

Kenta's 20 Phrase Cards

Walk up to any Japanese shop counter without freezing, and finally hear what anime is really saying



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You can read 300 kanji and still freeze at a convenience store counter in Japan.

Three hundred kanji is months of serious work, and none of it helps the second the clerk starts talking.

She asks something fast, then something else, then something else again, and every question goes by in a blur before you can catch one.

The fix is two short replies, and almost nobody teaches you those first.

The counter is not a test of how much Japanese you know.

At the counter, the customer mostly answers, because **the customer answers** questions the clerk asks.

The clerk runs through a set of offers, like heating your food, a bag, chopsticks, a point card and the receipt, and every single one of them is a yes or a no.

Now picture your own moment. It's your first night in Tokyo, with a bento in one hand and a cold drink in the other.

Later it's the bakery, the ticket window and a market stall, and then it's the night you watch an episode without subtitles and get every joke.

I made Kenta's twenty cards for the learner who wants to walk up to that counter and sound like they belong there, and who wants every anime they watch to make their real Japanese stronger.

I believe 'yes' is the most expensive word you can say at a Japanese counter.

Nod politely to everything and you walk out having paid for bags, holding chopsticks and a spoon you never asked for.

I believe anime gave you a head start that most textbook learners would love to have.

You already know dozens of words by sound, and once you can tell screen Japanese from street Japanese, every episode turns into a listening lesson.

And I believe the right twenty phrases will carry you through more real moments than two hundred words from a list.

Look at what happens in real life.

Japanese shops charge for plastic bags, so the bag question comes at nearly every counter, and card 4 is the line that answers it.

Japanese also came out fastest in a study of seven languages, at close to eight syllables a second.

At that speed you can't build sentences in your head, so a ready phrase on one card helps you more than a whole word list.

Learn your first words by sound, the way a child does, and let the reading come later. Every card here puts the sound first.

Inside these pages you'll find out

- How to get through any convenience store counter with two replies, even when the clerk talks at full speed
- The one word to listen for in each question, so you never need to understand the whole thing
- Why the polite nod costs you money, and what to say instead
- The line that gets a fast talker to slow down for you
- How one little word can mean yes or no, and the rule that tells you which
- How Japanese teenagers hold a whole conversation on one anime word, and who never to say it to
- Four words from your favourite fight scenes that you should keep away from strangers, and the surprising history behind them

You don't need all twenty before your first trip.

Start with two replies, お願いします (onegai shimasu) and 大丈夫です (daijoubu desu), and the rest will follow.

Jump ahead to that first counter.

The clerk asks about heating your bento, you hear 温め (atatame), you say お願いします, and it's done before you've had time to feel nervous.

By the last card you'll know exactly what to say at the counter, what to listen for, and which anime words to enjoy from a safe distance.

That learner with 300 kanji had everything except two ready replies, one for yes and one for no. Let's get yours ready.

AT A JAPANESE TILL EVERY QUESTION IS A YES OR A NO, SO TWO READY REPLIES ARE ALL YOU NEED

300 KANJI

THE CLERK ASKS QUESTION AFTER QUESTION SO FAST THAT SHE JUST NODS TO EVERYTHING.

BECAUSE HE NODDED YES EACH TIME, HE WALKS OUT HAVING PAID FOR A BAG AND HOLDING CHOPSTICKS AND A SPOON HE NEVER WANTED.

HEAT? YES NO
BAG? YES NO
CHOPSTICKS? YES NO
POINT CARD? YES NO
RECEIPT? YES NO
YES / NO

SHE REALISES THAT EVERY OFFER THE CLERK MAKES CAN BE ANSWERED WITH JUST A YES OR A NO.

温め お願いします = YES PLEASE
ふくろ 大丈夫です = NO THANKS

NEXT TIME SHE LISTENS FOR THE KEY WORD AND ANSWERS WITH お願いします FOR YES OR 大丈夫です WITH A SMALL WAVE FOR NO.

Every question at the counter has two answers

The Two-Button Answer is the move that gets you through any Japanese counter. You treat every question from the clerk as an offer with only two buttons: お願いします (onegai shimasu) to say yes please, and 大丈夫です (daijoubu desu) to say no thanks. You keep both ready before you reach the counter, and you answer every question with one or the other.

It works because a Japanese counter runs on offers.

The clerk asks whether to heat your food, whether you want a bag, whether you have a point card, whether you want the receipt and whether you need chopsticks.

