

An Introduction to Japanese

An Annotated Compilation of Japanese Resources I Found Useful

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 About the Author and Document Goals

1.1.1 About the Author

My name is Dylan, and I would consider myself a multilingual word nerd, be it in English, Japanese, or Mandarin. For the purposes of this guide; however, you can consider me a Japanese word nerd. In terms of formal qualifications, I have passed the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) N1 test¹ and have performed volunteer translation projects of various technical and non-technical articles. Additionally, I am constantly studying for the Japan Kanji Aptitude Test Levels 1 and 1.5.² Since beginning my studies in 2020, I have amassed thousands of hours of experience in Japanese, matured tens of thousands of Anki cards (more on Anki later), and continue to actively engage with the

¹The Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) is a standardized test used to evaluate and certify the Japanese language proficiency of non-native speakers. It has five levels, with N5 being the easiest and N1 the most advanced. JLPT N1 assesses near-native comprehension of Japanese, including advanced grammar, vocabulary, and reading/listening comprehension.

²The Kanji Kentei (Kanken), evaluates a person's ability to read, write, and understand kanji, the logographic characters used in Japanese. Levels 1 and 1.5, the highest and second highest official levels, are extremely challenging, even for native speakers. Level 1 tests mastery of over 6,000 kanji, including obscure and archaic characters.

language every day.

I enjoy Japanese through a variety of means, including, but not limited to, listening to podcasts, reading literary works (be it more modern works, semi-modern works like those of [Natsume Sōseki](#) such as [吾輩は猫である](#), or older works available through the [国立国会図書館デジタルコレクション](#)), watching shows (not just anime!), as well as researching and learning about new kanji and words.

1.1.2 Document Goals

I occasionally find myself being asked by learners how I studied Japanese. While I am happy to discuss my learning journey, I often repeat myself. To save time for all parties involved, I created this document. It is not meant to serve as a full step-by-step guide on how to learn Japanese, but rather lay out the major resources I found to be useful on my path in learning Japanese as well as give my thoughts on each one, as if I were talking to you in a conversation.

1.2 A Word of Warning Before Starting Japanese

Japanese is not an easy language to learn. The [U.S. Department of State’s School of Language Studies \(SLS\)](#) states as much, ranking Japanese as a Category IV, or “super-hard language.” This is not meant to discourage you, but rather it serves as a warning that learning Japanese to any appreciable level of fluency is going to require patience, perseverance, and a bit of ingenuity. It is no impossible feat, but if I had to give one piece of advice to any Japanese learner, it would be this: **do not miss a day of study!** If you are willing to put in the continued effort needed to succeed, you will find a veritable treasure trove of content to keep you occupied for the rest of your life.

1.3 Important Remarks and Disclaimer

This document is an iteration, typeset in L^AT_EX, from my [previous guide](#) and is liable to further revisions.

I would like to preface the rest of this document by stating that all of the resources and ways of thinking introduced are from **my** experiences with the language—I understand there are varying opinions!³ Furthermore, some of the resources introduced are paid; however, free alternatives are more than likely available.⁴ Finally, to learn more about a given topic, please click the blue hyperlink for a given word/phrase to be redirected to the relevant resource.

³You will find that there exists a bit of politics when it comes to what method is “best” for learning Japanese. Hint: the best method is the one you don’t give up on!

⁴I will do my best to introduce such free alternatives, though if I have not personally used them I cannot vouch for their efficacy.

Chapter 2

Resources

2.1 Beginning Stages: Kana and IME

As an absolute beginner looking to learn Japanese, the first thing you must do is [install an Input Method Editor \(IME\)](#) (how you input Japanese characters on a digital device, be it your computer or smartphone) and [learn kana](#) (the Japanese non-kanji syllabary, composed of [hiragana](#) and [katakana](#)). Refrain from using [romaji](#) unless strictly necessary.

For me, the process of learning¹ kana took about two days of intense study; however, I will admit katakana was a weak spot for a few weeks after learning it, since it doesn't appear as often as hiragana. To help reinforce your knowledge, there are plenty of online applications for drilling kana, which I will leave to your discretion to find and use (though the [guide provided by Tofugu](#) is a good start). I recommend being able to read *and* write kana, if not just to solidify your understanding.

¹Learning here meaning being able to recognize kana.

