
Recommended System for Romanizing Japanese

Department of English Language /
Komaba Organization for Educational Development
The University of Tokyo, Komaba

When writing Japanese words and names in English, you should use a standard and consistent system for representing the sounds of Japanese with the English alphabet. This document compares the main systems for romanizing Japanese and describes one recommended system in detail.

▶ Kunreishiki and Hepburn Romanization

The two main traditional romanization systems are called Kunreishiki (訓令式) and Hepburn (ヘボン式). Summaries of these two systems appear in *Japan Style Sheet* (Society of Writers, Editors and Translators, 1998). In recent years, a third, informal system—what we will call the Wapuro System here—has emerged as well.

The principal differences between the Kunreishiki and Hepburn systems are shown in the following chart:

	Kunreishiki	Hepburn
し	<i>si</i>	<i>shi</i>
じ	<i>zi</i>	<i>ji</i>
ち	<i>ti</i>	<i>chi</i>
つ	<i>tu</i>	<i>tsu</i>
ふ	<i>hu</i>	<i>fu</i>
しゃ	<i>sya</i>	<i>sha</i>
じゃ	<i>zya</i>	<i>ja</i>
ちゃ	<i>tya</i>	<i>cha</i>
しゅ	<i>syu</i>	<i>shu</i>
じゅ	<i>zyu</i>	<i>ju</i>
ちゅ	<i>tyu</i>	<i>chu</i>
しょ	<i>syo</i>	<i>sho</i>
じょ	<i>zyo</i>	<i>jo</i>
ちよ	<i>tyo</i>	<i>cho</i>

Kunreishiki is the system taught in most Japanese primary schools, it was adopted in the ISO 3602 standard, and it is used sometimes in academic writing and Japanese-language education. Hepburn romanization is used by the Japanese government on passports and in

most of its international communications, it is recommended for academic writing, and it is the system most widely used in English-language publications in Japan and other countries.

Each system has advantages and disadvantages. Kunreishiki provides a closer one-to-one correspondence between Japanese kana and English letters. For example, the first consonants of the syllables た, ち, つ, て, and と function in Japanese as the same sound (i.e., the phoneme /t/). In Kunreishiki, this sound is represented by the letter *t* in all cases: *ta, ti, tu, te, to*. This correspondence makes Kunreishiki easier for native Japanese speakers to learn and more suitable for linguistic descriptions of the Japanese language. On the other hand, English speakers who do not know Japanese can guess the actual sounds of these syllables more accurately from the Hepburn romanizations: *ta, chi, tsu, te, to*. A typical English speaker who sees ちかてつ written as the Kunreishiki *tikatetu* would likely pronounce all of the *t*'s like a hard English “t”; this hard “t” sound is quite different from the initial consonant sounds in ち and つ. The Hepburn spelling *chikatetsu* would yield a pronunciation closer to the Japanese.

The Wapuro System is based on the methods used to type Japanese on computers using romaji input (rather than kana input). To input じゅうよう, for example, one types J-U-U-Y-O-U. Habituated to this method, many people now romanize じゅうよう with extra vowels (*juuyou*) rather than with macrons (*zyūyō* in Kunreishiki or *jūyō* in Hepburn). And because the syllabic *n* (ん) must often be typed N-N, many people now spell a word like けいひん as *Keihinn*. While the Wapuro System is convenient for e-mail and other informal contexts, it has not been adopted officially by any major publications and it is not suitable for academic writing.

Whatever romanization system you use, if you have to romanize a lot of Japanese you will encounter many tricky issues when trying to represent long vowels, word divisions, and other features of Japanese consistently. If you have no preference for a particular romanization system, we recommend that you use the Hepburn-based system outlined in the following section.

