

# For the Adventurous Knitter

## Interpreting Japanese Knitting Patterns



The beauty of Japanese knitting patterns is intriguing and inspiring knitters worldwide. Their discovery of it is often filled with awe, as I was when I first glimpsed inside **“Knitting Patterns Book 250”** (a Nihon Vogue publication shown on the left). Japanese stitch pattern books are well charted with detailed illustrations on how to work chart symbols. Though challenging, deciphering the charts is achievable for the intermediate to advanced knitter.

The pattern books, on the other hand, present a few more challenges. But for the Adventurous Knitter who is not easily daunted, it can be quite a fascinating journey. Though Japanese knitting patterns are written entirely in Japanese, there is much information readily available for the English-speaking knitter. Shown on the right is **“Let's Knit Series Beautiful Knit”** published by Nihon Vogue. The cover sweater is an elegant pullover with bobble chevrons.



Japanese patterns are charted in a clear and consistent system, and most of the information that you require to knit the garment is given in the charts. There are many clues given in the pattern introduction and the charts. This handout has been created to help you to both find them and decipher their meaning.

While the following pages will give you enough information to read the basics about a given pattern, you will also need to draw on other online resources for additional information. A list of them is on page 8, and some of the basic knitting chart symbols are on page 7.

Referring to the picture of the garment is also helpful in seeing what stitch patterns are used, and what the garment shaping looks like. Some key chart symbols are listed on the page 3 for reference.

Shown on the right is **“Let's Knit Series # 10”** published by Nihon Vogue. The cover lace sweater, an intricate patterning combination of lace and texture, has inspired many knitters to learn more about Japanese knitting techniques and designs.



In the pages following are samples of Japanese text and charts from a variety of different patterns, used as reference examples. Special thanks to Nihon Vogue who graciously granted permission\* for their charts and Japanese text to be used.

Special thanks to intrepid knitting designer/teacher, Maureen Mason-Jamieson for her technical expertise in editing and adding to this work. Maureen has taught a course on **Japanese Knitting Techniques** (plus several other topics) at Knitter's Magazine Stitches events and several guilds. For more information on her design work and teaching workshops, please visit her web site at [www.kinverknits.com](http://www.kinverknits.com).

Forward Ho!

And wishing you much success and joy  
in your Japanese knitting adventures.  
Marsha White, The Needle Arts Book Shop

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## Before you jump in with both needles...

Before you start knitting a Japanese pattern, below are some key tips to help your relationship with Japanese knitting get off to a good start.

- While many knitters are initially attracted to Japanese patterns with elaborate patterning, translating a more simplified pattern first will help you to learn some of the basic chart symbols and pattern structure.
- You are actually translating the chart into your own instructions, and having a journal or notebook handy will help you keep your notes and figures handy and organized. Plus you can also record any conversions from cm to inches. **Remember to double check your math along the way.**
- With your notebook in hand, go through the pattern charts noting measurements; find the key symbols for increase and decrease areas; read stitch pattern graphs; identify the pieces of the garment – everything you will need to translate and understand before you cast-on.
- Where there is no decrease or increase information given with a front garment chart, it is listed on the back chart.
- **Note that most Japanese patterns are given in 1 size, or sometimes 2** (and this is often a small size compared to North American sizing) so it's likely you will need to resize – having a good understanding of the pattern structure will give you a starting point for this.
- Japanese pattern measurements are in cm. Having a tape measure that has inches on one side and cm on the other will give you a handy and accurate way to translate – look up the cm value, flip over the tape, and now you have inches.
- **Japanese needle sizes are different from US and Metric.** A chart listing all of them is given below.
- After you have interpreted and knit a basic Japanese knitting pattern, the notes you made and the knowledge gained along the way will help you tackle that wonderful complex pattern that first caught your eye!

### Equivalent Chart for Japanese Knitting Needles vs US and Metric

On the chart below, Japanese sizes are listed with the closest equivalent in Metric.

Metric	1	1.5	1.75	2	2.25	2.5	2.75	3	3.25	3.5	3.75	4
Japanese				0		1	2	3	4	5		6
Metric Equivalent				2.1		2.4	2.7	3	3.3	3.6		3.9

US		000	00	0	1		2		3	4	5	6
Metric Equivalent		1.5	1.75	2	2.25		2.75		3.25	3.5	3.75	4

Metric	4.25	4.5	4.75	5	5.5	5.75	6	6.25	6.5	7	8	9
Japanese	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	7mm	8mm	
Metric Equivalent	4.2	4.5	4.8	5.1	5.4	5.7	6	6.3	6.6	7	8	

US		7		8	9		10		10.5		11	13
Metric Equivalent		4.5		5	5.5		6		6.5		8	9

## Identifying Key Information on the Charts

On the following pages are charts of 4 examples from different garment designs (ie this is not a lesson on how to knit a specific garment, but one on how to read key elements from the charts.)

