

### □ Using は to set the topic

Simply stated は marks the topic of a sentence.

わたし  
私 は ジョージ です。

I am George. / Speaking of me, I am George

は doesn't translate to anything into English, however it helps to think of は as meaning "is, am, was" since it tends to line up perfectly with those words in sentence translations.

おもしろ  
これ は 面白い です。

This is interesting.

あした きんようび  
明日 は 金曜日 です。

Tomorrow is Friday.

きのう わたし たんじょうび  
昨日 は 私 の 誕生日 でした。

Yesterday was my birthday.

It doesn't matter how complicated the sentence, when there is a は then what comes before it is the topic or the main point of discussion. The rest of the sentence is a question or statement about that item. Consider the very big sentence:

きのう やまがた みな まえ い いま き はなし いみぶか  
昨日 山形さんが 皆の前で 言ったことは 今まで 聞いた話 よりも 意味深い です。

What Mr. Yamagata said in front of everyone yesterday was much more deeply meaningful than the other talks I have heard up until now.

Everything before the は is the topic, everything after the は is about the topic.

### □ Don't serve the topic twice!

In tennis and volleyball you serve the ball and then that ball is bounced around until it's dropped or goes out of bounds. This is EXACTLY how Japanese works. In English we constantly use pronouns like "it, he, she, I" to reserve the topic. Look at the following few sentences and notice how pronouns are used.

Yumiko is my friend.

She is from Japan.

She is 22 years old.

She works at the same company as me.

Japanese does not use pronouns like *かのじょ*、*かれ*、*わたし* to prop up the topic. They serve the topic ONCE and then it is assumed in all following sentences. This is how the same introduction of Yumiko would sound in English if it used Japanese style speaking:

Yumiko is my friend.

Is from Japan.

Is 22 years old.

Works at the same company as me.

ゆみこ わたしともだち  
由美子さんは私の友達です。

にほん き  
日本から来ました。

さい  
22歳です。

わたし おな かいしゃ はたら  
私と同じ会社で働いています。

### □ Rule of thumb

1. Don't use **は** twice in one sentence.

There is a quick rule of thumb. You should never have more than one **は** in a sentence. If you need one then you should probably use **が** instead for the 2<sup>nd</sup> occurrence.

わたし とうきょう す  
私は東京が好きです。

I like Tokyo.

わたしともだち た  
私の友達はピザが食べたいです。

My friend wants to eat pizza.

2. There is ALWAYS a topic.

Sometimes the topic is not said but assumed. In this case the double は rule is still applied. When the topic isn't stated it means it's already known or it has already been "served".

If no prior topic is served then everyone will assume the topic is the speaker of the sentence.

とうきょう <sup>す</sup>  
東京 **が** 好きです。

I like Tokyo.

If the topic was about your mother then the topic is also applied to the topicless sentence.

とうきょう <sup>す</sup>  
東京 **が** 好きです。

She (my mother) like Tokyo.

### □ は for stressing

In some cases は is used to show stress or to emphasis. This can confuse students when they learn about the "subject" marker が since が also functions as a stresser. The logic is simple.

Both は and が can stress. Typically は is used to stress when が would be the expected marker. The following examples show は as a stresser.

私は <sup>ねこ</sup> <sup>す</sup> **が** 好きだけど、<sup>いぬ</sup> <sup>きら</sup> **は** 嫌いです。

I like cats, but I don't like **dogs**. ("dogs" is stressed)

Typically with <sup>す</sup>好き and <sup>きら</sup>嫌い you use the subject marker が to mark what you like or dislike. In the sentence above you notice there are 2 は in the sentence. Typically you shouldn't have 2 は in the sentence. In this case the second は is not marking a topic, but is instead emphasizing that dogs are not liked in comparison with cats. And when は is the expected marker then が can be used to stress.

A: あなた<sup>たなか</sup>は田中さんですか。

B: いいえ、彼<sup>かれ</sup>が<sup>たなか</sup>田中さんです。

A: Are you Tanaka?

B: No, he is Tanaka. (“he” is emphasized)

### □ Question words and は

は and が usage can be confusing without much speaking practice with natives, but this is one rule that you can remember that will make sure you don't sound like a foreigner when speaking Japanese.

は can NEVER follow a question word. If you want to use は after a question word then you MUST use が instead.

パーティーに誰<sup>だれ</sup>が<sup>き</sup>来ますか。

Who is coming to the party?

なんじ<sup>なんじ</sup>が<sup>なんじ</sup>いいですか。

What time is good?

どこ<sup>たの</sup>が<sup>たの</sup>楽しいですか。

Where is fun?

Thank you for learning!



**Learn Japanese From Zero!**

**Japanese grammar that makes sense!**

**Join YesJapan.com, course 1 is completely free.**