

# MASTER JAPANESE

SELF GUIDED IMMERSION  
FOR THE PASSIONATE LANGUAGE LEARNER



5th Edition

By John Fotheringham

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# Dedicated To:

## **Mom and Dad**

Few parents would support their son changing majors from Industrial Design (i.e. a degree that might actually lead to a job) to Linguistics (a degree that usually just leads to more school), let alone in the 3rd year of college! You stood by me then and have continued to support me in my language learning adventures across the globe over the past decade. While I miss you both dearly when living abroad, knowing that I am loved and supported makes all the difference.

## **Kim**

The most dedicated language learner I have ever met! Thank you dearly for your support, patience, and laughter. I could not have finished this project without you.

## **Graham & David**

My two brothers who are far smarter than I but were discouraged in foreign languages by bad teachers and an ineffective language education system. I wrote this guide with you in mind!

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# START HERE

## Welcome to Master Japanese!

*Master Japanese: Self-Guided Immersion for the Passionate Learner* aims to provide you with the tips, tools, and tech you need to master the Japanese language as quickly, cheaply, and enjoyably as possible.

I won't lie to you: even with this guide, learning Japanese is going to take lots of time and effort. But if you employ the tips and tools I recommend, it will also be a hell of a lot of fun, and you will end up saving a significant amount of time, energy, and money.

As is usually the case with most endeavors I undertake, I made just about every last possible mistake when I started out. But on the bright side, it was the very act of taking so many missteps (and later correcting course) that makes me the ideal language learning coach. You never want to learn from someone who picks up the material easily, for they will not know how to explain what they did and will not understand (nor have any empathy for) people who are struggling along in the dark.

I have been there, too, and can help show you the way forward.

Here we go!



# Guide Content & Format

In addition to the guide you are currently reading, *Master Japanese* also includes the following reader-only bonuses:

- ✓ **3+ Hours of Expert Interviews**
- ✓ **Free Lifetime Updates of the Guide and Printable Worksheets**
- ✓ **ePub and Mobi versions**
- ✓ **50% Off Aaron Myer's *Everyday Language Learner* guides**
- ✓ **A Free Copy for One Person of Your Choosing**

## The Master Japanese Guide

I have done my best to make this guide as user-friendly and learning conducive as possible. Since time is the most precious resource we have, many of this guide's features center around ways to shave off seconds, minutes, and hours that be used for actually learning Japanese instead of searching for tools and materials. To that end:

- ✓ **All web links are clickable.** All online resources listed in the guide include a clickable link to their location on the big 'ole world wide web so you don't have to waste any time searching for them or entering ridiculously long URLs. Within the text, the links are shown in blue, underlined text. For most resource lists, the link will be located at the beginning of the paragraph.
- ✓ **Cross-Referenced Sections are Hyperlinked.** In an effort to save you even more time, I have created hyperlinks that take you right to any cross-references in the guide. That way you don't have wade through the Table of Contents or scan through the document to find the section in question.

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Keep a lookout for formatting like this: it indicates links to resources on the web and hyperlinks to bookmarks in the guide.

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- ✓ **All Japanese terms are presented in *romaji*, *kanji*, and *kana*.** I hate when Japanese books or materials indicate Japanese terms solely in *romaji* (ローマ字・ろうまじ), Romanized Japanese written using only English letters. While this is supposed to make things easier for new learners who might not yet be able to read a word's

corresponding *kanji* (漢字・かんじ) or *kana* (仮名・かな), why do these publishers miss an opportunity to provide you with meaningful exposure as I just did in this sentence? From this point on:

1. All Japanese words and names will be presented with an English translation (if relevant), the word in italicized *romaji*, and the word's corresponding *kanji* and *hiragana* (see Example 1).
2. Words written in *katakana* (片仮名・かたかな) will be rewritten in *hiragana* (平仮名・ひらがな) as well to help you get used to both systems more quickly.
3. In both cases, the actual Japanese word will be separated from the *hiragana* reading guide with the • symbol, which is used in Japanese like the / would be in English.

