

Kanji radicals, often termed as “部首” (bushu) in Japanese, are kanji characters’ foundational components or building blocks. These elemental parts serve as essential clues to a kanji’s meaning or pronunciation and offer a systematic way to categorize and recall the vast array of characters. By understanding radicals, one gains insights into the structure and essence of the kanji script, making the learning process more intuitive and enriching. Hence, it is crucial to remember the most common Kanji radicals to **learn and remember Kanji**.

Each kanji character is a symbol and a mosaic of meanings and sounds. Central to understanding kanji are the radicals – the foundational elements or building blocks of these characters. Radicals often hint at the meaning or pronunciation of a kanji and are essential tools for categorization and memorization.

Most Commonly Used Kanji Radicals

There are many radicals, but the **following 51 are the most common Kanji radicals, making up 75% of the 2,136 regularly used Kanji (*jōyō kanji*)**. Remembering these radicals at the beginning of your Kanji studies will increase the pace of your learning exponentially.

Radical	Source Kanji	Radical Meaning	Usage Example (Kanji)	Meaning of Example Kanji
口 (“Mouth” Radical) □	□	Mouth / Opening	1. 中 (Chu/Naka)	1. Middle, Inner, In, Mean, Center
			2. 同 (Ona-ji)	2. Same, Equal
			3. 各 (Onono, Kaku)	3. Each
			4. 名 (Na-mae)	4. Name
			5. 和 (Nagomu, Yawaragu)	5. Harmony, Peace, Soften
匚 (“Box” Radical) □	N.A.	Enclosure	1. 国 (Kuni)	1. Country
			2. 四 (Yon, Shi)	2. Four
			3. 園 (En, Sono)	3. Park, Garden
				4. To be: Troubled, or Worried, or

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冫 (“Water” Radical)	水	Water	4. 困 (Koma-ru) 海 (Umi)	bothered, or embarrassed Ocean
木 (“Tree” Radical)	木	Tree	森 (Mori)	Forest
亻 (“Person” Radical)	人	Person	化 (Ba-kasu / Ba-keru)	Transform, Change, Convert, Chemistry
扌 (“Hand” Radical)	手	Hand	投 (投げる – Nageru)	Throw, Discard, Give up, Sell at a loss
忄 Or 小 OR 心 (“Heart” Radical)	心	Heart (Spirit, Mind)	怪 (怪しい 【あやしい: Ayshii])	Suspicious, questionable, doubtful, unreliable, clumsy, strange
言 (“Word” Radical)	言	Say, Word, to Speak	語 (Go)	Language, Speech, Word
日 (“Sun” Radical)	日	Sun or Day	日本 (Nihon / Nippon)	Japan
糸 (“Thread” Radical)	糸	Thread, Yarn, String, 0.001%	約 (Yaku / Yakusoku)	Promise, agreement, appointment
么 (“Short Thread” Radical)	糸	Small or Tiny	幼 (Ito)	Young child, infant
肉 (月 or changes shape to very narrow shape of Moon Kanji 月)	肉	Meat, Organ, Flesh	1. 腐 (Kusa-ru) 2. 肋 (Niku)	1. Rot, decay, sour 2. Meat
(“Flash” Radical)				
月 (“Moon” Radical)	月	Moon or Month	朝 (Asa)	Morning
土 (“Earth” Radical)	土	Ground, Earth, Soil	寺 (Tera)	Buddhist Temple
辶 and 彳 (“Movement” Radicals)	Variant of 足	Go, Road, Walk, To advance	辺 (Hen)	Area, vicinity
艹 and 艸 (“Grass” Radicals)	草 (ancient kanji 艸)	Grass / Plant	花 (Hana)	Flower

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宀 (“Roof” / “Crown” Radical)	家	Roof / Crown	1. 安 (Yasui) 2. 家 (Ie)	1. To prevent or defend 2. Department or section 3. Sun as a celestial body
貝 (“Shell” Radical)	貝	Shell / Property / Wealth	賃 (Chin)	Fare or rent
女 (“Woman” Radical)	女	Woman	好 (Suki)	To like or love
阝 (“Hill” or “Village” Radical)	阜 (Hill) or 邑 (Large Village)	Hill or Hill (on the left side) / Village or City (on the right side)	1. 防 (bou) 2. 部 (Bu) 3. 太陽 (Taiyō)	1. To prevent or defend 2. Department or section 3. Sun as celestial body
金 (“Metal” Radical)	金	Gold / Metal / Mineral	針 (Hari)	Needle
一 (The “One” Radical)	一	One	1. 二 [futa-(tsu), Ni] 2. 三 [Mi-(tsu), San]	1. Two 2. Three
刀, 刂, and 刁 (“Sword” Radical)	刀	Sword	1. 切 (Ki-ru) 2. 別 (Waka-reru, betsu) 1. 動 (Ugo-ku)	1. To cut 2. Separate, Another, Different 1. Move, Motion, Operate
力 (“Strong” or “Power” Radical)	力	Power, Strength, Ability	2. 効 (Ki-ku) 3. 励 (Hage-masu)	2. Effect, Efficacy 3. Encourage, Inspire, Cheer up
十 (“Cross” or “Needle” Radical)	十	Ten	1. 協 (Kyo) 2. 博 (Haku, Baku)	1. cooperation 2. Extensive, Doctor

