



How to Study Japanese Efficiently

A Kokoro Media Guide

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Part One

Define Your Goals

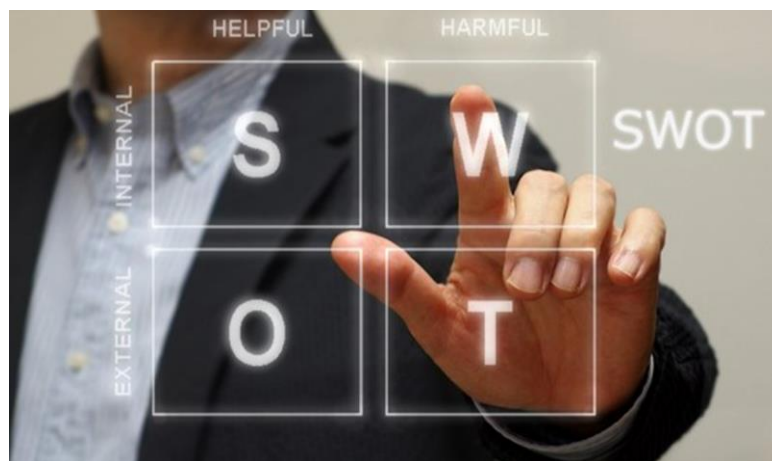
and Make Time to Study



Define Your Objectives Using a SWOT Analysis

By Anthony Griffin

A business-school favorite, the SWOT framework analyzes an organization's **strengths**, **weaknesses**, **opportunities**, and **threats**. Strengths and weaknesses are internal factors while opportunities and threats are external ones.



The goal of conducting a SWOT analysis is to identify opportunities for improvement. That's why this framework is also a great personal development tool, be it for overall personal growth or for individual aspects of your life, such as language learning.

Why Should You Conduct a SWOT Analysis?

Be it in business or life in general, we can't make progress unless we fully grasp our current situation. Conducting a SWOT analysis creates a 360-degree picture of where we stand, including positive and negative elements, so that we can make an informed decision on how to work toward improvement.

In business as well as language learning, randomly trying ideas to see what works will rapidly deplete your most valuable resources: time and money. Instead, turn your learning process into science by establishing a framework and a plan. This is where the SWOT analysis comes in.

How to Conduct a SWOT Analysis for Learning Japanese

1. Internal Factors

The first half of a SWOT analysis is about examining internal factors that you can influence directly. First, explore **your strengths**. To do so, consider the following question: what do you do well?

Does grammar come easy to you? Have you mastered all your kanji flashcards? Perhaps you're an excellent test taker with a great JLPT score. When noting your strengths, back them up with quantitative data (number of flashcards mastered, test scores, etc.).

Next, take a hard look at **your weaknesses**. Consider the following questions:

- In what aspects of Japanese are you underperforming?
- Where do you need to improve?

Perhaps you're struggling with the JLPT or having trouble memorizing intermediate-level kanji. Maybe you freeze up when it's time to speak Japanese in real-world situations. Again, try to quantify this or note any anecdotes that highlight your weaknesses.

2. External Factors

Now it's time to focus your attention on external factors in the form of **opportunities** and **threats** to your progress. Let's start with opportunities, which are usually environmental factors that can help you build on your strengths or address your weaknesses.

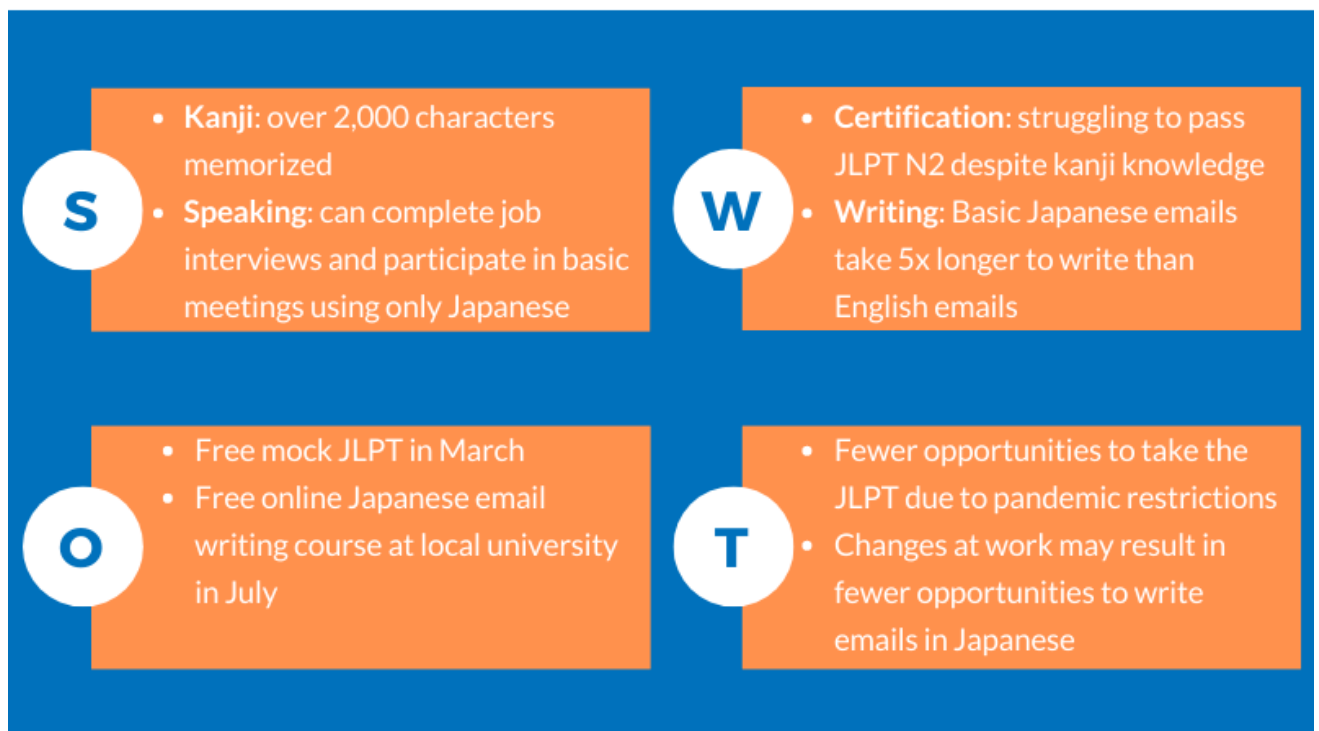
For example, if you are struggling with speaking Japanese in real-world situations, perhaps there are some upcoming mixers or social events you can add to your calendar that will offer you chances to put your textbook knowledge into practice.



Finally, in a similar fashion, be on the lookout for external threats that have the potential to derail your growth. Threats are intimidating because the worst of them are truly out of your control. For example, heavy-handed immigration policies in response to the global pandemic were a threat to any student who was counting on studying in Japan as part of their Japanese language learning strategy.

Although you can't control threats like the above, attempting to anticipate them gives you an opportunity to mitigate their effects by creating contingency plans to overcome periods of adversity.

SWOT ANALYSIS FOR LEARNING JAPANESE



When conducting your SWOT analysis, consider creating a matrix like the one above.

Once you've carefully crafted a SWOT matrix, you'll have a clear understanding of your current capabilities and challenges, which will prepare you to harness upcoming opportunities and manage inevitable threats.

From here, the next step is creating an action plan, and for that, consider laying out your SMART goals.

Set Clear and Achievable Goals with the SMART Method

By Anthony Griffin

Born from the business world, SMART goals are also perfect for personal pursuits such as language learning.

