

AN INTRODUCTION TO KANJI

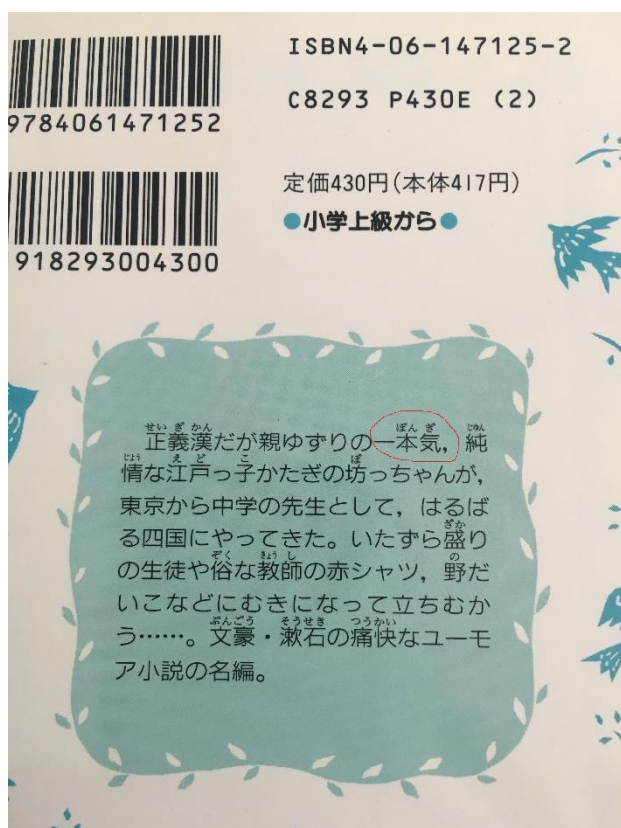
Kanji is a little different to the hiragana and katakana scripts so we are going to give you some background information before you dive into mastering the words in this program. The first difference is that the hiragana and katakana alphabets are individual letters. They represent a sound and usually need to be combined with other letters to become a word.

For example:

にほん nihon Japan

In this example, the first word is written in hiragana, the second word is written in romaji and the third word tells us the meaning in English. Although there are some exceptions, generally those hiragana letters are always pronounced the same way regardless of what word they are in. The hiragana don't give you a clue as to what the word means, you just have to recognise the word from the pronunciation.

Kanji is special because each Kanji is a simplified picture that has evolved over the years. Originally kanji came from China but it has been modified over the years so that some kanji now look different to the Chinese Kanji and they are pronounced in different ways.



Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji work together. Let's take a look at an example of a Japanese text and see if you can recognise some hiragana and katakana.

Look at the image on the left and highlight some of the letters you know.

Did you find some examples of both hiragana and katakana?

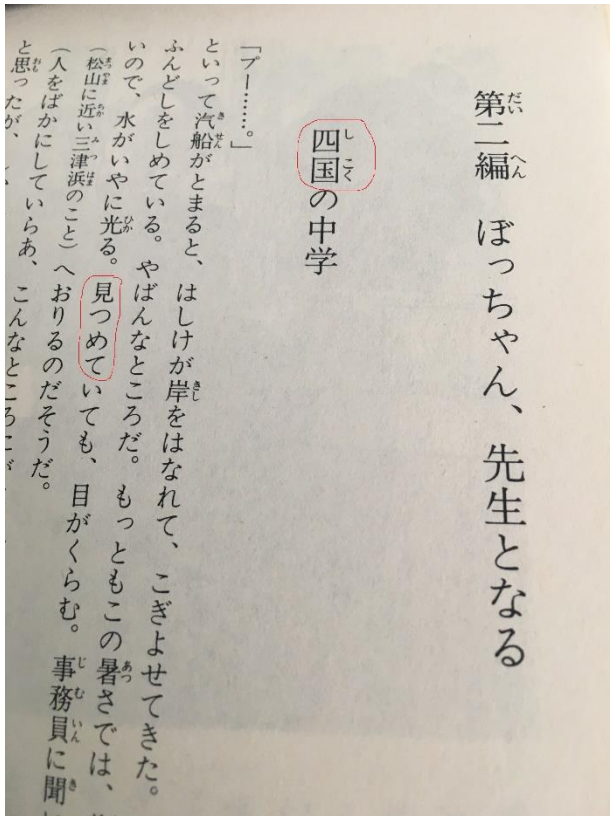
This is the back cover of a famous Japanese novel called Botchan by Natsume Soseki. It is natural Japanese so if you can read some of the letters here you are well on your way to reading "real Japanese"!

Now take a look at the word that is circled in red.

Can you see that there are small hiragana letters written above the kanji word? These small hiragana letters are called **furigana**. You need to learn this word! Furigana help readers know how to pronounce the kanji.

Before we move on to another text example, take a look at the direction the words are written. Can you see that this text is written left to right? We call this a

horizontal text. Some of you may be thinking, I know that it is a horizontal text but how do I know that it is written from the left to the right? That is a good question! Consider your background knowledge of English. When you start a paragraph in English what do you have to do? If you said, indent from the left a little before you write the first word, then you are spot on. If we look at our Japanese example here, we can also see that they have indented on the left which would allow us to guess that they were writing left to right. Try to use your knowledge of English and other languages as you make predictions about Japanese texts – you will be surprised what you will be able to work out using this strategy.



Now let's take a look at a page out of the Botchan novel.

What do you notice about the direction of the text? Do you think this is a vertical text or a horizontal text?

It is a vertical text, isn't it. When writing a vertical text in Japanese, the sentence is written from the right to the left. So in our example you may notice that the words on the right in the first line are bigger because it is the chapter title.

When we looked at the horizontal text, you may have noticed that the **furigana** was written above the kanji word.

Where is it written on a vertical text?

It is written on the right of the kanji word, isn't it. You can see this on the example that is circled in the middle of the page. This is another example of **furigana**.

There is one more term that you need to learn about kanji to really understand it as a system. Look at the second circled word located on the left of the page.

Can you see that the word begins with a kanji and has three hiragana following it? These hiragana are **okurigana**. Okurigana are always written in hiragana and are the special talent of Hiragana. They indicate the grammatical ending, for example if the verb is in the negative tense or the past tense.

The next interesting thing to note about kanji is that each kanji has more than one way of being pronounced. Generally speaking this is divided into **kunyomi** and **onyomi** readings. **Kunyomi** is the original Japanese pronunciation and the sound attached to the kanji's most basic meaning.

For example: 人 This kanji means person. ^{ひと}人 You can see here that the furigana above the word is hito. This is the kunyomi reading of this kanji.

Onyomi are based on the Chinese pronunciation and are used when the kanji becomes part of a compound word. A mnemonic to help you remember this is that onyomi is when the kanji is "on" another kanji to form a compound.

For example: 日本人 This kanji means Japanese person. ^{にほんじん}日本人 You can see here that the furigana above the word is nihonjin. "Jin" is the onyomi reading of this kanji.

Unfortunately, Kanji can have several onyomi though! This kanji can also be pronounced in the following ways:

^{さんにん}三人 3 people

^{ひとり}一人 1 person

At this stage, just aim to remember the key terms and learn each Kanji compound case by case. As you increase your knowledge of Kanji, you will find you will be able to make better predictions about how it is most likely to be pronounced. Reading Japanese is a real achievement so be proud of your efforts and keep at it!