



The Texas Tech Student's Kanji Strategy Guide

Supplemental study strategies for your
Japanese classes

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Preface

This guide was created in the Fall 2025 semester to help students enrolled in Texas Tech University's Japanese language courses. Please be aware that this guide does not reflect official departmental or instructor policy. While it provides course-specific information, courses may change in the future and certain sections may become outdated. However, the strategies and educational material provided should remain useful regardless.

Introduction

As a student enrolled in Texas Tech University's Japanese language courses, you'll regularly be tested on kanji, the Chinese characters used by the Japanese writing system. Kanji can be overwhelming, especially when first learning them and studying for your kanji assessments. However, learning kanji doesn't have to be a struggle. With the right strategies, you can learn to see kanji as structured, meaningful characters instead of random marks.

This strategy guide offers practical kanji learning strategies to supplement your existing methods in a way that'll help you develop a deeper understanding of how kanji work and prepare you for your kanji assessments.

How to use this guide

This strategy guide is organized to be read from start to finish, but you can use this guide however you want. Each section can be read independently, so you can jump to whatever section is most relevant to you. Some sections assume more Japanese knowledge than others, so it's fine if some don't click right away—you can always return to them later.

Assessment information

In your Japanese courses, you'll regularly take kanji quizzes or kanji tests where you'll be tested on kanji in context.

You'll encounter questions like:

- Fill in the kanji

__く (いく) → 行く

__事 (ぎょうじ) → 行事

- Write the reading

行く → いく

行事 → ぎょうじ

- Write the whole word

いく (go) → 行く

event → 行事

These types of questions don't explicitly ask you to just write a kanji's onyomi or kunyomi readings¹ or meanings, but you'll still need that knowledge.

To help you prepare for kanji assessments, the strategies and exercises in this guide are designed with these questions in mind.

Which kanji should you study?

Your instructor will specify the kanji to study for each assessment. Typically, the kanji you'll be tested on corresponds to a specific textbook and workbook lesson (if you're using a workbook).

For Genki users

Pay attention to the Reading and Writing Section (読み書き編) in the back of the textbook and its corresponding lesson in the workbook. Your textbook lists example words for each kanji, and those words are a source that assessments often draw from. Your workbook's Using Kanji pages show each lesson's kanji use in context, and those words are another source that assessments draw from.

第14課 LESSON 14
悩みの相談 Personal Advice Column

彼	彼 (かれ) 男性 (male) 彼 (かれ) 男性 (male) 彼 (かれ) 男性 (male)
代	代 (か) 代 (か) 代 (か) 代 (か) 代 (か)
留	留 (る) 留 (る) 留 (る) 留 (る) 留 (る)
族	族 (ぞく) 族 (ぞく) 族 (ぞく) 族 (ぞく) 族 (ぞく)
親	親 (おや) 親 (おや) 親 (おや) 親 (おや) 親 (おや)
切	切 (き) 切 (き) 切 (き) 切 (き) 切 (き)
英	英 (えい) 英 (えい) 英 (えい) 英 (えい) 英 (えい)
店	店 (みせ) 店 (みせ) 店 (みせ) 店 (みせ) 店 (みせ)

第14課 読み書き編 Using Kanji

Write the Kanji with an appropriate mix of kanji and Hiragana. Rewrite the kanji with Hiragana.

- 私の _____ はとても _____ です。二語 _____ です。
それ しんせつ 正直
- 二語 _____ します。_____ は _____ します。
しんせつ 正直 する
- その _____ の人は _____ でした。
おや 親
- _____ になって _____ に行きました。
しんせつ 正直
- _____ は _____ でした。
しんせつ 正直
- 東京から _____ まで飛行機 _____ のりました。
しんせつ 正直
- かみは _____ して、髪は _____ です。
しんせつ 正直
- 失学 _____ の先生は _____ でした。
しんせつ 正直
- 仕事の後、_____ をして、_____ しました。
しんせつ 正直
- 子どもの _____ を _____ して _____ ました。
しんせつ 正直

Figure 1 and Figure 2. Genki 2's Reading and Writing Section pages from the textbook and workbook.