First coined by consultant [George T. Doran](#), SMART goals are:

- Specific:** What exactly do you want to accomplish? Why do you want to achieve your goal?
- Measurable:** How can you measure progress? How will you know when you've reached your goal?
- Achievable:** Do you have the necessary skills? Is your goal worth the effort required?
- Relevant:** Is your goal related to your life plan? Is it aligned with the other goals in your life? Why are you doing this now?
- Time-bound:** How long will it take to achieve your goal? Do you have a deadline?

1. Specific

There are a variety of reasons to study Japanese. Think carefully about yours. Perhaps you want to communicate better with loved ones. Maybe you want to get more out of your annual sightseeing trips. Or, like many of us, knowing Japanese is integral to your livelihood. Sort these questions out, and write down your answers. You might find a worksheet like [this one](#) to be useful.

2. Measurable

Once you've decided on a specific destination, it's time to figure out how you'll know when you have arrived. The simplest form of measurement would be achieving certain scores on exams such as the [JLPT](#). However, depending on your goal, exam scores might not be congruent with what you are trying to achieve.

A good method is to measure progress by what you can do with the language. Previous goals may include knowing enough Japanese to travel anywhere in the country on your own, participate in meetings, pass job interviews, and write emails.

Easy-to-measure milestones such as these make it easy to see whether or not you are making progress with your studies.



3. Achievable

People tend to give up on language learning simply because they failed to set realistic goals. When tackling a new language, learners often fail to realistically account for their station in life. Someone working full-time with a family simply doesn't have as much time to study as a college student or part-time worker does.

Therefore, if you have interests, responsibilities, and priorities that trump Japanese, set your goals accordingly: making a living as an interpreter within five years might not be achievable considering your current circumstances.

4. Relevant

It's important to do a gut check to ensure that studying Japanese is the right thing to be doing at this time in your life. Learning a new language requires a massive time commitment, and as gratifying as the process can be, you may have more pressing concerns at this moment. For example, if you are in the process of becoming an accountant, you should probably be focusing your efforts on passing the CPA Exam. You can always come back to learning Japanese later.

5. Time-Bound

As tempting as it may be, we can't simply toil away at our goals indefinitely. It's important to make your best estimate of how long it will take to achieve your goal and, when the time is up, evaluate your performance. If you succeeded, it's time for a brand-new SMART goal.

If you failed, do a postmortem to figure out what went wrong, pivot to a new approach, and try again. The time-bound aspect of goal setting is closely related to making your goal achievable. Be realistic based on what's going on in your life.

relevant

specific and measurable

“As a sports journalist, I want to interview runners in Japanese during the 2022 Tokyo Marathon.”

time-bound and achievable

Now that you’ve had a brief primer on crafting SMART goals, it’s time to reevaluate your language-learning progress and determine your next steps.

Organize Your Study More Efficiently with the Eisenhower Matrix

By Anthony Griffin

Dwight D. Eisenhower, the 34th President of the United States, was a paragon of productivity. According to the Eisenhower Presidential Library, his two terms in office (1953 to 1961) were filled with accomplishments that shaped the U.S. and the world.

Highlights include signing the 1957 Civil Rights Act, authorizing the development of the Interstate Highway System, signing the bill that created NASA, and presiding over the establishment of Hawaii and Alaska as U.S. states. Additionally, he authorized the creation of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA), the birthplace of technological breakthroughs such as the internet and GPS satellites.

“Who can define for us with accuracy the difference between the long and short term!

Especially whenever our affairs seem to be in crisis, we are almost compelled to give our first attention to the urgent present rather than to the important future.”

**Dwight D. Eisenhower
in a 1961 address to the Century Association**

Decades later, Stephen R. Covey would distill Eisenhower's philosophies down to a **Time Management Matrix**, which is now commonly referred to as the Eisenhower Matrix.

That brings us to the focus of this section: using this matrix to structure your Japanese learning efforts.

Learning a new language, especially one that requires the memorization of over 2,000 kanji characters, is daunting at best and overwhelming at worst. Therefore, it's important to follow a framework that can help you learn efficiently. This is especially important if you just started living in Japan where your quality of life and career opportunities depend on language proficiency.

The Eisenhower Matrix Explained

	URGENT	NOT URGENT
IMPORTANT	<u>Quadrant I</u> <i>urgent and important</i> DO	<u>Quadrant II</u> <i>not urgent but important</i> PLAN
NOT IMPORTANT	<u>Quadrant III</u> <i>urgent but not important</i> DELEGATE	<u>Quadrant IV</u> <i>not urgent and not important</i> ELIMINATE

The Eisenhower Matrix.

Photo credit: [Davidjcmorris](#), CC BY-SA 4.0, via [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Before we can apply the Eisenhower Matrix to learning Japanese, we first need to understand this tool in its original context: productivity.

The matrix, as pictured above, is divided into four quadrants representing four ways to separate your actions and tasks:

- Quadrant I (urgent and important):** tasks that need immediate attention
- Quadrant II (important but not urgent):** long-term tasks that should be planned
- Quadrant III (urgent but not important):** tasks that should be delegated or automated
- Quadrant IV (neither urgent nor important):** tasks that should be eliminated

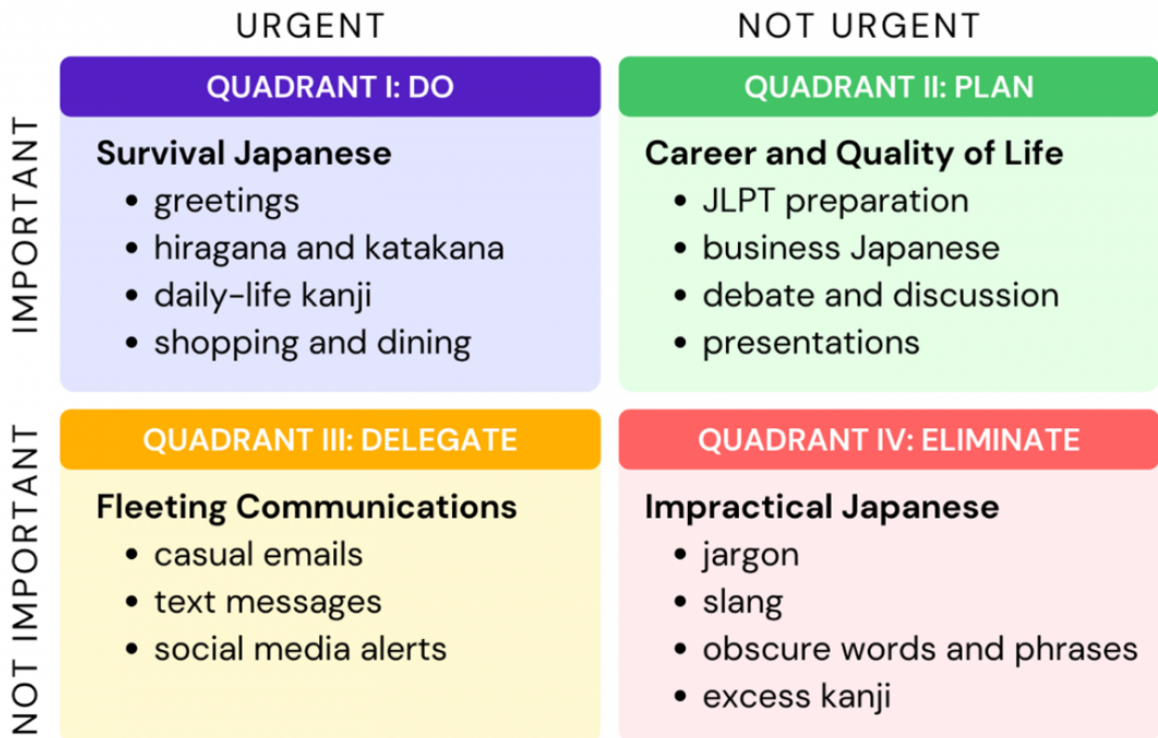
When it comes to productivity, we often fall into the trap of believing that urgency automatically equates to importance.

