

## Pronunciation

Japanese has five vowels. Like the vowels in many European languages other than English, they are “pure” vowels; that is, they are not diphthongized. The vowels are pronounced roughly like these sounds in standard North American English: “A” as in “father,” “E” as in “set,” “I” as in “bee,” “O” as in “toe” (but without the “W” glide at the end) and “U” midway between the vowels in “good” and “goo” (but with the lips less rounded, and without the “W” glide at the end). Vowels in Japanese may be long or short. Long vowels are held for twice as long as short vowels, but except for the length, there is no difference in pronunciation between short and long vowels.

That said, the short vowels “I” and “U,” and occasionally others, are often whispered (“devoiced”) when they come between two unvoiced consonants. For this reason, words such as “deshita” and “Asuka” often sound like “deshta” and “Aska” to the English ear.

Consonants may also be short or long (“doubled”). Doubled consonants are pronounced by holding the sound for an extra beat, something like the “P” sound in “cap-pistol.”

The “L” and “R” sound issue is a bit misunderstood: all Japanese can pronounce one of them, and many can pronounce both. The problem is that in the Japanese language they do not discriminate between the sounds, and to the English ear it sometimes sounds like an “L,” and sometimes more like an “R,” or even like a rapid “D” as in “adder.”

Japanese also has what is called a “syllabic nasal.” This sounds like the English “N” in “night” when it is followed by an “S,” “Z,” “T,” “D,” “N,” or “R” sound, like the “NG” in “sing” when followed by a vowel or a “K,” “G,” “Y,” or “W” sound, and like the “M” in “man” when followed by a “B,” “P,” or “M” sound.

Japanese lacks the strong stress accent found in English, and so in Japanese it is generally safest to pronounce a word flat, making each syllable (including the syllabic nasal) the same length. This means that instead of “tsuNAmi” (as pronounced in English), it is better to pronounce all three syllables with equal stress. (Japanese does have a pitch accent, but its complexities are beyond the scope of this brief overview.)

## Hepburn Romanization

Several methods are in use to transliterate Japanese into the Latin alphabet. A modified version of the Hepburn system is probably the most widespread, and it also has the advantage of being the easiest for English speakers to learn. Others that may be encountered include the Kunrei and Nippon systems.

In Hepburn romanization, “sh” and “ch” represent sounds like those written the same way in English, as in “fish” and “chocolate.” The sound represented by “g” is always hard as in “get,” never soft as in “age.”

Note that the hiragana and katakana character sets map to the same sounds. There are many exceptions, but katakana is generally used for loan words from other languages, while hiragana is more commonly used for native Japanese words.

## Simple Sounds

Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana
a	あ	ア	ka	か	カ	sa	さ	サ
i	い	イ	ki	き	キ	shi	し	シ
u	う	ウ	ku	く	ク	su	す	ス
e	え	エ	ke	け	ケ	se	せ	セ
o	お	オ	ko	こ	コ	so	そ	ソ

Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana
ta	た	タ	na	な	ナ	ha (1)	は	ハ
chi	ち	チ	ni	に	ニ	hi	ひ	ヒ
tsu	つ	ツ	nu	ぬ	ヌ	fu	ふ	フ
te	て	テ	ne	ね	ネ	he (2)	へ	ヘ
to	と	ト	no	の	ノ	ho	ほ	ホ

Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana
ma	ま	マ	ya	や	ヤ	ra	ら	ラ
mi	み	ミ				ri	り	リ
mu	む	ム	yu	ゆ	ユ	ru	る	ル
me	め	メ				re	れ	レ
mo	も	モ	yo	よ	ヨ	ro	ろ	ロ

Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana
wa	わ	ワ	n (5)	ん	ン
wi (3)	ゐ	ヰ			
we (3)	ゑ	ヱ			
o (4)	を	ヲ			

Notes:

- (1) Romanized as “wa” when used as grammatical particle.
- (2) Romanized as “e” when used as grammatical particle.
- (3) No longer in use.
- (4) Historically “wo.” Now used only as grammatical particle.
- (5) The syllabic nasal; also often romanized as “m” before “b,” “m,” or “p.”

