

Japanese Professor

Everything you ever wanted to know
about Japanese, fully explained

The Topic Marker “Wa”

This is the first of two lessons focusing on several particular grammar topics that are critical for you to understand very early on. Both this and [The Copula "Desu"](#) assume that you are familiar with the more general concepts covered in [The Structure of a Japanese Sentence](#).

Japanese is a *topic-prominent language*. This means that the typical sentence has a *topic*, the focus of the sentence, and a *comment* about the topic. The interesting thing about this structure is that the topic is not necessarily the same as the grammatical subject. Let's look at how this works.

Subjects and Topics

Similar to the [subject marker](#) *ga* and the [object marker](#) *o*, the topic is specified by the particle は "wa" (spelled with the Hiragana "ha" for historical reasons). The topic might replace the subject or the object, or appear in addition to both. Here's an example where the topic is also the subject.

わたしは	けんどうを	する。
Watashi wa	kendou o	suru.
I TOPIC	kendo OBJ	do.

Note: Kendo is a Japanese martial art similar to fencing.

If you want to translate *wa* literally, the closest English equivalent is "as for...", so we can translate the above sentence as "As for me, (I) do kendo". The implied subject of this sentence is *watashi* "I" (remember that a *subject* is an entity that receives a role from the verb), but because it's also the topic, there's no need to reiterate it. In fact, you will *never* see both an explicit subject and topic if they refer to the same entity.

There's one important condition whether some entity can be a topic: it must be *established in the discourse*. In other words, the listener has to know who or what the entity in question refers to.

This happens to be the same requirement as that for the determiner "the" in English. For example, if you were talking to someone while shopping and said something like "The burglar broke into the store yesterday" out of the blue, they would either ask "What burglar?" or just look at you funny, because they have no idea who "the burglar" is or even that he exists.

But what if the subject hasn't been established in the discourse? In this case, simply keep *ga*. Then, once you or anyone else has mentioned it, use *wa* when from that point on.

In the case of English, we do roughly the same thing with *a/an*. To continue the example above, it would be fine to say "A burglar broke into a store" out of the blue (as long as this isn't overly off topic from what you were already talking about), and after that, you could continue talking about "the burglar". So what English does with "a" and "the", Japanese does with "ga" and "wa".

Obviously, with certain [pronouns](#) like *watashi* (I/me), the listener will always know who you are referring to, and so those pronouns can always be used as topics.

Wa, Ga, or Nothing at All

There's another important case where you keep *ga*: when answering a question. For example, "Watashi *ga* kendou o suru" is an answer to the question "Who does kendo?" Here you're presenting the subject itself as new information (rather than a comment about the subject), so it's not a topic, and can't take *wa*.

(Read more about [questions](#))

Likewise, in any other cases where the subject is not a topic (which you won't encounter until a bit later on), simply keep *ga*. The difference between *wa* and *ga* is often subtle, and will be discussed in more detail in a future article.

Simply "Kendou o suru", with the subject/topic omitted, would also be a valid sentence, and is in fact more likely to be used than the complete sentence "Watashi wa kendou o suru".

Suppose you're answering the question "What do you do (as a hobby)?" Since the topic of the response (you) is clearly known to the listener, it can and should be omitted. Actually, when making *any* statement about a pre-established topic, the topic can usually be dropped; it should be left in only when you want to emphasize the topic.

In summary:

1. The first time a subject is introduced, it takes *ga*.
2. The next time someone uses it, it's a topic and takes *wa*.
3. After that, drop the topic (unless you want to emphasize it).
4. When the topic changes, use *wa* the first time, and drop it thereafter.

Here's another way to look at it, including answers to questions.

What to do with a Japanese subject	
When you want to...	Do this...
Introduce a new subject to the discourse	Leave it as a subject
Make a comment about a new topic	Turn it into a topic
Make a comment about a pre-established topic	Drop it
Answer a subject question	Leave it as a subject
Answer a non-subject question	Drop it

Halfway Point

At this point, stop and take a minute to make sure you've understood everything so far. The remainder of this section is about more complicated uses of *wa*, and are not strictly necessary until after you've had some practice with the most basic use. Feel free to skip to [The Copula “Desu”](#) and come back to finish this section later.

When the Topic is Not the Subject

Beginning students are sometimes bewildered by sentences like this famous one:

わたしは	うなぎです。
Watashi wa	unagi desu.
I TOPIC	eel be-POLITE.

Here's a hint: it does *not* mean "I am an eel." Let's take a look at the partial translation:

As for me, (it) is eel.

This "it" does not have to be the same thing as the topic. In fact, if you say it in a restaurant (which you could), the "it" would be "my order", so the real meaning of the sentence is "My order is eel".

This raises an important point: while the topic is often the subject, it does not by any means have to be. Now let's look at some other cases where the topic is different from the subject.

Object as Topic: Topicalization

Now we can create another version of our mixed up sentence from [earlier](#): "Terebi o kodomo ga mita". If we replace *terebi o* with *terebi wa*, we get:

テレビは	こどもが	みた。
Terebi wa	kodomo ga	mita.
TV TOPIC	child SUB	watched.

Now the object "TV" is *topicalized*: "As for (the) TV, (a) child watched (it)". The difference from the more common use of *wa* is that the topic has replaced the object instead of the subject.

Seem like kind of an odd thing to say? Maybe, but explicit topics are relatively rare in English, so it's difficult to get the Japanese nuance. In situations like this, English speakers are more likely to use the *passive construction*: "The TV was watched by a child". Passives exist in Japanese too, but tend to be used in different places.

Separate Topic and Subject

The last case I'd like to cover is the one where there are *both* a topic and an explicit subject, which is very common construction in Japanese. This sentence is another classic:

ぞうは	はなが	ながい。
Zou wa	hana ga	nagai.
Elephant TOP	nose SUB	be long.

The literal translation of the sentence is "As for elephants, (their) noses are long." In English, of course, we would normally say something like "Elephants *have* long noses" or "*Elephant's noses* are long", both of which show *possession* rather than topic and comment.

But in Japanese, this pattern is the norm when you want to describe characteristics of someone or something. Here's another example:

やまださんは	せが	たかい。
Yamada-*san wa	se ga	takai.
Yamada TOP	height SUB	be tall.

*"San" is a gender neutral [name suffix](#).

Are you getting the pattern? "As for Yamada, (his) height is tall." Or, fully translated, "Yamada is tall."

(Read more about [adjectives](#))

Beyond the Topic Marker

It's worth noting that the particle *wa* has another, related use: to show contrast. I won't get into this *contrastive wa* here, but just for the record, if you come across the situation where there are two *wa*'s in the same sentence, that's what the other one is.

What Next?

[The Copula “Desu”](#)

[Back to Beginning Lessons](#)

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