[As James Clear](#), author of Atomic Habits says, “Urgent tasks are things that you feel like you need to react to: emails, phone calls, texts, news stories. Meanwhile, in the words of Brett McKay, ‘Important tasks are things that contribute to our long-term mission, values, and goals.’”

As Eisenhower once said in quoting an anonymous college president, “I have two kinds of problems, the urgent and the important. The urgent are not important, and the important are never urgent.”

How the Eisenhower Matrix Can Be Applied to Japanese

The chart below features common elements of learning Japanese that are especially relevant to those who have just moved to Japan with a limited command of the language.



Quadrant I is where every Japanese learner begins—the important and urgent characters, expressions, and phrases needed to survive. The sooner you can master greetings, hiragana, and katakana, and how to obtain daily necessities, the sooner you can start enjoying life in Japan.

The content of **Quadrant II** requires long-term planning and goal setting. Passing the Japanese Language Proficiency Tests (JLPT) and learning business Japanese are some of the most important aspects of your language-learning journey. However, by definition, they are not as urgent as the contents of Quadrant I.

Quadrant III is where this model gets a little tricky. Of course, in the grand scheme of things, casual, daily communication is important for building relationships.

However, they are also fleeting and depending on your progress with Japanese, they may not serve your study goals. To respond to these urgent forms of communication, consider delegating your comprehension to translation software or the aid of native speakers. This will enable you to respond to the urgency of these items without taking time away from more valuable efforts in Quadrants I and II.

Finally, we have **Quadrant IV**: Japanese that can be eliminated (unless you have a specific purpose for studying it). Popular textbooks and study applications occasionally teach jargon and obscure vocabulary words that are hardly ever used in daily life.

Work with an instructor or Japanese friends to identify and minimize time and effort spent on these words. Additionally, unless you simply enjoy studying kanji, spending large amounts of time going beyond the [joyo kanji](#) yields diminishing returns. Of course, if you need certain jargon or kanji for your career or hobbies then, by all means, add them to your repertoire.

The Eisenhower Matrix, a tool typically used for productivity, may not be a perfect fit as a guide for learning a new language. However, maintaining the motivation to achieve your goals requires a framework to direct your studies and guide you from one milestone to the next.

Choose Your Favorite Way to Make Time to Study

By Anthony Griffin

Learning a new language demands a significant amount of time. Factor in a busy career, social and family obligations, and hobbies, and it's easy to leave language learning by the wayside, admitting defeat with the tried-and-true excuse of "I just don't have time to study."

As the popular expression states, regardless of how busy we are, we all have the same 24 hours a day—it's all about how we use them. In other words, it's not about having time to study—it's about making time to study. This is something all of us can do, albeit to varying degrees.

How Much Time Will It Take?

Persistence, efficiency, and consistency trump quantity.

For example, you'll progress faster and further by studying an hour every weekday instead of a five-hour marathon once a week. Additionally, spreading out your study time is the only way to take advantage of a [spaced-repetition system](#) (SRS), a methodology that's built into the most popular Japanese learning methods including, [Wanikani](#), [Remembering the Kanji](#), [Bunpro](#), and [Cardemy](#).

Overall, the length of time it takes to learn Japanese depends on two key variables:

- Your goals (basic fluency, business-level Japanese, full literacy, native-level mastery, etc.)
- How much time you can devote to language studying on a daily basis.



Diehards can achieve a modicum of fluency within months while those who study more casually might take years to cover the same ground. The most important thing is to **be realistic about your expectations**. If you can't devote the majority of your free time to studying Japanese, take that into account when you are crafting your long-term study plan.

Here is an example of a language journey:

Year one: comfortable ordering food, shopping, and asking for assistance in Japanese

•**Year two:** capable of traveling throughout the country on my own, relying only on Japanese

•**Year four:** basic office Japanese (professional greetings and introductions)

•**Year six:** ability to pass job interviews in Japanese

•**Year eight:** business Japanese capability (emails, meetings, etc.)

•**In progress:** Japanese business presentations and business writing

Setting and acknowledging milestones like these ensure that you receive real feedback on your progress and will keep you motivated for the long haul.

1. Early to Bed and Early to Rise

Hands down, my most successful language-learning habit has been waking up 30 to 60 minutes early to start my mornings with a warm cup of coffee and an SRS queue full of kanji, vocabulary, and grammar points to learn and review. In my world, early mornings are a magical time when the rest of the world ceases to exist: no meetings, email activity, or appointments to worry about—just me and Japanese. I realize that getting up an hour earlier every morning is a lot to ask. Work your way up to it in 15-minute increments, making sure to go to sleep earlier as well.

Of course, not everyone is a morning person. If you're a night owl, carve out a block of time before bed ([In fact, studying at night might be even more efficient.](#)). Whatever you choose, remember that **consistency is king**. If you can't put in an hour, 30 minutes (or even 15 minutes) can be enough to keep your momentum going.

2. Lunch with a Side of Kanji

Studying during your lunch break is the perfect way to make up for a morning study session that was cut short or put in some extra time to accelerate your progress. When I study during a lunch break, I prefer doing something more practical than flashcard or textbook work. **It's important to work on something that's motivating and easy to get into quickly.** For me, that's usually a Japanese book, magazine, or news article.

Whatever you decide, don't rely on your lunch break as the core of your study routine. Lunch breaks can be inconsistent, easily interrupted, or cancelled altogether—especially if you work in an office.

3. Japanese on the Go

Digital flashcards are essential tools for studying Japanese due to their SRS algorithms. Portability, however, is equally important.

Having a flashcard app on your phone means that **any moment of downtime throughout your day becomes an opportunity** to learn and review Japanese vocabulary, kanji, and grammar points. Waiting in lines, train commutes, and coffee breaks all become chances to chip away at a queue of digital flashcards. With a good podcast, you can even put your listening skills to the test while walking.



4. Mixing Business and Pleasure

Once you break the bonds of beginner-level Japanese you'll start to realize the practicality of your new-found language prowess. **Opportunities to study will materialize in your hobbies or perhaps even in your work.**

Try enjoying some of your favorite video games, animation, and manga in Japanese—learning while doing something you love. Netflix serves up a ton of original Japanese content regardless of where you live. You could even take things a step further by fully immersing yourself and changing the language settings for your smartphone, computer, and other electronic devices to Japanese.

5. Reduce but Do Not Eliminate

At some point (or several points) in your Japanese journey, you're going to hit a plateau. For most learners, this occurs somewhere between the intermediate and upper-intermediate levels. Although many can overcome plateaus by switching up study methods or routines, **plateau breaking often requires a greater investment of your time** as well.

If you need to learn Japanese as quickly as possible, you may have to put aside some of your hobbies, responsibilities, or passions to achieve your goal. For many of us, however, this is too much to ask.

That being said, when you hit a plateau, it's time to audit your schedule and squeeze in a little more time for Japanese. For example, after looking through your weekly schedule, you may realize that you spend two hours a day watching television shows. There's nothing wrong with that, especially if it helps you wind down after a grueling day of work. In fact, giving up television entirely may stress you out too much to study effectively. But what about reduction? How about sacrificing just one of those hours of escapism to study Japanese instead?

You'll find that this approach is much more realistic and sustainable than giving up your hobbies and passions entirely.

The Way Forward

At first, learning Japanese seems impossible. However, if you **set realistic expectations, build consistent habits, and creatively make time to study** every day, you'll be speaking and reading Japanese sooner than you could have ever imagined.

