

Re: Help With Learning Kanji

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- *From:* Ben Finney <bignose+hates-spam@xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx>
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"metaphist" <pauleford@xxxxxxxx> writes:

What you some of you better recommend for learning: looking up and drilling sets of kanji as they appear in actual reading? Or learning the radicals first, then moving on to the complex stuff?

My method is reductionist. I'm learning the writing-to-meaning associations as a separate study, and learning the readings (pronunciations) as they occur in vocabulary learning.

The latter is simply a matter of vocabulary drilling and other methods. It's made much simpler, though, by the fact that I'm learning the writing-to-meaning associations systematically, and can recognise the kanji as familiar characters with core meanings that usually associate easily with the word I'm learning.

The writing-to-meaning association is a systematic study, which I've derived as a combination of James Heisig's *Remembering the Kanji* volume I, the core meanings from Jack Halpern's dictionaries, the *Zhong Wen* and *KANJIDIC* online dictionaries, and (following the method Heisig gives) my own mental-image-based mnemonics for the associations.

Remembering the Kanji volume I

<URL:[http://www.nanzan-u.ac.jp/SHUBUNKEN/publications/miscPublications/Remembering the Kanji 1.htm](http://www.nanzan-u.ac.jp/SHUBUNKEN/publications/miscPublications/Remembering_the_Kanji_1.htm)>

New Japanese-English Character Dictionary

Kanji Learner's Dictionary

<URL:<http://www.kanji.org/kanji/index.htm>>

Zhong Wen

<URL:<http://zhongwen.com/>>

KANJIDIC

<URL:<http://www.csse.monash.edu.au/~jwb/kanjidic.html>>

Be aware that Heisig's *RtK* series, and especially *RtK:I*, is a

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rather controversial topic among Japanese teachers and learners. Many consider it to be at best useless, and at worst actively harmful, to study kanji using Heisig's books.

I can sympathise with this, and find that many aspects of the series are not worth the bother, but I do think that the first volume's *method* is a very effective one for me. I'll go into some detail of what I do and don't use from his work, since I believe I'm taking only the good parts and leaving the rest.

Heisig's RtK:I teaches a method sometimes called by others "component analysis". The kanji are analysed and sequenced based on their composition from components: sometimes other kanji, sometimes radicals, and sometimes other collections of strokes. Each of these components is given a single meaning (Heisig calls it a "keyword") that is unique to that component. The meaning is written as an English word or short phrase, but must be learned as a nuanced conceptual meaning independent of language, rather than rote learning of an English phrase.

I try to choose meanings that are strongly associated with the actual range of meanings the component or kanji has in use:

* For kanji found in Halpern's dictionaries (jouyou, jinmeiyou, and many less-common characters), this is the "core meaning" given there. This is much more useful than Heisig's "keyword", which I disregard as irrelevant for my purpose.

Halpern's core meanings are carefully chosen to give a concept that ties most or all of the actual in-use meanings of the character together logically, which means that making this association *first* in my mind is an aid to learning all the other nuances for that character.

* For kanji found on KANJIDIC, I analyse the range of meanings and derive a suitable "core meaning" for the kanji, using the same principles as Halpern's dictionaries (but without the benefit of his research).

* For components that are radicals but not kanji, I use the commonly-accepted radical meaning, or something similar that works better for my mnemonic stories.

* For components that are Chinese characters, I look up the meaning of the character on Zhong Wen. These meanings are often helpful in learning Japanese kanji that use this character as a component, obviously since the Japanese kanji meanings are derived from the Chinese meanings.

* For other components that are not separate radicals or characters,

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I make up an arbitrary meaning (or use Heisig's suggested keyword) that will aid in constructing a mnemonic story image.

This is a last resort, and is quite rare, but since the component isn't a character I won't be using it outside the context of this study, so it doesn't really matter what mnemonic I associate with it, as long as it helps me learn others.

This gives me a single, nuanced meaning for every kanji and component of the kanji I learn, and Heisig's `_RtK:I_` gives a progression of components and characters to learn that build knowledge up based on components already learned.

Having chosen a core meaning for the component, I follow Heisig's method, ignoring his often-unhelpful keywords, and making my own image stories to associate the meaning of each of the existing components found in the current character, with the meaning of that character. (This is Heisig's recommendation; the stories given in the book are actually just suggestions to help train the reader into the practice of creating their own. Since I'm not using his keywords, most of his suggested stories are virtually irrelevant to me anyway.)

Having learned a character, I have a flash card with the core meaning written on one side and the character written large on the other. Flash card drills consist of reading the core meaning and writing the character, then checking to see if I've got it right. I never need to drill the other way; drilling from established knowledge to new knowledge is effective at making the reverse association as well.

I have an empty Kim Chi box (bright red!) that nicely fits about 150 flash cards, with two spacer cards to separate to-be-drilled, correct and incorrect cards inside the box. I carry that with me everywhere so that I can use a spare ten minutes productively drilling a few dozen cards, stopping and closing the box the moment my attention is needed.

I'm starting to use a Leitner-style spaced-repetition method to select which cards to drill next, but don't know whether I'd recommend it yet.

<URL:<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Flashcard>>

<URL:http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spaced_repetition>

Another aspect that makes Heisig's work controversial is that he teaches writing-to-meaning as a discrete study from writing-to-reading (pronunciation). His argument is that the readings are not strongly associated with the writings, so are less amenable to systematic study; the meanings, on the other hand, are quite strongly associated with the written composition of the components of the kanji, and thus

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reward systematic study.

Thus, he argues, separating this association out as an early, separate study can help the student through focus on the part of the kanji that makes the most logical sense, and will give a solid foundation for the much more arbitrary writing-to-reading association.

The requirement to learn readings and more nuanced meanings is not eliminated, but, he argues, it gets rid of much of the senseless repetition encountered by trying to learn all aspects of a kanji at once and forgetting most of it many times over. This is probably one of the more unproven parts of his method, but I can only anecdotally say that it works great for me.

What some detractors seem to conclude from this is that Heisig advocates learning **all** the jouyou kanji writing-to-meaning associations before learning **any** other part of Japanese. I can understand how a superficial reading of Heisig's books might give that impression, but I don't agree that he advocates that.

I certainly haven't delayed any of my other Japanese learning while studying writing-to-meaning of the kanji. On the contrary, I find that I get far more effectiveness and satisfaction in my vocabulary learning the more kanji I study this way. The association between the word meaning and the kanji used to write it is often quite clear, and is always amenable to a simple mnemonic, when I have learned core meanings for the kanji in that word. For kanji that I haven't yet learned, it's nowhere near as easy, and I would hate to learn kanji only as I encountered them in vocabulary.

\ "If you were going to shoot a mime, would you use a silencer?" |

\ -- Steven Wright |

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Ben Finney

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