## Examples

1. Nihongo (日本語・にほんご, “the Japanese language”)
2. nama biiru (生ビール・なまびいる, “draft beer”)

 **Japanese names are presented in Japanese order.** As you probably know, Japanese family names are written *first*, followed by a person's given name. To help you get used to this and minimize confusion, I have written all Japanese names in this guide using this order (family names followed by given names). Also, you will notice that I write the *romaji* version of last names in all capital letters to help reduce ambiguity.

## On That Note...

To limit potential confusion, I suggest following the “FAMILY NAME, Given Name(s)” format when writing your English name on name tags, filling out official forms, etc.

**FOTHERINGHAM, John Austin**

I didn't do this when I first moved to Japan, and a lot of my formal documents got screwed up, with some listing my middle name as my last name, my first name as my middle name, and my last name getting chopped off half-way through!

# Who, What, Why & How Long?

Here are some likely questions you have, or at the very least, what I want you to know before you get underway with the guide. If any of your questions are not answered here, [email me](#).

## Who is Master Japanese For?

If you try to make a product that fits everyone's needs, it probably won't fit *anyone's*. This guide, therefore, is not designed to make every single learner happy. *Master Japanese* was written for those who can nod their heads in agreement to the following statements:

- I want to learn to speak, read and write Japanese really well.** *Master Japanese* provides you with detailed tips, tools and tech on how to speak, read and write Japanese like a pro.
- I have never learned any Japanese.** This course does not require any previous Japanese study, providing step-by-step instructions from the very beginning. Consider yourself lucky as you will be able to bypass the years most of us (including this author) have wasted using traditional but highly ineffective methods.
- I have tried and failed to learn Japanese before.** If you have studied Japanese in the past but failed to ever reach even a modicum of fluency, this course is for you, too. You are not stupid or lazy; you have just been using poor methods.
- I want to live and work in Japan.** There are countless materials and courses available for “travel Japanese” and they are equally useless. They may show you how to say a few things, but they don't equip you with the level of fluency needed to understand what is said back to you. Follow the tips in this guide, and you will be able to engage in *real* two-way communication.
- I want to really get to know the Japanese people and culture.** Most foreigners who visit Japan, or even live in the country for many years, only see the tip of the iceberg. Being able to speak and read Japanese gives you scuba gear you need to go below the surface and see, understand and interact with the *real* Japan.
- I am passionate about languages.** You have to really *want* to learn Japanese, or any language for that matter. And you have to enjoy the journey just as much as the destination (and in fact, there really is no “destination” in language learning as there will always be more to learn even for native speakers).

## Why Did I Create It?

As Steve Kaufmann points out:



**“We do not need more language courses.  
We need courses on how to learn languages.”**

This guide is designed to be just that: a course on *how* to learn Japanese. While teachers and tutors can help answer questions, select materials for you, and answer questions you have about word usage, it is important to understand that nobody can *teach* you a language; it is something that you *acquire* if, and only if, you get enough exposure to (and enough practicing using) the language in meaningful contexts. I believe this misconception is one of the major reasons why traditional language courses and materials don't work. Well, that and the fact they tend to bore the heck out of learners, convince them they aren't good at languages, and completely ignore how our brains evolved to learn, process, and produce language.

Like many of my fellow language learners (including both of my brothers, to whom this guide is dedicated), I have tried and failed using more traditional methods. This has lead me to investigate alternatives to the tried and *not-so-true*d “sit in a classroom, memorize grammar rules and vocabulary” approach, a journey that has yielded the tips in this guide.

## Why Learn Japanese at All?

There are countless reasons to learn Japanese. In fact, now that I think about it, I can't come up with any good reasons *not* to learn the language.

