

Hiragana

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Hiragana (平仮名 [?]) is a Japanese syllabary, one component of the Japanese writing system, along with katakana and kanji; the Latin alphabet is also used in some cases. Hiragana and katakana are both kana systems, in which each symbol represents one mora. Each *kana* is either a vowel (such as *a* ア); a consonant followed by a vowel (such as *ka* カ); or *n* ン, a nasal sonorant which, depending on the context, sounds either like English *m*, *n*, or *ng* (IPA: [ŋ]), or like the nasal vowels of French.

Hiragana are used for words for which there are no kanji, including particles such as *kara* から "from," and suffixes such as *~san* さん "Mr., Mrs., Miss, Ms." Hiragana are also used in words for which the kanji form is not known to the writer nor the readers or is too formal for the writing purpose. Verb and

adjective inflections, as, for example, in *tabemashita* (食べました [?] "ate"), *BE MA SHI TA* are written in hiragana. In this case, part of the root is also written in hiragana. Hiragana are also used to give the pronunciation of kanji in a reading aid called *furigana*. The article Japanese writing system discusses in detail when the various systems of writing are used.

There are two main systems of ordering hiragana, the old-fashioned iroha ordering, and the more prevalent gojūon ordering.

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The hiragana writing system

The hiragana consist of a basic set of characters, the *gojūon*, which can be modified in various ways. By adding a *dakuten* marker (ダクテン), an unvoiced consonant

Hiragana	
Type	syllabary
Languages	Japanese and Okinawan
Time period	~800 A.D. to the present
Parent systems	kanji <p>Man'yōgana</p> Hiragana
Sister systems	katakana, hentaigana
Unicode range	U+3040-U+309F <p>(http://www.unicode.org/charts/PDF/U3040.pdf)</p>
ISO 15924	Hira
	



Japanese writing

Kanji

Kana

- **Hiragana**
- Katakana
- Hentaigana
- Man'yōgana

Uses

- Furigana

such as *k* or *t* is turned into a voiced consonant such as *g* or *d*: *k* *g*, *t* *d*, *s* *z*, and *h* *b*. Hiragana beginning with an *h* can also add a *handakuten* marker (◌゜) changing the *h* to a *p*. A small version of the hiragana for *ya*, *yu* or *yo* (◌ゃ, ◌ゅ or ◌ょ respectively) may be added to hiragana ending in *i*. This changes the *i* vowel sound to a glide palatalization. Addition of the small *y* kana is called *yōon* ◌ゃ. A small *tsu* ◌っ called a *sokuon* indicates a geminate (doubled) consonant. It appears before fricatives and stops, and sometimes at the end of sentences. This is represented in *rōmaji* by doubling the following consonant.

■ Okurigana
Rōmaji

In informal writing, small versions of the five vowel kana are sometimes used to represent trailing off sounds (◌っ, ◌っ).

There are a few hiragana which are rarely used. *Wi* ◌ゐ and *we* ◌ゑ are obsolete. *Vu* ◌ゔ is a modern addition used to represent the /v/ sound in foreign languages such as English, but since Japanese from a phonological standpoint does not have a /v/ sound, it is pronounced as /b/ and mostly serves as a more accurate indicator of a word's pronunciation in its original language. However, it is rarely seen because loanwords and transliterated words are usually written in katakana, where the corresponding character would be written as ◌ヴ.

Table of hiragana-rōmaji

The following table shows hiragana together with their Hepburn romanization. The obsolete kana are shown in **red** romanization. There are 109 cases.

