

Part I: Web Resources

Rikai

<http://www.rikai.com>

Rikai is one of the most useful tools for learning Kanji. Using Rikai, you are presented with a pop-up window that presents information on kanji that appear on a webpage. Information is given on the word as whole and for each individual kanji. The definitions are taken from Jim Breen's WWWJDIC dictionary.

When using Rikai.com for the first time(or if you ever clear your cookies), be sure to click on the drop box on the upper right and select "Japanese to English".

Rikai presently comes in two flavors:

Web Site

The Rikai web page gives you two options. You can either type in a URL or paste a block of text and Rikai will process the data immediately.

Rikai XUL Plugin

This plugin only works with Firefox (<http://www.mozilla.org/products/firefox/>).

With RikaiXUL, you no longer have to visit the Rikai webpage. When visiting a page, you simply right and choose "rikaixul". Processing will take place in the same manner as on Rikai.com

WWWJDIC

<http://www.csse.monash.edu.au/~jwb/wwwjdic.html>

For those not in the know, this is the web's premier Japanese-English dictionary. In fact, many web tools(for ex. Rikai) make use of Jim's EDICT dictionary. You can search for Japanese words either in Japanese, Romaji, or English.

The dictionary has two search options: "Text" and "Romaji".

Use the "Text" option when you want to search for a word that has the same meaning as some English word. For example, let's say you want to know the Japanese word for "table". You would select the "Text" option and type in "table".

Also, use the "Text" option when you want to search for words by typing in Japanese

Use the "Romaji" option when you want to search for Japanese words using Romaji. This is a great option for searching for words that you've heard(either through drama, movies, anime, talking to people, etc.). Often, you'll find that even if you don't find the word you're looking (usually because you misspelled it), you'll often stumble upon interesting words in the process.

Lastly, there's one option that's a little buried in the interface that most people are not aware of and is very valuable.

Go to the front page. Click on "translate words in text". On the upper box, you can type or paste in text and WWWJDIC can translate it.

Alternatively, on the bottom box, you can type in a URL, and a list of all of the words and meanings will be generated (in the order that they appear on the page). This is a godsend for studying vocabulary from Japanese articles (especially when you are not near a computer).

Flashcard Exchange

<http://www.flashcardexchange.com>

This site is perhaps the largest flashcard study site on the web. There are over a million flashcard sets available (covering many topics, not just Japanese). Luckily for us, kanji seems to be a fairly popular topic. Of particular interest is that there are flashcard sets for James Heisig's Remembering the Kanji Vol. I book. Of course, there are many other kanji sets as well.

This is the perfect site for creating web flashcards and quizzing yourself. You can quiz yourself either in the order that your set was created or at random.

For the studious, I would suggest making flashcard sets for articles that you read and just periodically come back to the site and quiz yourself.

JLPT-Kanji

<http://www.jlpt-kanji.com>

For those studying for the JLPT exam, this is the best site for studying. Similar to Flashcard Exchange you can create flashcards. However the real power of this site comes in the fact that it is organized by JLPT level. It takes the Kanji required for every level and organizes them into sets of 30 kanji. You can study these sets in either normal or random order.

Pera Pera Penguin

<http://www.yomiuri.co.jp/ppp-e/>

Without a doubt this is perhaps the best grammar review on the web.

"Pera Pera Penguin" appears once every 5 weeks in the Daily Yomiuri, one of the most popular Japanese newspapers.

Foreigners from all over Japan mail their questions to the author and one letter is chosen to be the topic for a column. Often, these articles focus on topics that have confused Japanese language learners for quite some time. It's great for learning material that you would never encounter in a textbook or course.

Even on simple topics, you will always learn subtleties that you never even knew about. Finally, the author adds a small column for vocabulary to ensure that you will learn new words every week. Usually these words are related to the article topic

Kanji Clinic

<http://www.kanjiclinic.com>

If you've ever been frustrated with Kanji, this is the site for you. Kanji Clinic is the de facto website for researching approaches to studying kanji. Through articles and book reviews, Kanji Clinic critically evaluates various kanji-learning methods.

Part II: Books

Kanji

If you find yourself always spending lots of time studying kanji and then forgetting most of them by the next day, here are a few kanji learning systems that have proven to be effective.

Remembering the Kanji: A Complete Course on How Not to Forget the Meaning and Writing of Japanese Characters, Vol. 1

By James Heisig

For many, this is the Holy Grail of kanji learning. The first edition of this book was written in the late 1970s. The newest edition is up-to-date with the latest kanji list from the Japanese Ministry of Education. This series comes in three volumes. The author of the book got sick of his Japanese classes and came to the conclusion that there must be a better way.

He has devised a system so effective that you can learn all 1945 Joyo Kanji (necessary for 90% literacy) in as little as one month of dedicated full-time study. This is a bold claim that no other kanji learning system can make. After completing part I of this book, I believe Heisig's claim.

One aspect that may surprise language learners is that this book doesn't teach you how to pronounce the characters at all (this issue is handled in the second volume). He argues that the assignment of Chinese and Japanese readings to kanji is not as logically structured as the assignment of meanings to kanji. Thus he separates these issues across different volumes.

By the time you finish this book, you will be able to look at any Joyo Kanji and know its meaning. Furthermore, given a keyword, you will be able to write the corresponding Kanji from memory.

The introduction and preface are highly controversial and really set the pace for the rest of the book. He expresses his belief that learning Japanese as done in Japan is completely the wrong solution for foreigners. This is the type of book that you'll either absolutely love or absolutely hate. A tremendous amount of dedication and persistence is required. If you make it to the end, you will have finally overcome what many consider to be the biggest obstacle of the Japanese language.

Volume II addresses the problem of Kanji pronunciation.

