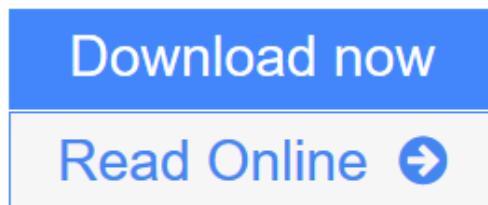# Remembering the Kanji, Volume I: A Complete Course on How Not to Forget the Meaning and Writing of Japanese Characters

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Part one of a complete course on how not to forget the meaning and writing of Japanese characters. These self-teaching methods help you remember and write by harnessing the power of the imagination.

Remembering the Kanji, Volume I: A Complete Course on How Not to Forget the Meaning and Writing of Japanese Characters Details

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rob says

Don't be fooled into thinking there is any one way to get thru the kanji-- your ass is on a mission through imaginationland as you read his and create your own stories to go along with all 2000 or so common kanji. Working through this book took me about 8 months, and it's benefit is only felt when you finish them all. They are in what Heisig calls "imaginative memory" order; that is, you can't expect the first 300 to be the kanji with the fewest radicals. However, they're laid out nicely so the stories flow together in yr own mind.

The companion website is almost as good as the book, and even better as a supplement. Remember, the more penises your kanji have, the more the stories seem like hot love stories you'll never wanna forget.

Chrispwill says

An excellent book by an excellent author - RTK invokes mnemonic techniques that are useful not only in learning the kanji, but learning almost anything else one puts one's head to. On a good day, I often learned almost 100 kanji, with high levels of retention. If I were to read/complete the course again, I would probably take it easy, learning at a rate of about 25 per day. Slow and steady wins the race.

May ? says

I DID IT!!
After 4 months of studying 25-50 Kanji characters every day, I can easily say that coming across this book has been one of the best things that has ever happened to me. When I first started learning Japanese, I was in despair; not knowing how on earth was I going to memorize 2000+ complex characters and be expected to use them, but with Heisig's book it became fun and interesting. And for that I'm incredibly grateful.

Sophie says

I DID IT. Right on.

Phew! I started working with this book at the end of July/the beginning of August. Heisig himself says in the preface that it should be possible to finish it all in six weeks if you're dedicated and have the time - I laughed at that and thought to myself that it would take me years.

It took me four months. Four months of sitting down every evening to learn about 15-20 new kanji each day. (And I would've been done even sooner if some dickwads hadn't broken into my apartment and stolen my laptop with the data on it, but that's another story.)

Sure, I "only" recognize the kanji and know their basic meaning, but. Well. Considering that five months ago I didn't know any kanji, let alone their meaning, that's pretty awesome. I still have a lot of revising to do, and more studying, but I have to say I found this book incredibly helpful and fun.

It may not be for everyone, and it may seem like double the work because you don't learn everything in one go, but that's kind of the point. And I have to say that in combination with my Japanese language course and my attempts in reading manga in Japanese, I've already learned some of the readings without making much of an effort, so that helps, too.

I think what it did was take away my fear of the kanji. I mean, they and especially their number are really overwhelming, but I'm now confident enough to be able to count the strokes and just, well, look it up. (Also, I try not to think about how many there are and how overwhelming it is. It also helps that I've only been doing this for such a short amount of time, so I can always tell myself, it's okay, you don't have to know this yet!)

And at the end of the day? I'm just really, really, REALLY proud of myself for sticking to it and accomplishing all this.

Also, six months ago? I would never have imagined that I would be this intend on learning Japanese, but there you go. Now I'm in love <3

Patrick Wallace says

For anyone wanting to remember how to read and write kanji, this book is a must have.

The author, James Heisig, makes a few assumptions about learning the kanji that may seem odd at first, but in the end make perfect sense.