- ☑ **Keep your brain young and fast.** Learning a new language requires the alteration of zillions of neural pathways, helping to promote brain plasticity more than any amount of cross-word puzzles or *sudoku* (数独・すうどく).
- ☑ **Get a kick-ass job.** Foreign language skills are in high demand, and fluency in Japanese is a highly sought-after skill. And since so few Westerners speak or write Japanese well, you will have a serious leg up over the competition if you *do*.

- ✓ **Become sexier.** What is the surefire way to make a film's lead character look suave and sophisticated? You show them speaking one or more foreign languages. It's cliché but true: foreign language skills *are* sexy.
- ✓ **Enjoy Japanese art *in* Japanese.** Japan is home to some of the greatest authors, artists, animators, actors, directors, and producers of all time. Even non-Japanophiles are likely familiar with MIYAZAKI Hayao (宮崎駿・みやざきはやお), SOUSEKI Natsume (漱石夏目・そうせきなつめ), MURAKAMI Haruki (村上春樹・むらかみはるき), and KUROSAWA Akira (黒沢明・くろさわあきら), but there are countless more Japanese literary, artistic and cinematic masterminds to discover. And there is no better way to read or view their work than in the language they were created.

## What Do I Mean by “Mastery”?

First of all, “mastery” does **not** mean “perfection”, as such a thing does not exist when it comes to languages. And even if it *did*, “perfection” would not be a “SMART” (**s**hort, **m**easurable, **a**ttainable, **r**ealistic and **t**imely) language learning goal.

At the risk of getting into the sticky realm of sociolinguistics, here are some reasons why perfection cannot exist in language learning:

- ✓ **Even native speakers sometimes struggle.** We stumble over our words. We have a hard time remembering that word hiding on the tip of our tongue. We confuse the meaning of certain similar, uncommon terms. We forget how to spell things. All normal.
- ✓ **Languages are constantly changing.** Every generation that learns a language changes it in small ways. What is considered “correct” or “proper” in one generation, might sound “old-fashioned” in the next.

So if “mastery” does not equal “perfection”, what *does* it mean? I define “mastery” as follows:

The ability to use a language well for your communicative purposes.

That's it. It is completely relative to **your** purposes.

- ☑ So if you are learning Japanese to live and work in Japan, then “mastery” would mean being able to easily communicate with your colleagues, your boss, a sushi chef, and new friends at a bar.
- ☑ If you are an *anime* (アニメ・あにめ) addict, then mastery for you might mean being able to understand an episode of your favorite show without relying on English or even *Japanese* subtitles.
- ☑ For a hitherto monolingual Japanese-American, perhaps mastery entails finally being able to talk with Japanese relatives in *their* native language.
- ☑ An aspiring Japanese translator will need to amass a wide vocabulary in Japanese and know the precise equivalent for each term in English. And on and on it goes.



What “mastery” does **not** entail is learning every last word you may hear or read. Even native Japanese speakers come across words every day that they don’t know the meaning of, or encounter kanji that they forget how to write or pronounce. The key is to know enough Japanese that you can *ask* someone the meaning of an unfamiliar word and then actually understanding the answer.

You should of course strive to constantly expand your vocabulary, but your focus should always be on *quality over quantity*. Just as in martial arts, having lots of moves is not as important as mastering a small set of techniques. As the old saying goes:

“I do not fear the 10,000 kicks  
you have thrown once. I fear the one kick  
you have thrown 10,000 times.”

## How Long Will it Take to Learn Japanese?

This is one of the most common questions I hear, and also happens to be one of the most difficult to answer. How long it takes you to get *there* will ultimately depend on where “there” is (not to mention how badly you want to get there, and what mode of transportation you use).

Obviously, learning how to speak, read, and write Japanese fluently on a wide range of topics is going to take longer than just being able to have casual conversations on a small set of topics. The former will likely take a year or more, while the latter can be attained in a few months. But on this note, progress toward your goals should be measured in how many **hours** you spend actively listening, speaking, reading and writing, not months, years or school terms. Just as you can spend many hours a day on Japanese and progress like an avalanche, you can just as easily spend only a few hours a week (like most college or language school students) and progress a glacier’s pace.