For Tobira users

The Kanji Lists (漢字表) at the end of each lesson are your primary kanji resource. Pay attention to the words marked “RW” (words students should be able to read and write) and words marked “R” (words students should be able to read) to guide your studies.

漢字表			
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3 読む	読む	3 読む	読む
4 読む	読む	4 読む	読む
5 読む	読む	5 読む	読む
6 読む	読む	6 読む	読む
7 読む	読む	7 読む	読む
8 読む	読む	8 読む	読む
9 読む	読む	9 読む	読む
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36 読む	読む	36 読む	読む
37 読む	読む	37 読む	読む
38 読む	読む	38 読む	読む
39 読む	読む	39 読む	読む
40 読む	読む	40 読む	読む

Figure 3. Tobira’s Kanji List.

1. Kunyomi and onyomi refer to the Japanese and Chinese ways of reading a kanji. The kunyomi reading is the native Japanese word assigned to a Chinese character while the onyomi reading is the reading derived from the character’s original Chinese pronunciation. Some kanji may have multiple kunyomi readings and some may not have kunyomi at all.

Strategy #1: Using components to learn structure and meaning

Kanji are made from visual, semantic, and phonetic building blocks called components.¹ Whether a kanji consists of a singular component or is made from multiple components, components give each kanji structure. Components can hint at a kanji's meaning, tell a story, and can even indicate an onyomi reading.²

There is no definite number of components out there or strict rules about how kanji must be broken down. This flexibility gives you the freedom to choose the breakdowns that make the most sense to you.

You don't need to memorize every component to benefit from this approach. Instead of thinking, "I need to memorize components before I can learn kanji," think of it as, "understanding components makes difficult kanji easier to learn." Components help you distinguish similar looking kanji, provide building blocks that aid muscle memory,² and enable you to create meaningful mnemonics.

Example

Let's look at 花, the kanji for flower. 花 can be broken down into two components, 艹 on the top and 化 on the bottom. 艹 means grass, and 化 means change. A mnemonic to remember the kanji's meaning and components could be, "a

flower is grass that changes.”

You can also use components to distinguish similar looking kanji. 時, 持, 待, and 侍 can all look the same at first glance. They share the same component on the right, but the component on the left differs. These differing components hint at the kanji’s meaning, allowing you some differentiating mnemonics.

Finding resources

To find kanji components lists online, search for “list of kanji radicals” in English or 部首一覧表 in Japanese. Some online dictionaries like Jisho.org or JapanDict.com also list the components of a kanji for you.

While radicals and components are technically different,¹ radical lists provide a useful standardized reference of kanji components organized by stroke count.³

Exercise: Breaking down kanji with component Trees

For this exercise, you’re going to practice breaking down kanji into its components using a tree diagram.

You’ll need

- Writing materials (pen and paper, or digital equivalent)
- Kanji radical resource (online or offline)

Steps

1. Select and write one kanji to analyze.



Figure 1. Example using 藤, the kanji for wisteria.

2. Identify its components using your radical resource as reference.



Figure 2. Dotted lines around the kanji components.

3. Map the components using a tree diagram.



Figure 3. Tree diagram of 藤.

4. Apply the following breakdown methods based on your goals.
5. To memorize meaning, create a mnemonic from component meanings. Kanji radical lists typically list the radical meanings, providing a list of concepts you can tie together.



Figure 4. Example mnemonic and drawing for 藤.

- To memorize structure, practice writing its components then assemble the full kanji from memory.

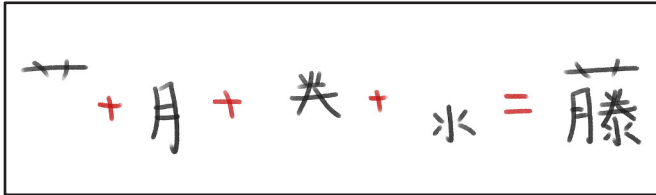


Figure 5. Constructing 藤 from its components.

