

Japanese 09H and 10H: Conquering Kanji (I) and (II) Amherst College

Course instructor

Wako Tawa (多和わ子)

Office: 108 Webster Building

Telephone: 542-7919

e-mail: wtawa@amherst.edu

Office hours: Mondays and Tuesdays 4:00-5:00 and by appointment

Course description

Japanese uses three different writing systems, one of which is called “kanji,” characters that were borrowed from China. A linguist, R.A. Miller (1986; p.1) in his book *Nihongo* (Japanese), writes: “The Japanese writing system is, without question, the most complicated and involved system of script employed today by any nation on earth; it is also one of the most complex orthographies ever employed by any culture anywhere at any time in human history.” The difficulty lies not merely in the number of characters that students must learn (roughly a couple of thousand), but also in the unpredictable nature of the ways these characters are used in Japanese. It is not possible in regular Japanese language classes to spend very much time on the writing system because the students must learn other aspects of the language in a limited number of class hours. This writing system is, however, not impossible to learn. In this half course, the students will learn the Japanese writing system individually, and aim to overcome preconceived notions of difficulty related to the learning of kanji. Each student in this class is expected to master roughly 500 kanji that are used in different contexts. Requisite: Japanese 01 at Amherst College or its equivalent.

Course objective

Because the number and the kind of kanji each student knows are different, the kanji each student will learn will be determined individually. The course focuses on writing rather than reading kanji. Each student will receive a folder with blank test sheets in it. See below as to how this folder is used throughout the semester.

Instruction for the kanji folder

1. You will receive a folder with 14 sheets of blank kanji test sheets in it. Fill out every row of a page with words that you want to write in kanji (see 3. below). The minimum requirement for each student is to complete a page a week, which could add up to as many as 40 to 50 kanji per week depending on the kind of words a student wishes to learn.
2. Kanji should be learned in the word level but not in isolation. Example: よむ → 読む is better than よ → 読. どくしょ → 読書 is better than どく → 読.
3. Submit the folder when you fill in the ひらがな part of a sheet. Drop off your folder in the box next to my office door. The first submission deadline is 10:00 a.m., Thursday 9th of September 2010.
4. I will check the words in your list, correct errors if there are any, date it, and return the folder in the box next to my office door by 5:00 p.m. on the same day (Thursday).

5. After studying the kanji for the words in your list, pick up your folder from the box, and fill in the 漢字 and 意味 sections in Room 114. You may not take your folder anywhere other than Room 114. All folders must be in my box except for the time when the students are taking the quiz in 114.
6. Return your completed work into my box (submit the folder itself), latest the following Tuesday, 5:00 pm. I will return your folders by the following morning (Wednesday).
7. Submit a new list by 10:00 a.m. of every Thursday.
8. I will circle the incorrect kanji, date it, and return the folder in the pick-up folder by 5:00 p.m. each Thursday. **The marked incorrect kanji words must be repeated in the next list.**
9. Repeat the process 1~7 once a week. For some students, it works better to break down the words into a smaller number of words. In this case, you will have to repeat the process 1~7 more than once a week. You can decide which way works best for you; you can also vary it from week to week. As long as you reach a goal every week, how you will reach the goal matters little. But you must complete 1~7 at least once a week.
10. I will e-mail you or leave a hard-copy note if I will need to see you regarding your work. If no e-mail, it means that you are doing what I am expecting you to do. Please e-mail me and set up an appointment if you have any questions or concerns regarding the course.

Final: There will be no final for this course. You can repeat the above process during the reading and final examination period. Your last submission is 5:00 pm, 22nd of December 2010, which is the last day of the final examination period.

Grade for the course: Grading is based on the percentage of the fulfillment of your goal: ~95% (A), ~90% (A-), ~88% (B+), ~85% (B), ~80% (B-) (the proportional division applies for the lower grades as well).

Recommended reference books

1. *The Japanese Stage-Step Course: writing practice book*. Wako Tawa. Routledge, 2009 (available for purchase at Amherst Books).
2. *A Guide to remembering Japanese characters*. Kenneth G. Henshall. Tuttle Language Library.

This is a good source book for learning the origin of each character, or Kanji, which may help students of Japanese to learn Kanji more effectively. It even gives a mnemonic method for each character. A weakness of this book is that the model characters are not well drawn. It is very important for students to have well-formed models when practicing the characters. 673 pages total.

3. *Kanji and Kana: A Handbook and dictionary of the Japanese writing system*. Wolfgang Hadamitzky and Mark Spahn. Charles E. Tuttle Company.

A concise Kanji dictionary, in which you can find all Joyo Kanji (the Kanji determined by the Japanese government to be necessary for all educated people to know – about 2000 Kanji) with necessary information, such as radicals, different readings, and example words for each Kanji. This is a very convenient first Kanji dictionary, but it is not a comprehensive one, so you will not be able to use it to look up words in Kanji compounds that you may need in intermediate and advanced Japanese classes. 394 pages total.

4. *Read Japanese Today*. Len Walsh. Charles E. Tuttle Company.

This is a very compact and fun book about Kanji characters. The book explains the system of Kanji, its origins, and provides readings of Kanji compounds. It is light reading and quite entertaining. But you should be aware that some of the Kanji that the author uses are old; knowing old Kanji could be helpful in some ways but is not necessary. 159 pages total.

We have not ordered these books at any bookstores in town because we do not know how many students are interested in them. You can order any of them through any bookstores in town or via the internet.

The basic information on characters are given in our textbooks and will be explained in class, but having a book that explains them in greater detail will certainly facilitate your learning of the characters.

5. Many websites.