Each one is a yes or a no, so a handful of short replies finishes the whole thing and you never have to build a sentence.

Stand at one real counter, slowly, and the same pattern shows up every time.

The order changes from shop to shop, though, so it is not a script you can learn once.

First comes いらっしゃいませ (Irasshaimase), a welcome you don't need to answer, then the run of offers, then the total, then a question about how you'll pay, where 現金で (genkin de) means cash.

If you buy alcohol, the clerk will ask you to press a button on the screen to confirm your age, because the drinking age in Japan is 20.

So you don't need to memorise a script, because the script keeps changing.

You need your two buttons and an ear for the one word in each question that tells you what's on offer.



The order changes from shop to shop, but every question gets one of the same two answers.

When you accept something, say **お願いします** (onegai shimasu), or **はい** (hai)、**お願いします** if you want it extra clear.

You'll sometimes hear **いいです** (ii desu), but it can come across blunt, and Japanese customers themselves pick **お願いします** for that reason.

Add a hand wave When you turn something down, give a small wave of your hand as you say **大丈夫です** (daijoubu desu). Soft words plus a clear gesture is how Japanese speakers make a no impossible to miss.

Cards 1 to 4: Getting help in a shop

These four are the lines you start yourself, so say them out loud until they come out without thinking.

- 1. すみません (sumimasen): Excuse me, sorry, or thank you for the trouble. Say it to get a staff member's attention before you ask a question.
- 2. いくらですか (ikura desu ka): How much is it? Point at the item and say すみません、これはいくらですか.
- 3. これ、ください (kore, kudasai): This one, please. It works for a drink, a ticket or a snack, anything you can point at.
- 4. 袋は大丈夫です (ふくろは だいじょうぶです · fukuro wa daijoubu desu): No bag, thank you. Literally 'the bag is fine', which is the polite way to turn something down.

すみません comes from a word that means 'to be settled', so it really says 'this can't be settled'.

That's why one word covers sorry, thanks for the trouble and excuse me all at once.

In Japan, stopping a stranger takes up their time, and that counts as a small burden, so すみません is how you open almost any request in a shop.

Close friends say ごめん (gomen) to each other instead, so keep すみません for shops, stations and people you don't know.

The textbook version of card 3 is これをください (kore wo kudasai), with a little を in the middle.

People drop it when they talk, and the comma on the card shows exactly where it went.

Card 3 is perfect at a bakery, a ticket window or a market stall, but at a convenience store counter you'll hardly need it, because there the clerk does the asking.

Card 4 is what most of Japan says at the counter.

Shops charge for plastic bags, so turning one down is now a conversation you have most days, and card 4 is the line for it.

If you do want a bag, 1枚で大丈夫です (ichimai de daijoubu desu) means one is fine.



Print this page and cut along the borders so the four shop lines fit in your wallet.

Cards 5 to 8: What the clerk asks you

This group is the part of the conversation the clerk says, and that's why it matters so much.

You only need to recognise these four, and each one has a single word to listen for: ふくろ (fukuro) for the bag, おはし (ohashi) for chopsticks, あたため (atatame) for heating and ポイント (pointo) for the point card.

Hear that word, press one of your two buttons, and you're done.

- 5. 袋はお付けしますか (ふくろは おつけしますか・fukuro wa otsuke shimasu ka): Do you need a bag? Listen for ふくろ and answer 大丈夫です for no.
- 6. お箸お付けしますか (おはし おつけしますか・ohashi otsuke shimasu ka): Would you like chopsticks? Answer お願いします for yes or 大丈夫です for no.
- 7. 温めますか (あたためますか・atatamemasu ka): Shall I heat it up? Said about a bento or a hot snack, and usually said fast.
- 8. ポイントカードはお持ちですか (ポイントカードは おもちですか・pointo kaado wa omochi desu ka): Do you have a point card? Answer 大丈夫です or 持っていません (もっていません・motte imasen).

Clerks word the bag question a few different ways.

You might hear レジ袋はご利用ですか (rejibukuro wa go-riyou desu ka), or be told that bags cost money and asked how many you want.

Either way, ふくろ is in there, and 大丈夫です answers it.

Because bags now cost money, there's a newer question too: 温かい物と冷たい物は分けますか (atatakai mono to tsumetai mono wa wakemasu ka), which means shall I keep the hot and cold things apart?

Say お願いします, or your hot bento goes into the same bag as your ice cream.

After you say yes to heating, the clerk will usually say 少々お待ちください (shoushou omachi kudasai), please wait a moment.

