Japanese Grammar Essentials

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Pronunciation

While not important for our project, pronunciation is worth mentioning briefly.

Except for ん (which sounds like "n"), every sound in Japanese is composed of a consonant sound followed by a vowel sound.

The vowels used are: "a", "i", "u", "e", or "o".

The vowel pronunciations are:

"a" - pronounced "ah" as in "father"

"i" - pronounced "ee" as in "meet"

"u" - pronounced "oo" as in "soon"

"e" - pronounced "eh" as in "pet"

"o" - pronounced "oh" as in "old"

The Scripts

Japanese has three main written scripts: Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji

Hiragana Chart

•	w	r	y	m	h	n	t	s	k		
ん n/m	わ wa	ら ra	や ya	ま ma	は ha	な na	た ta	さ sa	か ka	あ a	a
		り ri		み mi	ひ hi	に ni	ち chi	し shi	き ki	い i	i
		る ru	ゆ yu	む mu	ふ fu	ぬ nu	つ tsu	す su	く ku	う u	u
		れ re		め me	へ he	ね ne	て te	せ se	け ke	え e	e
	を o	ろ ro	よ yo	も mo	ほ ho	の no	と to	そ so	こ ko	お o	o

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Katakana Chart

•	w	r	y	m	h	n	t	s	k		
ン n/m	ワ wa	ラ ra	ヤ ya	マ ma	ハ ha	ナ na	タ ta	サ sa	カ ka	ア a	a
		リ ri		ミ mi	ヒ hi	ニ ni	チ chi	シ shi	キ ki	イ i	i
		ル ru	ユ yu	ム mu	フ fu	ヌ nu	ツ tsu	ス su	ク ku	ウ u	u
		レ re		メ me	ヘ he	ネ ne	テ te	セ se	ケ ke	エ e	e
	ヲ o	ロ ro	ヨ yo	モ mo	ホ ho	ノ no	ト to	ソ so	コ ko	オ o	o

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空	車	見	山	白	男	上	日	一
糸	名	立	川	赤	女	下	月	二
字	正	休	花	青	子	右	火	三
夕	音	天	雨	学	人	左	水	四
玉	早	気	田	校	口	大	木	五
文	王	本	石	先	目	中	金	六
力	村	犬	貝	生	手	小	土	七
円	町	虫	林	年	耳	入		八
	竹	草	森		足	出		九
								十
								百
								千

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Hiragana is the primary phonetic writing system used to represent every sound in Japanese. Hiragana is often used for grammatical purposes, such as particles. More details on those later.

Katakana represents the same sounds as Hiragana, but is primarily used to represent words imported from other languages.
Ex. ビジネス (*bijinesu*) "Business"

Kanji are Chinese characters adapted for use in Japanese. Each Kanji character has its own meaning. Kanji are used on their own to represent words and when combined with other Kanji form more words. There are often many pronunciations for the same Kanji character.
Most words in written Japanese are written using Kanji (nouns, verbs, adjectives). There are no spaces in Japanese so Kanji is helpful in distinguishing between individual words in a sentence. The beginning or "stem" of Japanese adjectives and verbs are almost always written using Kanji. The Hiragana that follows the Kanji is the part that conjugates.

Example:
Verb: 見る (*miru*) "to see"
The Hiragana る (*ru*) portion gets altered when the verb is conjugated.
The Kanji portion 見 remains the same.

Unconjugated: 見る (*miru*) "see"
Past tense conjugation: 見た (*mita*) "saw"

Note: Japanese words are not required to contain Kanji. Colloquialisms, words with extraordinarily complex/rare Kanji, and onomatopoeias are oftentimes written using Hiragana. Hiragana is also often used for beginning Japanese students and children in place of Kanji they don't know.

General Grammar Rules

SOV
Japanese is an SOV language. The basic word order of a sentence is Subject - Object - Verb.

Japanese: **S**   **O**   **V**
     私は寿司を食べる。(*Watashi wa sushi o taberu.*)
     "I"   "sushi" "eat"   Note: Pronunciations are indicated by italicization text inside of parenthesis throughout this document.