Part Two

Choose the Best Tools

for You



The Essential Books You Need to Study Japanese

By Anthony Griffin

Never underestimate the value of an excellent book. It may be possible to study Japanese entirely with online resources, however this approach overlooks **a major benefit of a well-written book: curation.**

To craft, publish, and print a quality physical book involves an incredible amount of care and effort before it reaches your hands. Well-curated books are filled with essential content that would take you countless hours just to gather on your own via the internet. When it comes to mastering Japanese, the following books, originally published before the dominance of digital learning materials, are essential.

Shin Kanzen Master (Series)

The merits of passing the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) vary depending on who you ask. However, few doubt that studying the content of this exam, especially as a beginner, serves as a great compass to guide your language-learning journey. And when it comes to mastering JLPT content, few resources can surpass the quality of the [*Shin Kanzen Master*](#) books.

This series is divided by JLPT levels (N4 to N1), and each level contains individual books for each functional section of the test (kanji, vocabulary, grammar, reading, and listening). These books are incredibly thorough and contain example sentences and exercises of the utmost quality. The content of these books tends to be harder than the actual JLPT exams, so “mastering” the *Kanzen Master* series is a surefire way to earn that coveted “pass” certificate or simply level up your overall Japanese ability.

A Dictionary of Basic/Intermediate/Advanced Japanese Grammar (Series)

Like the *Kanzen Master* series, this hallowed collection of grammar books is renowned for its depth, scope, and quality. There are three books in total: [beginner](#), [intermediate](#), and [advanced](#). One key way that these books differ from the *Kanzen Master* books is that they feature English explanations for all skill levels.

While learning kanji and vocabulary words without English explanations can be beneficial for intermediate and advanced learners, the nuance of grammar is more complicated, and English explanations are helpful. Since these books are strictly dictionaries, without exercises, using them with other textbooks and resources is a winning strategy. On a side note, unlike the other books in this article, these dictionaries are now available in Amazon Kindle format.

Kanji in Context

As you can guess from the title, [this three-book collection](#) is all about learning Japanese kanji characters through practical context: commonly used vocabulary and sentences. Like the previous resources, this book is unrivaled in its quality and completeness. The example sentences contained within the workbooks are relevant and natural—a far cry from the dubious, crowd-sourced example sentences one has to sift through on the web.

Be warned, however. To get the most out of this series, you have to buy the entire set of three books. The main reference book is basically a high-quality kanji dictionary. The meat of the study materials, example sentences and exercises, is in the two companion workbooks .

Besides the Kindle versions of the grammar dictionaries, none of the above resources have online components or apps. You might want to manually export the content of these books into your own digital study system. As you peruse these books, **make custom digital flashcard decks to review what you've learned** and beat back the forgetting curve.

Ultimately, a successful study strategy is all about merging the best features of curated books with the interactivity and flexibility of digital resources.



How to Choose the Right Digital Flashcard App For You

Written by Anthony Griffin

Digital flashcard applications are a popular and effective way to study Japanese kanji and vocabulary. However, not all flashcard applications are created equal.

Reviewing flashcards in a random or sequential order is not the most effective way to learn. You need an application that can leverage the power of spaced repetition to quiz you on the right content at the right time to help you enshrine words and kanji characters in your long-term memory.

“Retrieval practice—recalling facts or concepts or events from memory—is a more effective learning strategy than review by rereading. Flashcards are a simple example. Retrieval strengthens the memory and interrupts forgetting.

A single, simple quiz after reading a text or hearing a lecture produces better learning and remembering than rereading the text or reviewing lecture notes.”

Peter C. Brown
Author of *Make It Stick: The Science of Successful Learning*

Considering how quick and easy it is to create and quiz yourself with flashcards, they are the ultimate tool for retrieving what you are learning from your Japanese lessons and textbooks.

The Power of Spaced Repetition

Don't run off and start building your first kanji card deck just yet—any old flashcard app won't do. **You need to select an application built on an algorithm that will leverage the power of spaced repetition.** A reliable flashcard application should quiz you on the words that you struggle with more frequently and vice versa for the words that you can easily recall. This results in the spacing out of your studies with different material resurfacing at hourly, daily, and monthly intervals.

For example, you can see a typical spaced-repetition system (SRS) at work in the popular Wanikani kanji studying software. In this system, once you study a new kanji character or vocabulary word, you'll have to wait four hours until you can review it. If you recall what you learn during your first review, the card will move to a higher SRS stage and won't reappear for eight hours. Keep getting it right, and the interval increases to one day, two days, one week, and so on. This continues until the interval reaches four months. If you can recall the flashcard content after that, the item is considered mastered (or "burned" in Wanikani parlance), never to appear again.



Worrying about timing and algorithms might seem too troublesome for the traditionally rote act of learning new vocabulary. If you're like most Japanese learners, planning to tackle the 2,136 joyo kanji and the 3,863 official readings that accompany them, studying with a spaced repetition algorithm can literally shave years off of your language learning journey. With this in mind, choose wisely before you invest time and effort in a learning platform.

Cardemy; an Authentic Way to Learn Japanese

By Anthony Griffin

I've studied Japanese on and off since I was in college, encountering several progress plateaus along the way. Whenever I managed to cross one of those plateaus, it was due to one of the following pillars of my language-learning journey. The first one was the accountability and coaching I received via formal classes and private lessons. The second pillar was the four years I spent working in a Japanese office, immersed in a constant flow of opportunities for language input and output. Finally, the third pillar was fully embracing the use of digital flashcard applications with spaced-repetition (SRS) algorithms that helped me burn kanji, vocabulary, and grammar into my brain.

Over the years, I've tried almost every app and classroom format imaginable in my never-ending quest to improve my Japanese. However, no single option integrated the three pillars responsible for my progress—**accountability, authenticity, and technology**—under one virtual roof. That changed when Kokoro Media offered me the opportunity to chronicle my experience with Cardemy, an online learning system that combines the best of all worlds: personalized online lessons seamlessly integrated with bespoke, immersive video-flashcard decks.

In this section, I'll share my experience with the full-featured [Cardemy free trial](#), which includes both the online lesson and flash card components of the learning system.

An Online Lesson Tailored to Your Needs

Upon connecting with my instructor via Zoom, I was immediately impressed with just how customized my lesson was. At this point, I had only filled out some basic information about my goals, level, and interests during the free trial onboarding process. Yet within minutes, I was engaged in a lesson based on a hand-picked YouTube news report covering the recent Tokyo Game Show. Although this was a discussion and listening comprehension lesson, I was told that future lessons could include role-playing scenarios to address my other Japanese learning goals (e.g., making pitches and presentations for my business).



My instructor made sure to unobtrusively correct my speech as we conversed, introducing me to new words that were more appropriate and natural for business conversations. I appreciated how she typed the words that I needed to know into the Zoom chat box, even though, like magic, all these words would end up in my personalized digital flashcard deck in a matter of hours.

After watching the minute-long video a few times and working through a few comprehension questions, I could see the vocabulary words I needed to learn to plug the gaps in my understanding. There was never a dull moment in my 30-minute lesson, and before I knew it, it was time to part ways with my instructor. The lesson was effective on its own, and the fact that it's bundled with a robust self-study flashcard routine is not just icing on the cake—it's an extra layer.

Flash Cards: Personalized and Effortlessly Generated

A couple of hours after my lesson, I logged into my Cardemy account and was greeted by custom flashcards based on the content I had just learned. My first task was to confirm which cards—from a mix of AI-generated and hand-picked options—I needed to learn and which ones I already knew. Once I sorted everything out, I had a queue of digital flashcards to review each day, with ideal spacing intervals based on my performance.

Each card featured YouTube content (including the clip from my online lesson) to help me learn words in phrases in relevant, natural contexts. I could even input vocabulary that wasn't covered in my online lesson. I tried this with 通貨 (currency), a word I recently picked up while reading the news in Japanese, and I was amazed to see that Cardemy instantly generated a flashcard featuring a YouTube video clip about the foreign (currency) exchange market. With a feature like this, learning is never limited to your most recent online lesson.

