

HOW TO LEARN JAPANESE EFFICIENTLY

This guide is also available [in video form](#)! (How efficient is that?)

Learning Japanese changed my life. It opened new doors, introduced me to new people, and gave me self-confidence I never had before. It was the best decision I ever made.

I wrote this guide for anyone else who seriously wants to learn Japanese, for whatever reason. Teach yourself, and while it would be too much to say learn it fast, certainly learn it efficiently. The resources I introduce in this document are ones I have determined to be the best for this, after participating in the Japanese-learning community for several years. Use them properly and they will take you far.

Written by [Bonyari Boy](#) for the [EJLX Discord](#).

KANA

First you need to learn kana, if you haven't already. It's the basics of the Japanese writing system. It's important, but don't spend too much time on it. Here's the shortcut:

- Hiragana <https://www.tofugu.com/japanese/learn-hiragana/>
- Katakana <https://www.tofugu.com/japanese/learn-katakana/>

When you're done reading those pages, practise with [RealKana](#) and review daily with [Anki](#). You'll learn them all in a day and be reading them smoothly within a week.

Don't be tempted to fill out pages by writing the characters out again and again--that's a big time-wasting trap that many beginners fall into.

ELEMENTARY JAPANESE

To actually learn the language, you need exactly three things: something to learn **grammar**, something to learn **kanji**, and something to learn **vocabulary**.

It can be easy to get overwhelmed by the huge number of different Japanese resources out there, so limiting yourself to just three resources is the key to staying on task and focussed.

Grammar

It may seem old-fashioned, but textbooks remain the best way to learn all the grammar you need to know. Here are some recommendations.

- **Nakama** - This is my favourite beginners textbook, as it treats you like an adult and introduces some very helpful concepts (such as pitch accent) early on, which most other books don't do.
 - Apparently Nakama is out of print :(
- **Genki I & II** - This is what I used as a beginner. Solid grammar explanations and exercises, accompanied by cute illustrations and a recurring cast of

characters. Pretty cuddly-wuddly, but some people need that cuddly-wuddliness, and that's okay.

- **Japanese From Zero!** - Very simple, very friendly, and has an accompanying [YouTube series](#).
- **Human Japanese** - Series of apps that make a digital textbook. Come highly praised for their understandable and practical grammar explanations and exercises.
- **Bunpro** - Probably the best, most comprehensive digital tool for learning grammar, with lessons from beginner all the way up to advanced level. Subscription service.
- **TOBIRA Beginning Japanese** - Very new textbook from the creators of the beloved TOBIRA intermediate textbook. Early impressions seem very positive!

Textbooks typically come with a workbook of exercises, which you need. The textbook is what will teach you, the workbook is how you practise to get the info properly into your head.

Check your own answers to most of the questions, but for longer-form questions where you're asked to write a paragraph or two, you should get your answers checked by a native using a site such as [LangCorrect](#). You can also find people who will check your work on [HiNative](#) (single sentences or short paragraphs only), [Discord](#), [HelloTalk](#), or by asking real-life friends (if you have those).

Making mistakes and getting your work corrected is really important because [it's the only way](#) to fix your bad habits and improve.

DO NOT TRUST ANY OF THE ABOVE BOOKS TO TEACH YOU KANJI. They generally ask you to learn through dry rote memorisation, which is *torturous*, takes forever, doesn't work, and is the reason so many people quit learning. skip any kanji sections of your chosen textbook because we're going to use smarter methods to learn them.

Kanji

If you're just learning casually, because you're visiting Japan on a holiday, or you just think Japanese is cool or whatever, then it's fine to learn a few of the most common kanji the way most textbooks teach them. Just picking a few and brute-forcing them into your head is manageable if you're only aiming to learn a handful.

But if you want to learn them *all*? Or, at least, the 2,200-ish that every functioning adult in Japan is expected to know? We'll have to be more efficient than that.

Mnemonics are the magic bullet that makes the whole process so much smoother. Instead of looking at a kanji as a tangle of squiggles and trying to remember it as it is, you look at the parts that make the kanji up, assign names and memorable images to those parts, and use them to create a short story, sentence or image in your mind.