- To distinguish similar kanji, create a list of similar looking kanji, circling distinguishing components and noting how the components indicate meaning.

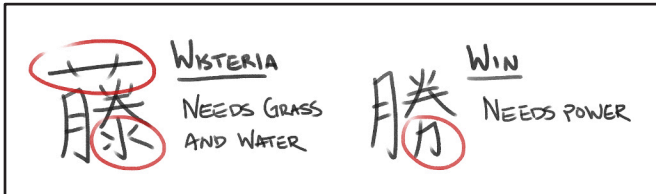


Figure 6. Differentiating 藤 from 勝, the kanji for win.

1. The terms “radical” and “kanji component” are often interchangeably used to refer to the visual, phonetic, or semantic components of a kanji. Technically, “radicals” (部首) refer to a singular component of a kanji used to index them while “kanji components” (偏旁冠脚) functions as a broad generic term.
2. See Sidenote: Kanji classes
3. See Sidenote: Stroke order

Sidenote: Stroke order

Stroke order, the sequence of writing a character, is an important aspect of the Japanese writing system. Following Japan's standard stroke order can improve your muscle memory, writing legibility, writing efficiency, and overall handwriting. When you combine kanji component knowledge with a standardized stroke order, writing kanji shifts from memorizing every individual stroke to assembling kanji from components in your mental repository.

That said, you don't need to master the stroke order of every component or kanji out there. What matters is following a consistent system—ideally Japan's—since following a consistent system makes reading and writing easier. Even if your stroke order deviates from a standard system, consistency when writing will help you in the long run.

Finding resources

To find stroke order resources online, look up “kanji stroke order diagrams” in English or 書き順 in Japanese. Some dictionaries may also include stroke order diagrams, and the Genki textbooks provide diagrams for all lesson-assigned kanji.

Strategy #2: Using model words to remember readings

This strategy is more memory intensive and requires a more larger vocabulary, but it's a powerful one that can help you learn kanji readings in context. Memorizing all of a kanji's readings in isolation can be overwhelming, especially for kanji like 生 with over ten readings. Instead of memorizing readings in isolation, you can learn a kanji's model words—words that function as perfect examples of a kanji's readings—then work backwards to memorize its readings. Additionally, your textbook often provides these words for you.

For this strategy, it's key to focus on learning relevant, common words over learning every possible word for every reading. Some readings are uncommon, and you may not need those readings when first learning the kanji.

Example

Let's look at 目. Its kunyomi readings are め and ま. Its onyomi readings are もく and ぼく. Let's look at its most common readings.

- 目 reading: め ; eye
- 目的 reading: もくてき ; objective, goal
- 面目 reading: めんぼく ; appearance, face

The kunyomi reading ま is much less commonly used than め. This reading is usually

when 目 replaces a another kanji, like 目差し being an alternative to 眼差し (まなざし). In practicality, め, もく, and ぼく are the main readings, and memorizing its three words 目, 目的, and 面目, gives you concrete examples for remembering and recalling those readings in context.

Finding resources

Since many online kanji dictionaries also show the readings of a given kanji, they double as both a reading lookup tool and a tool to find words that contain a certain kanji.

To find dictionaries online, search for “Japanese dictionary” in English or 辞書 in Japanese.

Exercise: Mind mapping kanji and their model words

For this exercise, you’ll create a mind map to visualize a kanji’s readings in context. You can later incorporate the information from your mind map into other study tools like flashcards to practice recognition and recall.

You’ll need

- Writing materials (pen and paper, or digital equivalent)
- Japanese dictionary (online or offline)

Steps

1. Select one kanji you want to memorize the readings for.



Figure 1. Example using 放, the kanji for shoot or release.

