

日本語

JAPANESE FOR SOCIAL LIFE

Foundations

きほん・の・にほんご

Everything you need before you say a word to anyone — how the language **sounds**, the kana, and the politeness dial that quietly decides whether a stranger warms to you or backs away.

LESSON 0 OF 6

01 How Japanese actually sounds はっおん

Good news: Japanese pronunciation is far easier for an English speaker than the reverse. There are only five vowel sounds, they never change, and there is no heavy word-stress to trip over. Nail the five vowels and you already sound better than most learners.

The five vowels — the whole game あいうえお

Every Japanese sound is built from these. They are short, clean, and constant.

KANA	SOUNDS LIKE (ENGLISH)	EXAMPLE WORD	MEANING
あ a	"ah" — as in father	あい <i>ai</i>	love
い i	"ee" — as in see	いいえ <i>iie</i>	no
う u	"oo" — as in boot (lips relaxed)	うみ <i>umi</i>	sea
え e	"eh" — as in bed	えき <i>eki</i>	station
お o	"oh" — as in or	おとこ <i>otoko</i>	man

Five things that instantly make you sound natural

RULE	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLE
Even timing (mora)	Give every syllable equal length. Don't stress one beat like in English. Ka-ra-o-ke = 4 equal beats, not "ka-RAO-kee".	からおけ <i>ka-ra-o-ke</i>
Long vowels matter	A doubled vowel is held twice as long — and can change the meaning.	おばさん / おばあさん <i>obasan / obāsan</i> = aunt / grandma

RULE	WHAT IT MEANS	EXAMPLE
Soft "r"	Japanese r is a quick tongue-tap between English R, L and D. Think the soft "tt" in American "butter".	ありがとう <i>arigatō</i>
"u" often whispers	After voiceless sounds the u nearly disappears. desu sounds like "dess", suki like "ski".	です <i>des(u)</i>
Pitch, not stress	Japanese rises and falls in pitch rather than punching loud syllables. Keep it level and gentle; don't sing it.	はし <i>hashi</i> = bridge / chopsticks (by pitch)

PRACTICE TRICK

Record yourself saying よろしくお願ひします (*yoroshiku onegai shimasu*) and compare to any free TTS or a YouTube clip. This one phrase contains most of the sounds you'll ever need, and you'll use it constantly.

02 The writing systems かな・かんじ

You do **not** need to read fluently to flirt or make friends — but recognising kana lets you read a menu, a name, or a LINE message, and it locks the sounds into your head. Japanese mixes three scripts.

SYSTEM	USED FOR	EXAMPLE	READING
Hiragana ひらがな	Native words, grammar, soft/rounded shapes. Learn this first.	さくら	<i>sakura (cherry blossom)</i>
Katakana カタカナ	Foreign/loan words & names, angular shapes. Your own name will be in this.	ビール	<i>bīru (beer)</i>
Kanji	Chinese characters for meaning. Thousands exist — learn by exposure, no rush.	恋	<i>koi (romantic love)</i>

Hiragana — the core 46 ごじゅうおん

Read top-to-bottom, then add the small marks: か→が (ka→ga) , は→ば→ぱ (ha→ba→pa) .

あ <i>a</i>	い <i>i</i>	う <i>u</i>	え <i>e</i>	お <i>o</i>
か <i>ka</i>	き <i>ki</i>	く <i>ku</i>	け <i>ke</i>	こ <i>ko</i>
さ <i>sa</i>	し <i>shi</i>	す <i>su</i>	せ <i>se</i>	そ <i>so</i>
た <i>ta</i>	ち <i>chi</i>	つ <i>tsu</i>	て <i>te</i>	と <i>to</i>
な <i>na</i>	に <i>ni</i>	ぬ <i>nu</i>	ね <i>ne</i>	の <i>no</i>
は <i>ha</i>	ひ <i>hi</i>	ふ <i>fu</i>	へ <i>he</i>	ほ <i>ho</i>

<i>ha</i>	<i>hi</i>	<i>fu</i>	<i>he</i>	<i>ho</i>
ま <i>ma</i>	み <i>mi</i>	む <i>mu</i>	め <i>me</i>	も <i>mo</i>
や <i>ya</i>		ゆ <i>yu</i>		よ <i>yo</i>
ら <i>ra</i>	り <i>ri</i>	る <i>ru</i>	れ <i>re</i>	ろ <i>ro</i>
わ <i>wa</i>		を <i>wo/o</i>		ん <i>n</i>

REALISTIC PLAN

Spend two weeks on hiragana with a free app (Dr. Moku, Tofugu's guide, or Anki). You don't need kanji to date — but romaji alone will keep your accent foreign forever, so read the kana out loud as you learn phrases in the next lessons.

03 The politeness dial けいご・タメ口

This is the single most important social concept in the language. Japanese constantly signals **distance**. Use the wrong register and you'll seem cold, creepy, or childish. Use the right one and people relax instantly.

