



# **The Kana Crash Course**

**A quick (yet thorough!) introduction to  
Japanese phonetic writing**

**Andrew Scott Conning**



© 2016 by Lexica Global Language Systems, LLC  
All rights reserved.

# The Kana Crash Course

A quick (yet thorough!) introduction to  
Japanese phonetic writing



*Andrew Scott Conning*

LEXICA GLOBAL LANGUAGE SYSTEMS



## JAPANESE PHONETIC WRITING • 日本語の表音文字体系

A wall chart of the 92 kana base characters and their stroke order, together with the core information in this booklet, is [available here](#). Display the chart beside your desk — or under a translucent desk pad — for convenient reference as you learn to write and type in Japanese.

### Introduction

The term “kana” (仮名) refers to syllabic scripts used to represent the sounds of the Japanese language. The earliest kana was the *man’yōgana* (万葉仮名), a set of Chinese characters the Japanese borrowed in the seventh century as phonetic symbols for similar native sounds. As these complex ideographs proved unsuitable for the transcription of a polysyllabic tongue, the Japanese soon invented two sets of phonetic kana symbols: the relatively curvy *hiragana* (adapted from cursive *man’yōgana*), and the more angular *katakana* (adapted from fragments of *man’yōgana*).

Modern Japanese is written in a combination of hiragana, katakana, and Chinese characters (*kanji*), along with Roman letters (*rōmaji*) and Arabic numerals (*Arabia sūji*). Kanji are used mainly for Chinese-derived nouns, proper nouns, and the stems of native verbs and adjectives. Hiragana are used for all types of native words not written in kanji, and for the inflected endings following a kanji stem, known as *okurigana* (e.g., the 「く」 in 巻く). Katakana are used mainly for Western loanwords, scientific names (such as names of species), sound-mimicking words, and emphasis (like italics). Rōmaji are used mainly for alphabetical abbreviations (GHQ, ISO) and foreign names.

The rōmaji spellings in this booklet follow the widely used Hepburn system, which best approximates Japanese sounds for speakers of English and Romance languages. In addition to Hepburn, you may sometimes come across spellings based on the competing Kunrei system, especially in writing by native Japanese. Kunrei spellings can generally be deduced from the tables that follow by combining each character’s alphabetical row and column headings (e.g., *t* + *ya* = *tya*, corresponding to Hepburn’s more phonetically instructive *cha*).

To input Japanese on an alphabetical keyboard, it is possible – and in a few cases necessary – to use non-Hepburn spellings. This booklet always lists Hepburn spellings, but also notes in angular brackets any non-Hepburn spellings required for keyboard input.

### Native Japanese syllables

The table on the next page displays the kana characters and Hepburn romanization for all native Japanese syllables, divided between 清音 *seion* (“clear [unvoiced] sounds”) and 濁音 *dakuon* (“turbid [voiced] sounds”). For the purpose of learning kana, we can somewhat loosely use the term *seion* here to refer to syllables that are not followed by diacritic voicing marks (though some of these syllables in fact have voiced consonants). Similarly, we can loosely use the term *dakuon* to refer to syllables that do have such marks.

*Seion* and *dakuon* are each further divided into one-character 直音 *chokuon* (“straight sounds”) and two-character 拗音 *yōon* (“bending sounds”). *Yōon* are contractions formed by adding a small version of a Y-row kana, such as *ょ* *yo*, to an I-column kana, such as *き* *ki*. This eliminates the *i* sound, leaving the one-syllable *きょ* *kyo* (“residence”), not to be confused with the two-syllable *きよ* *kiyo* (“contribution”). Kana Keys refers to *chokuon* as “monographs” and *yōon* as “digraphs”.

The leftmost column displays the hiragana, katakana, and Hepburn Romanization for all 48 basic Japanese sounds (including two obsolete sounds in parentheses). Because all but one of the sounds can be arranged into a 5×10 grid according to their initial (consonant) and final (vowel) sounds, this table is known as the “fifty sounds table” (五十音図 *gojūonzu*). The one misfit sound is syllabic *n*, a late entrant to Japanese phonology made necessary by the borrowing of words from Chinese.

清音 SEION

五十音 Gojūon ("50 sounds")

Monographs  
直音 (Chokuon)

Digraphs  
拗音 (Yōon)

A I U E O

YA YU YO

Katakana  
Hiragana

あ い う え お  
ア イ ウ エ オ  
a i u e o

The five vowels are pronounced as in Italian. Hepburn spellings offer generally reliable guidance to pronouncing consonants by English orthography -- except for r.