## Voiced Consonants and "P"

Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana
ga	が	ガ	za	ざ	ザ	da	だ	ダ
gi	ぎ	ギ	ji	じ	ジ	ji	ぢ	ヂ
gu	ぐ	グ	zu	ず	ズ	zu	づ	ヅ
ge	げ	ゲ	ze	ぜ	ゼ	de	で	デ
go	ご	ゴ	zo	ぞ	ゾ	do	ど	ド

Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana
ba	ば	バ	pa	ぱ	パ
bi	び	ビ	pi	ぴ	ピ
bu	ぶ	ブ	pu	ぷ	プ
be	べ	ベ	pe	ぺ	ペ
bo	ぼ	ボ	po	ぽ	ポ

In words written in katakana, long vowels are usually indicated by placing a bar after the vowel, as in カーブ (from "curve") and ブルー (from "blue"). In the Hepburn system, words whose kana spellings use a bar to indicate a long vowel are always romanized by placing a macron over the vowel.

In hiragana, long "A," "I," and "U," are always spelled by writing the vowel sound twice, as in おかあさん, うつくしい, and ふうりん. Long "E" is sometimes spelled in the same way, by placing an "e" character after the "E" sound, as in おねえさん, but more commonly it is spelled by placing the character for "i" after the "E" sound, as in せんせい. Long "O" is usually spelled by placing the character for "u" after the "O" sound, as in たいおう, but there are a number of common exceptions where the first character containing the "O" sound is followed by the "o" character, as in とおい and おおきい. There are also cases where the following "u" character is a verb ending that keeps its pronunciation as "U" and does not indicate a long "O," as in おもう. Here are the rules for romanization for such cases:

- Long "A," "O," and "U" are indicated by placing a macron over the long vowel.
- Long "E" follows the same pattern when the long vowel is indicated by the "e" character, but is written "ei" when the kana spelling uses the "i" character.
- Long "I" is always written "ii."

For example,

おかあさん	okāsan
うつくしい	utsukushii
おねえさん	onēsan
たいおう	taiō
とおい	tōi

ビール	bīru
ふうりん	fūrin
せんせい	sensei
おもう	omou

In phonetic Japanese script, a small "tsu" is used to show that the following consonant is to be pronounced doubled. In romanized Japanese, doubled consonants are transliterated by writing the consonant twice, except for a doubled "CH" sound, which is romanized as "-tch-."

kk (as in "Nikkō")	にっこう
pp (as in "ippai")	いっぱい
ss (as in "bassuru")	ばっする
tch (as in "matcha")	まっちゃ
tt (as in "matte")	まって

When the syllabic nasal is followed by a vowel or a “Y” sound, an apostrophe (‘) is placed after the “n” to show that the “n” is not part of the following syllable. The following examples illustrate the difference.

きにゅう (記入)	kinyū
きんゆう (金融)	kin’yū

### Short Compound Syllables

Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana
kya	きゃ	キャ	sha	しゃ	シャ	cha	ちゃ	チャ
kyu	きゅ	キユ	shu	しゅ	シュ	chu	ちゅ	チュ
kyo	きょ	キョ	sho	しょ	ショ	cho	ちょ	チョ

Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana
nya	にゃ	ニャ	hya	ひゃ	ヒャ	mya	みゃ	ミャ
nyu	にゅ	ニユ	hyu	ひゅ	ヒユ	myu	みゅ	ミユ
nyo	にょ	ニョ	hyo	ひょ	ヒョ	myo	みょ	ミョ

Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana
rya	りゃ	リャ	gya	ぎゃ	ギャ	ja	じゃ	ジャ
ryu	りゅ	リュ	gyu	ぎゅ	ギユ	ju	じゅ	ジュ
ryo	りょ	リョ	gyo	ぎょ	ギョ	jo	じょ	ジョ

Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana	Latin	hiragana	katakana
ja	じゃ	ジャ	bya	びゃ	ビャ	pya	ぴゃ	ピャ
ju	じゅ	ジュ	byu	びゅ	ビユ	pyu	ぴゅ	ピユ
jo	じょ	ジョ	byo	びょ	ビョ	pyo	ぴょ	ピョ

Foreign names and some other words (especially loan words) are written using compound-kana spellings that are not covered in the foregoing tables. The following examples illustrate the principles of romanizing such words.

