

What is the difference between 'wa は' and 'ga が'?

Probably you may encounter the occasion when you don't know which to use 'wa' or 'ga'. So, I will explain when to use them today.

There are 13 steps to understand the difference between 'wa' and 'ga' in my teaching materials. So, let's study them step by step.

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Step-1

Basically, 'wa' is used to show the topic of the sentence. In Japanese, the topic of the sentence means 'what the sentence is about'.

When there is a certain thing, person, animal or matter, etc which we want to talk about and state our opinions or judgement about it, we use 'wa' right after that thing, person, animal or matter, etc to make it the topic of the sentence.

'wa' can be translated as 'As for,' in English.

Example-1:

watashi wa shingapōru-jin desu.
(I {As for me,} am Singaporean.)

In Example-1, the topic of the sentence is '**watashi**' and the rest of the sentence describes what '**watashi**' is like.

Example-2:

Shingapōru wa tanoshii desu.
(Singapore {As for Singapore,} is enjoyable.)

In Example-2, the topic of the sentence is '**Shingapōru**' and the rest of the sentence describes what '**Shingapōru**' is like.

Example-3:

kare wa mai-asa asa-gohan o tabemasu.
(He {As for him,} has breakfast every morning.)

In Example-3, the topic of the sentence is '**kare**' and the rest of the sentence describes what '**kare**' does.

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Step-2

Generally, any word in a sentence can be used as a topic. When we make a word a topic, we follow the rules below. ('X' represents any word in a sentence.)

'X' becomes 'X **wa**'.

'X **ga**' becomes 'X **wa**'.

'X **o**' becomes 'X **wa**'.

'X **e**' becomes 'X **e wa**' or 'X **wa**'.

'X **ni**' becomes 'X **ni wa**'.

'X **de**' becomes 'X **de wa**'.

'X **to**' becomes 'X **to wa**'.

'X **kara**' becomes 'X **kara wa**'.

'X **made**' becomes 'X **made wa**'.

'X **made ni**' becomes 'X **made ni wa**'.

'X **yor**i' becomes 'X **yor**i wa'.

Normally, when we make a word in a sentence a topic, we put it at the beginning of the sentence.

Example-1:

a: **watashi wa kinou ringo o tabemashita.**

(I {As for me,} ate an apple yesterday.)

b: **kinou wa watashi wa ringo o tabemashita.**

(As for yesterday, I {as for me,} ate an apple.)

c: **ringo wa watashi wa kinou tabemashita.**

(As for an apple, I {as for me,} ate it yesterday.)

d: **watashi wa kinou wa ringo wa tabemashita.**

(As for yesterday and an apple, I {as for me,} ate it.)

In these sentences, '**watashi**' is the topic of the whole sentence and '**kinou**' and '**ringo**' are also topics because the speaker wants to talk about these words or to make these words a topic as well.

Note that we often leave out '**watashi wa**' when we speak such as;

'**kinou wa ringo o tabemashita**' or

'**kinou ringo wa tabemashita**' or

'**ringo wa kinou tabemashita**'.

However, '**kinou wa ringo o tabemashita**' doesn't mean 'Kinou ate an apple' and '**kinou ringo wa tabemashita (ringo wa kinou tabemashita)**' doesn't mean 'Ringo ate it yesterday'. So, please guess the meaning of the sentence from the context.

Example-2:

a: **kare wa go-gatsu ni tomodachi to hikōki de nihon e ikimasu.**

(He {As for him,} goes to Japan by airplane with his friend in May.)

b: **go-gatsu ni wa kare wa tomodachi to hikōki de nihon e ikimasu.**

(As for what he is going to do in May, he {as for him,} goes to Japan by airplane with his friend.)

c: **tomodachi to wa kare wa go-gatsu ni hikōki de nihon e ikimasu.**

(As for what he is going to do with his friend, he {as for him,} goes to Japan by airplane in May.)

d: **hikōki de wa kare wa go-gatsu ni tomodachi to nihon e ikimasu.**

(As for what he is going to do by airplane, he {as for him,} goes to Japan with his friend in May.)

e: **nihon e wa kare wa go-gatsu ni tomodachi to hikōki de ikimasu.**

(As for the fact that he is going to Japan, he {as for him,} goes there by airplane with his friend in May.)

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Step-3

'**wa**' is also used to contrast a word with another word in a sentence. We call this '**wa**' a contrastive '**wa**'. However, it is a bit difficult to judge whether '**wa**' shows a topic or contrast. So, you should guess which is which according to the situation.

Example-1:

watashi wa ringo wa tabemasu. demo, mikan wa tabemasen.

(I eat an apple. But I don't eat an orange.)

In Example-1, the speaker contrasts '**ringo**' with '**mikan**'. Notice that '**ringo o**' becomes '**ringo wa**' and '**mikan o**' becomes '**mikan wa**' as I mentioned at Step-2.