His first assumption is that it is a waste of time trying to learn only a handful of kanji. If our goal is language acquisition, then we should try to remember all of the kanji that the Japanese government has declared open for daily use in Japanese. By making this assumption, Heisig can arrange the order of kanji to be learned according to ease, rather than according to frequency or grade level. Heisig thus forces the learner to plan on success on learning all the kanji, rather than failure, unlike most books which try to teach the kanji.

His second assumption is that we should learn the pronunciation of the kanji separately from the meaning, as the pronunciation of the kanji is in some ways more difficult than the meaning. Since even many native Japanese are sometimes unclear as to how to pronounce unusual kanji combinations they might come across, this is also a good call.

Instead of relying on rote memory, Heisig teaches a method for remembering the kanji that relies on imaginative memory. Students visualize a story about the different elements within a kanji character, with this story being tied to the meaning of the kanji and to the way it is written.

While I myself am not fond of mnemonic devices and am not very good at using them, I found his method invaluable to me as I sought to learn how to read Japanese. The book helped get me over the language-learning hump and helped me learn considerably more kanji in a much shorter period of time than I had ever learned before. I would heartily recommend the book to any serious student.

Toofan says

Although it is very helpful in remembering the shape and stroke order of the kanji, it fails to provide any readings (On and Kun). Therefore it cannot be used on its own which is a big disadvantage.

Paul says

Definitely a solid offering. I was at first very disappointed when I realized I wouldn't actually be able to "read" kanji after working through this book, but I decided that since I had limited time before my trip to Japan, knowing the general meanings of a *lot* of Kanji would be better than knowing how to *pronounce* maybe 300-400 or so. In about 6 weeks using this book and Anki decks already compiled and available in the shared decks library (NihongoShark for recognition and this koohi-based deck for production), I was able to very easily recall and produce about 1700 kanji, which turned out to be quite useful in Japan - it's not the same as reading it, but you can get the gist of a good fraction of the signs.

That said, he does things in a *really* funky order. You learn the obscure kanji ? (legitimate wife 2130th most common in newspapers) *way* before you learn the incredibly common ? (life - 29th most common in newspapers). If you're not going to commit to learning *all* the kanji in this book, you may want to start out with Basic Kanji instead - that is a much more standard way to learn the kanji.

Still, overall, the memory tricks used in this book really helped me get a good handle on how to learn more kanji, and I'm pretty easily able to learn about 50 new mnemonics per day. Extremely effective at what it's offering.

Note: I found this thread only *after* drilling on 1900+ characters on my phone, only to realize that Android was prioritizing Chinese characters over Japanese, leading to slightly different forms of many, many characters. See e.g. ? - if that character looks different on your phone than in the book, you may need to adjust your kanji font.

Naukhel says

This book was recommended to me years ago by a French lecturer at my university in Japan. I mainly checked it out because I found the concept fascinating and wanted to give it a try, but in the end the way of learning that this book teaches you is not compatible with my own mental way of categorizing what I learn; in a sense, I would have had to un-learn everything I already knew to begin with, and since this book only teaches you to recognise meaning and not to "read" - that is, not to be able to read out loud, or hear the correct Japanese words in your head while reading, something that I find I need to be able to do in order to glean understanding from Japanese OR English - I didn't find it of much use to me other than as an interesting exercise in another style of study. Perhaps it would be useful to complete beginners who would like to divine meaning from written Japanese text without needing to speak the language, and my professor told me that it allowed him to learn to recognise a great number of Japanese characters in a very short period of time. If that's your goal, this book could be a useful reference tool.

bhen adrecra says

I was going to begin this review by repurposing the old dictionary joke about how the zebra did it. In the case of Remembering the Kanji book I it was the sign of the snake that did it (2042. ?). You are right, it is a terrible joke and does not work at all here. I am glad I did not use it

I found James Heisig's Remembering the Kanji books I and II in a used-bookshop in old Tokyo town. They were a rather cheap ¥500 each—much cheaper than the £30 or ¥2000 I had seen them at before—so, despite having sworn off learning kanji as a task for one with a better brain than I myself have, I bought them as a kind of symbolic gift