Unlike Japanese language schools, textbooks or proficiency tests like the *JPLT* (日本語能力試験・にほんごのうりよくしけん), I will not give you exact milestones of how far you should have progressed after a given numbers of hours. Such milestones are bogus for a number of reasons:

- ☑ **They are designed by and for language schools.** Having been a manager in a language school, I can assure you that most administrators and teachers have no idea what those vague proficiency descriptions hanging on the wall *actually* mean. But this does not stop them from quoting the levels in their largely meaningless and artificial level assessments, which are used more as a sales tool (“You really need to complete another 10 units so you can progress to the next level on this nifty chart here”) than actual assessments of your progress.
- ☑ **They do not take into account individual goals.** Every learner is unique. We each prefer certain colors of underwear, and more importantly, we all have different paces, preferences, and purposes for learning Japanese. One-size-fits-all proficiency charts (*and* underwear designs) ignore these differences.
- ☑ **They don’t reflect how the brain works.** Linguists have spent a lot of time (and research grant money), trying to figure out what language structures you acquired when. While they have a pretty good idea about the basics, there are still more questions than answers. Even if they are allegedly “supported by research”, attempts to order various grammar structures on a syllabus usually entails more guesswork than actual science.

# The Master Japanese Road Map

While I don't believe in formal milestones or proficiency levels, I *do* think it's useful to break the language up into a few major "phases" (which I have listed below) with different tasks, tools, and materials for each.

However, only *you* will know when it's time to move onto the next phase; not some teacher, textbook, vague progress chart, standardized test, or language school motivated more by profits than *your* progress...



**PHASE 1:**  
Master the Basics

**PHASE 2:**  
Sharpen Your Sword

**PHASE 3:**  
Get Your Black Belt

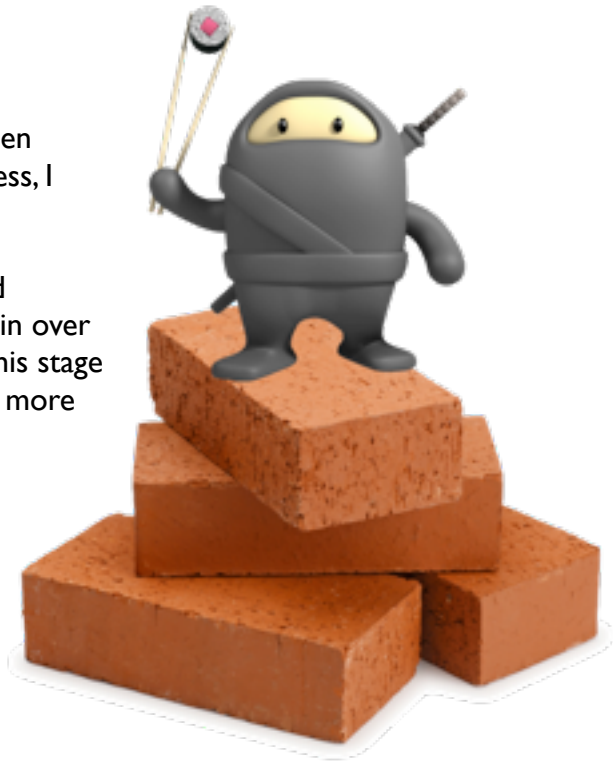


## Phase 1: Master the Basics

If you are just starting out in Japanese or have been “studying” for some time without any real progress, I recommend that you follow the tasks in Phase I.

Don’t be in a rush to move on to more advanced materials, but by the same token, feel free to get in over your head if you still enjoy yourself. The key at this stage is to build a strong foundation on which to place more advanced words and structures.