Your brain *loves* to associate information with imaginative imagery, making learning each kanji a natural and smooth process.

Mnemonics methods typically order the kanji in a way that makes them easy to remember and build mnemonics around, rather than putting the most common kanji first. This means that some very common kanji show up very late, and the information you learn will not be useful until you have completed the entire course, but it will all pay off once you get to the end. After all, our goal is to learn them *all*, so it doesn't matter which order we go in as long as we get through it quickly, which mnemonics will allow us to do.

Here are a few resources that teach using mnemonics:

- **Remembering the Kanji 1** - This book is the OG mnemonics method that led the way for all that came after. The author introduces the concept of mnemonics, names all the kanji and their parts for you, and provides mnemonics for the first 500-or-so kanji to get you started. After that, he stops giving mnemonics and encourages you to make your own, as personal mnemonics are far more memorable.

Making your own mnemonics for every kanji would be kind of a pain, so thankfully a community dedicated to sharing RtK mnemonics can be found on [Kanji Koohii](#). Here borrow other people's mnemonics, submit your own, and edit existing ones to make them more personal to you. You can also review flashcards daily to stop the mnemonics slipping from your memory.

RtK1 is not without its quirks--the author is an American religious studies professor, so some of his mnemonics are very American and/or religious--but over 20 years since its first publication, it remains the fastest way to introduce yourself to all the kanji you need to know. I finished it in six months while juggling other stuff, but it's absolutely possible to go faster. Learn 20 kanji a day with it (very doable) and you'll be done in 3-4 months, which is an order of magnitude faster than the *decade* it usually takes through normal classroom study.

RtK2 and RtK3 also exist, but they're not so useful. When you're done, move straight on to learning vocabulary.

If you decide to use it, make sure you read the introduction first--it's the most important part!

- **WaniKani** - A subscription service [site](#) that will teach you both kanji through mnemonics *and* a ton of vocabulary in, if you're diligent, just over a year. This one also comes with a community attached who can help you through, as well as generally nice design and graphics.

Its use of mnemonics is on par with RtK1, so which option you go for really depends on whether you'd rather buy a book that requires a little more work on your part, or pay a subscription fee for an all-in-one service that just log in to every day.

Lifetime membership for WaniKani is usually \$300, but they drop it to \$200 as part of a New Years sale every December-January.

- **Kodansha Kanji Learner's Course** - If you think RtK1 is too bare-bones, teaching you *only* a kanji and its meaning with no context or immediately practical information, this book is for you. Every kanji comes with not just a mnemonic, but its readings and some sample vocabulary too, which is

everything you need to know about a character.

However, while this approach feels more immediately satisfying as you will be able to use the kanji much faster, the added bloat from all the extra info dumped on you at once will slow you down and may get confusing as all the wires get crossed.

The RtK approach of learning the kanji and their meanings in isolation before picking up all the other information later through learning vocabulary is more efficient in the long run. But if you crave that instant gratification, KKLC will give it to you.

- **KanjiDamage** - If you can't spare a penny for your kanji education, [this site](#) is the most complete free option. But you get what you pay for--the supplied mnemonics are loaded with dirty humour and 'yo momma' jokes, and there are more than a few mistakes throughout. But you will learn *something*, at least...

Vocabulary

The key to learning vocabulary quickly is to use a **spaced repetition system** for memorisation. These are memorisation schedules that exploit a weird feature of your memory: you will remember something for longer if you recall it *juuust* when you're about to forget it. Digital flashcard apps based around SRS will show you a piece of information once, then again after 10 minutes, then again the next day, after three days, 10 days, a month, six months, a year... As the interval gets longer, the information moves from your short-term to your long-term memory, which is exactly what we want when we are aiming to learn hundreds or thousands of foreign-language words.

This really is the bread and butter of efficient language learning. If you put anything into an SRS system, and are good about reviewing your flashcards every day, you *will* remember it. No question. It's like magic.