English: **S** **V** **O**
     I eat sushi.

No Singular or Plural
Japanese grammar does not distinguish between singular and plural forms. Plurality is expressed by adding a word that indicates quantity.

No Articles
Japanese does not use articles ("a", "the", etc.)

Example:
学生 (*gakusei*) can be translated to English as "student", "students", "a student", "the student", "some students", depending on the context.

Punctuation
Similar to an English period ． Japanese sentences end with 。
Phrases can be separated with 、the Japanese version of a comma.

Sentence Analysis
私 (*watashi*) - pronoun - "I", "me"
母 (*haha*) - noun - "mother"
仕事 (*shigoto*) - noun - "work", "job", "occupation"
行く (*iku*) - verb - "to go", "to move (towards)"
行った (*itta*) - the past tense conjugation of 行く
Note: Vocabulary used in example sentences is highlighted in gray throughout this document.

私の母は仕事に行った。(*Watashi no haha wa shigoto ni itta.*)
"My mother went to work." Note: English translations are shown in quotation marks throughout this document.

Japanese	私	の	母	は	仕事	に	行った。
Pronunciation	*Watashi*	*no*	*haha*	*wa*	*shigoto*	*ni*	*itta.*
English	I	-'s	mother	Topic-particle	work	Locative-particle	went

Particles

Particles are small words written in Hiragana that directly follow other words.

Particles are used to indicate the relationship of words within a sentence.

は (*wa*) - marks the topic of a sentence.

の (*no*) - indicates possession, similar to apostrophe+s in English.

に (*ni*) - indicates a place towards which something or someone moves.

が (*ga*) - marks the subject of a sentence.

を (*o*) - marks the object of a sentence.

も (*mo*) - works like "also" or "too" in English.

へ (*e*) - similar to に but emphasis on direction than arrival.

で (*de*) - indicates the location of an action.

Example:

私の	母は	仕事に	行った。
(*Watashi no*)	(*haha wa*)	(*shigoto ni*)	(*itta*)
"My"	"mother (topic)"	"to work"	"went"

State-of-being

Japanese does not have a verb for the state-of-being, like "to be" in English.

However, the Hiragana character だ (*da*) (referred to in linguistics as a copula) can be attached to a noun or na-adjective to declare what something is.

私 (*watashi*) - pronoun - "I", "me"

は (*wa*) - particle - marks the topic of a sentence

学生 (*gakusei*) - noun - "student"

だ (*da*) - copula - "be", "is"

Example:

私は学生だ。   Note: The grammar an example sentences intends to showcase will be

(*Watashi wa gakusei da.*)   highlighted in yellow throughout this document.

"I am a student."

Past State-of-being

To say something "was", attach だった (*datta*) to the noun or na-adjective instead of だ (*da*).

私 (*watashi*) - pronoun - "I", "me"

は (*wa*) - particle - marks the topic of a sentence

学生 (*gakusei*) - noun - "student"

だった (*datta*) - past tense of だ (*da*)

Example:

私は学生だった。(*Watashi wa gakusei datta.*)

"I was a student."

Adjectives

Adjectives modify and/or describe the noun that immediately follows it.

Japanese adjectives fall into two categories:

Adjectives ending with な (*na*) are referred to as na-adjectives.

Adjectives ending with い (*i*) are referred to as i-adjectives.

Na-Adjective

Na-adjectives act essentially like nouns. Na-adjectives can function as a noun in a sentence, but can also be used to modify a noun by adding a な (*na*) between the na-adjective and the noun.

私 (*watashi*) - pronoun - "I", "me"

の (*no*) - particle - indicates possession, similar to apostrophe S in English

母 (*haha*) - noun - "mother"

は (*wa*) - particle - marks the topic of a sentence

親切 (*shinsetsu*) - na-adjective - "kind", "gentle", "considerate"

人 (*hito*) - noun - "person"

だ (*da*) - copula - "be", "is"

Example:

Na-adjective acting as a noun

私の母は親切だ。(*Watashi no* haha wa *shinsetsu* da.)