### Some points to note before we tackle the charts

- Often the shaping of the chart will tell you what part of the garment it is, ie the front has a low neckline/and the back a high neckline.
- If the garment is knit in the round there will be a circular oval below the chart; and if knit flat there is a straight line with dots on the ends.
- Arrows indicate the direction of knitting. For example, if there is an arrow on the chart pointing down over the sweater hem area, and another arrow pointing up into the main body, this indicates that there is a provisional cast

Now that you have some understanding of what you are looking for, let's get down to the details.

### Reading the pattern introduction and some key Japanese characters and symbols.

Beside most patterns there is a section of information in Japanese with key numbers included, as well as some of the key Japanese characters and symbols shown below.

段 rows    目 stitches    回 times    号 needle size  
ゲージ gauge    前 front    後 back    袖 sleeve

You will often see the symbols for “rows, stitches and times” on the garment charts. Knitting teacher/designer Maureen Mason-Jamieson's clever way of remembering them is their alphabetic relationship – R S T.

### In the example shown above right:

- The 1st point lists
  - the suggested yarn and colour # (17)
  - the amount of yarn to be used:  
for M (medium) size: 620 grams = 16 balls,  
and for L (large) size: 690 grams = 18 balls.
- **Note that many Japanese yarns are in 40 gr balls.** In the *Let's Knit Series* pattern books (published by Nihon Vogue) there is a summary page with photos of the recommended yarns (which appear life size), and a list of which patterns they were used in, gauge, ball size, yardage, and recommended Japanese needle sizes.
- The 2nd point lists the needle sizes required, 8 and 6. Japanese knitting needle sizes are different from the British, US and Metric systems. See page 2 for a conversion chart.

on for the main body and you knit up.

After the main body is completed, you pickup the provisional stitches and knit the hem down.

- In the center of the chart is listed in Japanese what the chart is (ie front, back, etc – for some of the basic Japanese characters, see below “*Reading the pattern introduction and some key Japanese characters*”)
- The information in brackets in the middle of the chart refers to the stitch pattern to be used. If it is referring to a graphed stitch pattern, look at the different stitch pattern graphs that are given, and match up the Japanese characters used – your skills as a detective are very useful!
- Measurements in cm and rows knit (you will see the Japanese character for rows) are listed along the pattern side.

●材料 リッチモア カシミヤメリノ (極太タイプ) 紺 (17) M : 620 g = 16玉・L : 690 g = 18玉。

●用具 棒針 8号、6号。

●ゲージ 10cm平方でメリヤス編み19目×26段、模様編み24目×26段、1目ゴム編み24目×26段 (8号針)。

- The 3rd point lists the tension in stitches and rows over 10 cm. As there are 3 different tensions shown, this indicates there are 3 different stitch patterns used in the design, all using size 8 (Japanese) needle, as indicated at the end of the Japanese instructions.
- The 1st gauge given is 19 sts by 26 rows (note the 'stitches' and 'rows' symbols beside the numbers).
- Also given in the stitch graph section of the patterns would be graphs for the 3 stitch patterns.
- Note that while it is useful to know the suggested needle size, it is the gauge to be matched that is more important. This example recommends a Japanese needle size 8 (equivalent to 4.5 mm) to obtain a gauge of 24 sts and 26 rows over 10 cm square for the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> stitch patterns listed.



## Reading the Sweater Front Chart

From the shaping of the chart on the right, we see that the chart is for a sweater front cardigan (right side). This is confirmed by reading the first Japanese character in the middle of the chart (see page 3 list of “Japanese characters and symbols”).

The knitter is expected to reverse the shapings and use this chart as a guideline for the left front.