Proceeding through my review queue revealed a variety of cloze-test flash card types, including self-assessment and multiple choice. Cardemy also promises fill-in-the-blank cards that require you to manually input answers—the holy grail of any quality digital flashcard system. At the time of this writing, these have yet to appear in my review queue. However, I expect them to start appearing as my performance improves.

Speaking of performance, Cardemy's algorithm analyzes your progress every day, ensuring that you encounter more difficult flashcards more frequently. However, unlike other digital flashcard systems, Cardemy automatically limits the number of review cards that appear at once, keeping you from getting overwhelmed and demotivated during those times when life gets in the way.

Priced for Progress

The full, "Blended," Cardemy experience currently costs 14,800 yen per month. This includes four 30-minute online lessons per month, complete with access to instructor-created flashcards that you can review anywhere and anytime on your computer or smartphone.

If you are already enrolled in a language school or taking private lessons, Cardemy offers the E-Learning Full option for 6,000 yen per month. This app-only plan omits Cardemy's online lessons but includes all the flashcard features described above and a text-based chat system to request help and customized flashcards from your instructor.

Cardemy is a premium product and is priced accordingly. So, you'll need to consider how its value aligns with your learning style and needs. Fortunately, since Cardemy offers a [free 12-day trial](#) for the Blended experience, there's nothing to lose in giving the system a try. And this is an *actual* free trial—no credit card or payment information is required.

Cardemy CEO Christophe best explains the system's value. "The e-learning component of Cardemy is particularly strong. In traditional schools, you spend a lot of time in class going over kanji, vocabulary, and grammar with a teacher. Cardemy classes focus on conversation practice, and rote learning is done on the app, which is more efficient and cost-effective. As a result, you don't need to pay for as much class time compared to other schools."



Speaking of performance, Cardemy's algorithm analyzes your progress every day, ensuring that you encounter more difficult flashcards more frequently. However, unlike other digital flashcard systems, Cardemy automatically limits the number of review cards that appear at once, keeping you from getting overwhelmed and demotivated during those times when life gets in the way.

Although Cardemy's individual components—online lessons, AI support, and SRS flashcards—are compelling individually, the real magic of this online learning system lies in the sum of its parts. Never has a learning system brought all of **the most effective aspects of language learning together in a cohesive package** quite like this.

As I write this, the Cardemy team is just getting started, and based on my experience, it's only a matter of time before Cardemy becomes a household name among Japanese learners of all levels. Even English—and soon, French—learners can get in on the fun. But don't just take my word for it. [Check out the free trial](#), and experience Cardemy on your own terms to see if it's the right solution for your language-learning needs.

Three Applications That Will Help You Read Japanese

By Anthony Griffin

After coming to grips with the soul-crushing inevitability of having to memorize over 2000 kanji characters, the next wall of frustration that Japanese learners face is reading the same books, magazines, and blog articles that native Japanese speakers do. **Reading is essential for adding context** to the constant influx of vocabulary, kanji, and grammar points that learners face and gives purpose to the rote memorization that language learning requires. Unfortunately, reading native materials can also be incredibly intimidating and demotivating, especially when attempting to read something that is too difficult.

Thankfully, there's an app for that... Or, shall I say, several. Read on to learn about three apps that will aid you in your quest to improve your Japanese reading comprehension skill.

Japanese.io



- Platforms:** web
- Pricing:** \$10/month or \$100 annually (limited free version available)

Japanese.io is a minimal, cleanly designed web application containing a powerful suite of features that empower Japanese learners of nearly all levels to learn, and ultimately comprehend, an unlimited amount of reading material. Available content includes curated collections of classic books, a customizable news feed, and anything else you'd like to read via a powerful text import tool.

Whatever you choose to read, Japanese.io includes several useful tools to aid in the learning process:

- One-click dictionary with vocabulary and kanji definitions
- Built-in text-to-speech support
- A bookmarking system for capturing vocabulary to study
- Full Japanese-to-English translation of existing and imported content

Additionally, Japanese.io provides a detailed breakdown of what you're up against with stats for whatever you're reading—word counts, kanji counts, and estimated difficulty ranked by JLPT level. On top of all that, you can automatically export your bookmarked vocabulary word list into an Anki flash card deck.

It's important to note that the majority of the aforementioned features are locked behind a premium subscription—one without a lifetime option. That being said, anyone with an intense goal to level up their Japanese within the next couple of years will find value in Japanese.io.

Satori Reader



- **Platforms:** web, Android, iOS
- **Pricing:** \$9/month or \$89 annually (limited free version available)

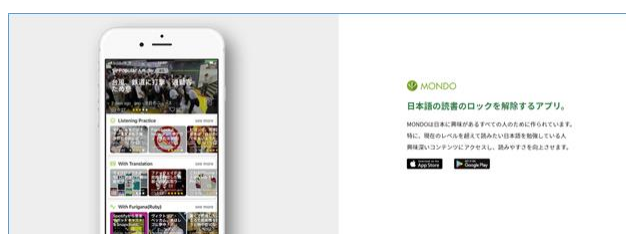
[Satori Reader](#) offers many of the same features as Japanese.io but focuses on originally produced content tailored to each stage of the Japanese learning process.

Additionally, Satori Reader's built-in dictionary goes beyond mere definitions. Words, grammar points, and unusual sentence structures have detailed annotations explaining conjugations and other oddities that threaten to throw your reading comprehension off track.

You can also bank the vocabulary words that you'd like to study with the added benefit of a built-in flashcard system. Additionally, with loads of original, quality audio content, Satori Reader is an excellent resource for improving pronunciation and listening comprehension via shadowing.

Using the full-featured version of Satori Reader comes at a price. However, those who seek a personalized experience with lovingly crafted original content may find the investment worthwhile (albeit a lifetime purchase option would be appreciated). Unfortunately, there's a downside to all of this personalization. When compared to other applications, content is limited and there is no way to add more on your own.

Mondo



- Platforms:** Android, iOS

- Pricing**

 - Basic:** \$2/month, \$10/six months, or \$19 annually

 - Gold:** \$9/month, \$43/six months, or \$79 annually

 - Limited free version available

Best for those who prefer studying on the go, [Mondo](#) is the only mobile-exclusive app on this list. This app stands out by constantly pushing you to increase your reading speed via auto-scrolling text based on a pre-selected characters-per-minute (CPM) rate.

Just as with the other apps on this list, Mondo allows you to bookmark unknown vocabulary words for later study. You can make proprietary flashcards or take fill-in-the-blank quizzes. The app tracks your progress and gamifies the learning process with leaderboards that pit you against other users. Premium subscription options unlock additional features such as listening practice and the ability to access Japanese teachers via the app's chat function.

Unfortunately, despite its ample content and unique features, the Mondo's user-interface and design leaves much to be desired. While it's quick and easy to start reading level-appropriate content and study vocabulary words, doing anything beyond that via the unwieldy app is an exercise in confusion.

Overall Strategy

Considering the above, a solid strategy for using these apps to improve your Japanese reading comprehension would be as follows.

- As long as Japanese.io remains free, this app should be at the core of your reading strategy. There's no downside to using it. Japanese.io will inevitably become a paid service, and as long as there is a reasonably priced lifetime purchase option, I'm confident it will be worth the investment.
- If necessary, supplement your use of Japanese.io with Satori Reader. Beginners may find value in the paid plan with full access to all of the custom content. Intermediate and advanced learners can enjoy the free content but will likely outgrow the limitations of the app and seek reading materials elsewhere.
- Lastly, in addition to the above, ambitious readers can try the free version of Mondo to quantify progress and improvement using the app's character-per-minute rate.

