

A (relatively) easy guide to Japanese pronunciation

Spoken Japanese consists of simple syllables, generally consisting of a vowel, or a consonant plus a vowel. There are few complex consonant clusters. All vowels and consonants have consistent pronunciation. Consonants are crisply pronounced.

Vowels are always pronounced the same way; long vowels (usually marked in English transliteration with a macron (“ū,” or as two vowels “ou”) are simply longer in duration (actually two syllables), the sound doesn’t change:

a = as in <u>f</u> ather	<u>A</u> - <u>sa</u> -ku- <u>sa</u> -- Tokyo place
i = as in <u>e</u> at	<u>Ni</u> -hon-ba- <u>shi</u> -- Tokyo place
u = as in <u>f</u> ood or <u>z</u> oo	<u>U</u> -e-no – Tokyo place
e = as in <u>e</u> nd	<u>E</u> -do – name of Tokyo before 1868
o = as in <u>O</u> hio	<u>O</u> -cha- <u>no</u> -mi-zu – Tokyo place

The consonant sounds are:

k = as in cat	A- <u>k</u> a-sa- <u>k</u> a – Tokyo place
g = as in gourd	<u>G</u> in-za – Tokyo place
s = as in Sue	E-bi- <u>s</u> u – Tokyo place
sh = as in seashore	<u>S</u> hi-ta-ma-chi – Tokyo area
z = as in zoo	Zen
j = as in Jack	San-gen- <u>j</u> a-ya – Tokyo place
t = as in tick	<u>T</u> o-ra-no-mon – Tokyo place
ts = this is one of the tricky ones; think <u>tsetse</u> fly.	<u>T</u> su-ki-ji – Tokyo place
ch = as in chicken	<u>C</u> hi-yo-da – Tokyo place
n = as in new	<u>Ni</u> -hon – “Japan”

h = as in have	<u>Ha</u> -ra-ju-ku – Tokyo place
f = another slightly tricky one; think of “who” with an f sound	<u>Fu</u> -ji-san – Mt. Fuji
b = as in Boeing	O-da-i- <u>ba</u> – Tokyo place
p = as in party, pea, Poe	I-p’ <u>pon</u> -ba-shi – Tokyo place
m = as in mama	<u>Ma</u> -ru-no-u-chi – Tokyo place
ya = as in yahoo, yeoman,	<u>Ya</u> -su-ku-ni – Tokyo shrine
r = the trickiest one – more like a “d” than an “r” (as in a British butler saying “very good, madam”) **	<u>Ro</u> -p’pon-gi – Tokyo place
w = as in wander	Su-mi-da-ga- <u>wa</u> – Sumida River

Sometimes syllables are made up of a combination of a consonant and a semi-vowel (ya, yu, yo) – as in Tōkyō, Kyōto, gyūniku (beef), etc.—resist the temptation to pronounce these as Tokiyo, Kiyoto, giyuniku – the consonant plus semi-vowel sound be a single syllable. **Think of kyu and the English word “cute”**

All syllables receive the same amount of stress or emphasis. (For most Americans that means pronouncing Japanese without any stress or emphasis.)

“yo-ko-ha-ma” NOT “yo-KA-HA-ma”
“mi-tsu-bi-shi” NOT “meats-U-bi-shi”
“Ko-i-zu-mi” NOT “COY-zumi”

You can almost always divide the syllables after a vowel. (exception: some syllables end in “n” (shinbun = newspaper) (Nihon = Japan); sometimes a consonant is doubled (Roppongi – Tokyo place; or Hatchōbori – Tokyo place), which actually represents two syllables (pronounced with a slight pause– Ro-p’pon-gi; Ha-t’cho-o-bo-ri).

** this one is the source of the stereotypical difficulties that some Japanese have with pronouncing “L” and “R”) – a Japanese “r” is NOT an English ‘rolled r’ (i.e., NOT “Ralph likes Rock ‘n Roll”).