2.2 Differing Opinions: Grammar and Mining

Now that you have mastered kana and can input it using an IME, it is time to dive into grammar and kanji. This is the point of your Japanese learning journey where, unfortunately, opinions on what you should do radically differ. For the purposes of this guide, I will share how I progressed.

To begin, it is time to dive into grammar and kanji. Before starting, while I understand there is a “grand mystique” around kanji, as long as you’re committed to actually learning the language as a whole, it’s not a big deal once you hit a “critical mass” of kanji knowledge: you come to use kanji to learn new kanji. What I mean by this is that even if you encounter a word unfamiliar to you, most words use a certain set of common kanji that you will be able to guess their reading/meaning from. To further supplement this, there is also the topic of [types of kanji](#) and [semantic-phonetic composition](#), both topics I strongly encourage you to read about before getting too deep into your studies—consider the topics important prerequisites. There are, of course, exceptions and things you just have to memorize (use your favorite mnemonic device to help you with this), especially for kun’yomi readings.

To accompany you throughout your entire Japanese language learning journey, you need a way to save new words. I **cannot overstate the importance of installing [Anki](#), setting up [Yomitan](#), and installing appropriate dictionaries**. As you progress through your studies, I recommend trying to work in Japanese (i.e. use JP-JP dictionaries) as much as possible, as the [additional cognitive effort required to convert between English and Japanese may impede your understanding](#).

As for grammar and kanji/vocabulary mining², **here are some plug-and-play resources I recommend:**

- [WaniKani](#): (Paid. I recommend either going monthly or getting their lifetime license during their mid-December sale.) A pillar of kanji and vocabulary knowledge and my original go-to original resource for learning kanji and fundamental vocabulary. I will admit that its importance does wane as you progress to more esoteric kanji/vocabulary, but it is nevertheless an effective way of learning kanji, especially at the early stages.³ Note that WaniKani can be substituted with appropriate Anki decks for free. One such deck that I still use even after completing WaniKani can be found on the [JP-EN Language Exchange Discord server](#) from [this](#) message. I use the monolingual (JP-JP) deck listed to study Kanken level 1.5 and 1 (the deck provides writing and reading practice and can be sorted by Kanken level). I often add common jukugo (kanji compounds) that the kanji is a part of via Yomichan into a separate deck.
- [KameSame](#): (Free.) A good supplement to WaniKani in that it tests you on production in more depth. Remember to link your API key. The usefulness of this utility wanes as you progress into higher-level vocabulary, as at that point you should start to only use Japanese. You need not use this application if you use the Anki deck I previously mentioned.
- [Bunpro](#): (Paid. They also have a yearly sale during December for a permanent license. Their monthly subscription price is low, however.) This was my favorite service when I was learning grammar. While for some it does not replace a textbook, it is well-suited for going along *with* one (one such textbook I will soon recommend). It also uses a spaced-repetition system

²Mining refers to the act of adding new words to your spaced-repetition software of choice for further review.

³If you decide to use WaniKani, I strongly urge you to also install some scripts to augment the experience. I personally used *double check* and *semantic-phonetic composition*. The full list of scripts can be found [here](#).

(SRS), which is an extremely efficient way of learning **if** you keep up with reviews. [This](#) website provides some promising supplements/replacements to Bunpro, though such replacements are more manual. Beware that Bunpro lacks a proper “workbook” component, meaning that the user is still required to find ways to solidify their understanding of the grammar on their own.

When it comes to learning Japanese grammar the old-fashioned way, I learned the basics through **Genki I and II**, the third edition. I personally ordered physical copies, but if you try hard enough I’m certain you will also be able to find them online as a PDF. As I went through each chapter in my textbook, I added the relevant grammar points in Bunpro and took notes in my own words in OneNote (this is important for retention!) for future reference. There are mixed opinions on whether or not to do the enclosed exercises (i.e. the workbook), though the consensus seems to be that they are not worth the time for most learners. Remember to stay organized. After Genki II, I went through **Quartet I and II**, made by the same publisher. After this I mainly used native material.

2.2.1 A Comment on Learning to Write Kanji by Hand

Many learners are unsure whether it is beneficial or worth their time to learn to write kanji by hand. As someone who studies for the Kanken and regularly writes many kanji, my thoughts are as such: while not necessary, taking the time to learn to write kanji encourages you to thoughtfully break down kanji into their constituent components (thus better internalizing and being able to discern similar characters, for instance 待 and 持), learn [stroke order](#), and be able to demonstrate your ability to write these remarkable characters.