For the point card, learners often reach for ないです (nai desu), and the clerk will get the idea, but the answer Japanese teachers give is 持っていません (motte imasen), I don't have one, and 大丈夫です works just as well.

Quick check in the queue: say お願いします and 大丈夫です quietly to yourself once each. When the first question comes, both are already on your tongue.



You never have to say these four, so read them aloud until you can pick out the key

word at any speed.

Cards 9 to 12: When it goes by too fast

Almost every learner who freezes at a counter freezes for the same reason: the clerk is far quicker than anything they practised with.

One teacher noticed the clerk said 温めますか (atatamemasuka) about three times faster than his lesson audio, and that's exactly what pushed him to learn card 9.

- 9. もう一度お願いします (もう いちど おねがいします · mou ichido onegai shimasu): One more time, please. Start with すみません so it sounds like a kind request.
- 10. ゆっくりお願いします (ゆっくり おねがいします · yukkuri onegai shimasu): Slowly, please. This is the line that saves the most conversations.
- 11. わかりません (わかりません · wakarimasen): I don't understand. Say it early instead of nodding.
- 12. 書いてもらえますか (かいて もらえますか · kaite moraemasu ka): Could you write it down? Useful when the words are new to you.

Card 10 is the most valuable card on the sheet, and the numbers show why.

Japanese speakers fit a lot of sounds into every second, and everyday conversation runs at roughly 420 to 480 beats a minute, where a beat is about one kana sound.

Research on Japanese for foreign listeners found that about 340 beats a minute felt close to ideal, and that little pauses help too.

So when you say ゆっくりお願いします, you're asking for about a quarter slower, which is roughly the gap between normal speed and comfortable.

Put すみません in front of cards 9 and 10.

すみません、もう一度お願いします sounds warm and polite, so the clerk is far more likely to say it again slowly and clearly.

わかりません is your honesty card.

Saying it early costs you nothing, while nodding along can cost you a bag, chopsticks and a spoon you didn't want.

For card 12, hold out your phone or a notepad as you ask, and if you'd like a fuller line, すみません、ここに書いてもらえますか (koko ni kaitemoraemasu ka) means excuse me, could you write it here?

