

A Quick Guide to Japanese Names and Pronunciation

Japanese names:

Japanese names are written family name first, followed by the given name.

For example, in the name Minakata Kumagusu the family name is "Minakata" and the given name is "Kumagusu". Writers, monks, poets, and artists are often known by their given name, a pen name, an artist's name, or a Buddhist name. Examples: Bashô (poet), Hiroshige (artist).

The imperial family has no family name; members are referred to by their title and given name, except for the Emperor who when alive is respectfully referred to in Japanese simply as "Tennô Heika" (roughly, "His Majesty the Emperor"), but is also sometimes referred to by his title and given name, especially in foreign media. After death (since the Meiji period), the Emperor is referred to by his "reign name": "Meiji Tennô" ("The Meiji Emperor," Mutsuhito, reigned 1868-1912, the "Meiji Period"); the Taishô Emperor (Yoshihito, r. 1912-1926); the Shôwa Emperor (Hirohito, r. 1926-1989); and the current emperor (Akihito, r. 1989-) who will be known as the Heisei Emperor after his death.

Japanese pronunciation:

In Japanese there is very little tonic accent (unlike Chinese) and all syllables are pronounced evenly. Consonants written double are pronounced double and do make a difference in meaning, i.e. "am-ma" (a masseur), "ama" (a woman diver).

A resembles the a as in father, but is shorter.

E like the ey in they; but it is shorter in a syllable terminated by a consonant, in which case it is like the e in pen.

I as the i in machine, but a little shorter; in a syllable terminated by a consonant it is like the i in pin.

O as in core, though a little shorter; in a syllable terminated by a consonant it is like the o in on.

U as in push.

Ai like the y in my.

Ei like the ay in play.

Au like the ow in cow.

Long and short vowels: tôri (a street); tori (a bird).

Japanese syllables:

With the exception of the final "n" each syllable will have a vowel; the vowel may be by itself or with one or two consonants. Below is a list of Japanese names and words that have been divided into syllables. Note that they are divided between the vowel and the following consonant, between two vowels, or before and after the final "n" sound.

Tokugawa	To/ku/ga/wa	samurai	sa/mu/ra/i
Tengu	Te/n/gu	hayashi	ha/ya/shi
Edo	E/do	Tôkyô	Tô/kyô