Part Three

Take Advantage

of the World Around You



Optimize Your Japanese Studies by Learning from the World Around You

By Anthony Griffin

As mentioned earlier in the present guide, Japanese textbooks can be a valuable resource when you're starting out with the language. However, it's important to remember that most textbooks are designed for an academic setting. If you have recently moved to Japan and are just starting to pick up the language, you'll need to **approach Japanese in a more practical way.**

During my first year in Japan, I didn't spend enough time formulating a strategy for learning Japanese. For the most part, I simply learned vocabulary, kanji, and grammar in the order presented in my textbooks. This was adequate for survival Japanese (ordering food, asking for directions, shopping, etc.), but had I simply stopped to take stock and prioritize all of the words and kanji that frequently appeared in my daily life, I could have picked up the language faster.

After reading this section, I hope that you can benefit from my mistakes and get a head start on Japanese fluency.

Setting Your Priority

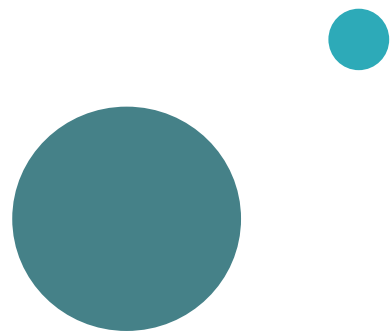
Prioritizing daily-life vocabulary and kanji seems like an obvious approach to tackling Japanese. However, once you move to Japan, you'll realize that the complicated characters found on everything from ATM menu screens to washing machine control surfaces can be overwhelming. One concession I have to make to the textbook-study argument is that there is a method to the madness of memorizing kanji characters. Most books and learning applications start with the simplest kanji and radicals—ones that serve as the foundation for more complicated characters to come.

If you're still in this stage of learning, it's easy to write off the more complicated daily-life kanji as out of your league. Despite that temptation, I suggest making flashcards and studying these characters, regardless of your Japanese level.



In the best-case scenario, you'll increase your vocabulary faster. The human brain prioritizes memories that are rewarding. Repeatedly seeing the words that you are studying as you go through your day creates a sense of novelty and ensures that they stick in your memory. It's much harder to memorize words and characters that only appear in your textbook.

In the worst-case scenario, by pre-studying words from your environment, your brain will be primed for them when they eventually do appear in your textbook or study application.



Getting Started

To get started, here are some practical sources for vocabulary and kanji that will show up in your daily life for as long as you live in Japan.

- Household appliances (television remotes and menus, air conditioner remotes, washing machine controls, etc.)
- Food and beverage packaging
- Touchscreens for commonly used kiosks (e.g., ATM and ticket machines)
- Letters and notices received in the mail (e.g., city hall notices, utility bills, etc.)
- Signs and advertisements along streets and on public transportation

If you need even more frequency-based study material, you can always dive into vocabulary lists [such as this one](#).

Moving to Japan? Learn Katakana First

By Kelsey Lechner

If you're moving to Japan (or even taking an extended vacation), you'll want to start learning the language, including how to read. Register for a class or buy a coursebook. You'll start first from hiragana, then katakana, and finally kanji. It's a natural progression. Actually, it's not. Or at least, not for everyone.

Hear me out. If you're a serious student of Japanese learning outside of Japan, this flow makes absolute sense. This is because the bulk of Japanese can be written in hiragana. With hiragana, you can write anything you don't know the kanji for and almost all of Japanese grammar. Every sentence in Japanese will feature hiragana.

On the other hand, katakana is used significantly less, mostly for foreign loanwords (about 18% of the language), certain common words with kanji that can be too complicated to read and write, or onomatopoeia.

But as an English-speaking immigrant, being able to understand these loanwords will be immensely and immediately useful. In fact, an estimated 90% of the 45,000 loanwords in Japanese come from English. Once you understand the patterns of the language, **you'll essentially have an instant vocabulary bank.**

Katakana Examples

Katakana words permeate all levels of Japanese, from basic shopping items to complicated chemical structures.

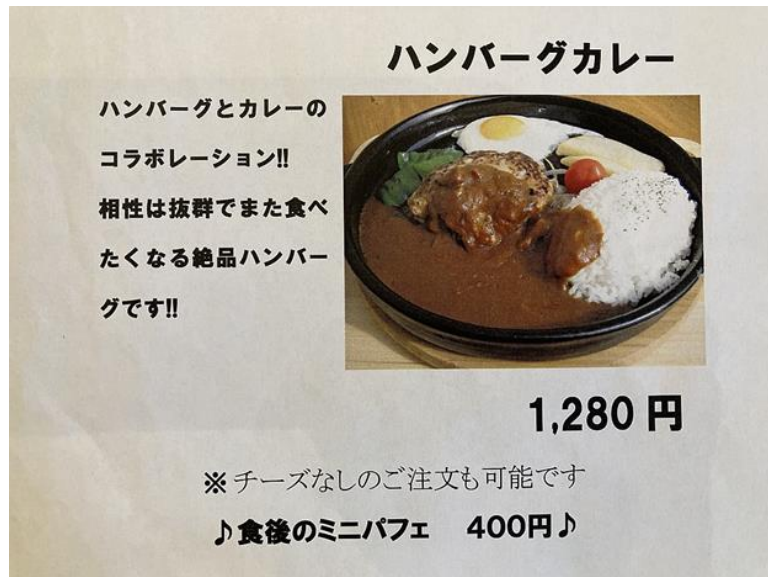
For example, you may go to the store to find:

- バナナ (*banana*, "bananas")
- オレンジ (*orenji*, "oranges")
- チキン (*chikin*, "chicken")
- ラーメン (*raamen*, "ramen")
- パン (*pan*, "bread," from Portuguese "pão")
- オニオンパウダー (*onion paudaa*, "onion powder")
- ハンドソープ (*handu soppu*, "hand soap")
- ペーパータオル (*pepaa taoru*, "paper towels")



While some of the above have a native Japanese word that may be alternatively used, all of these words above are commonly used and written in katakana.

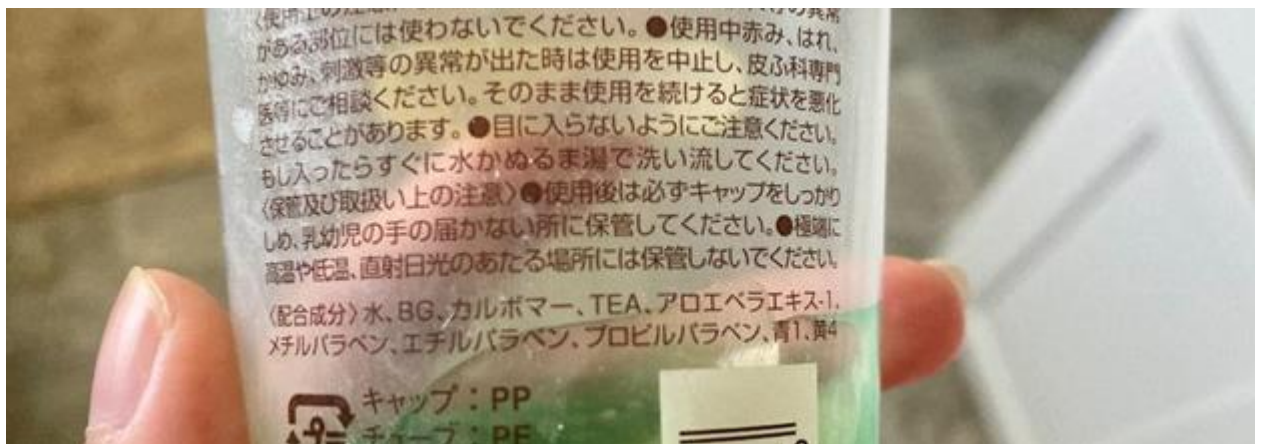
Just in this photo, we see a lot of katakana words:



(Photo credit: 山田好海, CC BY-SA 4.0
<<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0>>, via Wikimedia Commons)

- ハンバーグ (*hanbaagu*, hamburger steak)
- カレー (*kare*, curry)
- コラボレーション (*koraboreshon*, collaboration)
- チーズ (*chiizu*, "cheese")
- ミニパフェ (*mini pafe*, mini parfait)

Here's another type of example. This is an aloe rub I purchased. Let's take a look at the ingredients:



- カルボマー (*karubomaa*, carbomer)
- アロエベラエキス (*aroe bera ekisu*, aloe vera extract)
- メチルパラベン (*mechiruparaben*, methylparaben)
- エチルパラベン (*echiru paraben*, ethylparaben)
- プロピルパラベン (*puopiru paraben*, propylparaben)

Half of the ingredients are written in katakana. If your skin is sensitive to any of them, you'll know what to look out for.