vowels					yōon		
◌ <i>a</i>	◌ <i>i</i>	◌ <i>u</i>	◌ <i>e</i>	◌ <i>o</i>	(<i>ya</i>)	(<i>yu</i>)	(<i>yo</i>)
◌ <i>ka</i>	◌ <i>ki</i>	◌ <i>ku</i>	◌ <i>ke</i>	◌ <i>ko</i>	◌◌ <i>kya</i>	◌◌ <i>kyu</i>	◌◌ <i>kyo</i>
◌ <i>sa</i>	◌ <i>shi</i>	◌ <i>su</i>	◌ <i>se</i>	◌ <i>so</i>	◌◌ <i>sha</i>	◌◌ <i>shu</i>	◌◌ <i>sho</i>
◌ <i>ta</i>	◌ <i>chi</i>	◌ <i>tsu</i>	◌ <i>te</i>	◌ <i>to</i>	◌◌ <i>cha</i>	◌◌ <i>chu</i>	◌◌ <i>cho</i>
◌ <i>na</i>	◌ <i>ni</i>	◌ <i>nu</i>	◌ <i>ne</i>	◌ <i>no</i>	◌◌ <i>nya</i>	◌◌ <i>nyu</i>	◌◌ <i>nyo</i>
◌ <i>ha</i>	◌ <i>hi</i>	◌ <i>fu</i>	◌ <i>he</i>	◌ <i>ho</i>	◌◌ <i>hya</i>	◌◌ <i>hyu</i>	◌◌ <i>hyo</i>
◌ <i>ma</i>	◌ <i>mi</i>	◌ <i>mu</i>	◌ <i>me</i>	◌ <i>mo</i>	◌◌ <i>mya</i>	◌◌ <i>myu</i>	◌◌ <i>myo</i>
◌ <i>ya</i>		◌ <i>yu</i>		◌ <i>yo</i>			
◌ <i>ra</i>	◌ <i>ri</i>	◌ <i>ru</i>	◌ <i>re</i>	◌ <i>ro</i>	◌◌ <i>rya</i>	◌◌ <i>ryu</i>	◌◌ <i>ryo</i>
◌ <i>wa</i>	◌ <i>wi</i>		◌ <i>we</i>	◌ <i>wo</i>			
				◌ <i>n</i>			
◌ <i>ga</i>	◌ <i>gi</i>	◌ <i>gu</i>	◌ <i>ge</i>	◌ <i>go</i>	◌◌ <i>gya</i>	◌◌ <i>gyu</i>	◌◌ <i>gyo</i>
◌ <i>za</i>	◌ <i>ji</i>	◌ <i>zu</i>	◌ <i>ze</i>	◌ <i>zo</i>	◌◌ <i>ja</i>	◌◌ <i>ju</i>	◌◌ <i>jo</i>
◌ <i>da</i>	◌(<i>ji</i>)	◌(<i>zu</i>)	◌ <i>de</i>	◌ <i>do</i>	◌◌(<i>ja</i>)	◌◌(<i>ju</i>)	◌◌(<i>jo</i>)
◌ <i>ba</i>	◌ <i>bi</i>	◌ <i>bu</i>	◌ <i>be</i>	◌ <i>bo</i>	◌◌ <i>bya</i>	◌◌ <i>byu</i>	◌◌ <i>byo</i>
◌ <i>pa</i>	◌ <i>pi</i>	◌ <i>pu</i>	◌ <i>pe</i>	◌ <i>po</i>	◌◌ <i>pya</i>	◌◌ <i>pyu</i>	◌◌ <i>pyo</i>

The combinations ◌◌, ◌◌, and ◌◌ are not to be confused with the sequences ◌◌, ◌◌, and ◌◌. The combinations of ◌ with a small *y* kana each represent a single mora, while the sequences of ◌ followed by a large *y* kana represent two separate morae. The distinction can be illustrated with minimal pairs such as ◌◌◌ ◌◌◌ *ka-nyu-u*, "joining", and ◌◌◌◌ *ka-n-yu-u*, "persuasion", which are easily distinguished in speech, although in some romanization styles they might both be written *kanyu*. In Hepburn romanization, they are distinguished with an apostrophe: *kanyū* and *kan'yū*.

Spelling rules

With a few exceptions for sentence particles □, □, and □ (pronounced as *wa*, *o*, and *e*), and a few other arbitrary rules, Japanese is spelled as it sounds. This has not always been the case: a previous system of spelling, now referred to as historical kana usage had many spelling rules; the exceptions in modern usage are the legacy of that system. The exact spelling rules are referred to as *kanazukai* (仮名遣[?]).