Just as I’ve observed in martial arts training, new learners are often too eager to skip what they perceive as “easy” or “simple” and jump ahead to the flashy stuff. Don’t wait until you get kicked in the face to realize how important the fundamentals are...



☑ **Learn kana.** If you want to learn to read and write Japanese, it all starts with *kana* (仮名・かな), the Japanese alphabet system (technically called a “syllabary” since it’s made up of syllables). And even if you only want to understand and speak Japanese, it is still a good idea to learn the *kana* as they will help familiarize you with the sounds of the language, and make it easier to look words up in the dictionary. Each *kana* symbol represents a distinct vowel *a, i, u, e* and *o* (あ, い, う, え and お) or a consonant-vowel combination like *ka, ki, ku, ke* or *ko* (か, き, く, け and こ). There are two separate sets of *kana* symbols, *hiragana* (平仮名・ひらがな) and *katakana* (片仮名・かたかな), but both represents the same sounds. The difference is how they are written and when they are used:

1. **Hiragana.** Used for verb and adjective endings, particles, words with rare characters outside of “standard use kanji” (常用漢字・じょうようかんじ), and for denoting *kanji* pronunciations of Japanese origin in dictionaries.
2. **Katakana.** Used to represent foreign loan words like “coffee” (コーヒー), foreign names like “Johnson” (ジョンソン), sound effects in *manga* (漫画・まんが), and for denoting *kanji* readings of Chinese origin in dictionaries.

Since you will encounter *hiragana* more often, I suggest learning that set of symbols first. However, many learners make the mistake of “taking a break” after *hiragana*, and end up procrastinating on the *katakana* front. You need both for full literacy in Japanese, so don’t delay.

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See [The Sounds of Japanese](#) Section for More About Japanese Kana

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- ☑ **Begin learning “standard use” kanji.** Although many teachers, schools, and textbooks advise learners to wait on the *kanji*, I think this is a big mistake. First of all, learning Chinese characters can be quite easy *if* you follow the advice in this guide. It will of course take time, but won't come the nasty side effects faced by students learning by rote memory alone. Moreover, the sooner you begin learning *kanji*, the sooner you will be able to read and enjoy authentic Japanese materials; greatly expanding the pool of potential learning tools.

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See the [Reading Japanese](#) Section for More on Learning Kanji

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- ☑ **Learn basic structures and common greetings.** Buy a good phrasebook (I suggest [The Ultimate Japanese Phrasebook](#)) and begin going through it from the beginning. Try to complete at least a page a day. If you can afford it (or can borrow a copy from the library or a friend), I also highly suggest getting your hands on [Pimsleur Japanese I](#). Aim to complete at at least one lesson a day. Don't worry about knowing the meaning of every word you hear and read at this stage; your goal is to learn some useful phrases to strike up conversations with native Japanese speakers, all the while exposing yourself to the underlying structures of the language.
- ☑ **Listen to basic, language-learner specific podcasts.** Jumping right into authentic content works for some, but is probably a bit overwhelming for most learners. As Yoda would say (with surprisingly Japanese-like grammar), “Frustration, a path to the *Dark Side* it is.” To avoid “going Anakin”, I suggest that you find some good newbie level programs that have a format you like and hosts that don't drive you bonkers (I warn you now, many will.) [JapanesePod101](#) is a pretty good place to start, but they do get a little “salesy”.

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See the [Power to the Podcasts](#) For More Recommended Programs

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- ☑ **Watch Japanese anime and movies with English subtitles turned on.** Language learning Nazis will tell you that it's “sink or swim” in a language, and that English sub-titles are for sissies. Ignore them, they just have daddy issues they are playing out in the form of mis-guided language learning advice. Remember: enjoyment trumps all. And watching a Japanese movie with little to no Japanese is probably *not* a very enjoyable experience for most. You will graduate to Japanese sub-titles soon enough, followed thereafter with no subtitles at all.

