

JP

HIRAGANA

Hiragana 1 • Chapter 1 • Meet Hiragana

Hiragana 1

Chapter 1 · Meet Hiragana: A I U

🌸 Meet Hiragana — ひらがな

Welcome to your first Japanese writing lesson. By the end of this chapter you'll know how Japanese writing works, you'll have learned your first three characters (あい う), and you'll be able to read four real words. Romaji (Japanese in English letters) is shown for everything, so you're never guessing.

📖 Three Scripts, One Language — 三つの文字

Unlike English, Japanese is written with three different kinds of characters, often in the same sentence.

SCRIPT	WHAT IT'S USED FOR	EXAMPLE
ひらがな hiragana	Grammar words and endings, and Japanese words with no kanji. The first script children learn, and the one you start with.	ありがとう arigatō · thank you
カタカナ katakana	Words borrowed from other languages, foreign names, and emphasis. Same sounds as hiragana, different shapes.	コーヒー kōhī · coffee
漢字 kanji	Characters borrowed from Chinese that carry a meaning, such as 日 (sun, day). There are thousands, so you learn them gradually.	日本 Nihon · Japan

Here is one sentence using all three (kanji in orange, hiragana in red, katakana in green). You don't need to read it yet; just notice how the scripts share the work.

私はコーヒを飲みます。

Watashi wa kōhī o nomimasu.

abc How Hiragana Works — ひらがなのしくみ

Hiragana isn't an alphabet of single letters like A, B, C. Each character stands for a whole **syllable**, a consonant plus a vowel such as ka, shi or mo.

- **46 basic characters** make up the core set. You'll learn them all in this course, about three per chapter.
- **Five vowels** (a, i, u, e, o) can stand alone. Every other sound is a consonant plus one of those vowels, except ん (n), which stands alone.
- **One character = one beat.** Japanese has an even rhythm: each character takes about the same time to say, with no strongly stressed syllables.
- The characters are arranged on a grid called the **gojūon** ("fifty sounds"): five vowel columns and rows of consonants. This is the map of the whole course.

	a	i	u	e	o
(vowels)	あ	い	う	え	お
k	か	き	く	け	こ
s	さ	し	す	せ	そ
t	た	ち	つ	て	と
n	な	に	ぬ	ね	の
h	は	ひ	ふ	へ	ほ
m	ま	み	む	め	も
y	や		ゆ		よ
r	ら	り	る	れ	ろ
w	わ				を

	a	i	u	e	o
n	ん				

The three characters highlighted are today's. A few sounds change slightly in Roman letters (si is written shi, tu is tsu), and we'll meet each of those as we reach it.

🌟 Your First Three Characters — あ い う

Japanese vowels are short, clean and steady. Unlike English "ay" or "oh", the sound doesn't glide into a second sound. Say each one, hold your mouth still, and stop.

あ

a

like the "a" in *father*, but short
("ah")

3 strokes · [stroke order](#) ▶

Memory hook: a person throwing their arms out and shouting "Ahh!", with a loop for a head.

い

i

like the "ee" in *see*, but short
("ee")

2 strokes · [stroke order](#) ▶

Memory hook: two slim eels swimming side by side. "eel" gives you the sound.

う

u

like the "oo" in *moon*, but with relaxed, flat lips ("oo")

2 strokes · [stroke order](#) ▶

Memory hook: a little hat on a curved body, a ghost going "ooo".

How to Write a Character — Stroke Order

Japanese characters are written with a set **stroke order** and direction. The general rules are: **top to bottom, left to right**. Following the order keeps the shapes balanced, makes handwriting faster, and it's how Japanese people recognise handwritten characters. Open each "stroke order" ▶ link to watch the animation, then write the character on paper 10 times, saying its sound aloud each time. Slow, correct writing beats fast, careless writing.

📖 Read It — Your First Words

You can already read these four words. Each character is one beat, so ii is two beats.

#	WORD	ROMAJI	ENGLISH	NOTE
1	あい	ai	love	<i>a + i, slide quickly from "ah" to "ee"</i>
2	いい	ii	good	<i>two beats: "ee-ee", not one long "ee"</i>
3	あう	au	to meet	<i>a + u</i>
4	いう	iu	to say	<i>often heard as "yuu" in everyday speech</i>

Romaji Is a Helper, Not the Goal

Romaji is shown everywhere in this course so you can check yourself, but try to read the Japanese first and glance at the romaji afterwards. In the next courses the romaji will gradually disappear. Also remember that one hiragana always makes the same sound, so there are almost no spelling surprises (the only exceptions are the particles は, へ and を, which you will meet later), which makes hiragana the easy part of learning Japanese.

Try It Yourself — れんしゅう

Say each answer out loud first, then click to check.

1. Which sound does あ make: *a*, *i* or *u*?

▼ Show answer

a ("ah", as in *father*).

2. Read these aloud: い・う・あ

▼ Show answer

i · u · a

3. Read these words and say what they mean: あい・あう・いい

▼ Show answer

ai (love) · au (to meet) · ii (good)

4. Write these in hiragana: *ii* · *au* · *ai* (check the stroke order as you write).

▼ Show answer

いい · あう · あい

5. How many beats does いい have, and how many strokes does あ have?

▼ Show answer

Two beats (one per character, "ee-ee"). あ has 3 strokes.

6. Which script would you use to write the English loanword "coffee", and which for the ending of a verb?

▼ Show answer

Loanword: **katakana** (コーヒー). Verb ending: **hiragana** (as in みます).

Coming Up in Chapter 2

You've learned three of the five vowels. Next up: え (e) and お (o), which completes the vowel row, and you'll be able to read いえ (house), うえ (above), あお (blue) and いいえ (no).