There are two hiragana pronounced *ji* (□ and □) and two hiragana pronounced *zu* (□ and □). These pairs are not interchangeable. Usually, *ji* is written as □ and *zu* is written as □. There are some exceptions. If the first two syllables of a word consist of one syllable without a *dakuten* and the same syllable with a *dakuten*, the same hiragana is used to write the sounds. For example *chijimeru* ('to boil down' or 'to shrink') is spelled □□□□. For compound words where the dakuten reflects *rendaku* voicing, the original hiragana is used. For example, *chi* (血 "blood") is spelled □ in plain hiragana. When 鼻 hana ('nose') and 血 chi ("blood") combine to make *hanaji* 鼻血 "nose bleed", the sound of □ changes from *chi* to *ji*. So *hanaji* is spelled □□□□ according to □: the basic hiragana used to transcribe 血. Similarly, *Tsukau* (使う; "to use") is spelled □□□□ in hiragana, so *kanazukai* (かな使い; "kana use", or "kana orthography") is spelled □□□□□ in hiragana.

However, this does not apply when kanji are used phonetically to write words which do not relate directly to the meaning of the kanji (see also ateji). The Japanese word for 'lightning', for example, is *inazuma* (稲妻). The 稲 component means 'rice plant', is written □□ in hiragana and is pronounced: *ina*. The 妻 component means 'wife' and is pronounced *tsuma* (□□) when written in isolation - or frequently as *zuma* (□□) when it features after another syllable. Neither of these components have anything to do with 'lightning', but together they do when they compose the word for 'lightning'. In this case, the default spelling in hiragana □□□□ rather than □□□□□ is used.

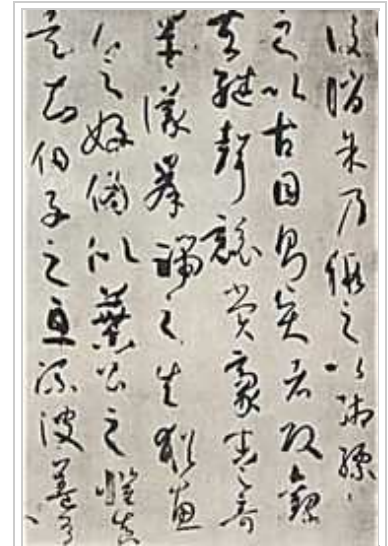
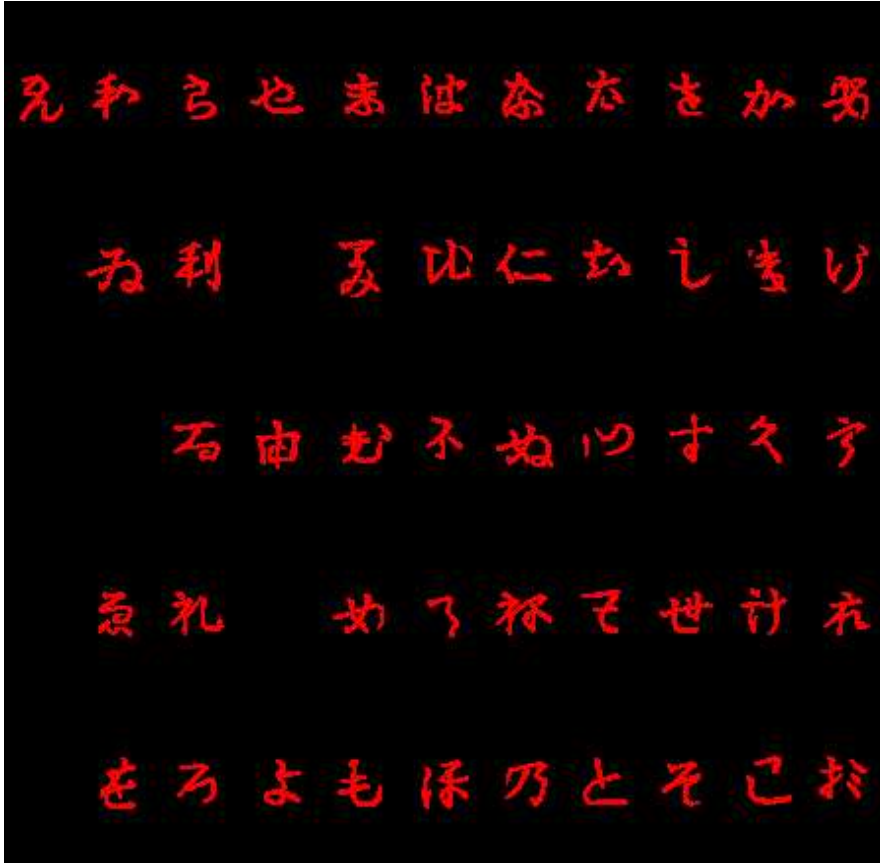
Hiragana usually spells long vowels with the addition of a second vowel kana. The *chōon* (vowel extender mark) (□) used in katakana is rarely used with hiragana, for example in the word □□□□, ramen, but this usage is considered non-standard.