ヴァイオリン	vaiorin	violin
フューズ	fyūzu	fuse
ティラミス	tiramisu	tiramisu
クォーター	kwōtā	quarter

フォーク	fōku	fork
デュアル	dyuaru	dual
ツエツエばえ	tsetsebae	tse-tse fly
ジェスチャー	jesuchā	gesture

## Variant Systems

While most romanizations in the Kunrei and Nippon systems match those of the Hepburn system, there are a few differences:

Hepburn	Kunrei	Nippon
ka	ka	kwa
ga	ga	gwa
shi	si	si
ji (じ)	zi	zi
chi	ti	ti
ji (ぢ)	zi	di
tsu	tu	tu
zu (づ)	zu	du
fu	hu	hu
o (を)	o	wo
sha	sya	sya

Hepburn	Kunrei	Nippon
shu	syu	syu
sho	syo	syo
ja (じゃ)	zya	zya
ju	zyu	zyu
jo	zyo	zyo
cha	tya	tya
chu	tyu	tyu
cho	tyo	tyo
ja (ぢゃ)	zya	dya
ju	zyu	dyu
jo	zyo	dyo

The Kunrei and Nippon systems indicate long vowels using a circumflex ( ^ ) instead of a macron ( ¯ ).

One feature of the Kunrei and Nippon systems is that they attempt to reflect the original Japanese kana more closely than the Hepburn system does. However, this leads to romanized spellings that may give rise to incorrect pronunciations by readers unfamiliar with these systems (“tyo” and “zyo,” for example). The Hepburn system overcomes this by using spelling conventions familiar to English readers, and that will, it is hoped, guide the reader toward something closer to the actual Japanese pronunciation (“cho” and “jo”).

One other variant that is less systematic, but often seen, is what has come to be called “baseball romanization” because of its use in writing the names of professional baseball players on their uniforms. This system is based on the Hepburn system, but instead of macrons over long vowels it uses an “h” after the vowel to be lengthened, as in “Kondoh” and “Saitoh.”

Occasionally other methods are seen for indicating long vowels, such as by writing the vowel sound twice, as in Toukyou or Tookyoo for “Tokyo.”

Not a true variant but an often-seen error in romanization is the insertion of a superfluous “y” in some short compound syllables. This appears to be a confounding of the Hepburn system with other systems, giving rise to such misspellings as “shya,” “chyu,” and “jyo” (the correct Hepburn romanizations for these being “sha,” “chu,” and “jo”).

## Kurodahan’s Policy

We prefer to use the modified Hepburn system for most uses because of its simplicity and the ease with which it can be learned by readers of English. Macrons indicating long vowels are sometimes omitted, especially in nonspecialist texts and for place-names and other proper nouns whose conventional English spellings ignore distinctions in vowel length (e.g., Tokyo, not Tōkyō; Osaka, not Ōsaka; and Tojo Hideki, not Tōjō Hideki). For personal names whose owners have demonstrated a clear preference for a particular spelling, we try whenever possible to observe the owner’s preference. (As the last example above shows, it is also Kurodahan’s policy to write Japanese and other East Asian names in their original order, that is, family name first and given name last, unless the owner of the name has demonstrated a preference for reversed order.)

In specialist texts, and for Japanese words from an older stage of the language, we may use spellings based on the Nippon system, as in Middle Japanese tahutosi (Modern Japanese tōtoi).