I had previously tried to learn kanji a few years ago by combining study with eating fruit. The British government recommends eating five portions of fruit per day. Thus, I reasoned, if I ate a piece of fruit while learning each character, I could learn five kanji each day and become as healthy as a horse

The first few kanji one learns are the numbers one to ten. This was a handy start for my fruit-based system. The numbers one to five I remembered by associating them with the severe stomach cramps I endured from eating five bananas in a row. It turns out the British government meant five portions of different fruit each day. They should state this more clearly, I reckon. The numbers six to ten I remember as swirling hallucinations of bananas dancing in front of my eyes, forming the strokes for each character. I stopped studying kanji soon after

I then decided to learn hiragana. I admit that trying to learn kanji before hiragana is like trying to run before you can walk, but equally, learning hiragana after trying to learn kanji is like trying to run, breaking both your legs in the process and then razzing around in a snazzy new wheelchair for a couple of months. Blissful. (I haven't thought this all the way through and I have never even broken one or both of my legs and even I can see the holes in this analogy are markedly obvious if pondered for even the briefest of moments. But alas!)

I learned hiragana while working on a quiet checkout in a quiet supermarket. I linked each character with a picture-sound-word. This is pretty easy with most hiragana. ? (to) looks like a toe. A perhaps unhealthy toe, but a toe nonetheless. Lets not be judgmental. ?(ku) looks like the mouth of a cuckoo. ? (shi) looks like and sounds like a waterfall. And so on. I learned hiragana like this in a couple of shifts at the supermarket, also benefiting from unwitting kanji review practice every time someone bought a bunch of bananas

Fast forward a year and I find myself living in Japan (if you want to know the full story please read my blog. Or simply imagine someone getting on a plane in one country and then getting off that same plane in another). I decided I should probably start trying to learn kanji again when my previous culinary skills (using the microwave) began to suffer (not being able to use the microwave)

I began to study again in earnest. This time I had a breakthrough when I realised the kanji for tree ? kind of looks like a tree, the kanji for forest ? is a picture of three trees, and the kanji for deep forest ?? is five trees. Now we are talking. Now we know what's what. I could learn kanji the same way I learned hiragana. The problem comes when you realise that most kanji, with a little imaginative license, resemble trees in various states of rude or ill health. I sighed for a week and then just ran with this explanation and supposed that everything I read on advertisements while idly riding the train, or on various shop hoardings while walking

around the city, every piece of writing I saw concerned the labyrinthine subject of dendrology. How nice to live in a society so preoccupied with nature

When I again found Remembering the Kanji books I and II in that used-bookshop, I was in such an arboreal haze I bought them right up, thinking ecstatically I could finally learn the names of all the different trees and various bushes and I could finally be as one with nature in this topiary city, covered as it is in metaphorical greenery

Then I remembered that the tree thing was all a nonsense

The books sat on my coffee table for a couple of weeks, unopened. A humble monument to my foolishness. They were a nice accoutrement to the room, however. If anyone had visited my apartment they might have remarked upon my studying kanji and I might have replied with a noncommittal hmmm. Luckily no-one visited. At all. And I avoided any potential embarrassment (??) Or conversation (??) Or human interaction (????). Or love (?). Phew (????)