No standard Japanese words begin with the kana □ (*n*). This is the basis of the word game shiritori. □ is sometimes directly followed by a vowel, for example, *ren'ai* 恋愛 ("romantic love, emotion") is written in hiragana as □□□□ rather than □□□□ *renai* (a nonexistent word). □ *n* is normally treated as its own syllable and is separate from the other N based kana. A notable exception to this is in slang usage; an example, often seen in manga, is where □ *n* can replace □□ *nai*, such as □□□□□ *wakaranai* meaning "[I] don't understand" being corrupted to □□□□ *wakaran*.

A rule when writing kana is the size of the character with respect to other characters. In general, each normally sized hiragana symbol is pronounced individually, with smaller sized versions being used in conjunction with the preceding, such as when a normally sized □ *ni* and a small □□ *ya* combine to form the syllable □□ *nya*. The singular exception to this is in the case of a small □ *tsu* (□), representing a glottal stop, where the sound is used in conjunction with the succeeding syllable, rather than the preceding.

History

Hiragana developed from *man'yōgana*, Chinese characters used for their pronunciations, a practice which started in the 5th century. The forms of the hiragana originate from the cursive script style of Chinese calligraphy. The figure below shows the derivation of hiragana from manyōgana via cursive script. The upper part shows the character in the regular script form, the center character in red shows the cursive script form of the character, and the bottom shows the equivalent hiragana.



Hiragana's character shape was derived from the Chinese cursive script (*sōsho*). Shown here is a sample of the cursive script by Chinese Tang Dynasty calligrapher Sun Guoting, ca. 650 CE.

When they were first created, hiragana were not accepted by everyone. Many felt that the language of the educated was still Chinese. Historically, in Japan, the regular script (*kaisho*) form of the characters was used by men, so-called *onode* (男手[?]), "men's writing", and the cursive script (*sōsho*) form of the kanji was used by women. Thus hiragana first gained popularity among women, who were not allowed access to the same levels of education as men. From this comes the alternative name of *onnade* (女手[?]) "women's writing". For example, *The Tale of Genji* and other early novels by female authors used hiragana extensively or exclusively.

Male authors came to write literature using hiragana. Hiragana, with its flowing style, was used for unofficial writing such as personal letters, while katakana and Chinese were used for official documents. In modern times, the usage of hiragana has become mixed with katakana writing. Katakana is now relegated to special uses such as recently borrowed words (i.e., since the 19th century), names in transliteration, the names of animals, in telegrams, and for emphasis.

Originally, all sounds had more than one hiragana. In 1900, the system was simplified so each sound had only one hiragana. Other hiragana are known as hentaigana (変体仮名[?])

The poem *Iroha-uta* ("Song/poem of colours"), which dates to the 10th century, uses every hiragana (except *n* □) once. In the chart below, the romanization shows the hiragana; the reading in modern Japanese is in parentheses.