Example-2:

watashi wa Tan-san ni wa hana o agemashita. demo, Lee-san ni wa agemasen deshita.

(I gave flowers to Mr Tan. But, I didn't give them to Mr Lee.)

In Example-2, the speaker contrasts '**Tan-san ni**' with '**Lee-san ni**'.

Example-3:

kare wa nihon e wa ikimasen deshita ga, kankoku e wa ikimashita.

(He didn't go to Japan, but he went to Korea.)

In Example-3, the speaker contrasts '**nihon e**' with '**kankoku e**'.

We sometimes use this contrastive '**wa**' without another word which we contrast. Look at examples below.

Example-4:

a: **watashi wa Lee-san ni wa aimashita.**

(I met Mr Lee. {*Implication*: But, I didn't meet any other person such as Mr Tan and Mr Kimura.})

b: **kinō wa terebi o mimashita.**

(I watched TV yesterday. {*Implication*: But, I didn't watch any other day such as the day after tomorrow and last week.})

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Step-4

Basically, '**ga**' is used to show the subject of the sentence. In Japanese, the subject of the sentence means that the person or thing that performs the action of the verb, or the person or thing which something is stated about by be-verb (is, are, am, be, etc.)

In most of Japanese sentences, the topic and the subject of the sentence are the same. When the topic and the subject of the sentence are the same, we consider the subject of the sentence to be the topic and use '**wa**'.

Example-1:

watashi wa / ga kesa pan o tabemashita.

(I {As for me,} ate bread this morning.)

In Example-1, the performer of the action of the verb (**tabemasu** = eat) is '**watashi**' and '**watashi**' is also the topic of the sentence, so we use '**wa**', not '**ga**'.

Example-2:

kare wa / ga nihon-jin desu.

(He {As for him,} is Japanese.)

In Example-2, the person which something is stated about by be-verb (**desu** = is) is '**kare**' and '**kare**' is also the topic of the sentence, so we use '**wa**', not '**ga**'.

Then, when do we use '**ga**'?

When we discover that something happens / happened / is happening / was happening, etc and state the fact or the phenomenon, we use '**ga**' right after the subject. We call this '**ga**' a discovery '**ga**'.

Example-1:

a: **a, basu ga kimashita yo.**

(Look there! The bus is coming. {I have discovered that the bus is coming.})

b: **mite kudasai. asoko ni neko ga imasu.**

(Look! There is a cat over there. {I have discovered that the cat is over there.})

c: **ame ga futte imasu ne.**

(It is raining now, isn't it? {I have discovered that it is raining now.})

When we translate 'There is (A)' into Japanese, we say '(A) **ga arimasu**' or '(A) **ga imasu**' to state that something or someone exists here / there.

Literally '(A) **ga arimasu**' or '(A) **ga imasu**' means '(A) exists' and we often use this expression when we discover that something or someone is at a certain place. So, we use a discovery '**ga**' particle in this structure.

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Step-5

We also use '**ga**' right after the subject of the sentence when we simply report or state the fact without any opinion or judgement.

Example-1:

a: **Tan-san ga kono okashi o tabemashita.**

(Mr Tan ate this snack. {The fact is that Mr Tan ate this snack.})

b: **jiko de densha ga tomarimashita.**

(The train stopped because of the accident. {I report that the train stopped because of the accident.})

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Step-6

When we describe the characteristic of something or someone, we often use a '(A) **wa** (B) **ga** (adjective)' structure.

In this '(A) **wa** (B) **ga** (adjective)' structure, firstly we mention the topic of the whole sentence by putting '**wa**' and secondly we mention the subject by putting '**ga**' to state what we discovered regarding the topic in the rest of the sentence after '**wa**'.

(Grammatically, '**wa**' shows the topic of the whole sentence and '**ga**' shows the subject in the rest of the sentence after '**wa**' that you state what you discovered regarding the topic.)

In many cases, '(A)' is a part of '(B)' in a '(A) **wa** (B) **ga** (adjective)' structure.

Example-1:

a: **zō wa hana ga nagai desu.**

(An elephant has a long trunk. {As for an elephant, I have discovered that its nose is long.})

b: **shingapōru wa sentosa ga tanoshii desu.**

(In Singapore, Sentosa is enjoyable. {As for Singapore, I have discovered that Sentosa is enjoyable.})

c: **watashi wa atama ga itai desu.**

(I have a headache. {As for me, my head is painful.})

We can change 'ga' into 'wa' when we show contrast.

Example-1:

a: **zō wa mimi wa ookii desu ga, [zō wa] me wa chiisai desu.**

(An elephant has big ears, but its eyes are rather small.)

b: **shingapōru wa uchi wa yasui desu. demo, [shingapōru wa] kuruma wa takai desu.**

(In Singapore, a house is cheap, but a car is expensive.)