濁音 DAKUON

Monographs  
直音 (Chokuon)

Digraphs  
拗音 (Yōon)

A I U E O

YA YU YO

The "50 sounds table" includes four initial consonants that are unvoiced: k, s, t, and h. These become the voiced sounds g, z, d, and b when followed by dakuten (濁点), a diacritic resembling inverted commas ( ` ). In non-technical usage, we can use the term dakuon (濁音) to refer to syllables voiced in this manner.

K か き く け こ  
カ キ ク ケ コ  
ka ki ku ke ko

きゃ きゅ きょ  
キャ キュ キョ  
kya kyu kyo

G が ぎ ぐ げ ご  
ガ ギ グ ゲ ゴ  
ga gi gu ge go

ぎゃ ぎゅ ぎょ  
ギャ ギュ ギョ  
gya gyu gyo

S さ し す せ そ  
サ シ ス セ ソ  
sa shi<sup>▽</sup> su se so

しゃ しゅ しょ  
シャ シュ ショ  
sha<sup>▽</sup> shu<sup>▽</sup> sho<sup>▽</sup>

Z ざ じ ず ぜ ぞ  
ザ ジ ズ ゼ ゾ  
za ji<sup>▽</sup> zu ze zo

じゃ じゅ じょ  
ジャ ジュ ジョ  
ja<sup>▽</sup> ju<sup>▽</sup> jo<sup>▽</sup>

T た ち つ て と  
タ チ ツ テ ト  
ta chi<sup>▽</sup> tsu<sup>▽</sup> te to

ちゃ ちゅ ちょ  
チャ チュ チョ  
cha<sup>▽</sup> chu<sup>▽</sup> cho<sup>▽</sup>

D だ ぢ づ で ど  
ダ ヂ ツ デ ド  
da ji<sup>●</sup> zu<sup>●</sup> de do

ぢゃ ぢゅ ぢょ  
ヂャ チュ デョ  
ja<sup>▽</sup> ju<sup>▽</sup> jo<sup>▽</sup>  
[dya] [dyu] [dyo]

ぢ and づ are pronounced identically to じ and ず in the Z row, though keyboard input requires "d". See the blue inset for details on the D row.

N な に ぬ ね の  
ナ ニ ヌ ネ ノ  
na ni nu ne no

にゃ にゅ にょ  
ニャ ニュ ニョ  
nya nyu nyo

B ば び ぶ べ ぼ  
バ ビ ブ ベ ボ  
ba bi bu be bo

びゃ びゅ びょ  
ビャ ビュ ビョ  
bya byu byo

H は ひ ふ へ ほ  
ハ ヒ フ ヘ ホ  
ha hi fu<sup>▽</sup> he ho

ひゃ ひゅ ひょ  
ヒャ ヒュ ヒョ  
hya hyu hyo

P ぱ ぴ ぷ ぺ ぽ  
パ ピ プ ペ ポ  
pa pi pu pe po

ぴゃ ぴゅ ぴょ  
ピャ ピュ ピョ  
pya pyu pyo

The circular handakuten (半濁点) ( ◌̤ ) changes the initial h to p, which though unvoiced is known as a "semi-voiced sound" (半濁音 handakuon).

M ま み む め も  
マ ミ ム メ モ  
ma mi mu me mo

みゃ みゅ みょ  
ミャ ミュ ミョ  
mya myu myo

Y や ゆ よ  
ヤ ユ ヨ  
ya yu yo

Blank cells: Japanese has no yi, ye, or wu sounds

Phonetically irregular particles: When used as sentence particles, は/へ are read & spelled wa/e, used only as a particle, is read & spelled o.

R ら り る れ ろ  
ラ リ ル レ ロ  
ra ri ru re ro

りゃ りゅ りょ  
リャ リュ リョ  
rya ryu ryo

W わ (ゐ) (ゑ) を  
ワ (ヰ) (ヱ) ヲ  
wa i<sup>●</sup> e<sup>●</sup> o<sup>●</sup>  
[wi] [we] [wo]

Gray font indicates obsolete sounds (wi & we) or unused kana (kata ヲ o, hira みゆ myu & several D-row syllables).  
を must be typed wo, and is often romanized that way to distinguish it from お o.

