As the title suggests, the present book has been prepared as a companion volume to Remembering the Kanji: A Complete Course on How Not to Forget the Meaning and Writing of Japanese Characters. It presumes that the material covered in the first book has already been mastered and concentrates exclusively on the pronunciation of the Japanese characters. Those who approached the study of the kanji in a different manner may find what is in these pages of some use, but it has not been designed with them in mind.

As I explained in the INTRODUCTION to the former volume, if it is the student’s goal to acquire proficiency in using the Japanese writing system, the entire set of “general-use characters” (常用漢字) need to be learned. To insist on studying them in the order of importance or frequency generally followed in Japanese schools is pointless if some other order is more effective as a means to that final goal. A moment’s reflection on the matter is enough to dispose of the common bias that the methods employed by those who come to Japanese as a foreign language should mirror the methods used by the Japanese themselves to learn how to read and write. Accumulated experience and education—and in most cases an energetic impatience with one’s own ignorance—distinguish the older student too radically from Japanese school children to permit basic study habits to be taken over with only cosmetic changes. A clearer focus on the destination should help the older student chart a course more suited to his or her time, resources, and learning abilities—and not just run harder and faster around the same track.

Perhaps the single greatest obstacle to taking full advantage of one’s privileged position as an adult foreigner is a healthy fear of imposing alien systems on Japanese language structures. But to impose a system on ways of learning a language does not necessarily mean to impose a system on the language itself. To miss this distinction is to risk condemning oneself to the worst sorts of inefficiency for the worst sorts of reasons.

Obviously the simplest way to learn Japanese is as the Japanese themselves do: by constant repetition, without interference, in a closed cultural environment. Applied to the kanji, this involves drilling and drilling and drilling until the forms and sounds become habitual. The simplest way, alas, is also the most
time-consuming and frustrating. By adding a bit of organized complexity to one's study investments, the same level of proficiency can be gained in a fraction of the time. This was demonstrated in the first volume as far as the meaning and writing of the characters are concerned. By isolating these skills and abstracting from any relationship they have to the rest of the language, a firm foundation was laid for the next step, the assignation of sounds or “readings” to the individual characters. That is the subject of this book.

The earlier volume was described as a “complete course”; the present volume is offered as a “guide.” The differences between the two books are as important as the similarities. While both books are intended to be self-taught and allow individual readers to progress at their own pace, the former traced out a path step by step, in a clearly defined order. Here, however, the material is presented in such a way that it may be followed frame by frame or may be rearranged freely to suit the particular student’s needs. The reason is that the readings of the kanji do not allow for any more than a discontinuous systematization: blocks of repeating patterns and clusters of unpatterned material organized under a variety of rubrics. In fact, the only thing ironclad about the method is the assumption that the student already knows what the characters mean and how they are written. Without that knowledge, the systematization becomes all but opaque. In any event, it is important to gain some understanding of how the book as a whole is laid out before deciding how best to make use of it.

The book falls into two parts of wildly disproportionate length. The first ten chapters cover the Chinese or on readings (音読み); the last chapter, the Japanese or kun readings (訓読み). This should not give the impression that the on readings themselves are so much more difficult than the kun readings, but only that their systematization requires much more attention. What is more, the method followed in Chapter 11 is closer to that followed in vol. 1 and can thus be treated in relatively short shrift.

One of the chief reasons for frustration with the Chinese readings is not that there are so many kanji to read, but that there are so few readings to go around, creating a massive confusion of homonyms to the uninitiated. No sooner does one attempt to establish a set of rules to rein in this phenomenon than exceptions begin to nibble away at one’s principles like termites until the entire construction begins to look like a colossal waste of effort.

True enough, there are exceptions. A lot of them. But there is also a great deal of consistency which can be sifted out and structured for the learning. The principal aim of the first ten chapters is to isolate these patterns of consistency and use them to the fullest, holding brute memory at bay as long as possible. To this end I have introduced what are called “signal primitives.” By this I mean primitive elements within the written form which signal a particular
Chinese reading. Since most of these primitive forms were already assigned a meaning in the first book, the strategy should come as a welcome relief and carry you well over one-third of your way through the on readings. Whatever readings fall outside the compass of this method are introduced through a variety of devices of uneven difficulty, each assigned its own chapter.

Chapter 1 presents 56 kanji which form the parent-kanji for the forms of the hiragana and katakana syllabaries and whose readings are directly related to the modern kana sounds. 49 of them are Chinese readings, 7 are Japanese.