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田 (“Rice Field” Radical)	田	Rice Field	1. 男 (Otoko) 2. 町 (Machi, Cho)	1. Town 2. Man
火 or 灬 (“Fire” Radical)	火	Fire	1. 災 (Wazawa-i) 2. 照 (Te-ru)	1. Disaster 2. Illuminate, Shine
大 (“Big” Radical)	大	Big, Large	1. 天 (Ama, Ame) 2. 失 (Ushina-u, Shitsu)	1. Heaven 2. Lose
山 (“Mountain” Radical)	山	Mountain	1. 岸 (Kishi) 2. 岳 (Take, Dake)	1. Shore, Riverbank 2. Peak, Mountain Peak
食 or 食 (“Food” Radical)	食	Eat, Food	1. 飢 (U-eru, Ki) 2. 養 (Yashina-u, Yo)	1. Hunger, Craving 2. To foster; Provide for; Nourishment, Bring up
車 (“Vehicle” Radical)	車	Car or Vehicle	1. 軍 [gun (グン)] 2. 輝 (kagaya-ku)	1. Army, Military, Troops 2. Shine, Sparkle, Glitter
彳 (“Movement” or “Moving Person” Radical)	彳	Small step, Walking Slowly, Stride	1. 得 (U-ru, E-ru, Toku) 2. 徳 (Toku)	1. Gain, Earn, Profit, Benefit 2. Virtue, morality
行 (“Going” Radical)	行	Go, Act	街 (Gai, Machi) 1. 県 (Ken)	Town or District (mainly in urban context) 1. Prefecture
目 or 目 (“Eye” Radical)	目	Eye	2. 着 (Ki-ru, Tsu-ku)	2. Arrive, Reach, Put on, Wear

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雨 (“Rain” Radical)	雨	Rain	3. 真 (Ma, Shin) 1. 雪 (Yuki) 2. 雲 (Kuma)	3. True, Truth, Reality 1. Snow 2. Cloud
犬 and 犴 (“Animal” Radical)	犬	Dog	3. 雷 (Kaminari) 1. 獅 (Shishi) 2. 狐 (Kitsune)	3. Thunder, Lightning 1. Lion 2. Fox
王 (“King” Radical)	王	King	3. 狼 (Okami, Mida-reru) 1. 琴 (Koto) 2. 理 (Ri)	3. Wolf 1. Japanese harp, Japanese zither 2. Reason, Principle, Logic
玉 (“Jewel” Radical)	玉	Bead, Ball, or Jewel	3. 珍 (Mezura-shii) 1. 研 (To-gu)	3. Rare, Infrequent, Unusual 1. Polish, Sharpen
石 (“Stone” Radical)	石	Stone	2. 破 (Yabu-ru) 3. 碎 (Kuda-ku) 1. 弟 (Ototo)	2. Brush, Polish 3. Crush, Smash 1. Younger Brother
弓 (“Bow” Radical)	弓	Power, Strength, Ability	2. 弔 (Tomura-u) 3. 引 (Hi-ku)	2. Mourn, Condole 3. Pull, Draw, Tug
衣 and 衤 (“Clothing” Radical)	衣	Clothes, Robe, Gown	1. 袋 (Fukuro) 2. 被 (Komu-ru)	1. Sack, Bag 2. Incur, Suffer 3. Back, Reverse side

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竹 and 𦵏 (“Bamboo” Radical)	竹	Bamboo	3. 裏 (Ura)	1. Chopsticks 2. Section, Paragraph, Season 3. Answer
			1. 箸 (Hashi)	
			2. 節 (Fushi, Setsu)	
又 (“Again” Radical)	又	Again, Also (Mata)	3. 答 (Kota-e)	1. Friend 2. Take 3. Receive, Accept
			1. 友 (Tomo)	
			2. 取 (To-ru)	
支 and 攴 (“Strike” Radical)	攴	Strike (U-tsu)	3. 受 (U-keru, U-kary)	1. Number; Amount, Several; A number of, Destiny 2. Let go, Release, Set free 3. Reform, Renew, Modify, Revise
			1. 数 (Kazu, Kazo-eru)	
			2. 放 (Hana-su)	
冬 (Winter radical)	冬	Winter (Fuyu)	3. 改 (Arata-meru)	1. Summer 2. Change, Vary, Abnormal, Unusual 1. Prohibit, Forbid, Ban 2. Festival
			1. 夏 (Natsu)	
			2. 変 (Ka-eru, Ka-waru)	
示 Or 礻 (“Show on Altar” Radical)	示	Show, Display, Indicate (Shime-su)	1. 禁 (Kin)	3. God, Deity 4. Company, Shrine (Mainly Shinto Shrine “神社”)
			2. 祭 (Matsu-ri, Matsu-ru)	
			3. 神 (Kami, Kan)	
			4. 社 (Sha, Yashiro)	