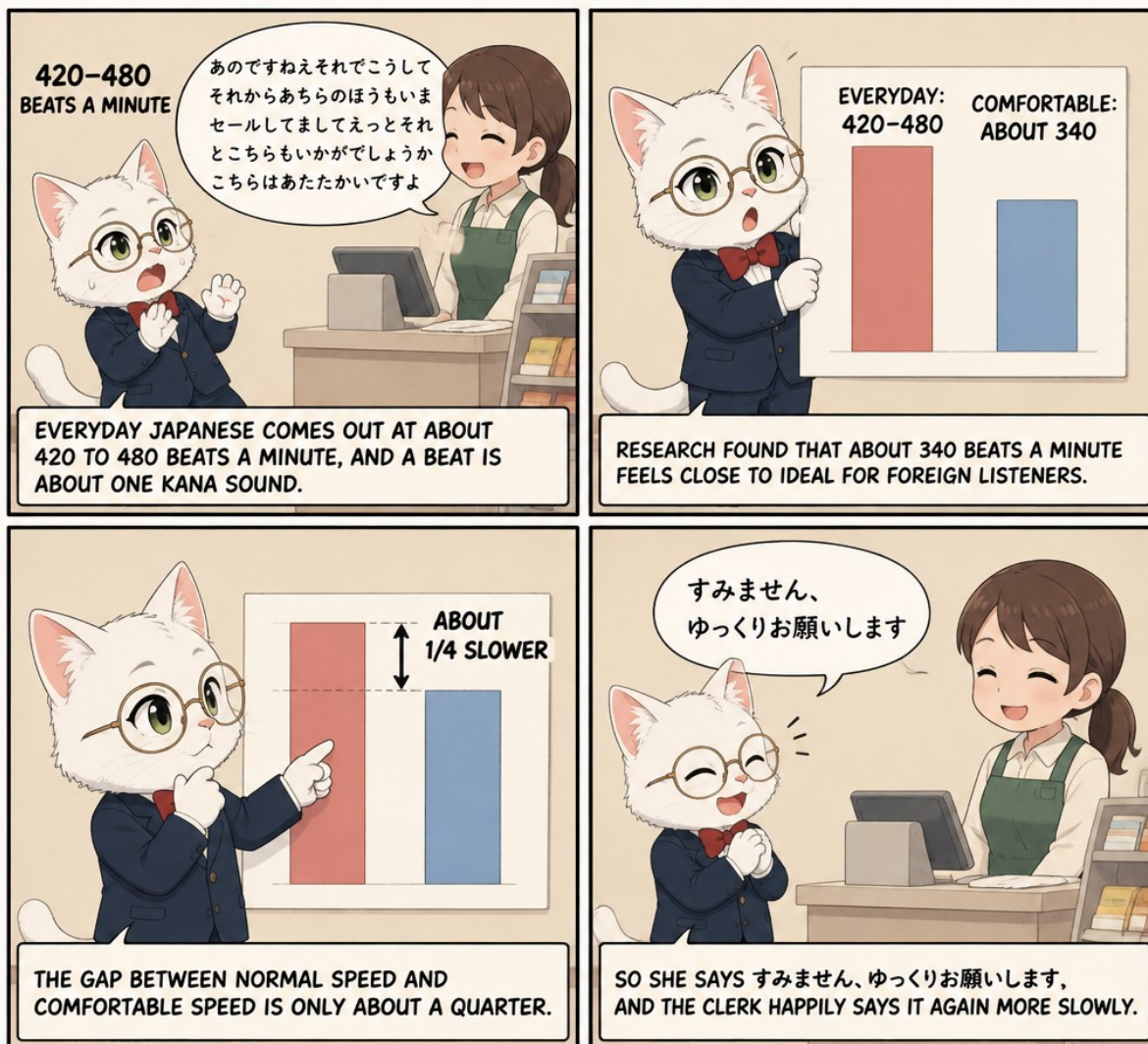


Cards 9 to 12: When it goes by too fast

9 もう一度お願いします mou ichido onegai shimasu One more time, please 	10 ゆっくりお願いします yukkuri onegai shimasu Slowly, please 
11 わかりません wakarimasen I don't understand 	12 書いてもらえますか kaite moraemasu ka Could you write it down? 

Keep this page closest to hand, because these four turn a frozen moment into a normal conversation.

ASKING THE CLERK TO SPEAK SLOWLY ONLY MEANS ASKING FOR ABOUT A QUARTER SLOWER, WHICH IS EASY TO GIVE



Cards 13 to 16: The anime words you'll actually use

Anime gave you a real head start here, because these four turn up in nearly every episode.

The thing to know is that anime speech is written to show who a character is.

Characters get catchphrase endings and pronouns that brand them, which experts call role language, and voice actors speak clearly in voices built to be understood.

Real people at a counter are quicker and less tidy, so use anime as your word bank and the counter as your listening test.

- 13. 大丈夫 (だいじょうぶ · daijoubu): I'm fine, it's okay, no thanks. A word that answers a great many questions.
- 14. やばい (やばい · yabai): Oh no, wow, this is bad, this is amazing. Tone decides which, and young speakers use it both ways.
- 15. すごい (すごい · sugoi): Amazing, wow, that's a lot. Add ですね (desu ne) to compliment something politely.
- 16. 待って (まって · matte): Wait. It's casual, so use 待ってください with someone you don't know.

大丈夫 (daijoubu) is the hardest-working word on the sheet, and one rule makes it safe.

When someone offers to do something for you, 大丈夫です means no thanks. When someone asks your permission, it means yes, that's fine.

A professor of Japanese grammar wrote about a learner who was offered coffee and answered いいです, meaning yes please, and got no coffee at all.

いいです and 大丈夫です both leave out half the sentence, so the listener has to guess whether you meant 'that would be good' or 'there's no need'.

That means for a clear yes you say はい、お願いします, and for a clear no you say いいえ、大丈夫です with your small hand wave.

Younger speakers and shop clerks hear 大丈夫です as no thanks almost every time, while some older speakers still hear 'it's fine', which is one more reason the wave helps.

やばい has a wild history. It shows up as やば, meaning dangerous, in a comic travel novel from 1802.

Later, police used the word for thieves and shouted やばい as they chased them, it passed into criminal slang after the war, and then young people flipped it around until it meant cool, talented or brilliant.

One Japanese teacher asked 30 kids and teenagers how they use it, and she found they could hold a whole conversation on やばい alone, with their faces, their tone and the situation carrying the meaning.

In her experience it's everywhere among people under about 40, some people in their 50s and 60s say it, especially if they're around kids, and she has never heard an elderly person say it.

