

## 1 Verb Conjugation

Verbs in Japanese conjugate, or take various shapes. In this lesson, we learn three forms: (1) the “dictionary forms,” (2) the present tense affirmative forms, and (3) the present tense negative forms.<sup>1</sup> There are two kinds of verbs that follow regular conjugation patterns, and an example of each is below.

	<i>ru</i> -verb	<i>u</i> -verb
verb bases	<i>tabe</i>	<i>ik</i>
dictionary forms	食べる (to eat) た	行く (to go) い
present, affirmative	食べます た	行きます い
present, negative	食べません た	行きません い
stems	食べ た	行き い

食べる belongs to the group of verbs called the “*ru*-verbs.” *Ru*-verbs are so called, because you add the suffix *ru* to the verb base (*tabe*, in the above example) to form the dictionary form. For the two long forms we learn in this lesson, you simply add the suffixes *masu* and *masen*, instead of *ru*, to the bases. We learn four *ru*-verbs in this lesson:

食べる      寝る      起きる      見る  
た            ね            お            み  
 食べます    寝ます    起きます    見ます  
た            ね            お            み

Another major group of verbs is called the “*u*-verbs.” The dictionary form of an *u*-verb like 行く can be broken down into the base (*ik* in the above example) and the suffix *u*. The long forms like 行きます and 行きません, then, are formed with the base plus suffixes *imasu* and *imasen*. You may find the *u*-verb conjugations slightly more difficult than the *ru*-verb conjugations, because of the extra vowel *i*. We learn six *u*-verbs in this lesson:

飲む          読む          話す          聞く          行く          帰る  
の            よ            はな          き            い            かえ  
 飲みます    読みます    話します    聞きます    行きます    帰ります  
の            よ            はな          き            い            かえ

<sup>1</sup>The use of the term “dictionary forms” is by no means restricted to listings in a dictionary. They also appear in various constructions in actual sentences. We will learn their uses in later chapters. Don’t be misled by the names given to the long forms too; the “present tense” in Japanese can indicate both the “present” and the “future.” We will return to this issue in Section 2 below. For the moment, we will concentrate on the forms, not the meaning of these verbs.

In later lessons, we will have many opportunities to refer to the parts like 食べ and 行き, which come before ます and ません in the long forms. For the sake of ease of reference, we will call these parts (same as bases with *ru*-verbs, and bases plus *i* with *u*-verbs) “stems.”

In addition to *ru*-verbs and *u*-verbs, there are two “irregular verbs.” Note that the vowels in their bases are different in the short (dictionary) forms and the long forms.

irregular verbs		
dictionary forms	する (to do)	くる (to come)
present, affirmative	します	きます
present, negative	しません	きません
stems	し	き

These two verbs are also used to form compound verbs. In this lesson, we learn the verb 勉強する, which conjugates just like the verb する.

It is important to remember which verb belongs to which conjugation class. It is a good idea, therefore, to memorize each verb as a set: instead of memorizing just the dictionary form, try to memorize the dictionary form *and* the present tense affirmative, like 行く → 行きます. This is especially important with verbs that end with the *hiragana* る, because they may be irregular verbs like する and くる, or *ru*-verbs, or *u*-verbs whose bases just happen to end with the consonant *r*. If you know the verb classes and the rules that apply to them, you know why it is wrong to say ×見ります and ×帰ます.<sup>2</sup>

	見る (= a <i>ru</i> -verb)	帰る (= an <i>u</i> -verb that ends with る)
verb bases	み	かえ
long forms	みます／みません	帰ります／帰りません
stems	見	帰り

<sup>2</sup> Things are not as bad as you might expect after reading the above paragraph. The key lies in the second from the last syllable in a dictionary form. The irregular verbs set aside, if you see the vowels *a*, *o*, or *u* right before the final る, you can be absolutely sure that they are *u*-verbs. (We have not learned any such verbs yet.) Unfortunately for us, the logic does not follow in the other direction; there are *ru*-verbs and *u*-verbs that have the vowels *i* and *e* before the final る. 寝る has the vowel *e* before る and is a *ru*-verb. 帰る, on the other hand, has the same sound sequence, but is an *u*-verb.

**3****Past Tense**

The past tense forms of verbs look like the following, where ~ stands for the stem of a verb.

	affirmative	negative
present tense	～ます	～ません
past tense	～ました	～ませんでした

メアリーさんは九時ごろうちに帰りました。 *Mary returned home at about nine.*

私はきのう日本語を勉強しませんでした。 *I did not study Japanese yesterday.*