

## Katakana Practice

The following sentences tell a story in English. Translate the katakana into romaji to find out what is being said. The first sentence is filled out for you.

If you're unsure how the characters are supposed to sound, refer to the katakana mnemonic sheets (<https://www.tofugu.com/japanese/katakana-chart/#standard-katakana-charts>). Remember that kana from the *r*-set can sometimes mean "L" in English.

Wエア・イス・マイ・コト? アイ・ハフ・ト・gオ!

W - e - a // i - su // ma - i // ko - to? A - i // ha - fu // to // g - o!  
Where is my coat? I have to go!

アイ・ハフ・ノト・sイイン・ア・jアケト.

メイ・アイ・テエク・ヨオ・スエタ・インステd?  
イツ・コルd!

アイ・dオント・ノオ ...

Pリス ? アイ・レト・ユウ・bオロオ・マイ・  
シヤアト・thアト・ワン・タイム.

オオ ... アアル・ライト・thエン.

サンク・ユウ・ソオ・マチ !!!

## Hiragana Practice

The following sentences tell a story in English. Translate the hiragana into romaji to find out what is being said. The first sentence is filled out for you.

If you're unsure how the characters are supposed to sound, refer to the hiragana mnemonic sheet (<https://www.tofugu.com/japanese/hiragana-mnemonics-chart/>). Remember that kana from the *r*-set can sometimes mean "L" in English.

あい わんと さむ あいす くりいむ !

A - i // wa - n - to // sa - mu // ai - su // ku - ri - i - mu !

I want some ice cream !

あいす くりいむ いす のと fお ゆ !

わあ ! いつ のと らいと ! あいむ あ  
gううd bおい !

お りいり ? そ わい dいd ゆ いいと  
ある まい すし ?

おお ... あいむ そ そり . あい をんと  
dう thあと あgえいん .

vえり gううd ! ゆ めい はve さむ あいす  
くりいむ !

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### *Things to Remember*

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Japanese is a **phonetic language**. This means that sentences are written out in characters (or **kana**) that correspond to different sounds. The three Japanese character sets are **hiragana**, **katakana**, and **kanji**.

**Romaji** is when you write out Japanese sounds in English letters. (For example, “hiragana” is the romaji for ひらがな.)

#### **Hiragana**

- Hiragana is Japan’s version of the alphabet. It is used for mainly for grammar and national Japanese words, along with some English loanwords.
- Writing exclusively in hiragana is associated with children, because it’s easier for Japanese children to read/write hiragana.
- Hiragana is the easiest set to learn for newcomers to Japanese. There are 46 basic characters.
- You can tell hiragana apart from the other sets because it’s loopy and “cute.”

#### **Katakana**

- Katakana is used to spell foreign words (you’ll often see it used to spell English words). It’s also used to spell company names and sound effects, or to denote “foreign” or “robotic” speech.
- Like hiragana, there are 46 basic katakana characters.
- You can tell katakana apart from the other sets because it’s sharp and angular.

Often, you will find a mixture of hiragana and katakana in the same phrase/sentence, depending on whether the words involved are Japanese vocabulary or loanwords.

ミスター スパークルー だよ, ベストー うおしゅー !

Mi - su - taa Su - paa - ko - ruu da - yo, be - su - too wo - shyuu !  
(Katakana is blue, hiragana is red.)

**Literal translation:** *Mister Sparkle (it is), best washer* = It's Mister Sparkle, Best Washer!

とっても テイスティ !

(Katakana is blue, hiragana is red.)

**Literal Translation:** *Tottemo teisuti (tasty)!* = Very tasty!

## Kanji

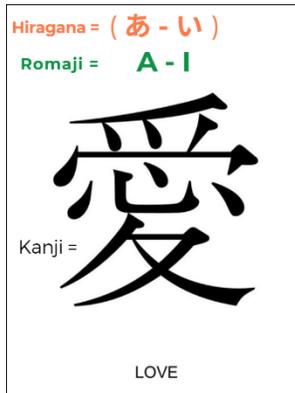
- Kanji is VERY different from hiragana and katakana. Kanji is **not** phonetic. A kanji character does not correspond to a sound. Instead, it is an ideogram or picture that depicts an **idea**.

- The average Japanese person spends a decade-plus learning over 2,000 kanji. (That's the number you need to know to be really proficient in the language, although there's many more kanji: over 50,000.)

- You can tell kanji apart from other character sets because it "looks Chinese" (because it DID start as Chinese).

愛 (*ai*—pronounced “ah-ee” quickly) is a kanji meaning “love.”

However, just looking at it won't tell you how it's pronounced. For that, you need hiragana and katakana. In this case, because the character is a kanji, that usually means it is a Japanese word, so you use hiragana to “spell it out.”



- Kanji is used in written Japanese because phonetic characters on their own are not always clear. Using kanji in sentences helps distinguish between homonyms.

For example, **かみ** (*kami*, paper) and **かみ** (*Kami*, God) are homonyms. Writing these words as kanji helps you tell the difference.

紙 = paper (pronounced **かみ**, *kami*)

神 = God (pronounced **かみ**, *Kami*)

Japanese sentences are typically a combo of hiragana, katakana, and kanji.