So keep やばい for people you're close to. At a part-time job, in an interview, with a boss or with someone older, it can make you sound like you're still acting like a student, or even come across as rude.

In anime, 待って is often a shouted moment of feeling, which is why it sounds normal to you and abrupt in a shop.

Adding ください turns it into a polite request.



Next time you watch anime, count how often these four come up in a



Cards 17 to 20: Four words to keep behind glass

These last four are rude, and they're never for strangers. That means no shop staff, no station staff, nobody older than you and nobody you've just met.

- 17. お前 (おまえ・omae): You, and a rude one between adults. In anime it's between close friends or in a fight, never to a shop worker.
- 18. 貴様 (きさま・kisama): You, openly hostile. Anime villains say it, and you shouldn't.
- 19. てめえ (てめえ・temee): You, rougher still. Fighting words on screen and off.

- 20. うるさい (うるさい・urusai): Shut up, or noisy. Between friends it can be teasing, but with anyone else it's a real complaint.

Think of how a museum treats ancient swords.

You can walk right up, study them and enjoy their stories, but they stay in the display case and nobody takes them home.

The Museum Shelf works the same way: お前, 貴様, てめえ and うるさい go on it, you learn to spot them in anime and enjoy where they came from, and you never take them out with strangers, shop staff or anyone older.

Their stories are worth knowing. 貴様 is openly hostile today, but it was once a very formal way to say you.

People used it sarcastically for so many years that it came to mean the opposite.

てめえ comes from 手前 (temae), meaning 'the one in front of my hand', and it started out as a humble way to say me.

So the rudest you on the sheet began life as a polite me.

お前 is the one learners slip on most.

A Japanese teacher explains that native speakers use it only with close friends or in a fight, and it's very rude said to anyone older.

One learner wrote online that they learned お前 meant you, thought it was just another way to say it, and then called their Japanese friend お前.

Another greeted a stranger with the Dragon Ball line お前、何者だ (omae, nanimono da) ? , meaning who are you.

The other person understood perfectly and took it as rude, when (あなたは)どなたですか ((anata wa) donata desu ka) would have sounded polite.

With **The Museum Shelf** in place, you'll still need a way to say you in real life.

Use the person's surname plus **さん** (san), a role such as **先生** (sensei) for a teacher, or simply leave the word out, which is what Japanese speakers usually do anyway.

And there's no need to worry about **俺** (ore), the rough-sounding I that anime heroes use, because it's ordinary for men: in one survey, almost nine in ten male university students used it with their friends.

If you ever need quiet, the polite way to ask is **静かにしてください** (shizuka ni shite kudasai), please be quiet.



Enjoy these four in every fight scene, and leave them in the glass case when you're out in Japan.

How to make all twenty come out without thinking

The people who reach the very top in Japanese got there by speaking long before they felt ready.

Katsura Sunshine is a comedian from Toronto who performs rakugo, Japan's art of sit-down comedy, where one person holds a whole room with a folding fan, a cloth and their voice.

He trained in Osaka under the master Katsura Bunshi VI, and the apprenticeship took three years, living in his master's dormitory and working beside him from morning till night.

His Japanese was rough at the start, and a single story could take him half a year to learn.

He learned those stories by saying them out loud, again and again, rather than reading about them.

Rakugo needs almost nothing to work, and a folding fan, a cloth and one voice are the whole stage. One person sits down, opens the fan, and the story starts.

Today he performs those same stories in English, in New York and London and around the world.

What he chases is the sound and feel of a real person, and that is what these twenty cards are for.

That's how to use these cards: out loud, with the rhythm of a real clerk in your head.

Sound first works from day one, too.

Learn your first few thousand words by ear, so you know how a word sounds before you worry about how it looks.

That is what the sound line on every card is for.

Feeling completely lost for your first two weeks of listening to real Japanese is normal, and the gains come quickly after that.

Nobody in that first fortnight is doing it wrong.

How to start

- 1 Print the five pages tonight and cut out the cards, or keep pages two and three as photos on your phone.
- 2 Say **お願いします** and **大丈夫です** out loud ten times each, until they roll off your tongue like one word.
- 3 Read each card aloud from the kana, slowly at first and then at clerk speed.
- 4 Next time you watch anime, tick off every card you hear and notice which group it comes from.
- 5 At your first counter, listen for one word in each question and press one of your two buttons. When you walk out with exactly what you wanted and nothing you didn't, it's working.



**Follow me for more stories that teach the Japanese people really speak,
at the counter and on screen.**

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Sources

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