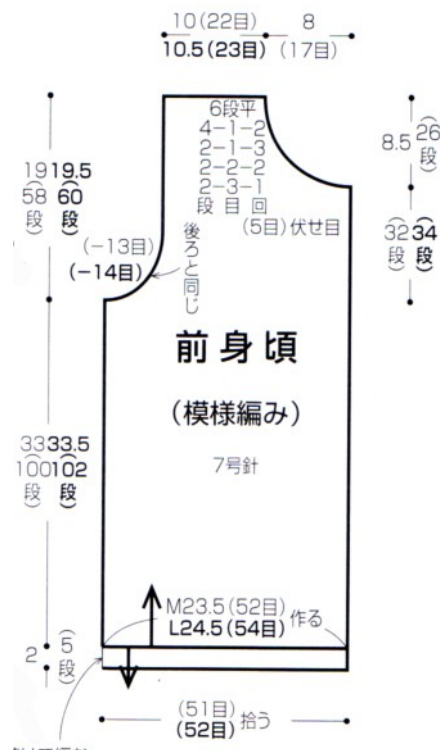
In the sample chart on the right, the number of stitches and rows are listed for 2 sizes, M (medium) and L (large - in bold), and the measurements given in cm.

Information learned on the back chart for armhole decreases is not repeated on the front chart, but given on the back chart only.

Remember that Japanese knitting patterns are mostly written for 1 or 2 sizes. Based on the detailed information given on the chart, the knitter is expected to be able to resize where required. My admiration and respect for the Japanese knitting designer now extends to the Japanese knitter – their skill levels are quite high!

### Starting at the bottom of the chart:

- The horizontal lines at the bottom, with the dots on the ends, indicate that this garment is knit flat.
- The width in cm, and the number of stitches to be cast on are given: M - 23.5 cm, 52 sts / L - 24.5 cm, 54 sts.
- Arrows on the chart indicate direction of knitting. In this sample the main sweater is knit first, then the bottom border is picked up from the main sweater and knit down for 2 cm / 5 rows. Note when you up pick up stitches to knit the hem, for M you pick up 51 sts (from the 52 cast on for the main body) and for L you pick up 52 sts (from the 54 cast on for the main body).
- Along the left side of the chart, the length and number of rows is listed for the main part of the sweater up to the armhole: M - 33 cm, 100 rows / L - 33.5 cm, 102 rows.
- In the lower center of the chart, the number 7 indicates the suggested Japanese needle size.
- The Japanese characters in brackets above the needle size identify the stitch pattern graph to be used.
- At the armhole edge the total stitches to be decreased are given: M-13 sts, and L-14 sts. The detailed decrease information would be listed with the Back chart, and you would duplicate this for both the right and left fronts.
- On the right side of the chart are listed the rows from the start of the armhole decreases to the start of the neckline decreases: M - 32 rows / L - 34 rows, plus the cm and rows for the depth of the neckline: 8.5 cm, 26 rows for both sizes.



- Double checking the math, the rows listed on the right-side for M are 32+26=58. For L 34 + 26 = 60. This agrees with the row count listed on the left-side of the chart for the armhole.
- The numbers given inside the shoulder area indicate decreases for the front neck. Starting at the bottom, 5 sts are first cast off. The next instruction of 2-3-1 indicates the “rows – stitches – times” formula. You can see the symbols for “rows”, “stitches” and “times” below the decrease instructions.
- The “5 sts” in brackets at the bottom row of the decrease instructions, indicate you first cast off of 5 sts.. Instructions for size M, first cast off 5 sts then decrease: every 2 rows, 3 sts, 1 time ( 3 sts decreased); every 2 rows, 2 st, 2 times ( 4 sts decreased); every 2 rows, 1 st, 3 times ( 3 sts decreased); every 4 rows, 1 st, 2 times ( 2 sts decreased); for a total of 17 sts decreased.
- When we double check the math, for M we started with 52 sts; less the neckline decreases of (5+3+4+3+2 = )17 sts; less the armhole decreases of 13 sts = 22 sts. This is confirmed by sts given at the top of the chart: M – 22 sts.
- At the top of the shoulder the width in cm of the shoulder seam and stitch count is listed: M - 10 cm, 22 sts / L – 10 cm, 23 sts.
- The width of the neck and the stitches decreased are also given: 8 cm / 17 sts.