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See [Awesome Anime](#) and [Must-See Japanese TV and Movies](#)

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- ✓ **Get a basic Japanese grammar book.** As you have probably guessed by now, I am not a big fan of formal grammar study. But I *do* think that a some cursory review of Japanese grammar can be helpful, just so long as it does not replace what *really* makes the difference: spending enough time listening, speaking, reading and writing the language. If you do enough of these four activities, even with *no* formal grammar study, you will eventually internalize all key Japanese structures. Thinking about Japanese grammar consciously is no substitute for this natural acquisition, but it *does* seem to help speed up the process a bit...

## Phase 2: Sharpen Your Sword

Now that you have “learned” the basics, it’s time to sharpen your sword with some authentic content, verbal “sparring”, and lots of feedback on your speaking and writing.



- ✓ **Become conversationally fluent.** Spend as much time as you can speaking with native Japanese speakers via social language learning sites, Skype, local Meetup.com conversation groups, or if you already live in Japan, just about anyone, anywhere. In addition to furthering your motivation to keep learning, speaking also helps to “show you where your gaps are” as Steve Kaufmann points out in our interview.
- ✓ **Continue learning “standard use” kanji.** By now, you have gotten the hang of learning new characters, though you probably still have quite a few to go. Don’t let yourself get overwhelmed. Just keep laying one brick at a time and before you know it, your “kanji castle” will be complete!

- ✔ **Continue listening to language-learner specific podcasts.** Learner specific podcasts are probably still your best bet, though by now you will be able to move past the “newbie” level programs to elementary or intermediate shows.
- ✔ **Watch Japanese anime and movies with Japanese subtitles turned on.** You can choose new programs or re-watch films you already watched in Phase 1. It might still be a little difficult for you, but try to watch with the Japanese subtitles instead of English. This will accomplish 3 tasks at once: 1) reinforcing the *kanji* you have learned so far, 2) helping you to create a direct link between pronunciation and characters, and 3) getting you to think in Japanese instead of translating to and from English.

## Phase 3: Get Your Black Belt

In martial arts, a black belt means you can both apply and defend against all the basic techniques of that style and are now ready to move on to more advanced material. Contrary to popular belief, it does **not** mean you are now a “master” or “expert”. Phase 3 in your Japanese language journey is much the same. You’ve assimilated the basics and are now ready to *really* learn Japanese.



- ✔ **Listen to and read content intended for Japanese native speakers.** It’s time to move past the learner-specific materials and enter into the wild world of Japanese media.

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Check Out [Recommended Podcasts for Native Speakers](#) for Listening Input, and [Recommended Blogs & Sites in Japanese](#) for Reading Content

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- ✔ **Watch Japanese anime and movies with subtitles turned off.** As in Phase 2, you can repeat programs you’ve already watched so that there is a clear context to stand on, or if you’re feeling adventurous, you can dive head first into new content and figure things out as you go!
- ✔ **Finish learning all “standard use” kanji and begin learning upper-level characters.** Finish laying the final bricks in your “kanji castle”, but don’t rest on your laurels. It’s now time to fortify the entrance, build a mote, and do some interior decorating!

- ☑ **Read Japanese newspapers, magazines, and novels.** You have probably peeked at some of these materials in Phases 1 and 2 already, but now that you can recognize the vast majority of the characters and words without reaching for the dictionary every 3 seconds, you can begin enjoying the writing for the *writing's* sake and forget that you're actually learning Japanese.
  
- ☑ **Learn all levels of Japanese formality.** This is the final step in mastering Japanese, and will set you apart from nearly all foreign language learners and even younger Japanese native speakers who nowadays must often be trained in *keigo* by their employers. This does not mean, however, that *keigo* is difficult; it is just not used enough in daily speech to become familiar as quickly as less formal language. You can see the same pattern in English vocabulary: everyone knows the word “dull” but how many of you know “insipid” without reaching for the dictionary?