▽ ● Irregular readings & spellings  
Syllables marked with superscripts have irregular romanization:  
▽ Hepburn departs from the "initial" and/or "final" to better represent the syllable's reading. For example, it represents ちゃ・チャ (initial t + final ya) as cha, not tya. Initials & finals can always be used for keyboard input, sometimes saving strokes. Where shown in brackets, they are required.  
▽ Ditto, plus the kana is phonetically irregular vis-à-vis its row.  
● Ditto ▽, plus Kunrei also drops or replaces the "initial".

D-row peculiarities: While there are D-row kana pronounced ji & zu, these sounds are usually written with their Z-row forms. The D-row forms are only used to indicate the repetition voicing of T-row ち or つ (as in ちぢめる chijimeru or つづく tsuzuku), or their liaison voicing (as in みぢかい mijikai, from み mi + ちかい chikai; or よこづな yokozuna, from よこ yoko + つな tsuna). As these exceptions are specific to Japanese, ぢ & づ are not normally used. D-row yōon normally go unused even in cases of repetition/liaison voicing; e.g., いちにち + ちゅう is usually written いちにちじゅう.

ん Typing syllabic n: To input syllabic n (ん/ン) on a keyboard, one may type either "n" or "nn" prior to a period, a comma or another kana that is not in the vowel, Y or N rows. Otherwise, one must type "nn" (a simpler rule is always to type "nn"). Thus to type a final ン followed by an N-row kana, one must type "nna", as in こんな konna (typed "konna"). Practice inputting the words in the next column:

かねん kanen (flammable) type "kanenn"  
かんえん kan'en\* (hepatitis) type "kannenn"  
かねん kannen (notion) type "kannennn"  
かんや kan'ya\* (cold winter's night) type "kannya"  
\* Hepburn spelling requires an apostrophe between syllabic n and vowels or y.

## Tokushuon

To more accurately transcribe foreign sounds not used in their language, the Japanese have developed a special system of phonetic combinations unique to katakana. All but one of these 特殊音 *tokushuon* (“special sounds” or transcription katakana) are digraphs formed by joining a small katakana vowel or ュ *yu* to a standard katakana; the character’s small size identifies it as a combining form rather than a stand-alone syllable. For example, the compound フェ *fe*, (from *fu* + small *e*) is used in transcribing “café” カフェ *kafe*, which otherwise would have to be rendered rather poorly as カヘ *kahe* or カフエ *kafue*.

If the initial character in such a combination is not itself a vowel, its final vowel sound is generally displaced by the small vowel that follows, as illustrated by フェ *fe* above. The exceptional combinations in which the initial character’s vowel is preserved include クィ *kwi*, クヱ *kwe*, and クォ *kwo*, but these, not coincidentally, are also frequently written as a combination of two standard katakana (クィ, クヱ, クォ).

The table below displays the Hepburn Romanization and katakana for all *tokushuon*:

特殊音 TOKUSHUON						
(Alternative kana spellings) [Special rōmaji for keyboard input]						
	A	I	U	E	O	YU YE
Kw		クィ (クィ) kwi		クヱ (クヱ) kwe	クォ (クォ) kwo	
S						シエ she▽
Z						ジエ je▽
T		ティ ti [texi]	トゥ tu [toxu]		テュ (チュ) tyu [texyu]	チエ che▽
Ts	ツア tsa	ツイ tsi		ツエ tse	ツオ tso	
D		ディ di [dexi]	ドウ du [doxu]		デュ dyu [dexyu]	
F	ファ fa	フィ fi		フェ fe	フォ fo	フュ fyu
Y				イエ ye		
W		ウィ (ウイ) wi		ウヱ (ウエ) we	ウオ wo [uxo]	
V	ヴァ (バ) va	ヴィ (ビ) vi	ヴ (ブ) vu	ヴェ (ベ) ve	ヴォ (ボ) vo	ヴュ (ビュ) vyu

Typing Hepburn or Kunrei spellings generally produces small-form kana as needed, due to standard rōmaji-kana conversion rules in software. In a few cases, it is necessary to preface the small form with a system-designated character such as “x” or “|”, as in the bracketed rōmaji. The section below on **Inputting small kana** gives further information.

V-row *tokushuon* are mildly unorthodox alternatives to the B-row kana (バ, ビ, ブ, etc.) for transcribing the English “v” sound, even though the latter are phonetically less similar. Thus “valve” is still generally transcribed as バルブ rather than ヴァルヴ, even though this renders it indistinguishable from “bulb”.