Therefore, if you can understand katakana loanwords, you will have an automatic vocabulary. Next, I'd like to present to you a guide on **how to demystify katakana words taken from English** and how you can put your katakana knowledge to immediate use.

Limits on Japanese Pronunciation Change English Sounds

What are the rules for creating katakana words? Let me tell you. (Note: If you are unfamiliar with how to pronounce Japanese, Tofugu has an excellent [guide](#).)

With the exception of double consonants—the “kk” in *gakko* (“school”), for example—as well as “n” (and sometimes “m,” depending on romanization methods), Japanese consonants always need to be followed by a vowel. Most of the time, that vowel is a “u,” or an “o” after a “t” or “d.”

Therefore, the Japanese-ified version of the English word “sun” turns into サン (*san*). On the other hand, “sum” and “hum” would become サム (*samu*) and ハム (*hamu*), respectively. “Monday” would be written as マンデー (*Mandee*—no “u” sound after “n”), and “Wednesday” would be ウェンズデー (*Wenzudee*—with an “u” after “z”). “Hat” would be pronounced as ハット (*hatto*), with an “o” sound after the “t.”



Japanese also has no distinction between “l” and “r” sounds like English does. Therefore, the English words “read” and “lead” pronounced in Japanese would both be リード (*riido*), and you will need to understand which it is by context. However, when there is an “r” in the middle of the word before a consonant in English, Japanese usually mimics it using a long vowel. With any “l” or “r” with a vowel after it, Japanese typically uses ゾ (*ra*), リ (*ri*), ル (*ru*), レ (*re*), or ロ (*ro*). Therefore, “homework” would be pronounced as ホームワーク (*homuwaaku*), while “homeless” would be ホームレス (*homuresu*). “America” transforms simply into アメリカ (*Amerika*).

We see almost all of these rules played out in “McDonald’s.” McDonald’s in Japanese is マックドナルド (*Makkudonarudo*). We can see an “u” sound after the “k” and “r,” but an “o” after the final “d.” The “l” turns into a ル (*ru*).

When reading katakana words, a little bit of reverse engineering can go a long way. Once you are used to the rules and patterns, you can even try making your own katakana words. When in doubt, if you don’t know a word, see if you can katakana-ize it! It may just be understandable.

Watch Out for False Friends or Wasei-Eigo (“Japan-Made English”)

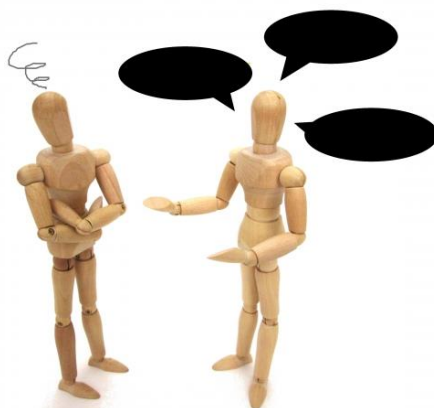
Learners beware: not all katakana words are what they seem. Japanese has plenty of “wasei-eigo,” which literally means “Japan-made English.” These are words that originally came from English, but Japanese has altered them significantly.

Sometimes, if the English word is too long, Japanese will cut off the middle or end to form a new word that is easier to pronounce. Common examples are:

- パソコン (*pasokon*, “PC” –from “personal computer”)
- テレビ (*terebi*, “TV” –from “television”)
- コンビニ (*konbini*, “convenience store”)
- チョコ (*choko*, “chocolate”)

We also saw this with *エキス* (*ekisu*, “extract”) above. Some katakana words have been taken from English but mean something entirely different in Japanese. Examples are:

- コンセント (*konsento*, “power outlet” –not “consent”)
- カニング (*kaningu*, “cheating [on a test]” –not “cunning”)
- マンション (*manshon*, “condominium” –not “mansion”)
- ハンドル (*handoru*, “steering wheel” –not “handle”)
- バイキング (*baikingu*, “buffet” –not “Viking”)



Some *wasei-eigo* takes multiple English words to make new meanings in Japanese.

Some examples are:

- ベビーカー (*bebii kaa*, “stroller”–literally, “baby car”)
- テレビゲーム (*terebi gemu*, “video game”–literally, “TV game”)
- バックミラー (*bakku miraa*, “rear-view mirror”–literally, “back mirror”)
- フライドポテト (*furaido poteto*, “french fries”–literally, “fried potato”)
- アメリカンドッグ (*Amerikan doggu*, “corn dog”–literally, “American dog”)

Starting with hiragana is logical if you are building up your Japanese proficiency. With hiragana you will be able to read and write more sentences while practicing your grammar and vocabulary. However, **if you need immediate survival Japanese, learning katakana should be your priority.**

Basic Tips to Read Books in Japanese

By Amelie Geeraert

Before anything, it is crucial you **choose the book you will read according to your level in Japanese.** In the following sections, I will be referring to the Japanese Language Proficiency Test levels, but please note that it is not exact science and only to give a rough idea how much language knowledge I think would be necessary.

Getting Started: The Best Books for Beginners in Japanese

I remember when I was a beginner in Japanese, someone advised me to start by reading illustrated books for small children (called “*ehon*” in Japanese). However, I have found out this was not the best option for me: there were often vocabulary words or onomatopoeias that, even though are very entertaining for Japanese children, were yet unknown to me.

The words and expressions were far from being on my priority list in my quest for reaching a conversational level. This tip might work for you if you carefully select your books, but I would not recommend it personally.

If you are a beginner but want to start reading, books designed for learners of the Japanese language are a good first choice. I remember having pleasure reading books from the “*Reberubetsu Nihongo Tadoku Raiburarii*” collection.

Each pack includes five or six small books with a different story. The [level zero packs](#) can be read by beginners who have about 350 words of vocabulary and know basic grammar. The [level one packs](#) are for people who are aiming at the JLPT N4 level, and so on up to the [level four packs](#) which are for people aiming at the JLPT N2 level.

Bonus points for this collection: there are *furigana* on all the kanji, and the books come with a CD so you can work on your listening skills as well. The narration is pretty good, which helped me remember new vocabulary.



Intermediate Levels

When you start getting more vocabulary, and are aiming for JLPT N4 level, reading manga is a great option if you choose them carefully.

First, make sure to choose manga for a younger audience because they have furigana on top of all the kanji. This will help you memorize new kanji without even realizing it. If your aim is primarily to get useful vocabulary, then *shonen manga* (mangas written for a young male audience in mind), especially the adventure ones, may not be the best choice. If you are a fan of “One Piece” or “*Kimetsu no Yaiba*” (*Demon Slayer* in English), you will probably enjoy it a lot, but you will maybe remember more names for cool sword techniques than vocabulary you will need to use with your Japanese friends. Some characters are also written so that they talk in a funny or outdated way and there is a risk you will memorize ways of talking that will not be appropriate.