Chapter 2 covers a large group of characters belonging to “pure groups” in which the presence of a given signal primitive entails a uniform sound.

Chapter 3 presents the small group of kanji whose readings are not homonyms and may therefore be learned in conjunction with a particular character. Chapter 4, conversely, lists characters with no on reading.

Chapter 5 returns to the signal primitives, this time gathering together those groups in which a signal primitive entails a uniform sound—but with a single exception to the pattern. These are called “semi-pure” groups.

Chapter 6 brings together readings drawn from everyday words, all or nearly all of which should have been learned during the course of a general introduction to Japanese conversation. Allowing for occasional slight shifts of meaning from those assigned the kanji in the first volume, the only work that remains to be done is to see how Japanese puts the pieces together to create new meanings.

Chapter 7 returns one final time to the use of signal primitives, picking up what characters can still make use of the device and subdividing them into three classes of “mixed-groups” where a given primitive element can signal two or more different sounds.

Chapters 8 and 9 follow the pattern of Chapter 6, except that the compounds will be less familiar and require learning some new vocabulary. The only thing these kanji have in common is that they do not belong to any natural phonetic group. The most useful compounds are presented in Chapter 8. The generally less useful compounds of Chapter 9 are all introduced with explanatory comments.

Chapter 10 is a wastepaper basket into which I have thrown the remaining readings: uncommon, rare, or generally restricted to proper names.

All the kanji from Chapters 1 through 10 are arranged in a frame of uniform design (see figure 1 on the following page). Taken together, they cover the entire range of on readings established as standard by Japan’s Ministry of Education. Five indexes have been added to facilitate reference and review.

Index 1 lists all the signal primitives, arranged according to number of strokes, and the frame in which they first appear.
Index II presents a listing of all the kanji treated in this and the former volume, arranged according to the number of strokes.

Index III lists, in syllabic order, all the on readings, their respective kanji, and the number of their respective frames.

Index IV lists all the kun readings and their respective kanji. Together these two indexes constitute a complete dictionary of readings for the general-use kanji.

Index V follows the frame sequence of the first book, giving the kun readings and the frame(s) in which the on reading is introduced in this book.

The frames have been arranged to facilitate reviewing: if you block out everything to the right of the compound used as an example, the student is able to run a simple self-test from time to time. For more thoroughgoing review, the flash cards that were prepared according to the design given in Chapter 5 of the first volume can be completed, with the aid of the Indexes. A complete explanation is provided in Chapter 11.

Although the principles that govern the structure of this book will become clearer as the student grows more familiar with the content, there are a few points that seem worthy of mention at the outset. They represent both the courtesies I paid my own memory in learning to read Japanese and the pitfalls I watched fellow students fall into following other methods. As time goes on, you may or may not choose to follow them, but at least you should know what they are.

First, relating one compound to another by means of similarities of sound is to be avoided at any cost. It merely clutters the mind with useless information. The fact that the two syllables sensei can mean teacher (先生) or astrology (占星) or despotism (専制) or oath (宣誓), depending on the kanji assigned to
them, may come as such a surprise that you are tempted to make some use of the coincidence. Resist the temptation.

Second, it is best not to try to learn on and kun readings at the same time for the same character. The idea of “conquering” a character in its entirety will be supported by nearly every textbook on the kanji that you pick up, but is nearly as mistaken as trying to learn to write and read the kanji at the same time. Once you have learned the general-use characters, you will have a much better base from which to learn the meaning, writing, and readings of new characters en bloc as you meet them. Until then, cling to the Caesarean principle of “divide and conquer.”

Third, with few exceptions, it seems preferable to learn the several possible Chinese readings of a given character as they come up, in isolation from one another. When second or third readings appear, reference to earlier frames will inform you of the fact. You will no doubt notice that the quickest way to complete the information on your flash cards is to rush to INDEX V and start filling them in. If you do, you might end up with a tidy set of cards that are no longer of any use for review, or else find yourself reviewing what you haven’t yet studied. In either case, you would be sidestepping the entire method on which this book is based. Be sure to read the instructions on pages 297–99 before doing anything with your cards.

Fourth, certain Japanese sounds undergo phonetic alterations when set alongside other sounds. For example, 一本, 二本, 三本 are read ippon, nihon, sambon, the syllable hon being like a chameleon that changes to suit its environment. Some of these alterations are regional, some standard. In any case, they are best learned by trial-and-error rather than by a set of rules that are more complex than they are worth.