"My mother is kind."

Na-adjective acting as an adjective

私の母は親切な人だ。(*Watashi no* haha wa *shinsetsu-na* hito da.)

"My mother is a kind person."

I-Adjective

I-adjectives always end with い (*i*). I-adjectives are used to describe the word that directly follows them. Unlike na-adjectives, nothing needs to be added between an i-adjective and the noun it describes.

高い (*takai*) - i-adjective - "high", "tall"

ビル (*biru*) - noun - "building"

Example:

高いビル (*takai biru*)

"tall building."

Past Na-Adjective

Past conjugation for a na-adjective is the same as nouns. Simply add だった (*datta*).
You do not add な (*na*) when modifying a noun with a past tense na-adjective.

魚 (*sakana*) - noun - "fish"
が (*ga*) - particle - marks the subject of a sentence
好き (*suki*) - na-adjective - "liking", "being fond of"
だった (*datta*) - past tense of だ (*da*)
人 (*hito*) - noun - "person"

Example:
魚が好きな人 (*Sakana ga suki-na hito*)
"Person that likes fish."

魚が好きだった人 (*Sakana ga suki-datta hito*)
"Person that liked fish."

Past I-Adjective

Replace the trailing い (*i*) from the i-adjective with かった (*katta*)

高い (*takai*) - i-adjective - "high", "tall"
ビル (*biru*) - noun - "building"

Example:
高かったビル (*Takakatta biru*)
"Building that was tall"

Verbs

Japanese verbs end in an "u" sound. う (*u*) く (*ku*) す(*u*) つ (*tsu*) ぬ (*nu*) む (*mu*) る (*ru*)

Verb Classification

With very few exceptions, Japanese verbs fall into two categories.

Ichidan Verbs - also known as class-1 verbs and sometimes referred to as ru-verbs.
Ichidan Verbs always end with る (*ru*)

Example:
見る (*miru*) 食べる (*taberu*) 寝る (*neru*) 起きる (*okiru*) 考える (*kangaeru*)
"to see"   "to eat"   "to sleep"   "to wake up"   "to think (about)"

Godan Verbs - also known as class-5 verbs and sometimes referred to as u-verbs.
Godan Verbs end with the other "u sounds": う (*u*) く (*ku*) す(*su*) つ (*tsu*) ぬ (*nu*) む (*mu*)
Godan Verbs can also end with る (*ru*)

Example:
話す (*hanasu*) 書く (*kaku*) 泳ぐ (*oyogu*) 飲む (*nomu*) 遊ぶ (*asobu*)
"to talk"   "to write"   "to swim"   "to drink"   "to play"
死ぬ (*shinu*) 切る (*kiru*) 買う (*kau*) 待つ (*matsu*)
"to die"   "to cut"   "to buy"   "to wait"

Special/Irregular Verbs

The exceptions to normal verb classification are the verbs する (*suru*) "to do" and
来る (*kuru*) "to come". These two verbs are referred to as irregular verbs or special class verbs.

Verb Conjugation

Conjugation rules for verbs in Japanese are possibly the most complex grammatical rules in the language.

Past Tense for Ichidan Verbs (AKA. Class-1 Verbs/Ru-Verbs)

Conjugating Ichidan verbs is the easier of the two major verb categories.

1. Start with the unconjugated form of the verb (referred to as the dictionary form).
   見る (*miru*) 食べる (*taberu*) 寝る (*neru*) 起きる (*okiru*) 考える (*kangaeru*)

2. Remove the trailing Hiragana る (*ru*) (The trailing Hiragana after a word's Kanji character(s) is referred to as 送り仮名 (*okurigana*) "accompanying letters")
   見   食べ   寝   起き   考え

3. Finally, add a Hiragana た (*ta*)
   見た (*mita*) 食べた (*tabeta*) 寝た (*neta*) 起きた (*okita*) 考えた (*kangaeta*)

Past Tense for Godan Verbs (AKA. Class-5 Verbs/U-Verbs)
Conjugating Godan verbs from their dictionary form to past tense is more difficult because Godan verbs are broken up into four additional categories. The four categories depend on the last character of the verb.