## Reading the Sleeve Chart

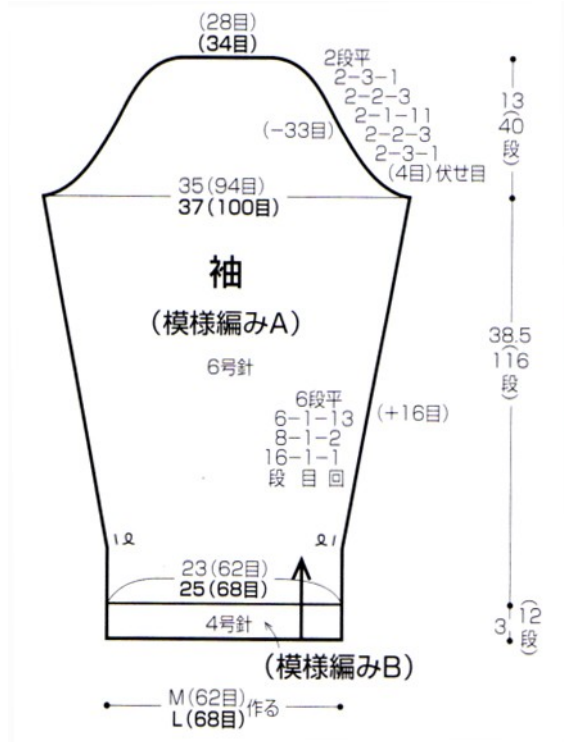
By the chart shaping we can see that this is a sleeve, and the Japanese character in the middle confirms this (see page 3 list of “Japanese characters and symbols”).

The number of stitches and rows are listed for 2 sizes, M (medium) and L (large - in bold), and the measurements are given in cm.

The main stitch pattern used is indicated in brackets in the center, ending in A, and for the cuff is at the bottom of the chart and ends in B. You would refer to stitch pattern graphs given with the pattern, looking for similar Japanese characters in the graph titles.

### Starting at the bottom of the chart:

- The horizontal lines at the bottom, with the dots on the ends, indicate that this garment is knit flat.
- The arrow on the chart indicates the direction of knitting, from the hem to the shoulder.
- The number of cast on stitches and measurements in cm is given: M - 62 sts, 23 cm / L - 68 sts, 25 cm.
- For each of the 3 sections of the sleeve (cuff, centre, and sleeve cap), both rows and cm are given up the right side of the sleeve, starting with the cuff section: 3 cm = 12 rows.
- The information in the cuff section refers to needle size to be used – 4 (Japanese needle size), with the stitch pattern graph referred to in brackets below, ending in B.
- The needle size used for the main sleeve is in the middle of the chart – 6 (Japanese needle size), with the stitch pattern graph referred to in brackets above, ending in A.
- Increases are listed on the inside, right side of the sleeve, and apply to both sides. They are worked as: after 'x' rows, increase 'x' sts, 'x' times. Note that the starting point on the chart for increases is indicated by a 'twisted loop' symbol, where you start your increases:
  - on the 16 th row, 1 st, 1 time; (1 st increased)
  - every 8 rows, 1 st, 2 times; (2 sts increased)
  - every 6 rows, 1st, 13 times. ( 13 sts increased) = 16 sts.
- As a double check, they also list on the outside of the sleeve chart that you have increased '+' 16 sts each side (for a total increase of 32 sts).



You started with M=62 st, plus 32 = 94 sts / L=68 st, plus 32 = 100 sts. This is confirmed in the sts /cm information at the top of the sleeve before the sleeve cap decreases are worked.

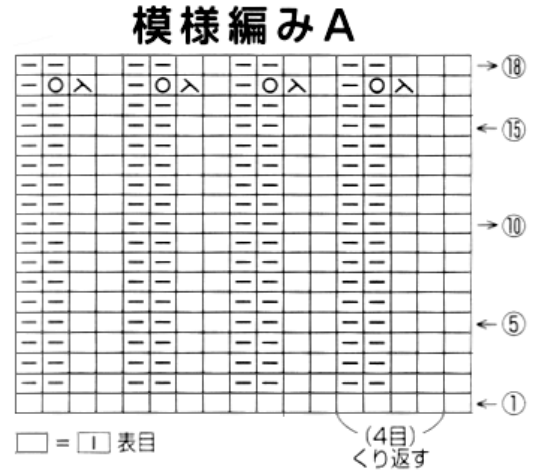
- For the decreases on the sleeve cap, read the values on the outside of the upper sleeve, applying them to both sides, for a total decrease of 33 sts each side, as listed inside the sleeve. Note that the first row in brackets is “4 sts” so you would first cast off 4 sts at each armhole edge, then continue with the other decreases listed.
- The ending stitch count is at the top, with M=28 sts / L = 34 sts. Double checking the math, for example M started with 94 sts before decreases, less (-4-3-6-11-6-3 = 32) for both sides is less 66 sts = 28 sts left.
- If the length of the sleeve needed adjustment, you would need to re-calculate the increase rate in order to customize for your own measurements.

## Reading a stitch graph

On the right is a sample stitch pattern graph. Often the graphs are labeled A, B, C etc and are referenced in the center of the garment chart where they are used.

