

Hiragana:

Instead of being a traditional alphabet, like English speakers have the roman 26 letter alphabet, Hiragana is a syllabary, which means that each letter represents a whole syllable or sound. The only letters that are identical to the Roman alphabet are the vowels (A, I, U, E, O) and the letter N. Those can be pronounced and written on their own. All the other characters represent sounds of two or more letters. This will become much clearer when you take a look at the second set of hiragana.

Hane:

Most characters will have little "hane" at the end of their strokes. Since originally the Japanese wrote their characters with a pencil and ink, they represent the ink marks that you would leave at the end of each stroke. We have adopted them into hiragana to make them easily recognizable when compared to its sister syllabary, katakana.

Ten-ten & Maru:

Ten-ten, or "dot-dot", are sets of two little dots, or strokes, in the top-right corner of a hiragana character. Ten-ten makes the sound of the character softer. Hence, the character Ka with ten-ten becomes Ga, and the character Su with ten-ten will become Zu. Ten-ten cannot be applied to all characters, but you will be able to see that in the actual hiragana charts below. Alternatively, there is the maru, or circle, that we can put there instead. A maru will harden the sound of the consonant, so Ha with maru becomes Pa. Maru can only be applied to the H-series of the hiragana syllabary.

Modified syllables:

In hiragana, there is a special series that has a double function. The characters Ya, Yu and Yo can be written half their size when combined with another hiragana to make a new sound. In order to make sounds like Sha, Shu and Sho, we can't simply insert an "h" like we would do in English. Instead, we add a half-sized version of Ya, Yu or Yo next to the syllable that we want to change. Byo, for example, would be written as びょ, which is Bo+yo. Notice that the Yo is very small compared to the normal yo: よ. So when you see a smaller version of one of these three hiragana next to a consonant syllable, remember that it extends the syllable and alters the pronunciation. One rule when writing a modified syllable, is that you always use the "i" version of the syllable. Meaning that we use Ki to make kya, kyu, and kyo. And Mi to make mya, myu, and myo, etc. You cannot use Ka and Ya to make Kya, you can only use a syllable that ends with an "i".

Double consonants and vowels:

So what do we do when we need a double consonant, like in the word kitte? For this, we need a half-sized tsu, which looks like this: っ. And then we put that small tsu in front of the syllable that we want to double the consonant of. In this case, that would be te. So we write: きって. The exception with this is when you double an "N", because we have a character for "n". So when you want a double N, just write a hiragana "N" before the syllable that starts with an "N". So what about double vowels? Well, since a syllable is always a consonant and a vowel in hiragana, we already have one vowel, so what we do is we simply write the other vowel after the syllable. Hence, if we want to write gyuunyuu (milk), we write it: ぎゅうにゅう. We put an extra U after the Gyu and Nyu. However, this would not be the case if we extended either an O or an I. Those vowels cannot be doubled like this. Instead, we extend an O with a U, and an E with an I. However, the pronunciation would still be "oo" and "ee", instead of "ou" and "ei" like we do in English. So koukou would be written こうこう, and pronounced "kookoo", and sensei would be written せんせい and pronounced "sensee". Many programs and books that "teach" Japanese make the mistake of doubling Os and Is with the same vowels, and this is **wrong**. Ask any native Japanese speaker, and he will tell you that the only way to double a O or an E is by adding a U or an I. This is perhaps the most common mistake made in Japanese language programs and books.

Ha or wa?

You will definitely discover this strange phenomenon in Japanese. In some instances when writing in hiragana, we have to write the "wa" syllable with the "ha" hiragana, and still pronounce it as "wa". This can be very confusing to first-time Japanese students, and it's something you will learn through making mistakes. For instance, we write "dewa" a very common word used in conversations, as では. "は" In this case is Ha, but is pronounced as "wa". Hence, writing でわ, where the second hiragana is Wa, would make your word incorrect and can make the sentence mean something else. The root of this phenomenon can be explained with difficult words in ethnology, but its best just to accept it and try to get used to it. If you are studying Japanese at school, your teacher should tell you in advance which common words are written in this way. If you're not sure, double-check with a dictionary to be on the safe side. Most, if not all Japanese writing programs that use Romaji instead of hiragana keys will not correct you if you write "dewa" as でわ, so be careful. In Unitype, for example, you will need to type "deha", simply because the program cannot accurately tell what you want to write. If you're typing with a

Japanese keyboard, or have a program that changes your English keys into hiragana, you needn't worry about this problem.

Hiragana Charts:

Vowels:

A	I	U	E	O
あ	い	う	え	お

K series:

KA	KI	KU	KE	KO
か	き	く	け	こ

G series:

GA	GI	GU	GE	GO
が	ぎ	ぐ	げ	ご

S series:

SA	SHI	SU	SE	SO
さ	し	す	せ	そ

Z series:

ZA	JI	ZU	ZE	ZO
ざ	じ	ず	ぜ	ぞ

T series:

TA	CHI	TSU	TE	TO
た	ち	つ	て	と

D series:

DA	JI*	ZU*	DE	DO
だ	ぢ	づ	で	ど

N series:

NA	NI	NU	NE	NO
な	に	ぬ	ね	の

H series:

HA	HI	FU	HE	HO
は	ひ	ふ	へ	ほ

H series:

BA	BI	BU	BE	BO
ば	び	ぶ	べ	ぼ

P series:

PA	PI	PU	PE	PO
ぱ	ぴ	ぷ	ぺ	ぽ

M series:

MA	MI	MU	ME	MO
ま	み	む	め	も

Y series:

YA		YU		YO
や		ゆ		よ

R series:

RA	RI	RU	RE	RO
ら	り	る	れ	ろ

W series and N:

WA		WO		N
わ		を		ん

Modified syllables (syllables with a half-sized Ya, Yu or Yo)

KYA		KYU		KYO
きゃ		きゅ		きょ

GYA		GYU		GYO
ぎゃ		ぎゅ		ぎょ

SHA		SHU		SHO
しゃ		しゅ		しょ

JA		JU		JO
じゃ		じゅ		じょ

CHA		CHU		CHO
ちゃ		ちゅ		ちょ

NYA		NYU		NYO
にゃ		にゅ		にょ

NYA		NYU		NYO
にゃ		にゅ		にょ

HYA		HYU		HYO
ひゃ		ひゅ		ひょ

BYA		BYU		BYO
びゃ		びゅ		びょ

PYA		PYU		PYO
ぴゃ		ぴゅ		ぴょ

MYA		MYU		MYO
みゃ		みゅ		みょ

RYA		RYU		RYO
りゃ		りゅ		りょ

* Ji and Zu are already in the T series, so we don't really use these characters anymore. You might find them in older literature, but its very rare.

Final Note:

There are two characters that I left out of this chart, "wi" and "we", ゐ and ゑ. These characters were used long ago, but they are not included in the standard syllbary of modern day. Also, the character "wo", を, is pronounced "o", and is used to supplement certain words, and is not part of any words like all the other hiragana are.

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