Popular SRS systems include:

- **Anki** - The king of SRS programs today. Its strength is in its infinite customisability. download pre-made decks of flashcards (useful for learning textbook vocabulary), and make your own decks of words you have found and want to learn. Add images, sound, text boxes, colours, buttons, whatever makes them work for you.
I have two main decks of vocabulary words. The first is made of textbook vocabulary, stuff I needed to know for JLPT, words lifted from the core 10k list--any kind of supplied vocabulary lists. The second is of words I discovered while reading, watching, talking etc. and wanted to remember. This combo gives me a strong base knowledge of vocabulary that I *have* to know, as well as the tools to spice up my sentences and sound a bit more native with less-common expressions.
The PC/Mac program is free, as is the (unofficial) Android app. The iOS app is \$25, but as you'll be using it every single day, that's a bargain considering the hours of use you'll get out of it.

- **WaniKani** - As mentioned above, WaniKani teaches you vocabulary too, and it uses SRS. But even if you use it, you'll probably want your own Anki deck separately so learn words that WaniKani won't teach.
- **Memrise** - Not really sure what's going on with this site right now. It used to be an Anki rival with a community of deck-makers, but they moved all the community-made decks onto a separate site called Decks, leaving only the Memrise-produced ones on the site itself. It's SRS, it works, it's prettier than Anki, but 't use it offline without paying for the premium subscription service.
- **iKnow!** - I know some real pros use this subscription service site, for the convenience of an all-in-one course that requires no fiddling about with decks.

Free Resources

Most of the resources I've named so far are paid. There are some great free Japanese-learning resources out there, but none of them offer the complete package of explanations, reading/listening materials and exercises that a real textbook does. They can be excellent when used as reference, but I can't recommend making them the core of your study. I will mention them here so bookmark them and turn to them when you are stuck.

- [Tae Kim's Guide to Learning Japanese](#)
- [Nihongo no Mori](#) videos
- [Japanese Ammo With Misa](#) videos (the [wa/ga video](#) is a must-watch)
- [Tofugu](#) articles
- [Wasabi](#) articles
- [Jisho.org](#) dictionary

Setting a Schedule

Setting a schedule that goes at just the right speed is important to keep you motivated. Try to learn everything too quickly and you'll burn out; slack too much and you'll lose motivation due to lack of progress. Either of those will end in you quitting, which is the one thing we want to avoid!

A manageable, concrete schedule would be something like 'one textbook chapter a week'. The Genki books contain 23 chapters between them, so if you finish one a week, you will have learned all of elementary Japanese in just under six months. Wow!

When I was going through Genki, I would set aside a few hours on a day when I had the time (usually Saturday) to read through a new chapter and start the workbook exercises, then do the rest of the workbook exercises in my free time during the week. I learned 10-20 kanji every morning through RtK1, and reviewed all my kanji and vocabulary flashcards in the evening immediately after dinner. (If you're trying to start a new habit, attaching it to something you do already every day is a great way to fix it in your daily routine.)

I found this to be a sustainable pace that was also fast enough to keep me motivated. Only you know how much time you can put in based on your unique schedule, so ask yourself when you can fit time in. Just don't skip your daily flashcard reviews!

INTERMEDIATE JAPANESE

It's harder to give recommendations for intermediate resources, as once you have covered all the basics, start turning your attention to things that interest you personally.

The further you progress, the less you have to rely on textbooks, and the more you can tailor your studies to your own goals. There is a great intermediate textbook--Tobira--and it's worth going through so keep adding to your fundamental knowledge, but it doesn't have to be everything.

Remember why you wanted to start learning Japanese, and dedicate your study time to resources that will help you do *that*. Is your big goal to watch anime without subtitles? Start watching anime! You wanna read manga or novels? Read them! You wanna talk to people? Go out and do it!