The lone *tokushuon* monograph is ヴ *vu*, formed by adding a *dakuten* to ウ *u*.

## Long vowels

Long vowels in native Japanese words are indicated in the following ways:

1. To extend *a*, *i*, or *u*, the corresponding vowel is added:

まあ	<i>mā</i>
かなしい	<i>kanashii</i>
くうき	<i>kūki</i>

2. To extend *o*, *ō* is added (though its phonetic value is お):

そう	<i>sō</i>
こうじ	<i>kōji</i>

except for a handful of special exceptions in which お is added, such as

おおきい	<i>ōkii</i>
おおい	<i>ōi</i>

3. To extend *e*, either an え or (more frequently) an い is added:

へえ	<i>hē</i>
ええと	<i>ēto</i>
めいし	<i>meishi</i>
せいさん	<i>seisan</i>

To input long vowels of native Japanese words on a keyboard, simply type the rōmaji equivalent of each kana.

Katakana follows the above rules for the writing of native Japanese words. But for indicating long vowels in foreign loanwords, a long dash known as the *chōonpu* (長音符) – typed with the dash key – is used to extend the final vowel of the preceding kana:

サービス	<i>sābisu</i>	"service"	[type: sa-bisu]
スープ	<i>sūpu</i>	"soup"	[type: su-pu]
メール	<i>mēru</i>	"e-mail"	[type: me-ru]
グループ	<i>gurūpu</i>	"group"	[type: guru-pu]
ソーセージ	<i>sōsēji</i>	"sausage"	[type: so-se-ji]

In Hepburn Romanization, all long vowels are indicated by a flat line (macron) above the vowel, except for the *ei* combination (see *meishi* and *seisan* above) and the doubled *i* in native Japanese words (see *kanashii* and *ōkii* above).

Some instances of vowel extensions are not in fact "long vowels" but rather consecutive vowels from separate morphemes (these should not be Romanized with a macron):

1. any extensions of *o* or *u* resulting from a う verb ending:

ぬう	<i>nuu</i>	"sew"
くるう	<i>kuruu</i>	"go crazy"
まよう	<i>mayou</i>	"get lost"
きそう	<i>kisou</i>	"compete"

2. any other coupling of separate morphemes:

はあく	<i>haaku</i>	"grasp" (from <i>ha</i> "grip" + <i>aku</i> "grasp")
みずうみ	<i>mizuumi</i>	"lake" (from <i>mizu</i> "water" + <i>umi</i> "sea")
かれえだ	<i>kareeda</i>	"dead branch" (from <i>kare</i> "dead" + <i>eda</i> "branch")
ほおん	<i>hoon</i>	"thermal" (from <i>ho</i> "conserve" + <i>on</i> "warm")
こうし	<i>koushi</i>	"calf" (from <i>ko</i> "small" + <i>ushi</i> "ox")

Within loanwords, all long vowels (even *i*) are Romanized with macrons:

コーヒー	<i>kōhī</i>	"coffee"
セーター	<i>sētā</i>	"sweater"
スープ	<i>sūpu</i>	"soup"

## Double consonants

The initial consonants of kana in the K, S, T, and P rows can be doubled by prefacing them with a small *tsu* つ/ッ. Unlike the full-size つ/ッ, these small *tsu* markers – known as *sokuon* (促音) – do not represent the sound *tsu* but rather a slight pause:

サッカー		<i>sakkā</i>	"soccer"
メッシ		<i>Messhi</i>	"Messi"
セット		<i>setto</i>	"set"
タッチ		<i>tatchi</i>	"touch"
チップ		<i>chippu</i>	"tip, gratuity"
さっか	(作家)	<i>sakka</i>	"writer"
けっきょく	(結局)	<i>kekkyoku</i>	"in the end, eventually"
ちっそ	(窒素)	<i>chisso</i>	"nitrogen"
いっしょ	(一緒)	<i>issho</i>	"the same"
わかった	(分かった)	<i>wakatta</i>	"Got it, OK"
まっちゃ	(抹茶)	<i>matcha</i>	"powdered green tea"
はっぱ	(葉っぱ)	<i>happa</i>	"leaf"

In katakana loanwords, other consonants may also be doubled:

バッグ		<i>baggu</i>	"bag"
バッハ		<i>bahha</i>	"Bach"

Though not classified as *sokuon*, a "doubling" effect for initial *n* consonants is achieved by prefacing them with ん/ン:

みんな	(皆)	<i>minna</i>	"everyone"
ペンネ		<i>penne</i>	"penne"

In all such cases, the ん/ン represents an extra *n* sound rather than a pause. Note that the initial *n* cannot be doubled by adding つ/ッ:

WRONG	みっな	<i>minna</i>
WRONG	ペッネ	<i>penne</i>

## Glottal stops

When small つ/ッ appears at the end of a word, it indicates a glottal stop:

あっ!	Ah!	"Oh!"
えっ?	Eh!	"Huh?"

