

Ga vs. Wa

Deciding when to use *ga* or *wa* can be difficult. As Jay Rubin says in *Making Sense of Japanese*, “Even the most accomplished Japanese speaker of English will continue to make mistakes with ‘the’ and ‘a,’ and native speakers of English (who learn Japanese) will probably always have some degree of difficulty with *wa* and *ga*.”

Here are some guidelines to consider:

1. Use ***wa* to indicate the topic** of a sentence. For example, if you say *ano hito wa sensei desu* (“as for that person over there, he is a teacher”), *hito* is the topic of the sentence, not the subject. The subject of this sentence is the silent pronoun “he” which is not expressed in Japanese but is understood. This silent pronoun can be seen when the sentence is translated: “as for that person over there, he is a teacher.”

Ano hito wa sensei desu is an example of a common Japanese construction which I call **sentence pattern A**: it begins with a noun or pronoun followed by *wa* to introduce a topic. Then it goes on to ask a question about, or make a comment on, this topic.

2. Use ***ga* to indicate the subject** of a sentence. **A subject may be something that exists.** For example, if you say *tanakasan ga asoko ni imasu* (“Tanaka exists over there”), the subject is *tanakasan*.

Alternatively, a subject may be someone or something that **does something**. For example, *otouto ga keeki o tabemashita* (“little brother ate the cake”), *hisho ga yamemashita* (“the secretary resigned”), and *e ga kakatte imasu* (“the picture is hanging”) are all sentences in which the subjects do something.

3. **Sentence pattern B** is also common in Japanese. It includes a topic followed by *wa* and then a subject followed by *ga*. For example, *zou wa hana ga nagai desu* (“the elephant has a long trunk”), *yamadasan wa yakyuu ga jouzu desu* (“Yamada is skillful at

baseball”), *nihon wa bukka ga takai desu* (“as for Japan, prices are high”) and *heya ni wa reizouko ga arimasu* (“as for in the room, there’s a refrigerator”).

4. If you are **introducing a noun or pronoun** into conversation, **use *ga***. For example, *kinou tanakasan ga toukyou ni kimashita* means “yesterday Tanaka came to Tokyo,” and it introduces the subject *Tanaka*.

5. If **a noun has already been introduced** into conversation, **use *wa***. For example, *ashita kare wa oosaka ni kaerimasu* means “tomorrow he will return to Osaka,” and it could be one of the next remarks you make about him.

6. When you **say that a noun or pronoun “is” an adjective, using *desu* or *da*, you may use either *wa* or *ga***.

a) Use ***ga*** if you are referring to a **particular noun**, if you want to **single the noun out from a group**, or if you are introducing it as a subject. For example, if you say *hana ga kirei desu* (“the flower is pretty”), you may be looking at only one flower, you may be singling a flower out from a group, or you may be introducing some specific flowers into the conversation. Other examples include *biiru ga oishii desu* (“the beer is good”), *apaato ga semai desu* (“the apartment is tight”), and *watashi wa kibun ga warui desu* (“as for me, the feeling is bad”). By using *ga*, you are placing emphasis on this or these flowers, this beer, a specific apartment or a specific feeling taking place now.

b) Use ***wa*** if you are referring to something **general**, or to **more than one thing**. For example, you could say *hana wa kirei desu* (“flowers in general are pretty” or “the flower [or flowers] we’ve been discussing is [are] pretty”), *biiru wa oishii desu* (“beer in general is delicious”), *apaato wa semai desu* (“apartments in general are tight”). Note that these sentences all include as subjects the silent pronouns “it”

or “they,” which become visible when translated into English. For example, “as for flowers, they are pretty.”

7. Generally speaking, when using the “exist” verbs *aru/arimasu* or *iru/imasu* by themselves, **you should use *ga***. For example, *Okane ga arimasu* (“money exists”) and *Hito ga imasu* (“a person exists”).

However, **you may use *wa* in clauses using *arimasu* if the clause ends in “*ga*,” where “*ga*” means “*but*”** and implies that a subject may appear further along in the sentence. For example, you could say *okane wa arimasu ga...* (“there is money, but...”) or *hito wa imasu ga...* (“there are people, but...”). The “*ga*” in these clauses may imply, for example, that you don’t have time to spend the money, or you have no cars in which to transport the people. By using *wa* in these sentences ending with “*but*,” you emphasize the topics “money” or “people” and also suggest a subject further along in the sentence (which may often be left unstated).

If you attach an adjective to *arimasu* or *imasu*, you may use either *wa* or *ga*. For example, *hito ga takusan imasu* is OK, and *hito wa takusan imasu* is also OK. **How can both of these sentences be correct?**

The first sentence, *hito ga takusan imasu*, can be translated “people, many, exist,” and *hito* is the subject. In the second sentence, *hito wa takusan imasu*, the adjective *takusan* is attached to *imasu*, and the silent pronoun “they” appears and functions as a subject: “as for people, they, many, exist.” Thus both sentences have valid subjects, and both mean the same thing: there are a lot of people.

