

# The Codebreaker's Guide to Gairaigo

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This guide provides detailed instructions on how to decode gairaigo as if they were secret messages or ciphers. They really are not, but codebreaking feels more exciting than studying grammar. For the purpose of this guide, you may think of yourself as a signals intelligence analyst.

**1. Start with sound:** Read the word as a sequence of sounds and listen: does it resemble an English word?

**2. Remove filler vowels:** Japanese phonology inserts vowels to make pronunciation possible.

- Drop final U: If a word ends in u, it is often just a technical helper vowel. (e.g. desuku → desk)
- Remove final O after T or D: In Japanese, t and d are often followed by o. If a word ends in o, try removing it. (e.g. hinto → hint, pado → pad)

**3. Restore the original consonants:** Japanese lacks some Western consonants, so sounds are replaced:

- R → L (raito → light, bīru → beer, kā → car)
- B → V (bideo → video)
- S / Z → TH (shīmu → theme, zatto → that)
- Chi / Ji → Ti / Di (chiketto → ticket, dejitaru → digital)
- Shi → Si (shiti → city)
- Fu / Fa → F (fairu → file)
- Geminate っ → Double consonant (kappu → cup, batto → bat)
- Long vowel ending → R/L-type ending consonant (bīru → beer, kā → car)

**4. Reverse-engineer missing letters:** Sometimes Japanese follows pronunciation rather than spelling. Certain English letters disappear entirely. Try reconstructing them:

- K → C (kamera → camera, karē → curry, sentā → center, shiti → city)
- K / Ku → Q (kuikku → quick, kuīn → queen, kuesuto → quest)
- K / Ku / Ks → X (bokkusu → box, takushī → taxi, zairofon → xylophone)
- U / W sound → W (wain → wine, raito → write)
- F → PH (fon → phone, firosofi → philosophy)
- F / Ø → GH (naito → night, rafu → laugh)
- N → KN (naifu → knife, nito → knit)
- S → PS (saikoroji → psychology, sāmu → psalm)
- shon → TION / SION (sutēshon → station, misshon → mission)

**5. Consider silent letters:** If you're close to the correct word but something still feels missing, the reason may be simple: silent letters in English disappear in gairaigo. Try inserting:

- K at the beginning (knight, know, knee)
- GH at the end (night, though, laugh)
- B before t or m (debt, doubt, bomb, climb)
- L in certain clusters (calm, walk, talk, half)
- W at the start (write, wrong, sword)
- G before n (sign, design)
- H after certain consonants (honest, hour, ghost)
- T in some clusters (castle, whistle)

**6. Think in context:** In summary, context and structural constraints help reconstruct the original word:

- What words are typically used in this situation?
- What word would you predict from the beginning of the sentence?
- Where might "forced" vowels appear?
- Which consonants could have been substituted?
- Which silent letters might be missing?

**In short:** Gairaigo aren't really learned — they are interpreted. To an English speaker, spoken gairaigo sounds like a cute accent. But in writing, everyone has to decode it. For a non-English speaker, it is a three-layer decryption process: 1. katakana to romaji, 2. romaji to English, 3. English to the native language.