2. Look up the kanji's readings using your Japanese dictionary. Genki textbooks also list readings in their kanji sections, but keep in mind these lists aren't always complete.

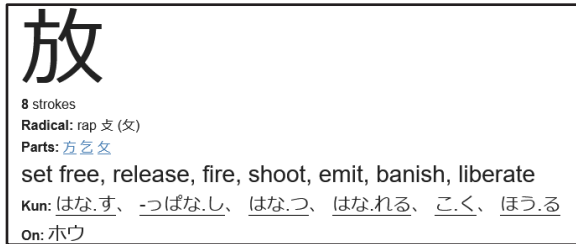


Figure 2. Jisho.org kanji page for 放.

3. Search for words containing your kanji using your dictionary or textbook.

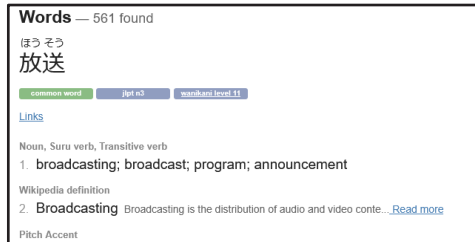


Figure 3. A Jisho.org search result for words using 放.

4. Select two to five model words with different readings. Choose words that are commonly

- used, personally relevant, or memorable to you.
5. Create your mind map. With your kanji in the center, write each of your chosen words around it, and connect the kanji to the words using its readings.

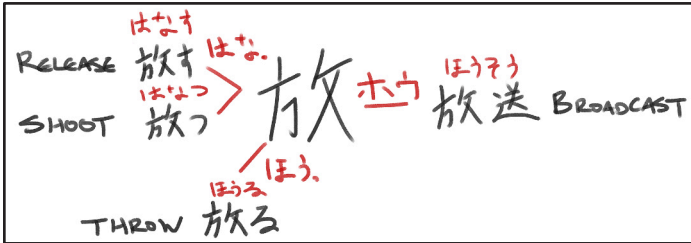


Figure 4. Mind map of 放, three of its main readings, and four model words.

Sidenote: Kanji classes

In 100 CE, Chinese scholar Xu Shen categorized Chinese characters into six classes (六書 in Japanese). These classes aren't defined by strict rules nor are they mutually exclusive categories, but they serve as useful models for understanding how kanji work. Of the six classes, four are the most practical for learning kanji: shoukeimoji, shijimoji, kaiimoji, and keiseimoji.

You don't need to memorize these classifications though. What matters is knowing that kanji can be generally sorted into these groups. Beginners are often taught that kanji look like what they represent, but that only describes one class of kanji—that class not even making up the majority of modern kanji. Understanding these classifications helps to explain why some kanji look the way they do and how they work.

Shoukeimoji (象形文字)

Shoukeimoji are kanji that visually depict the object they represent. Some examples are 目, 木, and 人. 目 looks like an eye, 木 looks like a tree, and 人 looks like a person if they were all legs.

Shijimoji (指事文字)

Shijimoji are kanji that non-arbitrarily depict abstract ideas. Some examples are

numbers like 一, 二, and 三. Similarly, up, down, and middle, 上, 下, and 中 respectively.

Kaiimoji (会意文字)

Kaiimoji are kanji that are made up of meaningful components, and often these components tell a story. The example from Strategy #1 is an example of this. Some others are 森 and 休, the characters respectively meaning forest and rest. Three trees (木) make a forest. A person (亻) rests next to a tree (木).

Keiseimoji (形声文字)

Keiseimoji are kanji that are made up of a phonetic component that indicates its onyomi reading and a semantic component that indicates its meaning.

An example of this is with the phonetic component 里 (リ).

- 理 kunyomi: ことわり ; onyomi: リ ; reason
- 狸 kunyomi: たぬき ; onyomi: リ ; tanuki
- 鯉 kunyomi: こい ; onyomi: リ ; carp

Looking at the semantic components on the left, 王 indicates that 理 relates to kings or jade, 犴 indicates that 狸 relates to animals, and 魚 indicates that 鯉 relates to fish.