REGISTER	FEEL	"TO EAT" EXAMPLE	USE IT WITH...
Keigo	Formal / honorific	召し上がります <i>meshiagarimasu</i>	Bosses, customers, much older people. You rarely need to produce it — just recognise it.
Polite です・ます	Safe default	食べます <i>tabemasu</i>	Your home base. Anyone you just met, staff, strangers. Never wrong.
Casual タメ	Friends / intimate	食べる <i>taberu</i>	Close friends, people your age once you click, partners. Switching to this is getting closer.

CULTURAL NOTE — THE CASUAL-SPEECH MOMENT

Dropping from polite into casual speech (タメ口, *tameguchi*) is a real milestone with someone you fancy. There's even a flirty line for it: 「タメ口でいい？」 *"Tameguchi de ii?"* — "**Can we drop the formal speech?**" Saying yes is a small green light that you're comfortable getting closer. We'll use this in Lesson 2.

Honorific name-tags — say these, not "you" さん・くん・ちゃん

Japanese avoids the word "you" (あなた can sound cold or even intimate). Use the person's **name + a suffix** instead.

SUFFIX	SOUNDS	WHEN TO USE
～さん	- <i>san</i>	Default respect — like Mr/Ms but for everyone. Use this until told otherwise. e.g. Yuki-san.
～ちゃん	- <i>chan</i>	Affectionate, for women, kids, close friends, pets. Warm but presumptuous if too early.
～くん	- <i>kun</i>	Friendly, usually for younger men/boys. Women may use it for a guy they're close with.
呼び捨て	<i>yobisute</i>	Name with no suffix = very intimate. Only once you're clearly close. Doing it early reads as rude or cocky.

04 Survival phrases サバイバル

Carry these ten in your pocket. They cover 80% of polite first contact.

JAPANESE	SOUNDS LIKE	ENGLISH	NOTE
こんにちは	<i>kon-nichi-wa</i>	Hello / good afternoon	Daytime default.
こんばんは	<i>kom-ban-wa</i>	Good evening	Your nightlife greeting.
すみません	<i>su-mi-ma-sen</i>	Excuse me / sorry / thanks	The Swiss-army word. To get attention, apologise, or thank.
ありがとうございます	<i>a-ri-ga-tō go-zai-mas</i>	Thank you (polite)	Drop gozaimasu for casual.
ありがとう <i>arigatō</i> thank you ございます <i>gozaimasu</i> (polite)			
お願いします	<i>o-ne-gai shi-mas</i>	Please / I'd like this	Ordering, asking a favour.
お願い <i>onegai</i> request します <i>shimasu</i> (I) do			
はい / いいえ	<i>hai / iie</i>	Yes / no	Hai also = "I'm listening".
大丈夫です	<i>dai-jō-bu des</i>	I'm fine / it's OK / no thanks	Hugely versatile. Also "are you OK?" as a question.
大丈夫 <i>daijōbu</i> fine / OK です <i>desu</i> is			
わかりました	<i>wa-ka-ri-ma-shta</i>	Got it / understood	Shows you're following.
日本語は少しだけ	<i>ni-hon-go wa su-ko-shi da-ke</i>	I speak only a little Japanese	Charming, lowers expectations, invites help.
日本語 <i>nihongo</i> Japanese は <i>wa</i> (topic) 少し <i>sukoshi</i> a little だけ <i>dake</i> only			
よろしくお願いします	<i>yo-ro-shi-ku o-ne-gai shi-mas</i>	"Nice to meet you / let's get along"	Untranslatable glue phrase. Use at the end of any intro.
よろしく <i>yoroshiku</i> favorably お願い <i>onegai</i> request します <i>shimasu</i> (I) do			

Tiny words that buy you time & warmth あいづち

JAPANESE	SOUNDS	ENGLISH / USE
えっと… / あの…	<i>etto... / ano...</i>	"Um..." / "Well..." — natural filler while you think.
そうですね	<i>sō des ne</i>	"That's true / let me see" — agreement + thinking time. そう <i>sō</i> so / that's right です <i>desu</i> is ね <i>ne</i> isn't it
へえ～ / そうなんだ	<i>hē / sō nan da</i>	"Ohh, really!" — shows you're engaged (casual).
なるほど	<i>naruhodo</i>	"Ah, I see / makes sense."
マジで?	<i>maji de?</i>	"For real?!" — casual surprise, great in clubs. マジ <i>maji</i> serious / real で <i>de</i> (emphasis)

CULTURAL NOTE — AIZUCHI (づち)

Japanese conversation expects constant little verbal nods — **un, un / sō sō / hē** — to show you're listening. Silence reads as boredom or disapproval. Sprinkling these makes you feel warm and attentive, which matters far more than perfect grammar.

MINDSET FOR EVERYTHING THAT FOLLOWS

In Japan, **effort is attractive and arrogance is poison**. A foreigner who tries in clumsy Japanese, stays polite, reads the mood (空気を読む, *kūki wo yomu*), and never pushes is genuinely charming. The phrases ahead are tools — the warmth and patience are what actually land.