Radical	Source Kanji	Radical Meaning	Usage Example (Kanji)	Meaning of Example Kanji
酉 (Sake Radical)	1. 酉 2. 酒	1. Bird (Tori) 2. Alcohol (Sake)	1. 酒 (Sake, Saka)	1. Sake, Alcohol
			2. 酌 (Ku-mu)	2. Pour, Serve drinks, Consideration for others
禾 (“Two branched tree” or “Grain” Radical)	N.A.	Grain	3. 醉 (Yo-u)	3. Getting drunk
			4. 酎 (Chu)	4. Shochu
			1. 稻 (Ina, Ine)	1. Rice plant
			2. 科 (Ka)	2. Subject of Study, Course, Department
宀 (“Building” or “House on a cliff” radical)	N.A.	Dotted cliff	3. 私 (Watashi, Watakushi)	3. I, Me
			4. 秀 (Hii-deru)	4. Excellent, Superior
			1. 店 (Mise)	1. Shop, Store
			2. 座 (Suwa-ru)	2. Seat, Sit
疒 (“Sickness” radical) radical)	N.A.	Sickness	3. 広 (Hiro-i)	3. Wide, Broad, Spread
			4. 度 [Tabi, to (ト) do (ト) taku (タク)]	4. Degree, Time, Occasion
			1. 痛 (Ita-i, Ita-mi)	1. Pain
			2. 症 (Sho)	2. Illness, Disease, Symptom
巾 (“Cloth” radical)	巾	Towel, Cloth, Width	3. 疲 (Tsukareru)	3. Tiring, Fatigue, Exhaust
			1. 市 (Ichi, Shi)	1. City, Market
			2. 布 (Nuno, Fu)	2. Cloth, Spread
			3. 帝 (Tei)	3. Emperor

Radical	Source Kanji	Radical Meaning	Usage Example (Kanji)	Meaning of Example Kanji
尸 (“Corpse” radical)	尸	Corpse, Remains Flag	4. 常 (Tsune, Toko, Jo)	4. Always, Ordinary, Usual
			1. 尺 (Shaku)	1. Unit of length, Approx. 30.3 cm
			2. 局 (Kyoku)	2. TV station, Post office, Department
寸 (“Inch” radical)	寸	Brief, Small, Measurement	時 (Toko, Ji)	Time

Tips for the Most Confusing Kanji Radicals

Among all the above-mentioned Kanji radicals, the following are the ones which cause confusion:

Radical 肉 (月) and 月

Kanji radical 肉 is called Nikuzuki, meaning Meat, Organ, or Flesh. While writing, this radical is simplified as 月. However, this simplified shape, most of the time, is written as 月. This change makes it hard to distinguish it from the radical representing the “Moon.”

However, a finer point to distinguish it from the Kanji radical for the moon and to remember the Kanji characters using this character is that the moon shape originating from this radical is generally narrower than the moon Kanji radical. To make it clear, please check the following examples:

- 肋: Niku or meat with the Nikuzuki radical (肉)
- 朝: Asa meaning morning with the moon Kanji radical

The other way to recognize this radical and differentiate it from the radical of the Kanji of Moon (月) is to check the combination of it with the other part of the Kanji for the overall meaning.

Kanji Radicals 口 and 囗

Aren't both these Kanji radicals look the same? Well, apart from the minor difference in size and shape, they are identical. The radical 口 originates from the Kanji for mouth or opening, while the radical 囗 denotes an enclosure and box.

The best way to differentiate these two radicals is by their position in the Kanji. Please note that as the meaning dictates, the radical for the enclosure always encloses the other part of the Kanji, while the radical for mouth never encloses the other part of the Kanji. The following examples explain this fact:

- **Radical for enclosure or box (口):** 国 (country), 四 (four), 園 (park), 困 (to be worried)
- **Radical for Mouth (口):** 中 (middle/center), 同 (same), 各 (each), 名 (name), 和 (harmony)

Radicals 刀 and 力

The radicals for sword or knife (刀) and the radical for power or strength (力) look quite similar. However, these two kanji radicals have distinct shapes, unlike the above-mentioned radicals of mouth, enclosure, and moon and flash. It's crucial to note and remember the slight differences in the shapes of these two radicals.

Radicals 夂 and 攴

Similar to 刀 and 力, the kanji radicals 夂 and 攴, denoting “winter” and “strike,” respectively, are hard to distinguish. However, they do have distinct shapes. Please take note of the horizontal line at the top. The horizontal line in the radical for “winter” extends outside the shape on the right-hand side.

Kanji Radicals 衤 and 礻

衤 for clothing and 礻, “Show on Altar” radicals can sometimes create confusion. Please note an extra stroke on the right-hand side in the radical for “clothing” to distinguish these two Kanji radicals.

Conclusion

In conclusion, kanji might initially seem complicated, but it becomes much easier when we learn about radicals. Radicals are the building blocks of kanji, giving clues about its meaning or how it sounds. By getting to know these radicals, anyone can make better sense of kanji and remember them more easily. Think of radicals as helpful stepping stones in the big river of Kanji. By starting with these stones, the journey becomes simpler and more enjoyable.