Sports manga and manga that take place in a school setting, or slices of life stories have more chances to provide you with useful material. But of course, the priority is to read what you will enjoy most and keep you motivated!

The next step, maybe from N3 to N2 levels, is to read books for Japanese children. Stories for kids in the higher levels of elementary school or for kids in middle school may not be to your taste, but there are easy-to-read versions of great Japanese classics as well. They provide furigana on the kanji and explanations of rare or old words when necessary. I have fond memories of reading Natsume Soseki’s “[*Botchan*](#)” and Akiyuki Nosaka’s “[*Hotaru no Haka*](#)” (*Grave of the Fireflies*) that way.

Upper Levels

From N2 level and above, it may be a good idea to start reading non-fiction related to your passions or in connection with your job or field of work. On top of acquiring useful knowledge, you will get a ton of words and expressions you will feel a connection with, and this will be even more handy if you are working in Japan or are planning to. For example, check out Anthony's article about the book *Iwata-san* [here](#).



Between N2 and N1 levels is also when you can start reading more complicated fiction. You may want to start with what the Japanese call “light novels,” which is roughly the equivalent of young adult books. The covers are often illustrated manga-style.

If you are braver, you can start reading modern novels, classics, and poetry. The difficulty varies according to the genre, the period, and the author; and it is always best to get a glimpse at a few pages of the book before buying. If you see that you can read it fairly without having to stop at every sentence because of an unknown word, then it is a good match.

Choose Your Reading Style

Once you have picked up one or several good books, it is time to choose *how* you want to read. I personally have two main “reading modes” for Japanese:

- The “**serious study**” **mode** for which I read a few pages, and then look for all the unknown words and kanji. If your book is a paper book, I have found taking pictures with the Google Translation application to be very useful for unknown kanji, even though it is not perfect. As I am a bit old fashioned, I take note of the new things in a good old paper notebook, but you may want to check more technologically advanced Japanese language learning tools, such as the ones we introduced earlier in this guide.

- The “**pleasure**” **mode**: I read the book mostly for entertainment, rely on context for most things I do not know, and only check the words and kanji that keep coming back or seem too important to ignore.

Reading in Japanese can feel very tiring in the beginning, and it is also true each time you start reading something more difficult. However, I have found that, like many other things, by keeping a constant reading practice, it gets easier. By reading a little bit every day, soon enough you will be reading with the same pleasure you would in your native language.

The Best Advanced Japanese Podcasts

By Kelsey Lechner

I am a huge fan of podcasts, but as an advanced Japanese speaker, sometimes I have struggled to find engaging content at the right level in Japanese. I consider myself fluent, but of course, I am not native. I also admit that my reading ability is much stronger than my listening. I can read a newspaper with relative ease but struggle more with audio news broadcasts. I also love to learn something new with podcasts but need them to be in entertaining formats.

This led me to spend a lot of time curating a list of authentic Japanese podcasts for advanced (and native) Japanese speakers. If you want to learn something new about the world in Japanese, here are my top recommendations.



Coten Radio 歴史を面白く学ぶ (*Rekishi o Omoshiroku Manabu*)

[Coten Radio](#) is one of the highest-ranking podcasts in Japan and for good reason. The podcast's tagline translates roughly into "Interesting History Lessons," and it is true to its word! The three hosts include two history lovers and one self-proclaimed "history dummy." The two former hosts teach the latter about an interesting aspect of Japanese or world history over a few episodes per season.

Past topics include Spartan society, the Japanese emperor, Gandhi, and the Russian-Ukrainian relationship. Since the experts are presenting to someone who claims limited understanding of (and previously limited interest in) the topics, the content is both easy to understand and entertaining.

This award-winning podcast is far from the dry lectures you may have had in school!

GNV – グローバル・ニュース・ビュー (*Gurobaru Nyusu Byu*)

[Global News View](#) (GNV) is a more serious podcast that introduces a global issue once a week. GNV is actually a research center at Osaka University with an objective to increase objective understanding of world issues. I view their weekly podcasts as similar to deep-dive news specials. I love that although they with difficult topics such as human trafficking in Nepal, the potential underbelly of lithium batteries, and universal basic income, the delivery is incredibly clear, organized, and spoken at a moderate pace, making it easy to understand.

The two hosts structure each episode into three sections: a fundamental introduction of the topic, the background of the topic, and what is being or can be done to resolve the issues around the topic.

Even though my background is in [international relations](#), I still learn a lot of both vocabulary and new information and perspectives from these podcasts!

ピートのふしぎなガレージ (*Piito no Fushigi na Gareji*)

If you are a fan of *Stuff You Should Know's* "Short Stuff" episodes, you will love ピートのふしぎなガレージ, or "Pete's Mysterious Garage." Surprisingly, this is not about automotive repair but is actually a history/culture audio-drama podcast sponsored by Mitsubishi. This podcast ran from 2013 to 2020, and you can find archives of hundreds of episodes on Google Play and Apple Podcasts.

Each audio-drama episode had a cast of characters, including Pete (a cat), Shin'ichi (an average Japanese man), Prof. Enu (an alien), and Maria (a robot). The professor takes Pete back in time to show him the history of a certain topic throughout different time periods and cultures. Topics can be on just about anything, such as the invention and spread of pizza, movie theaters, insect consumption, women's golf, and hula dancing. Each topic is spread across two episodes, one being the core audio-drama format with the cast of characters, and another interviewing an expert on the topic.

Most episodes are about 10 minutes, so they are easy to fit into your day and great at holding your attention!

About Kokoro Media

Kokoro Media was born in the summer of 2020 with the objective of bringing something new to the already crowded universe of websites about Japan.

We wanted to move away from simply sharing information, and instead, move toward putting people and culture at the center of our purpose. This is, in part, due to the fact that our founding members and contributors all have a personal interest in intercultural exchange, human contact, and listening to the experiences of others.

We have built Kokoro Media around three core values:

1. Respect for Diversity

On one hand, our contributors have very different backgrounds and profiles. On the other hand, we wish to represent Japan in all its forms by putting forward interlocutors of all origins, genders, ages, professions, interests, etc.

2. Encouraging Curiosity

We live in an era that encourages us to consume web content rapidly. We have voluntarily chosen long formats, which allow us to go deeper into the subjects we cover.

We hope to develop our readers' curiosity about different topics, inspire them with new ideas, and offer them new points of view on the world.

3. Candor and Personality

We provide articles based on each writer's experience living in Japan, opinions, personality and style, and articles in an honest and candid way.

The Authors

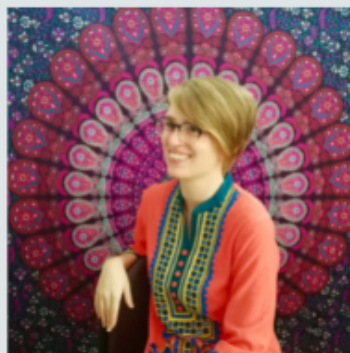


Anthony Griffin

Originally from California, I've been living and working in Japan since 2009. My work as a communications consultant lends a unique perspective to my writing, and I often explore the business behind Japan's beauty. When I'm not working, you can find me hunched over a screen reviewing kanji flashcards in my never-ending quest to master the Japanese language.

Amélie Geeraert

Born in France, I've been living in Japan since 2011. I'm curious about everything, and living in Japan has allowed me to expand my vision of the world through a broad range of new activities, experiences, and encounters. As a writer, what I love most is listening to people's personal stories and sharing them with our readers.



Kelsey Lechner

I am an American writer, translator, and educator. Japan feels like my second home, and I love exploring new countries and learning the local languages while I'm at it. Apart from English and Japanese, I am also conversant in Spanish, Mandarin Chinese, Swahili, and Bengali. I'm also an avid lover of dance, dogs, and tea--give me a mug of cha, an animal to pet, or some music to groove to, and I'm content.



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