



JAPAN INFORMATION
AND CULTURE CENTER
在米国日本大使館広報文化センター

TEACHING TUESDAY

WHY ARE THERE THREE ALPHABETS?

It's a common misconception that Japanese has three alphabets. In fact, Japanese has one alphabet and two character types: adopted Chinese kanji and syllabic kana. Kana itself consists of a pair of character sets, hiragana and katakana. Japan only had a spoken language before Chinese kanji were imported. However, because the Chinese and Japanese languages are so different, both in structure and pronunciation, Chinese kanji were not always perfect for use.

Hiragana and katakana were developed as writing systems to notate both verb-tense changes and extra phonetic sounds that could not be included in kanji, which represent words and concepts. Hiragana was developed from early literary works which used Chinese characters completely for their phonetic values, while katakana came from pronunciation aids for Chinese Buddhist scriptures. In modern times, hiragana is used for native Japanese words, while katakana is used for foreign and imported words.

Because they were all developed to supplement each other, kanji, hiragana, and katakana all work together to make up the Japanese language and writing system, through two character types serving one alphabet.