Note that the last line begins with an obsolete kana (*we* □).

□□□□□□□(□□ □ □□□□)	I ro ha ni ho he to (Iro wa nioedo)	Even colours and sweet perfume
□□□□□(□□□□ □)	chi ri nu ru wo (chirinuru wo)	Will eventually fade
□□□□□□(□□ □ □□ □)	wa ka yo ta re so (waga yo tare zo)	Even our world
□□□□□(□□ □□□)	tsu ne na ra mu (tsune naran)	Is not eternal
□□□□□□□(□□ □ □□□□)	u wi no o ku ya ma (ui no okuyama)	The deep mountains of vanity
□□□□□(□□□ □□□)	ke fu ko e te (kyou koete)	Cross them today
□□□□□□□(□□□ □□ □□)	a sa ki yu me mi shi (asaki yume miji)	And superficial dreams
□□□□□(□□ □ □□)	we hi mo se su (yoi mo sezu)	Shall no longer delude you.

Hiragana in Unicode

In Unicode, Hiragana occupies code points U+3040 to U+309F:

Hiragana

Unicode.org chart (<http://www.unicode.org/charts/PDF/U3040.pdf>)

	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	A	B	C	D	E	F
U+304x	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□
U+305x	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□
U+306x	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□
U+307x	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□
U+308x	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□
U+309x	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□	□

The Unicode hiragana block contains precomposed characters for all hiragana in the modern set, including small vowels and yōon kana for compound syllables, plus the archaic *wi* and *we* and the rare *vu*. All combinations of hiragana with *dakuten* and *handakuten* used in modern Japanese are available as precomposed characters, and can also be produced by using a base hiragana followed by the combining dakuten and handakuten characters (U+3099 and U+309A, respectively). This method is used to add the diacritics to kana that are not normally used with them, for example applying the dakuten to a pure vowel or the handakuten to a kana not in the h-group.

Characters U+3095 and U+3096 are small □ (*ka*) and small □ (*ke*), respectively. U+309F is a digraph of □□ (*yori*) occasionally used in vertical text. U+309B and U+309C are spacing (non-combining) equivalents to the combining dakuten and handakuten characters, respectively.

There are currently no characters at code points U+3040, U+3097, or U+3098.

See also

- Shodo, Japanese calligraphy.
- Iteration mark explains the iteration marks used with hiragana.

- Japanese typographic symbols gives other non-kana, non-kanji symbols.
- Japanese phonology explains Japanese pronunciation in detail.
- Nü Shū a syllabary writing system used by women in China's Hunan province
- Katakana

References

- "The Art of Japanese Calligraphy", Yujiro Nakata, ISBN 0-8348-1013-1, gives details of the development of *onode* and *omnade*.

External links

- Hiragana code chart at Unicode.org (<http://www.unicode.org/charts/PDF/U3040.pdf>)
- Real Kana (<http://www.realkana.com>) Practice hiragana using different typefaces (HTML & JavaScript).
- Rosseta (http://www.solosequenosenada.com/gramatica/japanese/Learn_Hiragana.php) Online Hiragana Practice (Flash).
- Hiragana derivation diagrams on nihongoresources.com (<http://www.nihongoresources.com/language/writing/kana.html>)
- hiragana stroke order diagrams on nihongoresources.com (<http://www.nihongoresources.com/language/lessons/lesson-00/hiragana.html#diagrams>)
- Learn how to read and write hiragana (http://thejapanesepage.com/readarticle.php?article_id=2)
- Test your hiragana knowledge (<http://www.easyjapanese.org/kanaquiz.html>)
- Background and information on hiragana (http://www.omniglot.com/writing/japanese_hiragana.htm)
- Animations showing how to write Hiragana (<http://www.users.pjwstk.edu.pl/~s4087/hiragana.html>)
- Online Hiragana tutorial (<http://www.karanagai.com/learn/hiragana>)

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Categories: Scripts with ISO 15924 four-letter codes | Japanese writing system | Japanese words and phrases | Kana

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