While the phonetic component of keiseimoji informs its onyomi reading, shared phonetic

components do not always produce the same onyomi readings between kanji. This is because pronunciations change over time and because onyomi are Japanese approximations of Chinese sounds. Similarly, semantic components aren't always concrete indicators of a kanji's meaning due to semantic drift (like in the case of 理).

Strategy #3: Self-quizzing

Quizzing yourself strengthens your recognition and recalls skills, skills crucial for learning kanji and vocabulary. This strategy combines what you've learned from Strategies #1 and #2 to practice with the types of questions that may appear in kanji assessments.

This is because Strategy #1 helps you recognize, distinguish, and write kanji using components. Strategy #2 helps you learn a kanji's readings in context.

Exercise: Self-quizzing and self-grading

For this exercise, you'll practice quizzing yourself on kanji recognition and recall. This exercise drills both writing and reading abilities through multiple rounds of quizzing and correction. As you "grade" yourself, you can mark kanji or readings you struggle with for further practice with.

You'll need

- Writing materials (different color pens and paper, or digital equivalent)
- Textbook or workbook pages with target words

Steps

1. Create your word list. Write the English translations of your target words on the far-left side your page. Use additional pages if needed to avoid creating multiple columns.

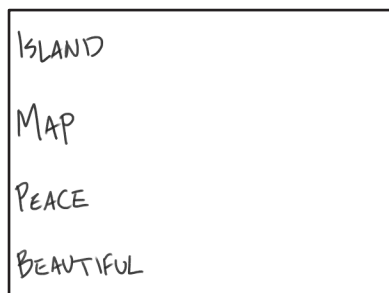


Figure 1. Example of vocabulary words from Tobira.

2. Quiz: English to Japanese. Without reference, write the Japanese word using kanji.

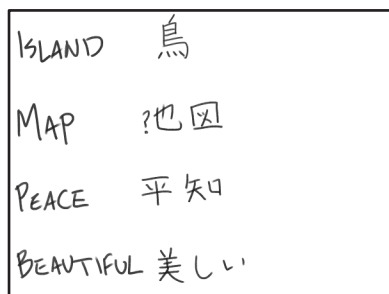


Figure 2. Results of English to Japanese quizzing.

3. Check and correct your answers. Use a different color pen to mark corrections and fill in any blanks.

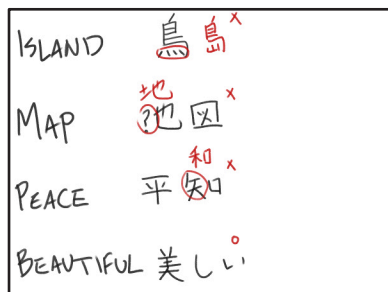


Figure 3. Corrections on English to Japanese quiz.

4. Cover the English column by folding the paper back or using separate sheet of paper.



Figure 4. Covered up English column.

5. Quiz: Kanji to readings. Write the Japanese word's reading using hiragana.

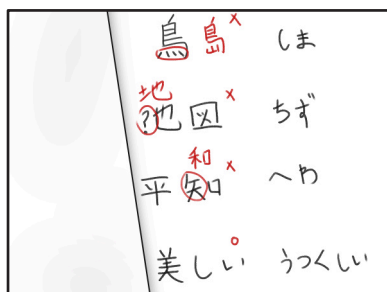


Figure 5. Results of reading quizzing.

6. Check and correct your answers again.

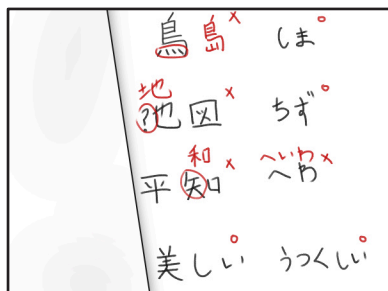


Figure 6. Corrections on reading quizzing.