## Inputting small kana

As noted above, typing Hepburn or Kunrei spellings generally produces small-form kana as needed, due to standard rōmaji-kana conversion rules in software. In cases where one must manually produce a small kana (such as when using つ to signal a glottal stop), it is necessary to preface the small form with a system-designated character such as "x" or "l". This is important to remember for typing the following *tokushuon*, whose Hepburn spellings would instead generate the output shown in the far right column:

Tokushuon	Keyboard input	Hepburn spelling	Katakana output of Hepburn spelling
テイ	texi	<i>ti</i>	チ
デイ	dexi	<i>di</i>	ヂ
テユ	texyu	<i>tyu</i>	チュ
デュ	dexyu	<i>dyu</i>	ヂュ
トウ	toxu	<i>tu</i>	ッ
ドウ	doxu	<i>du</i>	ヅ
ウオ	uxo	<i>wo</i>	ヲ

**Stroke order and stroke count**

The [wall chart](#) provides a guide character for all 92 basic kana characters, with stroke order numbers positioned at the beginning of each stroke. Follow the guide characters closely. Always write kana strokes in the conventional direction and order, as both are essential to writing legibly and learning to read cursive.

For hiragana it is common in handwriting – and even in typeface – for nominally separate strokes to run together. An extreme example is ㇿ, which can be shown with all four separate strokes, with only three strokes, or even in a single cursive stroke.

**Kana sources**

The tables below illustrate the origins of hiragana and katakana in the *man'yōgana*:

Man'yōgana Sources of the Kana																
Hiragana										Katakana						
无 えん	和 わ	良 ら	也 や	末 ま	波 は	奈 な	太 た	左 さ	加 か	安 あ	ア ア	イ イ	ウ ウ	エ エ	オ オ	於 於
	爲 ゐ	利 り		美 み	比 ひ	仁 に	知 ち	之 し	機 き	以 い	カ カ	キ キ	ク ク	ケ ケ	コ コ	己 己
		留 る	由 ゆ	武 む	不 ふ	奴 ぬ	川 つ	寸 す	久 く	宇 う	サ サ	シ シ	ス ス	セ セ	ソ ソ	曾 曾
	惠 ゑ	礼 れ		女 め	部 へ	祢 ね	天 て	世 せ	計 け	衣 え	タ タ	チ チ	ツ ツ	テ テ	ト ト	止 止
	遠 を	呂 ろ	与 よ	毛 も	保 ほ	乃 の	止 と	曾 そ	己 こ	宇 う	ナ ナ	ニ ニ	ヌ ヌ	ネ ネ	ノ ノ	乃 乃
										ハ ハ	ヒ ヒ	フ フ	ヘ ヘ	ホ ホ	保 保	
										マ マ	ミ ミ	ム ム	メ メ	モ モ	毛 毛	
										ヤ ヤ		ユ ユ		ヨ ヨ	與 與	
										ラ ラ	リ リ	ル ル	流 流	レ レ	礼 礼	口 口
										ワ ワ	和 和	井 井		工 工	惠 惠	ヲ ヲ
										ン ン	尔 尔					乎 乎

Use of these images is governed by the GNU Free Documentation License, version 1.2. These images may be accessed or downloaded @ [commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hiragana\\_origin.svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hiragana_origin.svg) & ...[Katakana\\_origine.svg](#)