I began to flick through the first book (book I) as a way of cooling myself in the ridiculous heat of the encroaching summer. Naturally I started to read a couple of entries and found myself recalling the meanings a couple of days later when viewed out in the wild

Unwittingly, during my earlier kanji and hiragana study I had been following the technique outlined by Heisig in his books without even knowing it. Only he uses more interesting stories and less bananas. His technique is to attach a little story to each kanji to help it embed it in your memory, and then, when that kanji is embedded within another kanji, he elaborates on the story. It works rather well, I find

The only criticism I have of the books thus far is that they are a little big and unwieldy to carry around in one's satchel in the heat of a Japanese summer—especially with the addition of an obligatory notebook. During a summer in which even the slightest thought of excess physical exertion leaves one in a sweat, when passing through the heat-blast exhaust of an idling bus leaves you wanting to throw yourself beneath its wheels, having an even slightly heavy book in your bag can colour the day in the most unflattering ways. Other than that they are most useful, beautiful books which might just end up changing my life and allow me to again use the microwave. Winter will soon be on its way, and my porridge oats will not warm themselves

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Cassandra says

Love, love, love this book. Between RTK, Anki, and kanji.koohii.com, I learned the (English) meanings and writing of over 2,000 kanji in 89 days. I averaged 22.9 kanji per day and studied for 136.8 hours. Of course, now that I've entered all of the kanji into Anki, I have to keep reviewing. But I love this method of learning kanji.

When I see an unfamiliar kanji, I can now break it down into radicals and figure out how to write it. Before RTK, kanji was just a bunch of scribbles. More than anything else, I believe this book gives the Japanese language learner the confidence to tackle any kanji. And since kanji is generally considered the most difficult part of learning the language, it's all downhill from here!

Karmologyclinic says

LAST AND FINAL UPDATE:I decided not to finish this kanji learning method, not because it's not good but because I found out another method (WaniKani) that works better for me at this point in my life. There are a couple of disadvantages of this book: 1. the learning arrangement of the kanji makes sense for learning them intuitively but not for practical use and 2. you don't learn any kanji reading at all. The disadvantages are not very important if you have time to study them fast and then move to the next step (learn the readings and extra meanings). If you don't have enough free time to finish the Heisig method fast, you end up studying kanjis for months and your only skill is spotting them while reading Japanese texts but being unable to do anything else beyond vaguely knowing their meaning ,no reading or studying grammar is possible while studying Heisig. There is no gratification in this and it is very frustrating because you have the feeling of not moving forward at all. That's why I decided to jump the WaniKani wagon.

Having said that I believe Heisig's method is great in opening up your intuition about understanding kanji characters. After about 600 kanji learned in the Heisig method, I was able to look at a completely unknown kanji for the first time, understand how to write it,deconstruct the radicals and search about it in a dictionary. Intuition is a great thing when it comes to kanji learning.

So, even though not for me at this point, because of time restrictions, I would still suggest this method to all people going into japanese learning. See if it works for you, not all methods are for everyone and this is especially true for a language that is one of the most difficult ones to learn for a westerner.

UPDATE: This method works. After three years of not studying japanese I returned to it. I found that I remember most of the kanji I learned with Heisig's method. After a small review and minimal effort they are dug up from somewhere inside my head and it's like I knew them forever.... It's an amazing feeling actually, wonders of the brain. I can't wait to finish reviewing what I already know and jump into new kanji.

My last attempt at learning Japanese stuck when I had to start memorizing the Kanji. I found it impossible to memorize writing, meaning and 2-3 readings for each kanji all at the same time. I ended up confusing everything and not being able to memorize more than a couple of kanji each day.
Mr. Heisig suggests you do each of these tasks separately. At first I thought it was an obnoxious idea and that it wouldn't fit my way of learning. But the reasoning behind the method seemed legit, and I gave it a try and after memorizing 50 characters in 2(!) days and with the help of Memrise, I have found a learning rhythm that works for me.

Quí Hi?n says

Only Kanji symbols and their English meanings, with hints for remembering. And those hints are, for most of the time, sooo sooo sooo etymologically incorrect. That's what grinds my gears. The Kanji are not Egyptian hieroglyphs, and looking at Kanji won't teach you how to read a book, let alone how to speak (and the book doesn't even show you how to pronounce the Kanji, ffs). For a better Kanji book in the same memrise style, please do yourself a favour and buy the Kenneth Henshall's "A guide to remembering Japanese characters", published by Tuttle. This has the best of both worlds, being etymologically correct (according to tradition and Kanji were made by the Chinese after all), while taking into account the mnemonic aspect much applauded by certain readerships.