On the other hand, **if the adjective is attached to the noun, you may only use *ga* before *arimasu* or *imasu*** (unless the clause terminates in “*ga*” meaning “*but*”). For example, *takusan no hon ga arimasu* (“a lot of books exist”) is correct. *Takusan no hon*

wa arimasu is wrong. The silent pronoun fails to appear in the second sentence, since *arimasu* by itself (without an attached adjective) just means “exist.” As a result, the second sentence has no subject: “as for many books exist.”

Nevertheless, the second sentence, *takusan no hon wa arimasu*, would become correct if you added “*ga*” at the end, suggesting that a subject is coming later: *takusan no hon wa arimasu ga* = “many books exist, but...”

8. After an **interrogative pronoun or noun phrase, use *ga***. For example, *dare ga kimashita ka* (“who came?”) or *nani ga ii desu ka* (“what is good?”).

You should also use *ga* in responding to such a question. For example, *keikosan ga kimashita* (“Keiko came”) and *kono hon ga ii desu* (“this book is good”).

9. If you use *kono*, *sono*, *ano* or other **specific markers**, like *kyou no* (today’s), **then you don’t need to use *ga*** (unless you are responding to a question that uses an interrogative pronoun or noun phrase) because your statement is already specific. So you could say, *Kono heya wa semai desu* (“this room is tight”), and that would be equivalent to saying *Heya ga semai desu*. If you say, *Kono heya ga semai desu*, you are really emphasizing the point that this room is tight.

10. When you are describing **one of the 5 senses, use *ga***. For example, *ii nioi ga suru* (“it smells good”) and *amai aji ga suru* (“it tastes sweet”).

11. When you want to show a **contrast between two competing topics, use *wa***. For example, *hiru wa atsui desu, yoru wa samui desu* (“the days are hot, the nights are cold”) and *kore wa watashi no desu, sore wa anata no desu* (“(this is mine, that’s yours”).

12. When you want to **stress something, use *wa***. For example, *Sushi wa oishii desu* (“sushi is delicious,” stressing *sushi*, but not necessarily other foods). *Biiru wa*

nomimasu (“I drink beer,” stressing beer, not other drinks). *Okane wa boku ga harau* (“as for money, I will pay,” stressing money, but I may not take care of other things). *Itsumo wa basu de ikimasu* (“as for always, I go by bus,” stressing always).

Similarly, ***wa* can be used to show stress in negative sentences**. For example, *Watashi wa ikimasen* (“as for me, I won’t go,” stressing “I,” but someone else might go). *Pen wa arimasen* (“a pen doesn’t exist,” stressing “pen,” but there may be other writing tools). *Kinou wa Bosuton e ikanakatta* (“as for yesterday, I didn’t go to Boston,” stressing “yesterday,” implying that I went on another day).

Always **use *wa* after *to*** (used to show quotes) **in negative sentences**. For example, *Takai to wa omoimasen* (“As for ‘expensive,’ I don’t think so”).

13. In **subordinate clauses, use *ga***. For example, *Debi ga Furansu e iku koto o shitte imasu* (“I am knowing that Debi will go to France”). If you want to soften this *ga* and put less stress on Debi, you could change *ga* to *no*: *Debi no furansu e iku koto o shitte imasu*.

14. In **some expressions, *ga* is almost always used** (but you could substitute *wa* if the clause ended in *ga* meaning “but,” or if you were showing a contrast or stressing something). For example, *miruku ga hoshii desu* (“I desire milk”), *supeingo ga wakarimasu* (“I understand Spanish”), *nihongo ga dekimasu* (“I can do Japanese”), *jikan ga kakarimasu* (“it takes time”), *tenisu ga jouzu desu* (“he’s good at tennis”), *onaka ga itai desu* (“the stomach hurts”), *satou ga irimasu* (“I need sugar”), or *koohii ga suki desu* (“I like coffee”).

15. **When stating a simple equivalence using *da* or *desu*, e.g., “it’s a car” or “it’s Tanaka,” don’t use *wa* or *ga***. In other words, don’t say ~~*kuruma wa desu*~~ or ~~*tanakasan ga desu*~~. Just say *kuruma desu* or *tanakasan desu*. However, you must use *wa*

and *ga* in more complex sentences employing *desu*, e.g., *kuruma ga ii desu* (“the car is good,” stressing or singling out “car”) or *tanakasan wa sensei desu* (“as for Tanaka, he is a teacher”).

You may download the audio lessons that correspond to this grammar guide at japaneseaudiolessons.com. They are free of charge.