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Step-7

When we translate, '(A) likes (B)', '(A) hates (B)', '(A) is good at (B)', '(A) is poor at (B)' or '(A) wants (B)' into Japanese, we also use a '(A) **wa** (B) **ga** (adjective)' structure. Because we consider one's liking, ability or desire to be one's characteristic (Refer to Step-6) in Japanese. Look at examples below.

Example-1:

a: **watashi wa yasai ga suki desu.**

(I like vegetables. {As for me, vegetables are my favorite.})

b: **kare wa gyūnyū ga kirai desu.**

(He hates fresh milk. {As for him, fresh milk is detestable.})

c: **kanjo wa nihon-go ga jōzu desu.**

(She is good at Japanese. {As for her, Japanese is skillful.})

d: **Tan-san wa tenisu ga heta desu.**

(Mr Tan is poor at playing tennis. {As for Mr Tan, tennis is unskillful.})

e: **watashi wa kuruma ga hoshii desu.**

(I want a car. {As for me, a car is desirable.})

In Japanese, '**suki** (like / favorite)', '**kirai** (dislike / hate / detestable)', '**jōzu** (be good at / skillful)', '**heta** (be poor at / unskillful)' are used as **na**-adjectives and '**hoshii** (want)' is used as an **i**-adjective.

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Step-8

In a subordinate clause or a noun phrase, we use '**ga**' as the subject.

Here are the definitions of 'clause' and 'noun phrase' in case you are not sure about it.

A clause is a group of words that contains a subject and a verb, but which is usually only part of a sentence. There are a main clause and a subordinate clause.

A noun phrase is a word or group of words and is used as a noun in a sentence. It mainly functions in a sentence as subject or direct-object.

Example-1:

kore wa watashi ga kinō katta hon desu.
(This is the book which I bought yesterday.)

In Example-1, '**watashi ga kinō katta**' modifies '**hon**' and it makes a noun phrase. In this noun phrase, we use '**watashi ga**' as the subject of '**katta** (bought)'. (The subject '**ga**' in the noun phrase can be changed into '**no**' in some cases. But I don't explain it now.)

Example-2:

watashi wa kimura-san ga nihon e kaetta koto o shitte imasu.
(I know that Mr Kimura went back to Japan.)

In Example-2, '**kimura-san ga nihon e kaetta**' modifies '**koto**' and it makes a noun phrase. In this noun phrase, we use '**kimura-san ga**' as the subject of '**kaetta** (went back / returned)'.

Example-3:

tomodachi ga kekkon suru toki, watashi wa omodetou to iimasu. or
watashi wa tomodachi ga kekkon suru toki, omodetou to iimasu.
(When my friend gets married, I say to him, 'Congratulations!')

In Example-3, '**tomodachi ga kekkon suru**' modifies '**toki**' and it makes a noun phrase and also this phrase functions as a subordinate clause. In this noun phrase or subordinate clause, we use '**tomodachi ga**' as the subject of '**kekkon suru** (marry)'.

Example-4:

kare ga ittara, watashi mo ikimasu. or
watashi mo kare ga ittara, ikimasu
(If he is going, I also go.)

In Example-4, '**kare ga ittara**' is a subordinate clause, so we use '**kare ga**' as the subject of '**itta** (go) **ra**'.

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Step-9

An interrogative such as 'nani (what)', 'dare (who)', 'doko (where)', 'dochira (which)', 'dore (which)' and 'itsu (when)', cannot become a topic of the sentence because it does not show any single specific thing. Therefore, when an interrogative comes to the position of the topic, we cannot use 'wa', but we must use 'ga' as the subject.

We also use 'ga' when replying to the question which has an interrogative to follow the format.

Example-1:

Q: **dare ga kimshita ka.** (Who came here?)

A: **Tan-san ga kimashita.** (Mr Tan came here.)

In Example-1, 'dare (who)' is an interrogative and a subject, so we use 'dare ga'. We also use 'ga' as in 'Tanaka-san ga' to reply to this type of question.

Example-2:

Q: **chūgoku to nihon to, dochira ga ōkii desu ka.** (Which is larger, China or Japan?)

A: **chūgoku no hō ga ōkii desu.** (China is larger.)

In Example-2, 'dochira (which)' is an interrogative and a subject, so we use 'dochira ga'. We also use 'ga' as in 'chūgoku no hō ga' to reply to this type of question.

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Step-10

In some expressions, we use 'ga' instead of 'o' as a direct-object of the verb. ('A direct-object' means 'what someone / something does' or 'the thing which someone / something does'.)