Volume III adds an additional 1000 Kanji which are necessary if you have an interest in reading modern Japanese literature.

Guide to Remembering Japanese Characters
By Kenneth Henshall

This book takes the approach of breaking down kanji via radicals and coming up with stories to remember the kanji. Henshall chose to go through Kanji by grade level. Many people who did not like “Remembering the Kanji” say that this book is better. I might even suggest to use both books. In many cases, I feel that some of the keywords that Henshall chooses fit much better. It’s also a good way to gauge the accuracy of the keyword meanings presented in Heisig’s book.

Lastly, this book is only 30 bucks.

Kanji Pict-O-Graphix: Over 1,000 Japanese Kanji and Kana Mnemonics
By Michael Rowley

This is an approach that might work for people who didn’t like the previous two books. It presents a more pictographic representation of Kanji. Unlike the other titles, these kanji are ordered by subject.

Kanji ABC: A Systematic Approach to Japanese Characters
By Andreas Foerster, Naoko Tamura

This is another book that presents a study of radicals and then attempts to devise methods for easily memorizing Kanji.

Grammar

Making Sense of Japanese: What the Textbooks Don't Tell You, Vol. 1

The book's title fits it perfectly. This book attempts to clear up vital issues that textbooks fail to cover. This is an excellent title for deciphering the Japanese sense of how their grammar works. No other book comes close to explaining the Japanese frame of mind Jay Rubin's seminal classic.

Handbook of Japanese Verbs **By Taeko Kamiya**

These next two books are a rare gem. It divides the study of Japanese grammar into verbs and adjectives. Each chapter covers a different form/topics and runs through grammar associated with each form/topic. For example, there are separate chapters on detailing numerous "te" and "tara" forms. The book itself is small, but only because it is concise.

The Handbook of Japanese Adjectives and Adverbs **By Taeko Kamiya**

Similar to the above title excepting now it covers adjectives and adverbs. Some of the topics include adjectives that express degree, time, circumstance and even onomatopoeia. Both titles are highly recommended. Every chapter is packed with well-written explanations, example sentences, and exercises to reinforce learning.

All About Particles **By Naoko Chino**

If you find yourself always fumbling on particles, this book is for you. It goes through literally every particle and gives clear concise definitions along with great examples.

Magazines

Hiragana Times

<http://www.hiraganatimes.com>

One of the only bilingual (English/Japanese) magazines in Japan. It keeps up with the latest current events and has numerous articles covering many aspects of Japanese culture. This magazine is especially great because every article is written in both languages. Even better, there is furigana over every Kanji.

Nihongo Journal

This is the best (any only) magazine dedication to Japanese learning. Nihongo Journal is written for Japanese language learners in Japan. It covers issues such as business Japanese, informal speech, kanji learning strategies, and culture. Most articles have English translations. Furigana is provided over most, but not all kanji. Also, each monthly issue includes a CD containing conversations from the dialogue presented in the issue. Overall, your speaking, listening, reading, and writing skills will improve from studying Nihongo Journal.

For JLPT test takers, there are sample JLPT level 1 and 2 exams given every issue.

Manga

For manga, I recommend:

<http://www.fujisan.com>

<http://www.jpqueen.com>

Note that they ship from Japan.

Part III: Tests

JLPT

This is the most popular Japanese Language Exam. It is written for foreigners learning Japanese. There are 4 levels with Level 1 being the toughest. Note that there is a huge jump in difficulty from Level 3 to 2.

This exam is often required by companies where hiring foreign employees. Most only look for those who have passed the Level 1 exam. In some cases, Level 2 is acceptable. No companies require Level 3 or 4. For foreigners who are considering employment in Japan, this exam is a must.

Note that this exam places heavy emphasis on grammar that many would admit is useless (or rarely used) in everyday conversation. Even so, if you're looking to increase your marketability to employers, you will likely have no other choice.

Kanken

Known as the "Kanji Kentei Shiken" or "Kanken" for short. This exam is rapidly growing in popularity among foreigners. Unlike the JLPT, this exam is actually intended for Japanese people. It is a test of Kanji ability and even includes questions on writing, stroke order, and radicals. There are 10 levels (and 2 pre-levels), with 1 being the highest. Note that the JLPT Level 1 is equivalent to a Kanken Level 5 or 6 exam. Educated Japanese college students can pass the pre-level 2 exam with a moderate amount of extra studying.

The exam is offered 3 times per year (February, June, and October). Many JLPT test takers use this exam to check up on their Kanji ability leading up to the JLPT exam. The nearest test centers are in NY and NJ.

Note that many employees in Japan take this exam in order to compete with one another. The Level 1 exam is only taken by 1000 people worldwide and on average, only 150 of them pass. Level 1 involves knowing 6000 Kanji inside and out. If you can pass Level 1, your Kanji skills are godly (by Japanese standards :-).

Part IV: Electronic Dictionaries

With so many electronic dictionaries on the market, it's hard to choose one. Here are a few dictionaries that allow you to write down Kanji with a stylus:

Casio XD-470(~\$150)

The handwriting recognition is great and serves as a good way to know if your writing is legible.

Be careful handling this dictionary. The casing is rather flimsy and tends to fall off easily. You don't want to drop this one.

Canon Wordtank V70/V80(\$300/\$400)

For those with bigger wallets, I would recommend the newer V70 or V80 Canon Wordtank dictionaries. These dictionaries include English, Japanese, and Chinese. Both dictionaries have the unique feature of being able to pronounce Chinese words. From what it looks like, this feature is exclusive to the Chinese dictionary.

Optionally you can purchase a leather snap case for added protection.

Retailers

I recommend the following:

<http://www.smartimports.net/>

<http://www.fujisan.com>