

Hiragana -Pronunciation & Use-

Now that you have familiarized yourself with writing hiragana, we will now go into detail about how to pronounce the syllables and we'll talk about the different uses of hiragana in every-day Japanese.

Pronunciation

Unlike in English, every syllable is pronounced the same way every time. An "a" will always sound like an "a", regardless of what word it is used for. With that in mind, let's review what every vowel should sound like.

- **A** is pronounced as in "father" never as "apple" or "cake"
- **I** is pronounced as in "machine" never as in "pit"
- **U** is pronounced as in "Jupiter" never as in "jump"
- **E** is pronounced as in "pen"
- **O** is pronounced as in "hope" never as in "on"

A habit you will need to break as an English speaker is letting the letters after the vowel influence the way you pronounce the vowel. Americans like to say "Handa" when talking about the car brand Honda because we change the sound of the "o" when we see the "n" after it. If you split the word up in Japanese, you get Ho-n-da, and each of these syllables is pronounced separately and have no relation to each other, other than the fact that they form a word or name. Try saying Honda by pronouncing each syllable separately. It sounds a lot different doesn't it?

When you encounter double vowels in English, the pronunciation always changes. In Japanese you simply make the vowel sound twice as long without changing the sound. You just need to treat it like another syllable. This might take a while to get used to, but you will get it when you talk to Japanese people regularly. Remember that every syllable should get the equal amount of time for pronunciation. This will help you spot double vowels more easily. One rule applied to double vowels though, and that is that when an "o" is extended with a "u", or an "e" with an "i", you simply extend the sound of the first vowel. So just like with double consonants, you make the "o" or "e" extra long. Now let's take a look at how some of the consonants sound.

- **CH** is pronounced as in "chocolate"
- **D** is pronounced as in "dog"
- **F** is pronounced as in "fat"
- **G** is pronounced as in "gate" never soft like "George"
- **H** is pronounced as in "hot"
- **J** is pronounced as in "Jam"
- **K** is pronounced as in "kangaroo"
- **M** is pronounced as in "moon"
- **N** is pronounced as in "nice"
- **P** is pronounced as in "pop"
- **R** is pronounced as a hard r (see notes)
- **S** is pronounced as in "sap"
- **SH** is pronounced as in "shake"
- **T** is pronounced as in "tap"
- **WA** is pronounced as in "want"
- **Y** is pronounced as in "you" (this is not a vowel!)
- **Z** is pronounced as in "zoo"

The "D" sound is a little harder than an English "D", make sure that when pronouncing it, the tongue presses against your teeth and gums to make it sound hard. The "F" sound is a tricky one because you do not bite your lip as you do with an English "F", your upper teeth should barely touch your

lower lip as you close your mouth naturally. This sound is almost the same as an "H" sound, but should never be written that way. Concerning the "R" sound, the myth that the Japanese "R" is equal to an English "L" is just that; a myth. The "R" should be pronounced almost similar to a Spanish "rolling R" sound. But because the Japanese brush the roof of their mouth when pronouncing this consonant is why it sounds like an "L". Also, when using katakana to write English names and words, since the Japanese have no "L" syllables, the "L" is replaced with an "R".

If you've taken College level English, you know that stress modulation is an important part of the English language. We stress a certain syllable in a word to convey its meaning and our intentions. In Japanese you need to remember that every syllable is pronounced with the same amount of stress. Do not single out certain syllables and put the focus on it, because it will sound very awkward.

If possible, listen to Japanese music and watch Japanese TV programs and just sit there and see if you can tell what syllables they are using. Listening to native Japanese speakers will be infinitely more valuable than listening to a recording!

How to use Hiragana

There are number of ways that we use hiragana in Japanese, here are the most common ways of using them.

Particles

All particles in Japanese are written purely as hiragana. Particles are a vital part to Japanese grammar and will be introduced during the later lessons. Particles often consist of one or two hiragana syllables.

Add meaning to a Kanji

Hiragana is used to change the meaning of, or add something to the meaning of a kanji. "Omo", 思, simply means "think", but "Omoi", 思い, means a whole score of things, but mainly "feel", whereas "Omowazu", 思わず, means "spontaneous". Adding hiragana to kanji thus determines how we interpret the meaning.

Determine pronunciation of Kanji

If you've ever seen Japanese lyrics, you'll have seen kanji with small hiragana on top of it. This is because the Kanji used is either rare, written differently, or because the kanji determines the meaning while the hiragana determines the word. Confused yet? Let's take a look at these examples.

貴女 meaning "you" in the feminine sense, is generally written as "kijo", however, when you see the hiragana "あなた" on top of it, it will read as "anata". Both are correct, but because "kijo" has a higher frequency of use, a Japanese speaker will likely read that as "kijo" rather than "anata".

行徃 which means “to go on a journey” is an outdated combination of kanji and is therefore put together with the hiragana “さまよ”. These kinds of word combinations are often very hard to find in Japanese writing software because they have been replaced with another character.

世界 meaning “the world” is a very basic word and known to everyone who has been to a Japanese school. However, you can write this word and add another pronunciation like “ここ” or “koko” on top of it. This is used in lyrics when a word doesn’t sound very good in a sentence and is simply given a different pronunciation to fit the song. However, just writing “koko” cannot mean the same thing as ‘sekai’.

Differentiate the sound of a kanji

Since kanji can have different pronunciations and sounds, hiragana is used to determine which one to use. For example, 光, can be pronounced as both “hikari” and “hikaru”. To make sure that a reader knows which pronunciation to use, we can write 光り for “hikari” and 光る for “hikaru”.

Writing verbs

Hiragana is also used to write verbs such as “to be” or です. Or other things like the “masu” verbs, 行ます for example is read as “ikimasu” meaning “to go out”. The “masu” part makes the kanji “iki” into a verb.

Words in Hiragana

Of course you can also use hiragana to write real words. However as you get more proficient with Japanese you will want to learn how to write in Kanji. Words like “sou” or “dou”

(そう, どう) will always be written in hiragana. However, like I indicated before, the word for “you”, “anata”, can be written in different ways to indicate gender. Therefore, writing “anata” in just hiragana will make the word genderless and more abstract.

That ends this lesson, I hope this small lesson was informative. For more lessons, be sure to visit [the Cherryblossom Garden](#) again.

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