

HOW TO USE A KANJI DICTIONARY

As I write this, in 2008, I fear that the skills I'm about to describe will soon be—who am I kidding?—already are endangered species. That is to say, the way to use a traditional (paper) dictionary is a skill few students learn any more, thanks to electronic dictionaries. It's so easy to take out your stylus or use your mouse to write the character on a pad and *voilà* find what you need. I'd be lying if I said that I didn't take my electronic dictionary with me everywhere in Japan, and that my Nelson's is just too heavy for a backpack. BUT (and you knew this was coming), that doesn't mean that my Nelson's is collecting dust on the shelf. Nor are any of the other dictionaries next to it unused.

No matter how good electronic dictionaries become, I believe that there is still an argument for learning the basic methods for paper dictionary use. It is a little bit like math in the age of the calculator. Sure, your calculator makes quick work of tough math problems so you use it. But, in a pinch, if you didn't have it, it sure is comforting to know how to do the same problems with a pencil and paper.

Another argument for learning the radical-organization method is that dictionaries without a touch pad or stylus are often cheaper and more comprehensive than those with them.

Finally, the more you use this method the faster you become at it. At first it may seem like a chore, but with time your fingers will fly through the pages with ease. Really. Stop laughing.

Basic Organization

In order to function in a CJK environment, one must first become comfortable with the concept of “radicals” (部首 *J. bushu*). What is a radical? Simply put, a radical is a part or a component of a character. **All** Chinese characters are made up of one or more radicals. In the traditional Kangxi 康熙 radical system, there are 214 radicals. Most dictionaries are arranged according to this system, although some use a modified version of it. We will be covering other systems of organization later in this course, but for now let's focus on the Kangxi system, which is the most widely recognized. It is useful for students to learn the 214 Kangxi radicals, because then they can use most CJK reference works. Even if you regularly use a dictionary whose system is somehow modified, we strongly recommend that you learn the 214 Kangxi radicals or banish yourself to being able to use only one dictionary for the rest of your life.

CJK dictionaries of Chinese characters will all have a chart of radicals. Here is an example from one of the major dictionaries, Morohashi's (we'll come back to this later in the course):

Identifying Radicals

In order to find a character in a dictionary, one must first be able to identify the radical. Think of the character as sitting on a grid. You look to different quadrants and/or sides to find the radical. With a character like 林 that is an easy task—the radical is the “tree” radical on the left-hand side. But what about a character like 爽? At first it may seem inscrutable, but there are some rules of thumb that can help. Although these rules don’t help 100% of the time, they are still remarkably effective. Ask yourself the following questions (in this order):

1. Is the character a radical **all on its own**?

氏, 田, 車, 舌 and 魚 are all examples of this. Do not make the mistake of thinking that this question should be easy for you to answer intuitively. It isn’t, but don’t be discouraged! It is all too common to see a new character, spend a few minutes trying to break it down into radical components, only to discover that it is in its entirety a radical. Characters with many strokes are particularly misleading, such as 龍 (dragon), 龜 (turtle), and 鼻 (nose). The only way to know the answer to this question quickly is to memorize the 214 Kangxi radicals.

2. Is the radical on the **left hand side** of the character?

Usually easily identifiable, typical left hand radicals can be seen in the following characters: 待 (wait, attend); 持 (have); 侍 (serve). In each of these cases, the right hand is the same (寺), but the left hand radical changes. Moreover, some these radicals are good examples of how the shape of a radical can change from the “full character” form. For example, 扌 is the left-hand radical form of 手 and 亻 is the left-hand radical form of 人. Most good radical charts, such as that above, show you both forms.

3. Is the radical on the **right hand side** of the character?

Characters that have right-hand side radicals include: 教, 難, 新, 別, 歌 and 額. Be careful not to mistake 阝 on the left with 阝 on the right. They are actually different radicals: 阝 on the left is an abbreviation of 阜 and 阝 on the right is an abbreviation of 邑.

4. Is the radical on the **top** of the character?

Characters that have top radicals include: 写, 安, 笑, 罪, and 老.

5. Is the radical on the **bottom** of the character?

Characters that have bottom radicals include: 兄, 忘, 熱, 貧, and 益.

6. Is the radical a **NW enclosure**?

Characters that have NW radicals include: 厚, 尺, 房, 店, and 病.

7. Is the radical a **SW enclosure**?

Characters that have SW radicals include: 近, 起, 建, 翹, and 黼.

8. Is the radical a **total enclosure**?

This category is rather a catch-all. Sure, there are obvious inclusions like 囧, but then there are other types of enclosures that don't seem "total," such as those we see in the following characters: 區, 包, 式, and 門. Some dictionaries, like Nelson's, break this category down into sub-categories like "NW radicals," etc. Others do not. In Japan, the category stands alone (see below) as a recognized unit.

The hardest radicals to identify are the one-stroke radicals, so it helps to take a look in that section of your dictionary to see what sorts of characters are categorized as having a one-stroke principal radical. Remember our friend 爽 from above? Nelson's categorizes it under the radical 丿, but notes that traditionally it is categorized under 爻.