Admittedly, when I started studying Japanese, I deferred learning how to really write kanji for a few years, only truly starting once I began studying for the Kanken. To that end, while it is not essential, knowing how to write kanji, even just the quotidian ones, ultimately carry substantial benefit to your overall

understanding of kanji.

I often hear of people not interested in learning to write kanji because they will never “use” such a skill. This is an unfortunate line of thinking: why bother learning anything at all? I **strongly recommend** watching [this video](#) (or reading the accompanying essay) that discusses this thought process more if you are interested: just replace ‘math’ with ‘writing kanji.’

2.3 Miscellaneous Resources, Writing, and Native Reading Material

In my experience, I found it best to largely refrain from interacting with native material until after Genki II. Of course, there is no *harm* per se in doing so, but you may encounter difficulties and frustration in a lack of understanding. After Quartet II; however, you should be able to largely read everyday Japanese content. Furthermore, after Quartet II, you should be striving to **only** read native content, adding new grammar points to Bunpro as they appear in texts. At this point, you should try using monolingual Japanese dictionaries in your Yomitan setup. I see many advanced Japanese learners still cling to bilingual dictionaries, which frankly baffles me at times. In any case, below are some miscellaneous resources I found useful:

- [Jisho](#): A useful bilingual dictionary covering most common (and some very uncommon) Japanese words. Owing to its bilingual status, do be careful with its definitions. I prefer to use the JP-JP definition for words using Yomitan as it avoids ambiguity. Nevertheless, this resource is useful, and since it is free, it is a resource one should consider using.
- [Kakimashou](#): If you are not already using a writing Anki deck but want to conveniently practice your kanji writing, this site is indispensable. There is also a similar application on Android/iOS called Kanji Study that achieves more or less the same result, though it does have some paid elements.

- Native Reading Material: In terms of finding native material in order to read, it's really up to you and your tastes. If you enjoy science fiction and want to improve your technical vocabulary, the [SCP foundation](#) is perfect for you. If you want manga, check out [this website](#). Free novels? This [website](#) or [this website](#). News? Try [NHK News](#) or [NHK News Easy](#) for normal news and [editorials](#) to challenge your reading comprehension.

2.4 Listening Resources

I decided to make listening a separate section as I personally found this to be one of the trickiest parts of learning Japanese. As a word of advice, get on listening as soon as possible. My process for listening in Japanese started with just the listening exercises provided by my textbooks, and once my textbooks were finished, learner-oriented Japanese podcasts/videos. After this, I used slowed-down native material in which I took notes of words I didn't catch/understand, and finally normal-speed material where I occasionally took notes of words I didn't know/failed to catch. With all that being said, here are the listening resources I recommend:

- [This list of Japanese podcasts for beginners](#): (Free.) While I know I'm being a bit lazy by dumping a list of podcasts, I feel that since there is such a vast spectrum of listening ability, it is best up to you, the learner, to find which level best suits you. I personally recommend the Let's Learn Japanese from Small Talk podcast for beginners and [ゆる言語学ラジオ](#) as well as its sister channels for more advanced learners.
- [Animelon](#): (Free.) Much to the chagrin of Japanese learners everywhere, it is disproportionately difficult to find Japanese anime/content only in Japanese subtitles if you do not live in Japan. This website solves this issue, while also being highly customizable with how you view its content. A word of advice: do not use English subtitles—only Japanese ones!
- Netflix with a VPN set to Japan: (Paid.) As the title implies, using a

VPN and setting your region to Japan lets you view a wealth of Japanese native content, though this requires both a Netflix and VPN subscription.

- Whatever you like watching, just in Japanese: Pretty self-explanatory. I personally enjoy watching Minecraft let's plays in Japanese on YouTube, but anything works. If people are speaking too fast, simply turn down the video speed and try to write down in a text editor what is being said and mine it for later.

Chapter 3

Conclusion

3.1 A Final Thought

Japanese is a difficult language to learn. However, if you are disciplined, you will, if not slowly, come to be able to listen, write, speak, and *think* in Japanese. If you have gotten this far into reading this guide, I assume you are extremely determined to learn this language, and I say all the power to you. Learning a language is a lifelong journey. Good luck, don't skimp out on your SRS reviews, and I hope your efforts prove fruitful.