

JP

HIRAGANA

Hiragana 3 · Chapter 2 · Long Vowels

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🌸 Long Vowels — Hold It Twice

Last chapter's small つ was a silent extra beat. This chapter's extra beat is a vowel: a long vowel is simply held for two beats instead of one. It is spelt by adding a vowel character, and it is what turns おかあさん into "mother" and おばさん into a different word entirely. Romaji is shown for everything.

🔪 The Rule — 長音

In katakana a long vowel is written with a line (ー). In hiragana, you **add a vowel character** after the vowel you want to stretch. The stretched vowel takes **two beats**, not one: おかあさん is o-ka-a-sa-n, five beats, not four.

VOWEL SOUND	LONG VERSION WRITTEN...	EXAMPLES	ROMAJI
a	add あ	おかあさん・ おばあさん	okāsan · obāsan
i	add い	おにいさん・ おじいさん	oniisan · ojiisan
u	add う	くうこう・ゆうめい	kūkō · yūmei
e	add い (usually)	せんせい・とけい・ えいが	sensei · tokei · eiga
e	add え (a few words)	おねえさん・ええ	onēsan · ē

VOWEL SOUND	LONG VERSION WRITTEN...	EXAMPLES	ROMAJI
o	add う (usually)	おとうさん・ ありがとう	otōsan · arigatō
o	add お (a few words)	おおきい・とおい・ こおり	ōkii · tōi · kōri

The Two Tricky Ones: え and お

For **a**, **i** and **u**, you repeat the same vowel (あ→ああ, い→いい, う→うう). For **e** and **o**, the usual spelling adds **い** and **う**: せんせい (teacher) and おとうさん (father). The exceptions that repeat the vowel (おねえさん, おおきい, とおい) are a short, fixed list that you simply learn as you meet them.

How It Is Pronounced

The long vowel is not two different sounds: it's one vowel held twice as long. せんせい is spelt with せ + い but said *sen-sē*, and おとうさん is said *o-tō-san*. In romaji you'll see *sensei* and *otōsan*, and the macron (ō, ū, ā) marks the long vowel.

Short or Long? — A Meaning Changes

Length is as important as the pause you learned last chapter. These pairs are real words that differ only by a vowel.

SHORT	SAY IT	ENGLISH	LONG	SAY IT	ENGLISH
おばさん	obasan	aunt	おばあさん	obāsan	grandmother
おじさん	ojisan	uncle	おじいさん	ojiisan	grandfather
ゆき	yuki	snow	ゆうき	yūki	courage

SHORT	SAY IT	ENGLISH	LONG	SAY IT	ENGLISH
とる	toru	to take	とおる	tōru	to pass through

Mind Your おばさん and おばあさん

Mixing up a short and a long vowel can cause real mix-ups: おばさん is an aunt (or a middle-aged woman), but おばあさん is a grandmother. Holding the vowel for the extra beat is not a small detail in Japanese.

Read It — New Words

Family words first, since you'll use them in Japanese Basic Conversation 1. Read the Japanese first, then check the romaji, and hold the long vowels.

#	WORD	ROMAJI	ENGLISH	NOTE
1	おかあさん	okāsan	mother	<i>o-ka-a-sa-n: five beats</i>
2	おとうさん	otōsan	father	<i>o-to-u-sa-n: the う lengthens the お</i>
3	おばあさん	obāsan	grandmother	<i>o-ba-a-sa-n</i>
4	おじいさん	ojiisan	grandfather	<i>o-ji-i-sa-n</i>
5	おにいさん	oniisan	older brother	<i>o-ni-i-sa-n</i>
6	おねえさん	onēsan	older sister	<i>o-ne-e-sa-n: a long e written with え</i>
7	せんせい	sensei	teacher	<i>se-n-se-i: the い lengthens the え</i>
8	ありがとう	arigatō	thank you	<i>a-ri-ga-to-u: the う lengthens the と</i>

#	WORD	ROMAJI	ENGLISH	NOTE
9	おおきい	ōkii	big	<i>o-o-ki-i: a long o written with お</i>
10	とおい	tōi	far	<i>to-o-i</i>

Real Japanese Tip — おかあさん Is Someone Else's Mother

The お and さん in おかあさん and おとうさん are polite. You use these words for *someone else's* parents, or when you speak to your own parents. For your own mother and father when talking to others, Japanese uses plain forms (はは and ちち), which you'll learn in Japanese Basic Conversation 1.

Review: Words from the Last Chapter

きっぷ (ticket) · ざっし (magazine) · まって (wait!) · もっと (more) · がっこう (school) · せっけん (soap).

Try It Yourself — れんしゅう

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

1. How is a long vowel written in hiragana?

▼ Show answer

By adding a vowel character after it: あ, い, う; and い or う after e and o (usually).

2. How many beats are in おかあさん?

▼ Show answer

Five: o · ka · a · sa · n.

3. Read aloud and translate: せんせい · おとうさん · ありがとう

▼ Show answer

sensei (teacher) · otōsan (father) · arigatō (thank you)

4. What is the difference between おばさん and おばあさん?

▼ Show answer

おばさん is an aunt; おばあさん is a grandmother. The long vowel changes the meaning.

5. Read aloud and translate: おおきい · とおい · おにいさん

▼ Show answer

ōkii (big) · tōi (far) · oniisan (older brother)

6. Write in hiragana: *sensei* · *otōsan* · *ōkii* (check the long vowels).

▼ Show answer

せんせい · おとうさん · おおきい

Coming Up in Chapter 3

The combined sounds begin: きゃ きゅ きょ and ぎゃ ぎゅ ぎょ, where a small や ゆ よ joins the character before it. You'll be able to read きょう (today), きょうと (Kyoto) and ぎゅうにゅう (milk), and your new long-vowel rule will already be working.