

## Introduction to Japan

### Background Notes for Teachers

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This document is intended for teachers who are planning on teaching about Japan in their classroom. These background notes will provide you with the basic key information you need to know about Japan, covering four main topics – geography, language, religion, and holidays and celebrations.

### Geography of Japan

Japan is an island country located in East Asia, consisting of four main islands: Hokkaido, Honshu, Kyushu, and Shikoku. Honshu is the largest island, with the capital city of Tokyo located in the east. Japan's flag is white with a red circle in the centre. The population of the country is approximately 120 million, with 37 million people living in the Greater Tokyo area alone. In contrast, London and the Greater London area has a population of approximately 9 million people, making Tokyo's overall population roughly 4 times bigger than London's.



Weather and climate vary greatly across the country; in Hokkaido, the most northern island, winters can be very snowy and cold. In contrast, in Okinawa, which is one of the furthest, most southern points of Japan, the climate is tropical, and summers can be very hot and humid.



Across the Japanese archipelago, you can see many mountains, with the largest and most famous being Mount Fuji, standing at 3,776 metres tall. Mount Fuji is still classified by geologists as an active volcano; however, it last erupted around 300 years ago.

## Japanese Language

The main language spoken in Japan is Japanese, which uses three different writing systems; hiragana, katakana, and kanji. All three writing systems are used simultaneously when writing, but are used for different purposes and reasons.

### Hiragana

Unlike in English, each hiragana is a combination of a consonant followed by a vowel. There are 46 characters in total, and they are easy to notice in a sentence because they have a more rounded and curvy shape in comparison to katakana and kanji. Hiragana is usually used when writing native Japanese words or grammatical elements in a sentence.

	n	w-	r-	y-	m-	h-	n-	t-	s-	k-	
-a	ん	わ	ら	や	ま	は	な	た	さ	か	あ
-i		ゐ	り		み	ひ	に	ち	し	き	い
-u			る	ゆ	む	ふ	ぬ	つ	す	く	う
-e		ゑ	れ		め	へ	ね	て	せ	け	え
-o		を	ろ	よ	も	ほ	の	と	そ	こ	お

### Katakana

Katakana is essentially the same as hiragana but is used for different reasons – usually when writing non-Japanese words, non-Japanese names, and even when writing Japanese slang.

Katakana differs from hiragana because the lines used when writing are straighter, sharper, and more angular.

	n	w-	r-	y-	m-	h-	n-	t-	s-	k-	
-a	ン	ワ	ラ	ヤ	マ	ハ	ナ	タ	サ	カ	ア
-i		キ	リ		ミ	ヒ	ニ	チ	シ	キ	イ
-u			ル	ユ	ム	フ	ヌ	ツ	ス	ク	ウ
-e		エ	レ		メ	ヘ	ネ	テ	セ	ケ	エ
-o		ヲ	ロ	ヨ	モ	ホ	ノ	ト	ソ	コ	オ

You might also notice that some katakana looks similar to their equivalent in hiragana.

For example – ka

- Hiragana - か
- Katakana - カ

## Kanji

Kanji originates from China, where it was introduced to Japan through the Korean peninsula in the 5<sup>th</sup> century and became a part of the Japanese language. Kanji represent meanings rather than sounds. This means that when looking at a sentence in Japanese, it is easy to quickly pick up the essential information just from looking at the kanji.



In comparison to hiragana and katakana, kanji are much more complex and detailed, and it can take school children a long time to master writing these. By the time students graduate from high school, they will be expected to have learned around 2,000 individual Kanji – but there are actually thousands more than this!

## Religion



The two main religions in Japan are Shinto and Buddhism, and as such, many aspects of Japanese culture and lifestyle are influenced by Shinto or Buddhist beliefs. You can see numerous shrines and temples across Japan, particularly in the traditional city of Kyoto, located in central Honshu.

**Fun fact:** It is estimated that there are approximately 2000 shrines and temples in the city of Kyoto alone!

## Holidays and Celebrations

Japan celebrates many unique holidays and festivals throughout the year. For example, on 5<sup>th</sup> May is Children's Day (known as **Kodomo no Hi 子供の日** in Japanese), a day where families celebrate together and pray for the health and happiness of their children!

New Year, which is known as **Oshogatsu お正月**, is arguably the most significant holiday of the year in Japan. People eat special traditional dishes such as osechi and visit shrines and

temples to pray for good fortune in the new year. Below is an image of some typical decorations you might see at New Year in Japan.



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