▶ Recommended Hepburn-Based Romanization System

▷ Syllables

あ <i>a</i>	い <i>i</i>	う <i>u</i>	え <i>e</i>	お <i>o</i>
か <i>ka</i>	き <i>ki</i>	く <i>ku</i>	け <i>ke</i>	こ <i>ko</i>
が <i>ga</i>	ぎ <i>gi</i>	ぐ <i>gu</i>	げ <i>ge</i>	ご <i>go</i>
さ <i>sa</i>	し <i>shi</i>	す <i>su</i>	せ <i>se</i>	そ <i>so</i>
ざ <i>za</i>	じ <i>ji</i>	ず <i>zu</i>	ぜ <i>ze</i>	ぞ <i>zo</i>
た <i>ta</i>	ち <i>chi</i>	つ <i>tsu</i>	て <i>te</i>	と <i>to</i>
だ <i>da</i>	ぢ <i>ji</i>	づ <i>zu</i>	で <i>de</i>	ど <i>do</i>
な <i>na</i>	に <i>ni</i>	ぬ <i>nu</i>	ね <i>ne</i>	の <i>no</i>
は <i>ha</i>	ひ <i>hi</i>	ふ <i>fu</i>	へ <i>he</i>	ほ <i>ho</i>
ば <i>ba</i>	び <i>bi</i>	ぶ <i>bu</i>	べ <i>be</i>	ぼ <i>bo</i>
ぱ <i>pa</i>	ぴ <i>pi</i>	ぷ <i>pu</i>	ぺ <i>pe</i>	ぽ <i>po</i>
ま <i>ma</i>	み <i>mi</i>	む <i>mu</i>	め <i>me</i>	も <i>mo</i>
や <i>ya</i>		ゆ <i>yu</i>		よ <i>yo</i>
ら <i>ra</i>	り <i>ri</i>	る <i>ru</i>	れ <i>re</i>	ろ <i>ro</i>
わ <i>wa</i>		を <i>o</i>		ん <i>n or n'</i>

きゃ <i>kya</i>	きゅ <i>kyu</i>	きょ <i>kyo</i>
ぎゃ <i>gya</i>	ぎゅ <i>gyu</i>	ぎょ <i>gyo</i>
しゃ <i>sha</i>	しゅ <i>shu</i>	しょ <i>sho</i>
じゃ <i>ja</i>	じゅ <i>ju</i>	じょ <i>jo</i>
ちゃ <i>cha</i>	ちゅ <i>chu</i>	ちょ <i>cho</i>
ぢゃ <i>ja</i>	ぢゅ <i>ju</i>	ぢょ <i>jo</i>
にゃ <i>nya</i>	にゅ <i>nyu</i>	にょ <i>nyo</i>
ひゃ <i>hya</i>	ひゅ <i>hyu</i>	ひょ <i>hyo</i>
びゃ <i>bya</i>	びゅ <i>byu</i>	びょ <i>byo</i>
ぴゃ <i>pya</i>	ぴゅ <i>pyu</i>	ぴょ <i>pyo</i>
みゃ <i>mya</i>	みゅ <i>myu</i>	みょ <i>myo</i>
りゃ <i>rya</i>	りゅ <i>ryu</i>	りょ <i>ryo</i>

			イエ <i>ye</i>	
	ウィ <i>wi</i>		ウエ <i>we</i>	ウオ <i>wo</i>
ヴァ <i>va</i>	ヴィ <i>vi</i>	ヴ <i>vu</i>	ヴェ <i>ve</i>	ヴォ <i>vo</i>
		ヴュ <i>vyyu</i>		
	スイ <i>si</i>		シェ <i>she</i>	
	ズイ <i>zi</i>		ジェ <i>je</i>	
	テイ <i>ti</i>	トゥ <i>tu</i>	チェ <i>che</i>	
	デイ <i>di</i>	ドウ <i>du</i>	ヂェ <i>je</i>	
ファ <i>fa</i>	フィ <i>fi</i>		フェ <i>fe</i>	フォ <i>fo</i>

▷ Long Vowels

When writing about Japanese topics for an audience that includes people who may know Japanese, indicate long (or double) vowels with a macron:

おかあさん *okāsan*
キーキー (onomatopoeia) *kīkī*
くうかい (空海) *Kūkai*
ケーキ *kēki*
とおり (通り) *tōri*

Spell けい, せい, and similar kana combinations with *ei*, even though they are pronounced with the vowel sequence ええ:

けいざい (経済) *keizai*
せいふ (政府) *seifu*
メイン *mein*

Spell combinations pronounced like おお, such as こう and ぞう, with *ō*:

こうぞう (構造) *kōzō*

Do not use *u* or *h* to represent vowel length, so avoid spellings such as *Kuukai*, *Kuhkai*, *kouzou*, or *kohzoh*. You should make an exception, however, with personal names (such as *Satou* or *Itoh*) when you know that the individual person prefers that spelling.

When the two vowels in a double-vowel combination would be represented by different kanji, repeat the vowel letter instead of using a macron:

ばあい (場合) *baai* (not *bāi*)
きいはんとう (紀伊半島) *Kiihantō* or *Kii Peninsula* (not *Kīhantō*
or *Kī Peninsula*)
かつうら (勝浦) *Katsuura* (not *Katsūra*)
いせえき (伊勢駅) *Ise Eki* (not *Isēki*) or *Ise Station*
こうた (小唄) *kouta* (not *kōta*)

Unicode fonts or other special fonts are necessary to produce straight macrons as in *ā*, *ī*, *ū*, *ē*, and *ō*. If you cannot produce those characters on your computer, you may use a circumflex instead: *â*, *î*, *û*, *ê*, *ô*.