# THE KODANSHA KANJI LEARNER'S COURSE

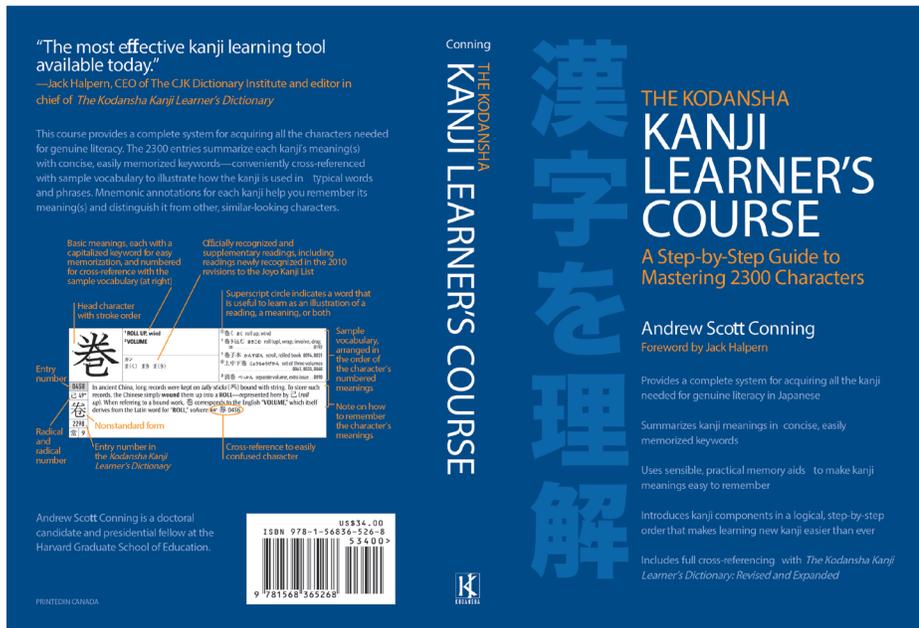
A step-by-step guide to mastering 2,300 characters

**As a kanji learning tool,  
this book has no peer...  
Absolutely essential for  
all students of Japanese!**

— Robert Nagell



Available on Amazon:  
[amzn.to/1Os6OgT](https://amzn.to/1Os6OgT)



**The Kodansha Kanji Learner's Course** is a step-by-step guide to mastering all the kanji needed for genuine literacy in Japanese. The 2,300 entries adeptly integrate the four essential elements for mastering kanji meanings:

- **Accurate keywords.** Each character's core meaning is encapsulated into a concise, easily memorized keyword. All keywords have been carefully chosen to be semantically accurate and to integrate the character's various senses into a core concept.
- **Key vocabulary to illustrate meaning and usage.** The concept captured in each keyword is illustrated with up to five examples, carefully chosen to clarify how the kanji is used in building words and phrases.
- **An unparalleled system of mnemonic aids.** Each entry contains an original mnemonic aid that is carefully designed to help learners remember the character's core meanings. Mnemonic aids pay special attention to helping learners immediately recognize each kanji and distinguish it from similar ones.
- **A rational learning sequence.** The course's widely praised sequence represents a breakthrough in kanji pedagogy. It aids learning by introducing kanji components step by step, grouping related kanji together, and building vocabulary progressively – all while teaching the kanji in rough order of importance.

## A self-guiding, self-reinforcing curriculum

The Course arranges all the information needed to master 2,300 characters into a streamlined, self-guiding, and mnemonically self-reinforcing curriculum. Sample compounds include only such kanji as have previously been learned, ensuring that learners are able to understand and use each compound, and providing a built-in review of all the kanji already studied.

## The ultimate kanji learning resource

- Provides a **sophisticated, pedagogically sound method** for remembering the core meaning of each kanji, conveniently summarized in **concise keywords** to facilitate memorization.
- Introduces the meaning and usage of each grapheme the first time it appears, helping learners seamlessly acquire new kanji based on a **sound understanding of their component parts**.
- Innovatively uses **concrete imagery** to simplify complex characters and make their meanings immediately recognizable in their graphical forms.
- Teaches characters in a **pedagogically effective sequence**, presenting graphically related characters together to help learners give significance to their contrastive features as they learn them, and thereby avoid having to re-learn them later.
- Helps learners actively apply each character's principal meanings and readings using **key vocabulary words**, carefully chosen to illustrate the character's usage.
- Helps learners **differentiate among graphically similar kanji** by showing how to remember the characters in a mutually contrastive manner that connects their graphical distinctions to their underlying semantic differences. Along the way, the course introduces **nearly 800 pairs of easily confused kanji**.
- Helps students learn to write kanji accurately, by indicating each kanji's **stroke order** and placing careful emphasis on distinctions among similar characters.
- Includes **all the kanji needed for genuine literacy**.
- **Extensive cross-referencing** allows learners to easily find the entries of lookalike kanji, as well as all kanji appearing in the sample compounds.