Ending Hiragana (Okurigana)	Non-Past (Dictionary Form) Godan Verb	Add New Hiragana	Past Tense Conjugation
す (su)	話す (hanasu)	した (nda)	話した (hanashita)
く (ku) ぐ (gu)	書く (kaku) 泳ぐ (oyogu)	いた (nda) いだ (nda)	書いた (kaita) 泳いだ (oyoida)
む (mu) ぶ (bu) ぬ (nu)	飲む (nomu) 遊ぶ (asobu) 死ぬ (shinu)	んだ (nda) んだ (nda) んだ (nda)	飲んだ (nonda) 遊んだ (asonda) 死んだ (shinda)
る (ru) う (u) つ (tsu)	切る (kiru) 買う (kau) 待つ (matsu)	った (tta) った (tta) った (tta)	切った (kitta) 買った (katta) 待った (matta)

Past Tense for Special Verbs
We know する (suru) and 来る (kuru) are exceptions to normal verb classification and conjugation. But there is one other exception when it comes to past tense verb conjugation.
行く (iku) "to go", "to move (towards)"
行く (iku) behaves like a regular Godan (class-5/u-verb) verb in all other conjugations except the past tense. So it is included here.

Non-Past (Dictionary Form)	Past Tense
する (suru)	した (shita)
来る (kuru)	来た (kita)
行く (iku)	行った (itta)

Verb Clauses as Adjectives
Verb clauses in Japanese can be used like adjectives to modify nouns.

魚（ *sakana* ）- noun - "fish"
を（ *o* ）- particle - marks the object of a sentence
食べる（ *taberu* ）- Ichidan (class-1/ru-verb) verb - "to eat"
食べた（ *tabeta* ）- the past tense conjugation of 食べる
人（ *hito* ）- noun - "person"
は（ *wa* ）- particle - marks the topic of a sentence
仕事（ *shigoto* ）- noun - "work", "job", "occupation"
に（ *ni* ）- particle - indicates a place towards which something or someone moves
行く（ *iku* ）- Godan (class-5/u-verb) verb - "to go", "to move (towards)"
行った（ *itta* ）- the past tense conjugation of 行く

Example:
魚を食べた（ *Sakana o tabeta* ）
"Ate fish"

魚を食べた人（ *Sakana o tabeta hito* ）
"Person who ate fish"

魚を食べた人は仕事に行った。（ *Sakana o tabeta hito wa, shigoto ni itta.* ）
"The person who ate fish went to work."

"Nounify" Verbs and Adjectives
As well as indicating possession the の（ *no* ）particle has another use. の（ *no* ）can be used as a noun stand-in, acting as a noun itself. Knowing that adjectives and verbs may modify nouns we may instead use an adjective or verb with the generic noun の（ *no* ）and "nounify" them.

高い（ *takai* ）- i-adjective - "high", "tall"
は（ *wa* ）- particle - marks the topic of a sentence
かわいい（ *kawaii* ）- i-adjective - "cute", "adorable"
仕事（ *shigoto* ）- noun - "work", "job", "occupation"
に（ *ni* ）- particle - indicates a place towards which something or someone moves
行く（ *iku* ）- Godan (class-5/u-verb) verb - "to go", "to move (towards)"
を（ *o* ）- particle - marks the object of a sentence
忘れる（ *wasureru* ）- Ichidan (class-1/ru-verb) verb - "to forget"

Example:
高いのは、かわいい。（ *Takai no wa, kawaii.* ）
"The thing that is tall is cute."

私の母は仕事に行くのを忘れた。（ *Watashi no haha wa shigoto ni iku no o wasureta.* ）
"My mom forgot to go to work." (more literally: "My mom forgot the thing of going to work.")