BUT, remember that you have to treat those resources as *study material*. You can't just lie back and hope that just by listening to Japanese you'll gradually come to understand it. Sit up, pay attention, pick out anything you don't know and look it up. If you're watching a TV show or movie, switch on the Japanese subtitles (not English ones) to make it easier to keep up. Note down all the vocabulary you don't know, and turn those notes into Anki flashcards so that you never forget them. Little by little, your knowledge will increase, your brain will be trained to understand the language better, and at some point it will all just become natural.

For me, the best resource for this training was the Japanese reality show *Terrace House*. It's about six young men and women living in a sharehouse in Shonan/Tokyo/Hawaii/Karuizawa/Tokyo, and has been a perfect fit for my main learning goal, which is to be able to talk to people and make friends in Tokyo. As the show is unscripted, it offers a valuable glimpse into how Japanese young people speak in the real world. My Japanese is not perfect, but hundreds of hours of exposure to real Japanese conversation through *Terrace House* has meant that when I do speak, I can do so in a tone and at a pace that shakes off the 'awkward foreigner' image and makes it easier for other people to open up to me. Through watching, I also learned a lot about how to *live* as a young person in Tokyo: what people expect of you, how to enjoy yourself, how to win respect and how to lose it. It sounds silly to give so much credit to a reality show, but *Terrace House* really did change my life.

A lot of people feel like they 'plateau' when reaching intermediate level--the grammar and vocabulary you learn is stuff that's used less frequently, and it can feel like you're stuck between kinda being able to understand Japanese, without really understanding much. Focusing your study time and attention on just a few things you really care about is a way to keep feeling like you're progressing.

Later, by the time you reach advanced Japanese, your study will be so personal to you that there's really no point in me giving advice.

WHAT ABOUT THE JLPT?

“The Japanese Language Proficiency Test isn’t proficient at testing Japanese” - [Dōgen, 2019](#)

The JLPT is a multiple-choice test that tests you only on reading and listening. Preparing for a test like this won’t teach you much about practical use of the language. It might be a motivator to drill lots of new grammar and vocabulary into your head, but if you’re doing that only with the test in mind, you might find it hard to apply that stuff in the real world. There are plenty of people with N2 or N1 certification (the top two levels) who find it really hard to actually speak Japanese.

However, the test is kind of a necessary evil, as some schools, universities and jobs will require a certification. If you’re aiming for one of those, go ahead and take the test, but you might not want to bother otherwise.

After I got on N2, at every interview I sat in Japan, one of the questions is always “What is this ‘JLPT’? What does N2 mean?” By the time I explained it, they didn’t care anymore because we had already been talking in Japanese for 20 minutes. Most employers don’t *really* care about a qualification, they just care about whether you would be able to communicate if you joined their company. An application written in Japanese followed by a successful interview could be all the proof they need.

GOALS AND MOTIVATION

There are no wrong reasons to learn a language.

Set a goal before you start. Make it really specific and clear. “I want to be fluent,” is the worst possible goal because it’s basically meaningless. ‘Fluent’ means different things to different people, and is essentially unobtainable. It’s not a useful word. Forget it.

Good goals are concrete and achievable. Goals like:

- I want to be able to discuss ____ in Japanese.
- I want to be able to read ____ manga in Japanese.
- I want to watch the anime ____ without subtitles.
- I want to be able to talk with strangers and make friends in Japanese.
- I want to talk to ____ about ____.
- I want to understand the band ____’s lyrics.

(Fill in the blanks yourself.)

Putting your goal into clear words like this will make it easier to contextualise your learning and personalise your study to help you achieve what you want to achieve. And when you get there, you’ll feel great. My life has never been the same since I became able to understand the lyrics of Kyary Pamyu Pamyu’s ‘PONPONPON’.

Motivation is fickle. It comes and goes with the wind, so you can’t rely on it. When it wanes, as it eventually will, **motivation** will need to be replaced by **discipline**, and when you’ve been disciplined for long enough, learning will become **habit**. When learning becomes part of your life, you won’t even need to think about *why* anymore, you’ll just do it. That is what will carry you far into the future, and keep you learning for years to come.

Okay, that's everything. I believe in you! がんばって ! Eat your greens and don't skip your Anki reviews!