

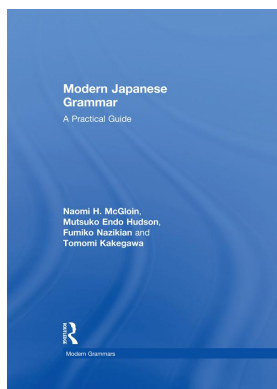
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## **Modern Japanese Grammar A Practical Guide**

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### **Writing system**

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# 3

## Writing system

Four types of writing system are used in Japanese: **hiragana**, **katakana**, **kanji** and, to a lesser degree, **roomaji**. A very general description of each type follows the example sentence below.

妻はフランス語の通訳としてUNで働いています。

**Tsuma wa Furansugo no tsuuyaku toshite UN de hataraitte imasu.**

wife *topic* France-language 's interpreter as UN at work-ing is

Kj H Kt Kj H R H Kj H H

(H: **hiragana**; Kt: **katakana**; Kj: **kanji**; R: **roomaji**)

(My) wife works (Lit. is working) for the UN as a French interpreter.

### 3.1

#### Hiragana

**Hiragana** are a set of 46 phonetic symbols, plus a couple of diacritic devices for voiced and *p* sounds; e.g. あ (a), か (ka), が (ga), ぬ (nu), ほ (ho), ぼ (bo), ぽ (po). They were created from the cursive style of **kanji** (Chinese characters) with similar sounds; e.g. 安→あ (a), 加→か (ka), 奴→ぬ (nu), 保→ほ (ho). They are chiefly used for particles (e.g. で **de** for location), inflected parts (e.g. 行った **itta** 'go-past', 若い **aoi** 'young-nonpast'), adverbs (e.g. ゆっくり **yukkuri** 'slowly'), and auxiliaries (見ている **mite iru** 'is seeing'). Train station names also appear in **hiragana**, as well as in **kanji**, on signs.

The sound and the symbol do not match for the particles **wa** (topic), **e** ('to'), and **o** (direct object). The symbols は (**ha**), へ (**he**), and を (originally **wo**) are used respectively. Palatal sounds are written with normal size *i*-row symbols of the **hiragana** chart, followed by small や (**ya**), ゆ (**yu**), or よ (**yo**).

きゃ	<b>kya</b> (ki+small ya)	しゅ	<b>shu</b> (shi+small yu)
りょ	<b>ryo</b> (ri+small yo)	ぴょ	<b>pyo</b> (pi+small yo)

▶ Appendix I

### 3.2

#### Katakana

**Katakana** are a set of 46 phonetic symbols, a vowel elongation symbol (ー), and a couple of diacritic devices for voiced and *p* sounds; e.g. ア (a), カ (ka), ガ (ga), ヌ (nu), ホ (ho), ボ (bo), ポ (po). They were created by taking a fragment of **kanji** (Chinese characters) with similar sounds; e.g. 阿→ア (a), 加→カ (ka), 奴→ヌ (nu), 保→ホ (ho). Some **katakana** symbols are based on the same **kanji** as those on which the corresponding **hiragana** symbols are based, but not all of them. **Katakana** symbols look angular, compared to the curvy hiragana.

**Katakana** is used mainly for loan words (especially those from countries other than China), to represent sounds (onomatopoeia), to express special nuances of words, including slang expressions, and to make a sound or word stand out from the rest.

アメリカ **Amerika** ‘America’      コンピュータ (一) **konpyuuta(a)** ‘computer’  
 ゴツン **gotsun** ‘thump!’      ワンワン **wanwan** ‘bowwow’

ヒロシマ **Hiroshima** ‘Hiroshima’ (as the internationally recognized city)

キツイ **kitsui** ‘difficult, harsh’ (special meaning; originally ‘tight’)

モノとコトは使い方が違う。‘**Mono**’ to ‘**koto**’ wa tsukai kata ga chigau.

**Mono** (‘thing’) and **koto** (‘thing’) are used differently.

Palatal sounds are written with normal size **i**-row symbols of the **katakana** chart, followed by small ヤ (**ya**), ユ (**yu**), or ヨ (**yo**).

キャ	<b>kya</b> ( <b>ki</b> +small <b>ya</b> )	シュ	<b>shu</b> ( <b>shi</b> +small <b>yu</b> )
リョ	<b>ryo</b> ( <b>ri</b> +small <b>yo</b> )	ピョ	<b>pyo</b> ( <b>pi</b> +small <b>yo</b> )

To accommodate foreign sounds, some combinations of **katakana** have been devised that do not exist in **hiragana**.

ウオ **wo** (**u**+small **o**): ウォーター **wootaa** ‘water’ (or ウォーター **uootaa**)

ティ **ti** (**te**+small **i**): ティーバッグ **tii baggu** ‘tea bag’

デュ **dyu** (**de**+small **yu**): デュース **dyuusu** ‘deuce’ (or ジュース **juusu**)

トゥ **tu** (**to**+small **u**): トゥー **tuu** ‘two’ (or ツー **tsuu**)

ファ **fa** (**fu**+small **a**): ファイト **faito** ‘fighting spirit’

### ▶ Appendix II

## 3.3

### Kanji (Chinese characters)

**Kanji** are logographic (word-representing) characters borrowed from Chinese since the fifth or sixth century. They are used for nouns and substantive parts of verbs and adjectives; e.g. ‘wife,’ ‘language,’ ‘interpreter,’ ‘work’ (in ‘working’) in the first example in this section, ‘(My) wife works (Lit. is working) for the UN as a French (language) interpreter.’ To be literate in Japanese, one needs to know a little over 2,000 characters (called **jooyoo kanji** ‘Chinese characters for daily use’), which children learn during their nine years of compulsory education. Young children’s books are written in **hiragana**, and it is common for children to use **hiragana** to write words for which they do not yet know the **kanji**. Among adults, there are individual preferences even for the same words. Some people like to use **kanji**, while others do not.

## 3.4

### Roomaji (Roman alphabet)

**Roomaji** is used mainly for acronyms (e.g. BBC, CD, OL ‘office lady’), station names (for foreigners’ benefit), and some brand names. Recently, it is becoming more and more common to write the names of pop artists (JUJU, Superfly), bands (e.g. GReeeeN, HY, SMAP), and songs (e.g. Love) in romaji (or English).