When your readers are not familiar with Japan or the Japanese language, or when macrons might cause problems for technical reasons, such as in e-mail or on the Web, do not use macrons: *Kukai*, *kozo*.

Unless you need to show the Japanese pronunciation unambiguously, do not use macrons with well-known place names, such as *Tokyo* or *Osaka*, or with Japanese words that have been naturalized into English, such as “bento” or “judo.”

▷ Long Consonants

Long (or double) consonants, represented by a small つ, are indicated in most cases by doubling the English consonant letter:

かった *katta*
いっぼう *ippō*
ぶっだ *budda*

Before syllables beginning with *sh*, represent the long consonant with *s*:

あっしゅく *asshuku*

Before *ch* and *ts*, use *t*:

あっちやく *atchaku*
よっつ *yottsu*

▷ Syllabic *n*

When ん comes at the end of a word or before a consonant other than *y*, use *n*:

しんかんせん *shinkansen*

When ん comes before a vowel or *y* in the same word, put an apostrophe after the *n*:

ほんい *hon'i*
ほんやく *hon'yaku*

The purpose of the apostrophe is to distinguish, for example, *honyū* (ほにゅう, 哺乳) from *hon'yū* (ほんゆう, 本有).

Although ん is often written *m* before *b*, *p*, or *m*, for simplicity's sake we recommend *n* in all cases:

とんぼ *tonbo* (not *tombo*)
しんぱい *shinpai* (not *shimpai*)
さんま *sanma* (not *samma*)

▷ Hyphens

Avoid using hyphens whenever possible:

西葛西 *Nishi Kasai* (not *Nishi-Kasai*)

常識的 *jōshikiteki* (not *jōshiki-teki*)

山の手線 *Yamanotesen* or *Yamanote Line* (not *Yamanote-sen*)

Exceptions are honorific prefixes and place-name suffixes:

田中さん *Tanaka-san*

落合君 *Ochiai-kun*

高松市 *Takamatsu-shi* or *Takamatsu City*

神奈川区 *Kanagawa-ku* or *Kanagawa Ward*

▷ Capitalization

When using a reference system that specifies sentence capitalization, capitalize only proper names, the first words of sentences, and other words that would be capitalized in English. When uncertain, use lower case. The following examples are book titles:

『帝国アメリカと日本 武力依存の構造』

Teikoku Amerika to Nihon: Buryoku izon no kōzō

『クマのプーさん』

Kuma no Pū-san

『生き生きまちづくり 埼玉県志木市の挑戦』

Ikiiki machizukuri: Saitama-ken Shiki-shi no chōsen

When using title capitalization, capitalize all words except particles (助詞). The following is the name of a journal:

『高圧力の科学と技術』

Kōatsuryoku no Kagaku to Gijutsu

▷ Word Division

When transcribing phrases or sentences, write nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs, and particles as separate words. Include verb and adjective suffixes as part of the root word (*kakimasu*, not *kaki masu*; *omoshirokatta*, not *omoshiro katta*). Treat forms of the verb *suru* as separate words (*kakunin shita*, not *kakuninshita*). Put a space after verb forms ending in *-te* or *-de* (*kangaete iru*, not *kangaeteiru*). Spell the particles は, へ, and を as *wa*, *e*, and *o*.

Here is an example:

日本国民は、正当に選挙された国会における代表者を通じて行動し、われらとわれらの子孫のために、諸国民との協和による成果と、わが国全土にわたって自由のもたらす恵沢を確保し、政府の行為によって再び戦争の惨禍が起ることのないようにすることを決意し、ここに主権が国民に存することを宣言し、この憲法を確定する。

Nihon kokumin wa, seitō ni senkyo sarena Kokkai ni okeru daihyōsha o tsūjite kōdō shi, warera to warera no shison no tame ni, shokokumin to no kyōwa ni yoru seika to, waga kuni zendo ni watatte jiyū no motarasu keitaku o kakuho shi, seifu no kōi ni yotte futatabi sensō no sankā ga okoru koto no nai yō ni suru koto o ketsui shi, koko ni shuken ga kokumin ni son suru koto o sengen shi, kono Kenpō o kakutei suru.