Hao Zui says

With all of its issues, such as this only being an introduction to kanji (though you're introduced to them all), Heisig makes this daunting task a little less so and a lot more fun/fast, all them "f" words. By the way, I like to brag and I finished it in 59 days filling up some 70 pages of notebook paper.

Abdullah Al-uthman says

two months have passed since I started this book. In these two months, I have learned 2200 Kanji, formed 2200 different stories, drew 2200 characters, and most importantly, learned 2200 words from the Japanese vocabulary. Heisig book offered me a significantly great push towards learning the Japanese language.

The main advantage of Heisig method it teaches you one of the best methods to differentiate between similar Kanji. There are a lot of Japanese Kanji which differ by a single stroke which can be missed easily. The way Heisig teaches it, makes almost impossible (if the method is done correctly) to misunderstand a Kanji. He teaches you all the building primitives of a Kanji initially, then he teaches you the Kanji which you can remember by forming a short story which relates the building primitives with the meaning of the Kanji itself. This way, after knowing all the primitives, there will be no way to forget primitive form which Kanji, because you have identified each Kanji and differentiated it from its similar primitives.

Some people argue they are better at drilling through the Kanji instead of using Heisig method. If they are content with drilling, then good for them, but I can't really imagine the type of memory someone needs in order to differentiate Kanji by the single stroke. Of course, I am not saying it is impossible, but it will take extremely long time, while it is possible to finish Heisig within three months.

The result of finishing the book? When I go through Japanese text now, I can see different Kanji which I know their meaning but not their readings, and i can get a general idea about the content of this text. That's the short-term benefit of finishing Heisig. The long-term effect is that you can easily differentiate between 2200 different Kanji, and hence reading them later and studying them thoroughly as they come in text won't be impossible. It would be still difficult and time-consuming, but keep in mind you are trying to learn a whole language based on which a whole civilization is functioning. Don't expect to learn it in a short time.

What to do afterwards? Honestly speaking, I just finished the book and I haven't gone through this issue yet, but I have seen infinite threads online about what to do after finishing Heisig, I am sure following them will prove beneficial as they were done by Heisig graduates.

Again, I owe this book a lot for helping me tremendously in my studies. God knows I would've stopped after 100 Kanji had I gone through the drilling method.

Kenrick Chien says

Don't let the method presented in this book turn you away. The first time I read about this book, I thought "WTF? When am I going to learn the readings of each character?! This is STUPID!"

About 3-4 years later, I realized that the method from my Japanese classes wasn't cutting it. What method am I referring to? The method where you learn the strokes for a particular character, 2 or 3 readings of it, and then repeatedly writing it ten times or more, hoping that it would stick in my memory past tomorrow.

Maybe that method works for you, but if not, I highly recommend picking up this book and using it with an SRS such as Memosyne, Anki, etc. (See AllJapaneseAllTheTime.com for more details.)

Heisig's method only concentrates on meaning and writing, saving reading for later, so this is a "divide and conquer" approach. His reasons:
1) Chinese and Korean students who come to the Japanese language already know kanji, just not the Japanese readings so they have a huge "head start" compared to Westerners.
2) Learning the writing and the meaning of each kanji puts you on the same level as them, associating each character with an English keyword and a story for each of what he calls 'primitive elements', some of which correspond to traditional radicals. Reading, can then be learned on its own.

Although by no means is it a scientific study, I know of several people who have had great success with this book, including myself. I even know of a Chinese friend who came to the study of Japanese and just learned the readings (and learned to speak and write fluently), so Heisig's reasons make a lot of sense to me.

If you can see the reasoning behind of all this, then I would definitely get this book. If not, that's okay too; everyone has their own learning style.