Fifth, a word about Chinese compounds (熟語, じゅご). With a grain of salt, one might compare the blend of Japanese (kun) and Chinese (on) words to the blend of Anglo-Saxon and Latin-Greek words in English. Generally, our words of Anglo-Saxon root are richer in meaning, vaguer, and more evocative than those of Latin-Greek root, which tend to precision and clarity. For instance, the word “glass” can suggest a whole range of possible images and meanings, but as soon as we substitute its Latin equivalent, “vitrine,” we have narrowed it down to a more concrete meaning. The presence of Chinese words (generally a compound of two or more on readings) in Japanese performs a similar narrowing, specifying function, while the native Japanese words reverberate wider and deeper meanings.

In much the same way that we combine Anglo-Saxon words with Latin and Greek words (for example, in the term “fiberglass”), Japanese will occasionally mix on and kun readings in the same compound. As a rule, I have avoided
these in the exemplary compounds. The order of preference in choosing examples was roughly as follows:

1. a compound that includes a reading appearing in a previous frame;
2. a compound in ordinary use;
3. a compound that uses a reading to appear soon after the frame in question;
4. the most common or instructive compound;
5. a name of a person or place;
6. rare or archaic compounds.

The student is encouraged to substitute familiar compounds at any time for the examples I have chosen.

Sixth, the use of signal primitives demands the same rigor applied to primitive elements in vol. 1. Where a single jot or tittle of difference is present, the element is excluded. Additional attention will have to be paid to the position of the primitive, which was not important in the earlier book.

Seventh, I would register a plea against trying to begin with the two volumes of *Remembering the Kanji* at the same time. I wash my hands (or as Japanese would have it, my feet) of all responsibility for the results. Having been said, there is no reason that these pages cannot be used in conjunction with a set of graded readers. I would only advise that you begin this after having worked your way through Chapters 2 and 5. The benefit of such an approach is that it enables you to take full advantage of the grammatical and vocabulary drills that such readers provide.

At the same time, the commonly heard advice about learning characters “in context” is one that is not as sensible as it sounds. Even if I learn the English word “troglodytic” in sentences such as “I can trace my ancestors back to the troglodytic age” or “There’s a family of troglodytes in my tool shed,” the word still needs to be learned in the first place. New Japanese vocabulary falls on the foreign ear with much the same impact—totally unrelated to anything we already know. The benefit of a context is that it enables one to drill a number of words and assimilate something of how they relate to one another grammatically and connotatively. Context defines the finer nuances that usage and tradition have affixed to the kanji, but the compounds themselves still need to be learned. For this reason, students who wish systematically to make their way through this book frame by frame need not trouble themselves over the absence of context provided they do not abandon all reading practice in the process.

Eighth and finally, a vigorous warning against the use of *rōmaji* in learning to read Japanese kanji. Get the idea out of your mind that the Roman alphabet is a “crutch” to help you hobble along until you master the *hiragana* and *kata-
kana syllabaries. It is nothing of the kind. It is rather a slow and self-inflicted amputation that will leave you crippled for the rest of your Japanese-reading years. Not only does the Roman alphabet inflict quirks on your pronunciation, it cultivates a systematic bias against the kana that gets harder and harder to uproot. Be patient with the kana, and never write Roman letters beneath them. The stricter you are in expelling all rōmaji from your study of Japanese words, the quicker you will find that Roman letters become an obstacle to reading and writing, which they are for the Japanese and should be for anyone learning the language.

Shinano-Ōmachi, Japan
28 December 1978

Note to the 2nd Edition

The material in these pages was composed during the third month after my arrival in Japan. I had just completed a volume describing the method I had used to learn the meaning and writing of the kanji, and I was anxious to try my hand at systematizing the notorious haphazardry of the readings. Once finished, the manuscript circulated for eight years in photocopy among a number of students of Japanese around the world. Their suggestions and contributions did a lot to round off the rough edges and save me from embarrassing mistakes. Only in 1986, with the encouragement and cooperation of Nakamura Toshihide and Murakami Yūnosuke of the Japan Publications Trading Company, did the book appear in print. Since that time it has gone through eleven printings and formed the basis for a set of flash cards published two years later.

Aside from a longstanding wish to make minor adjustments here and there in the examples and indexes, the immediate stimulus for a new edition has come from the preparation of a Spanish edition as a companion volume to the translation of vol. 1. The translation has also rekindled another longstanding desire, echoed in numerous letters from readers over the years: to prepare a reader to facilitate the use of this volume. The project has yet to materialize, but at least I can say that it is more in mind now than it has ever been.

Nagoya, Japan
2 January 2004