7. Cover the previous columns (English and kanji).

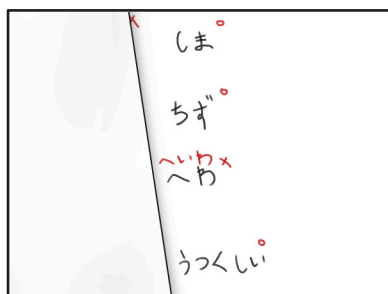


Figure 7. Covered up English and kanji columns.

8. Quiz: Readings to kanji. Write the word using kanji for each reading.

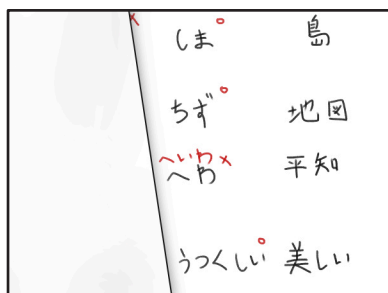


Figure 8. Results of reading to kanji quizzing.

9. Self-quiz and self-correct as many times as desired. Self-quizzing helps you find your weakpoints, so use the quizzes to guide your studies.

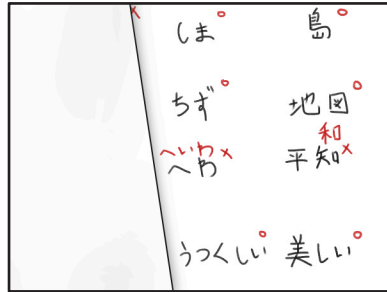


Figure 9. Nearly full marks on readings to kanji quizzing.

Conclusion

Kanji can feel overwhelming at first, but with consistent practice and effective studying strategies, kanji can become much more manageable. It's important not to see kanji as a roadblock to learning Japanese, but something that adds depth and nuance to the language.

This guide has offered practical strategies and exercises grounded in how kanji assessments have worked at Texas Tech University. Not every strategy and exercise will click with every learner, but hopefully you've learned something new or found new ways of thinking about kanji.

Additional resources

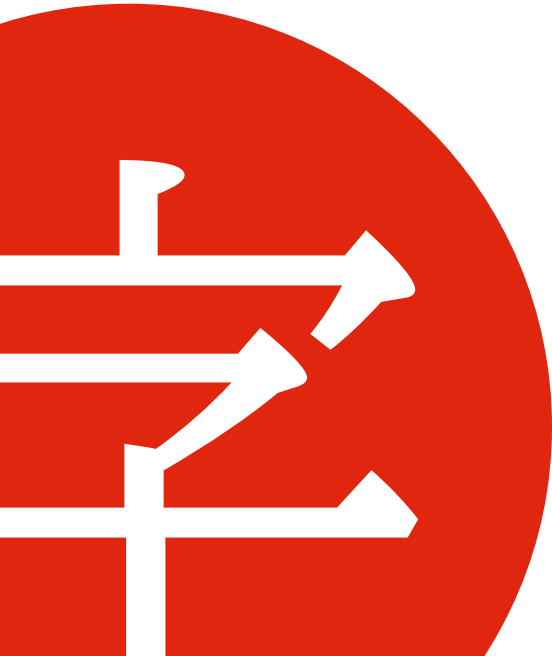
Below are some especially useful free tools for studying vocabulary and kanji. This is not an exhaustive list, but these resources complement the strategies in this guide and can be incorporated into your own study routine.

- **Jisho.org** An online Japanese to English dictionary that allows searching by radicals.
- **JapanDict.com** An online Japanese to English dictionary that includes a radical list.
- **jpdb.io** An online Japanese to English dictionary that has its own database of Japanese media ranked by difficulty.
- **Yomitan** A pop-up dictionary browser extension for Chrome, Firefox, and Edge that recognizes Japanese text and automatically looks it up for you.
- **Tofugu** A website dedicated to learning Japanese with educational articles and reviews of popular learning resources.



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頑張ってください！



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