The aim of this little book is a simple one: to help you teach yourself to read and write the two Japanese syllabaries, the hiragana and the katakana, in three hours each. By “three hours” is meant three cumulative hours of hard work, not three continuous hours of unbroken study, and certainly not three hours in a classroom with a teacher and other students.

The two parts of the book, set back to back, follow the same method, are laid out in the same format, and share common tables at the end of the volume. Readers who already know one or the other of the syllabaries completely can pass it over and go directly to the part they wish to learn. If you are a newcomer, you should begin directly with the course on the hiragana before tackling the katakana.

The syllabaries are arranged in their “dictionary order,” not in the order in which you will learn them. Following the instructions on each page will send you skipping forwards and backwards as you make your way through each lesson. In Lessons 3 to 5 of the hiragana course you will be taught a simple way to remember the dictionary order, which is indispensable for consulting Japanese dictionaries.

If you have already learned a few of the hiragana, you might be tempted to chart your own course. Don’t. You would be better advised not to use the book at all than to try to guide yourself through the labyrinth of this book. The method builds up step by step, and you will need the principles taught at the earlier stages to follow the directions given later. If you must, rush quickly through the material with which you already feel comfortable. But rush through it, not over it.

After each lesson, you will be asked to take a break. This is meant to increase your efficiency and to help you concentrate all your attention on the task at hand for short periods of 30 minutes or less. If you were to do two lessons a day, you could complete the six lessons on the third day. This seems the ideal way to proceed.
In any case, you should begin by reading the INTRODUCTION specific to the syllabary in question. You will be given instructions at the end how to begin.

When you have finished the book, do not forget to read the AFTERWORD that follows PART TWO. There you will find help with tackling the study of the final hurdle in your study of the Japanese writing system: the kanji.

A WORD ABOUT PRONUNCIATION

Compared with English, Japanese is a “sound-poor” language, and this is reflected in the fact that instead of an “alphabet” of individual vowels and consonants that can be combined in a variety of ways, Japanese uses a syllabary of 45 basic sounds and about 77 derivative sounds formed by the voiced and plosive pronunciations of certain consonants and by diphthongs. The full range of sounds is included in the tables on pages 146 and 147.

This does not mean that all the sounds of Japanese exist in English, or that the familiar letters of the Roman alphabet refer to precisely the same sound in Japanese that they do in English. The only way to learn how to pronounce Japanese properly is with the aid of a native speaker. In this book pronunciation is only indicated by a rough equivalent to English (or more precisely, General American).

A NOTE ON THE HISTORY AND USE OF THE KANA

Using the hiragana and katakana correctly will require skills that no Western language is equipped to provide you with. These are matters that fall outside the scope of these pages. Still, it is helpful to have a general idea of what is involved and why.

When the Chinese writing system was introduced to Japan around the sixth century CE, there was no native system of writing for it to replace or merge with, and the sounds of the language were quite different from those the Chinese and Korean settlers were accustomed to. The only solution was to assign each sound a Chinese character, or kanji, to approximate the pronunciation. For several centuries a catalogue of some 970 unmodified Chinese characters, or kanji, were used as phonetic symbols for the 88 syllables then used in the Japanese language.
As early as the middle of the eighth century some of these kanji were given a “rounded” or “common” (hira) form based on brush calligraphy as “substitutes” (kana) for some of the more widely used Chinese letters. During the early middle ages of Japan’s Heian period (794–1185), a style of writing using only these forms came into use, creating the first phonetic syllabaries with a one-to-one relationship between sound and written form. Initially it was used only by women, but by the early tenth century was recognized as an official way of writing, namely, the hiragana.

Today the hiragana are used for writing indigenous Japanese words, for adding inflections to words written with kanji, and for writing words whose kanji are rare or at least outside the standard lists taught in the schools.

The forms of the katakana also derived from Chinese kanji, but unlike the hiragana they were based less on calligraphic writing than on the extraction of a “part” (kata) of the full kanji to represent particular sounds. These forms were written in a square, blocked style to set them off still more from the hiragana. From the ninth century, the katakana appear in use as a mnemonic device for remembering how to pronounce Buddhist texts written in Chinese. Only much later, in 1900 to be exact, would they be standardized for the writing of foreign loan-words and onomatopoeia. Until the dawn of the computer age, they were also used for telegrams.

To sum up, the written Japanese is made up of three forms:

**Kanji.** Complex characters originating from Chinese and imported into Japan around the sixth century CE. There are some 80,000 of them in all, but Japan has narrowed their use by introducing a list of “general-use kanji” into the education system. A typical Japanese university graduate will be able to recognize around 3,000 of these Sino-Japanese characters.

**Hiragana.** One of the two syllabic alphabets or “syllabaries” of Japanese. It is used mainly to write indigenous Japanese words and to inflect words written with kanji.

**Katakana.** The second of the two syllabaries of Japanese. It is used mainly for foreign names and terms, and for onomatopoeia.

These three written forms coexist in Japanese, and it is not uncommon to find all three in a single phrase. Consider this example of a Japanese
phrase that combines kanji (bold type), hiragana (italics), and katakana (normal):

私の名前がマリアです。
Watashi no namee ga Maria desu.
My name is Maria.

Obviously, the only way to attain fluency in written Japanese is to learn all three forms of writing. This little book should get you well on your way.

It only remains for me to express my gratitude to Pat Crosby and Keith Leber of the University of Hawai‘i Press for their assistance in making this new edition possible. Special thanks are due to Helmut Morsbach and Kurebayashi Kazue, who collaborated in the accompanying course on the katakana that forms Part Two of the present book. It was their initiative to undertake the project and their devotion that saw it through to the end.

James W. Heisig
1 December 2006
INTRODUCTION TO THE HIRAGANA

The course that follows is intended for self study. It did not grow out of classroom experience and is not intended for classroom use. For one thing, I am not a language instructor. Most of my students are Japanese, who knew the hiragana by the first grade or before. I did not absorb myself in research on the Japanese syllabaries, survey existing methods, draft a set of mnemonic techniques, test them out systematically on a group of students, carefully record the results, and only then deliver a completed manuscript to the publishers. But neither did the idea occur to me on my own. The facts of the matter are a lot humbler: I wrote the book on a dare.

A visiting professor who had studied my earlier volumes on Remembering the Kanji was having trouble remembering the hiragana and casually tossed the challenge at my feet one evening over a mug of beer: “Why hasn’t anybody figured out an easy way to learn the syllabary?” I didn’t know if anyone had or not, but the next morning I took a sheet of white paper and wrote in large bold letters: LEARN THE HIRAGANA IN 3 HOURS. I set the paper on the corner of my desk and resolved not to publish anything until I was satisfied I had grounds to justify its boast. From the very beginning I was aware that I was up to something outlandish.

Fortunately, the chore turned out to be a lot easier than I had anticipated, and the basic text was completed in a few days. Once you have finished the task yourself, I am confident you will see how really simple the idea behind it is.

But enough of how this book was written. It is time to begin, following the instruction in the box below.