Now, let's take a look at a page from Nelson's dictionary and see how it is organized:

This is the number of brushstrokes in the radical (4)

This is the radical number—in this case, radical #75 is 木. Notice all the characters on this page have that radical in them.

75

These are all the radicals in the Kangxi system that have four brushstrokes in them. The square brackets indicate which radical will be found on this page. The small “5” indicates the number of residual brushstrokes of the first character on the page.

4
心
小
小
戈
戸
手
才
支
支
父
文
斗
斤
方
疋
日
月
[木]
欠
止
歹
爰
母
比
毛
氏
气
水
彡
水
火
爪
丩
父
爻
月
丩
片
牙
牛
犬
豸

- 2224 F961 枸 KU quince tree.
- 19 枸酸 *kuensan* citric acid
- 2225 F963 柑 KON. KAN citrus fruit; orange.
- 3 子類 *kōjirui* citrus fruits
- 16 橘類 *kankisurui* citrus fruits
- 2226 F966 柩 KYŪ bier. *hitsugi* coffin, hearse, casket.
- 7 車 *kyūsha* hearse
- 2227 F968 母 (国字) *tsuga* hemlock, hemlock-spruce.
- 6 松 *tsuga-matsu* hemlock-spruce
- 2228 F968 柁 (国字) *masa*, *masame* straight grain. *masaki* spindle tree.
- 5 目 *masame* straight grain
- 2229 F968 柵 柵 SAKU stockade, fence, palisade. *shigara(mu)* entwine around; check (a current) with a weir. *shigarami* weir.
- 9 垣 *sakugaki* fence
- 2230 F963 栢 HAKU. HYAKU. *kashiwa* oak.
- 4 手 *kashiwade* handclapping at a shrine
- 14 横 *byakushin* juniper tree
- 15 餅 *kashiwa mochi* rice cake wrapped in oak leaf
- 2231 F962 柿 SHI. JI *kaki* persimmon. *kokera* shingle.
- 6 色 *kaki iro* yellowish brown
- 8 板 *kokera ita* thin shingles
- 11 渋 *kakishibu* persimmon juice
- 2232 F965 柘 SHA, SO wild mulberry.
- 14 榴 *zakuro* pomegranate
- 榴子 *zakuroshi* garnet
- 榴石 *zakuro ishi* garnet
- 榴珠 *zakuroshu* garnet
- 2233 F967 柳 RYŪ. *yanagi* willow.
- 6 糸 *ryūshi* graceful willow branches
- 行季 *yanagigōri* wicker trunk
- 7 条 *ryūjō* willow branches
- 9 眉 *ryūbi* beautiful eyebrows [willow]
- 13 腰 *yanagigoshi* slender figure, slim waist;
- 暗花明 *ryūan-kamei* bright flowers under dark willows; rural springtime; red-light district

- 2234 F962 柄 柄 HEI. *e* handle, crank, grip, hilt, shaft, knob, spoke (of steering wheel on a ship). *gara* pattern, design; build; character, nature. *tsuka* hilt, grip, handle (of a knife).
- 7 杓 *hishaku* dipper, ladle, scoop
- 8 染 *garazo(me)* dyeing in designs
- 11 袋 *tsukabukuro* sword-hilt cover
- 10 樽 *edaru* fancy 2-handled (saké) barrel
- 2235 F966 查 SA investigate.
- A 取 *sashū suru* investigate and confiscate
- 8 定 *satei* assessment; revision; audit (of salaries); investigation and decision
- 11 問 *samon* inquiry, hearing
- 問会 *samonkai* court of inquiry
- 12 証 *sashō* visa; investigation and attestation
- 13 照 *sashō* a check-up
- 14 察 *sasatsu* inspection, investigation
- 15 閱 *saetsu* inspection, examination
- 2236 F966 柱 柱 CHŪ cylinder, supports for strings on a lute; pillar, post. *hashira* pillar, column, post, pole; support, prop, stay; sole support; counter for Shinto gods. *ji* bridge (of a stringed instrument).
- 5 石 *chūseki* pillar, mainstay, cornerstone
- 6 式 *chūshiki* column type
- 7 体 *chūtai* column shaft
- 状 *chūjō* columnar, pillar-like
- 10 時計 *hashiradokei* wall clock
- 11 廊 廊 *chūrō* colonnade, portico
- 掛 *hashiyaka(ke)* a motto or picture hanging on a post
- 14 曆 *hashiragoyomi* wall calendar
- 10 頭 *chūtō* capital of a column
- 2237 F961 架 KA frame, mount, stand, support; hang up; shelf. *ka(suru)* build (a bridge), construct. *ka(keru)* vt hang.
- 8 架 *kajō* on the shelf
- 工齒 *kakōshi* dental bridge
- 工義齒 *kakō gishi* dental bridge
- 5 台 *kadai* abutment; stand, frame, holder
- 6 空 *kakū* aerial, overhead, trolley; fiction. *kakū no* fanciful, fictitious, Utopian
- 空索道 *kakū sakudō* aerial cableway
- 空線 *kakūsen* aerial cable, overhead wire, trolley wire
- 11 設 *kasetsu* construction, building
- 道橋 *kadōkyō* road overpass
- 15 線 *kasen* aerial wiring
- 16 橋 *kakyō* bridge building [work]
- 橋工事 *kakyō-kōji* bridge-construction

