# Japanese Lesson 3: Syllables and Hiragana

Today we’re going to learn about the Japanese alphabet, called “hiragana.” It is essential to learn this if you want to eventually read Japanese. But even if you only want to speak Japanese, it is very useful to know some things about the alphabet because it will help you pronounce things the way Japanese people do.

Let’s start by talking about vowels.

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| English has 5 vowel letters: | | | But English has many more vowel sounds: | | |
| a, e, i, o, u. (and sometimes y) | | | **a**pple, f**a**ther, f**ee**t, cr**y**, k**i**ck, **e**nd, c**oo**l, c**oo**k, b**u**s, butt**er**, h**o**t… | | |
|  | | |  | | |
| Japanese has 5 vowel letters: | | | And Japanese has only 5 vowel sounds: | | |
| あ い う え お | | | あ い う え お | | |
|  | | |  | | |
| They sound like: | | | | | |
| あ | い | う | | え | お |
| f**a**ther | **ee**ls | b**oo**t | | **e**gg | b**oa**t |

That’s it. These are the only vowel sounds in Japanese. They determine the pronunciation of every syllable you’ll hear. And if you change your vowels just a little bit, you’ll make totally different words. One time I confused a bunch of Japanese people – I tried to call a puppy “kawaii” (cute) and accidentally said “kowai” (scary).

Look at a “Hiragana chart.” The chart shows all of the syllables of Japanese. Notice that the vowels form 5 rows, and combine with the consonants (in columns) to make each syllable. So you have the vowel column, the “ka” column, the “sa” column, the “ta” column, etc.

There are a few irregularities:

1. Instead of “si” being pronounced “see,” it is pronounced “shee.”
2. Instead of “ti” being pronounced “tee,” it is pronounced “chee.”
3. There are some blank spots where Japanese lacks syllables.
4. The character ん lacks a vowel. It is the only character that lacks a vowel. It can’t be the first syllable in a word, but it can appear in the middle of words or at the end of words.

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| Notice that every syllable is either | a vowel standing on its own (a-i-u-e-o) |
| Or | a consonant-vowel (ka-ki-ku-ke-ko) |

This explains part of how Japanese sounds different from English – every syllable ends in a vowel. Let’s practice reading the hiragana chart a little bit just to get a sense of the sounds.

There are 46 characters shown on the hiragana chart. That’s way too many to memorize in class, so I’ll give you tools and you can memorize them on your own if you want.

1. Use a **mnemonic** while studying them the first time. You’re trying to remember the character and the sound it makes, so make an association between the character, the sound, and some other idea. Use the 5 senses, color, exaggeration, humor, or motion.
2. Android app: “Hiragana Memory Hint”
3. Web: <https://www.tofugu.com/japanese/hiragana-mnemonics-chart/>
4. Continually **review** to prevent forgetting.
5. Android app: “Just Kana”
6. Computer: Anki. download software at <https://apps.ankiweb.net/>

then download this deck, import it <https://ankiweb.net/shared/info/2183294427>

1. **Test** yourself, find your weak spots, and give those more time and attention.
2. Android app: “Just Kana”
3. Computer: Anki will naturally spend more time on the more difficult characters.

If you’re having difficulty, use the internet. There are tons of resources out there to help you.

Let’s practice making some mnemonics!

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| あ | い | う | え | お |
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| あ | い | う | え | お |
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| あ | い | う | え | お |
|  |  |  |  |  |
| あ | い | う | え | お |