### Starting at the bottom:

- Note that any additional information needed to read a graph is given in the bottom left under the graph. In this case a “blank box =” indicates that for this graph, blank boxes are knit stitches. Knit stitches are usually indicated with a box with a vertical line, but this graph is easier to read when the knit stitch is blank, as there are many purl stitches (the box with a horizontal line).
- There is an edge stitch (for seaming) on the right side before the main pattern repeat, and it is assumed that an extra edge stitch is worked as the last stitch.
- There is a 4-stitch repeat section indicated on the bottom right of the graph. Three more repeats are shown so you have a fuller view of the pattern.
- Directional arrows on the right side of the graph indicate which row #'s you are knitting from right to left, or left to right.



## Japanese Chart Knitting Symbols



Some of the most commonly used knitting symbols are listed below. For a comprehensive listing of symbols and how to work them, there is “*Clear and Simple Knitting Symbols*” (shown on left, published by Nihon Vogue). The table of contents lists all of the knitting symbols and the page reference where detailed illustrations are provided – an

excellent resource. Also by the same publisher, “*Hand Knitting Techniques Book*” provides 80 pages of detailed illustrations and photos of dozens of techniques, including several cast-ons and cast-offs, grafting, working with multiple colours, picking up stitches around necklines and much more. It is one of the best visual reference books I have seen on knitting techniques.

In the symbols below, note the use of the 'purl stitch' dash under the 'purl 2 tog' symbols. This style of coding is used throughout the Japanese knitting symbol system so you know that you are working the stitch(es) purlwise.

□	knit stitch	☒	knit 2 tog, left slant	☒	purl 2 tog, left slant
▢	purl stitch	☒	knit 2 tog, right slant	☒	purl 2 tog, right slant
○	yarnover				

The above purl decreases are usually worked on the Wrong Side of the garment.

## Japanese Characters for Yarn Content

Acrylic	アクリル	Alpaca	アルパカ	Cashmere	カシミヤ	Cotton	コットン
Merino	メリノ	Mohair	モヘア	Polyester	ポリエステル		
Silk	シルク	Wool	ウール OR 毛				

## Web sites Resources for the Adventurous Knitter

### [www.tata-tatao.to/knit/e-home.html](http://www.tata-tatao.to/knit/e-home.html)

**ABC's of Knitting**, is a Japanese website on knitting, with some sections in English. This is the most highly regarded source of information for English knitters wanting to learn about Japanese knitting techniques.

### [www.clearwaterknits.com/charting/lesson1.html](http://www.clearwaterknits.com/charting/lesson1.html)

**Clearwater Knits** has a detailed description of reading Japanese knitting charts for machine knitters, and much of the information is also useful for hand knitters.

### [www.kanzawa.com](http://www.kanzawa.com)

**Hand knit & handcraft Kanazawa** This web site is all in Japanese, and shows many of the Japanese yarns that are available.

### [www.knitjapan.co.uk](http://www.knitjapan.co.uk)

**Knit Japan** features photos with written essays from the work of many Japanese knitters from 'Fushiginoiroito' who were at the Knitting & Stitching Show in the UK, as part of the Japan 2001 Festival. Also includes 2 essays on the History of Knitting in Japan.

### [www.knittingelegance.blogspot.com](http://www.knittingelegance.blogspot.com)

**Knitting Elegance Blog** is a great resource for knitters who are working on patterns from the Japanese knitting book series "Let's Knit". Also has links to other resources.

### [www.knittingfool.com/pages/symbols.cfm](http://www.knittingfool.com/pages/symbols.cfm)

**Knitting Fool** has an extensive list of knitting symbols from several sources, including Japanese, Barbara Walker Treasuries, and Burda.

### [groups.yahoo.com/group/knittinginjapan](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/knittinginjapan)

**Knitting in Japan** is a Yahoo Group that discuss resources, current projects of Japanese knitting patterns, discussions on how to work different Japanese knitting symbols, plus knit-a-longs and so much more.

### [www.kinverknits.com](http://www.kinverknits.com)

**Maureen Mason-Jamieson** is a knitting designer/teacher who has taught her popular workshop *Japanese Knitting Techniques* (plus several other topics) at Stitches events and several guilds. Visit her web site to check out her current teaching schedule, and for contact information if your guild or LYS would like to learn more about Japanese knitting techniques.

Also of great use is **Google's translation tools** – you can input a web site address too.

### [www.google.com/language\\_tools](http://www.google.com/language_tools)

Note that translations can be a bit difficult to read, but you can often learn quite a bit from them.