2224-2237
This is the range of kanji on this page (each kanji is assigned a discrete number)

496
This is the page number

Now let's look at a small section of the page in greater detail: For the first character, we get two different versions (although these look almost identical here, there is a slight font difference). The first is the common version, and the second is the less common (or complex) version. Next, we have two numbers, one over the other. The one on top is the number that Nelson's has assigned to this character. Other dictionaries will cross-list characters with the Nelson's number, which is why this is useful. The number below, which begins with an F, is a cross reference to another dictionary, Fuzambō's *Shōkai Kanwa Jiten*. For your purposes this is not all that useful.

The upper-case B or A to the left of the character indicate that the character is either one of the essential 881 *kanji* learned by elementary students (A) or one of the remaining 969 *kanji* in the list of 1850 *kanji* learned by the time one graduates from high school. If there is no A or B, then the *kanji* is not in either category.

The readings are given in either SMALL CAPS or in *italics*. If the reading is in SMALL CAPS it is an "on-yomi" or Sinicized reading, and if it is in *italics* then it is a "kun-yomi" or indigenous reading. Immediately following the reading is the definition in English. In a Japanese *kanji* dictionary, the on-yomi is represented with *katakana* and the kun-yomi is represented with *hiragana*.

Below each character is a list of other characters which, when combined with the first, create a compound with a new meaning. So, for example, the word ^{ひしゃく}柄杓 means "dipper" (see above).

The small number next to the compound *kanji* (such as the 7 next to 杓 above) indicates the number of strokes in the 2nd character of the compound. Notice that compounds are listed by total stroke order of the second character.

Note that the readings of the compounds are always in *italics*, regardless of whether it is an on-yomi or a kun-yomi.

	柄	2234 F962	柄	HEI. <i>e</i> handle, crank, grip, hilt, shaft, knob, spoke (of steering wheel on a ship). <i>gara</i> pattern, design; build; character, nature. <i>tsuka</i> hilt, grip, handle (of a knife).
B	柄			
	杓	7	杓	<i>hishaku</i> dipper, ladle, scoop
	染	8	染	<i>garazo(me)</i> dyeing in designs
	袋	11	袋	<i>tsukabukuro</i> sword-hilt cover
	樽	16	樽	<i>edaru</i> fancy 2-handled (saké) barrel
	査	2235 F966	査	SA investigate.
A	査			
	収	5	収	<i>sashū suru</i> investigate and confiscate
	定	8	定	<i>satei</i> assessment; revision; audit (of salaries); investigation and decision
	問	11	問	<i>samon</i> inquiry, hearing
	問		問	<i>samonkai</i> court of inquiry
	証	12	証	<i>sashū</i> visa; investigation and attestation
	照	13	照	<i>sashō</i> a check-up
	察	14	察	<i>sasatsu</i> inspection, investigation
	閱	15	閱	<i>saetsu</i> inspection, examination

Categories of radicals

Using the directional categories above, the radical divisions are:

Location	Term	Examples
Left-hand	へん(偏)	おんなへん いとへん かねへん さんずい にんべん 女 糸 金 彳 亻
Right-hand	つくり(旁)	おおざと さんづくり おのづくり ぼくづくり 冫 彡 斤 攴
Top	かんむり(冠)	わかんむり うかんむり あみがしら 宀 宀 冫
Bottom	あし(脚)	ひとあし れつか かい 儿 灬 貝
Northwest	たれ(垂)	がんだれ まだれ しかぼね やまいだれ 厂 广 尸 疒
Southwest	にょう(繞)	えんにょう そうにょう 廴 辵
Enclosure	かまえ(構)	つつみがまえ くにかまえ もんがまえ 勹 口 門

Notice that there are exceptions in many categories to how one refers to a certain radical. The water radical is not called “mizuhen,” as you might expect, but rather “sanzui.” There is no particular reason for this, or a particular rule to follow. It is idiosyncratic, like so much of Japanese. Nelson’s dictionary will give you the proper way to refer to each radical at the beginning of the radical section. It will also give you the meaning of the radical, which is amusing if not relatively useless (just because a character contains the short-tailed bird radical 隹 it does not mean that it has anything to do with birds—consider 難, 雜, and 焦).¹

Now, if you’re describing a character to a Japanese friend on the telephone, you would start with the radical, then give the other components. For example, 槁 would be “木偏に高い。” Or, to get more complicated, 糧 would be “木偏に山冠の下に豆。” In a pinch you can always refer to a radical as a *bushu* and then give the location (above, below, etc.) and a native speaker will probably be able to figure out what you’re saying.

¹ There are books that try to teach foreigners Chinese characters by telling us that characters implicitly represent what they mean. There are clever stories that go along with each character, complete with illustrations. Needless to say, if it were that easy we’d all be fluent in Japanese without trying. There ARE categories of characters (pictographs, abstractions, ideographs, etc.), but knowing these categories doesn’t really help the student of Japanese languages. We’ll revisit these categories in another unit.