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Other Things to Know

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### Ending on a Vowel

English loanwords converted to Japanese characters typically don't end in consonants, even if the original word does.

Cream = *Kuriimu*

ク リー ム

KU - RI - I - MU

Christmas = *Kurisumasu*

ク リ ス マ ス

KU - RI - SU - MA - SU

These vowels are often pronounced so quickly they are almost silent. If you get tripped up trying to figure out what English word is being converted to Japanese, saying the Japanese word quickly can help you figure out what English word it's supposed to be.

### Sound Replacement

If the English loanword contains a sound that Japanese lacks, the language will compensate with a native Japanese sound when converting to Japanese. Some examples:

theatre = シアター *shiataa*

boxer = ボクサー *bokusaa*

three = スリー *surii*

kale = ケール *keeru*

Visa = ビーザー *bijzaa*

hurry = ハリー *harii*

With enough practice, you will grow accustomed to these sound “replacements.” Even so, without context, it can be tough to be sure what English word is meant when translating from the original Japanese. For example, ハリ — (*hari*) can mean either the verb “hurry” or the name “Harry” in English.

Always pay attention to the sentence in which the word is written, and/or the situation in which the word is being used. (If you are in a movie theatre about to see the newest Harry Potter movie, the word ハリ — on your ticket probably means “Harry.” If you are playing a videogame and the screen flashes with the word ハリ — followed by a timer, it probably means “hurry!”)

### Little ツ and Big ツ

ツ (*tsu*) can also double as a little ツ. When this little ツ is used in a word, it doubles the kana immediately after it. (The kana itself is silent.)

ツナミ = TSU-NA-MI (tsunami) <--- regular ツ (*tsu*)

ロケツト = RO-KE-TTO (rocket) <--- little ツ (silent)

### The Possessive No

No (written in hiragana as の) is particle that denotes possession in Japanese. It often has the same function as an apostrophe s — 's — and connects two nouns together.

メイ の コレクション = ME-I NO KO-RE-KU-SHYON = May's s Collection

## Pronunciation and Usages of フ

フ (*fu*) does double duty representing both the f- and the h- sounds in English loanwords. It is not pronounced like the English F, but is a breathier sound. (Pronunciation: <https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/フ>)

English words with “fu” or “hu” sounds are spelled with the フ kana. Two examples:

Who = フー (*fuu*)

Food = フード (*fuudo*)

## Extending Vowels

ー is used in Japanese words to indicate an extension of vowels.

ルーマー *Ruumaa* = Rumor

スーモー *Suumoo* = Sumo

## The L/R Distinction

Just as we saw with the other sound replacements, it's important to note that Japanese does not distinguish between the English L/R.

へ ロー!

HE - ROO!

(HELLO!)

I love ラーメン!

I love RAA - ME - N!

(I love RAMEN!)

This leads to the well-known fly/fry confusion:

フライ = *furai* = fly

フライ = *furai* = fry

In this case, both are English loanwords that are spelled (and pronounced) the same in Japanese. This is fine for native Japanese speakers and writers, for whom the L/R distinction is not relevant, but again, native English speakers need to pay close attention to context to avoid being confused when hearing words derived from their native English L/R.

(As with フ, the pronunciation of any r-sound in Japanese is neither the English L/R but pronounced somewhat differently. Here, the sound is closer to the D in “rider.”

Pronunciation: <https://www.tofugu.com/japanese/japanese-r-sound/>)

Another problem with L/R is that an English word ending in L, when written in Japanese, *must* be spelled with a character from the r-set, which can add to the confusion. (That character is usually ル, *ru*.)

モール = *maaru* = mall

コール = *kooru* = call

ソール = *Soru* = Saul

### M/N and ん

ん (*n*) is the only consonant by itself in Japanese. It is usually seen at the end of words and does not need to be followed by a vowel like the other kana do.

If an English word or syllable ends in the letter "M," it is always rendered with ん in Japanese. Here are some examples.

リンボー *Rinboo* = Limbo

トレーン *Toreen* = Train

サンター *Santaa* = Santa

### **Practice Sites**

Some of the best sites to practice your memorization of the different Japanese characters are:

**Drag n' Drop Katakana:** <https://drilingua.com/japanese/games/kana-bento/>

**Real Kana:** <https://realkana.com/katakana/>)

**Tofugu:** <https://www.tofugu.com/japanese/learn-katakana/>

This site has a great rundown on how the Japanese render English loanwords into their native kana (<https://www.sljfaq.org/afaq/english-in-japanese.html>). It also has a great comprehensive guide on all your FAQs (Frequently Asked Questions) on Japanese: <https://www.sljfaq.org/afaq/afaq.html>

To practice grammar and vocabulary, visit:

**Mango:** <https://mangolanguages.com/> (library users can sign up for free at [www.cdalibrary.org/explore](http://www.cdalibrary.org/explore))

**Duolingo:** <https://www.duolingo.com/> (free phone and desktop program)

Mango and Duolingo both write out Japanese words and sentences using a mixture of hiragana and katakana, so it's easier to learn your vocabulary and grammar if you can already "read" these individual kana.