Example-1:

a: **watashi wa nihon-go ga wakarimasu.** (I understand Japanese.)

b: **kare wa kuruma ga arimasu.** (He has a car.)

c: **kanojo wa kodomo ga imasu.** (She has a child.)

d: **Tan-san wa nihon-go no jisho ga irimasu.** (Mr Tan needs a Japanese dictionary.)

e: **watashi wa nihon-go ga dekimasu.** (I can speak Japanese.)

f: **Tan-san wa nihon-go ga hanasemasu.**

(Mr Tan is able to speak Japanese. [To mention the direct-object of the potential-verb, we should use 'ga'.])

In these examples, we can change 'ga' into 'wa' when we show a contrast (Step-3).

Example-2:

a: **watashi wa nihon-go wa wakarimasu ga, chūgoku-go wa wakarimasen.**
(I understand Japanese, but I don't understand Chinese.)

b: **Tan-san wa inu wa imasu. Demo, [kare wa] neko wa imasen.**
(Mr Tan has a dog. But, he doesn't have a cat.)

FYI:

Actually, 'ga' of Step-10 is considered to be a discovery 'ga' (Step-4). Look at the English translations below and understand why we can say so.

a: **watashi wa nihon-go ga wakarimasu.**
(As for me, I have discovered / found that Japanese is understandable.)

b: **kare wa kuruma ga arimasu.**
(As for him, I have discovered that a car exists.)

c: **kanojo wa kodomo ga imasu.**
(As for her, I have discovered that a child exists.)

d: **Tan-san wa nihon-go no jisho ga irimasu.**
(As for Mr Tan, I have discovered that a Japanese dictionary is necessary.)

e: **watashi wa nihon-go ga dekimasu.**
(As for me, I have discovered that Japanese is able.)

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Step-11

Example-1:

Mr Tan: **watashi ga okane o haraimasu kara, anata wa harawa nakute mo ii desu.**
(I pay money for you, so you don't have to pay.)

Mr Lee: **hontō desu ka. arigatō gozaimasu.**
(Really? Thank you very much.)

In the above case, Mr Tan thinks that Mr Lee may think who would pay money. And Mr Tan has a thinking like '**kono hito wa dare ga okane o harau ka, to omotte iru kamo shirenai**' (This person may think who would pay money.)' in his mind. (Regarding 'ga' in '**dare ga**', refer to Step-9.)

As a result of this thinking, Mr Tan uses '**watashi ga**' to reply to '**dare ga**' which he uses in his mind although it doesn't appear in the actual conversation.

Example-2:

Mr Tan: **watashi wa nihon-jin no tomodachi ga hoshii desu.**

(I want a Japanese friend.)

Mr Lee: **jā, watashi ga shōkai-shimasu.**

(Then, I will introduce one to you.)

In Example-2, Mr Lee thinks that Mr Tan may think who will introduce a Japanese friend to him. And Mr Lee has a thinking like '**kono hito wa dare ga nihon-jin no tomodachi o shō-kai shite kureru ka, to omotteiru kamo shirenai**' (This person may think who will introduce a Japanese friend to him.)' in his mind. (Regarding '**ga**' in '**dare ga**', refer to Step-9.)

As a result of this thinking, Mr Lee uses '**watashi ga**' to reply to '**dare ga**' which he uses in his mind although it doesn't appear in the actual conversation.

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Step-12

Example-1:

Mr Tan: **kuruma ga arimasu ka.** (Do you have a car?)

Mr Lee: **hai, kuruma ga arimasu.** (Yes, I have.)

iie, kuruma wa arimasen. or

kuruma ga arimasen.

(No, I don't have.)

We often change '**ga**' to '**wa**' when we say the different thing from what the other person says. Because saying the different thing from what the other person says means showing a kind of judgment or opinion of the speaker and to state one's judgement and opinion, we use '**wa**'. (Refer to Step-1)

When we say the same thing as what the other person says, we don't change '**ga**' to '**wa**' because saying the same thing as what the other person says means stating the fact that what the other person says is correct. To state the fact, we use '**ga**'. (Refer to Step-5)

Example-2:

Mr Tan: **ringo ga suki ja arimasen ka?** (Don't you like an apple?)

Mr Lee: **hai, ringo ga suki ja arimasen.** (No, I don't like.)

iie, ringo wa suki desu. or

iie, ringo ga suki desu.

(Yes, I like an apple.)

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Step-13

Example-1:

asa-gohan wa pan o tabemasu. gohan wa tabemasen.

(As for my breakfast, I eat bread. {*Implication*: And I think that you may want to know about 'rice', so I tell you.} As for rice, I don't eat it for my breakfast.)

Example-2:

yoru wa taitei ongaku o kikimasu. terebi wa mimasen.

(As for what I do at night, I usually listen to music. {*Implication*: And I think that you may want to know about what other thing I do at night, so I tell you.} As for TV, I don't watch it.)

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Summary

Step-1

- '**wa**' shows a topic which means 'what the sentence is about' in Japanese grammar.

Step-2

- Any word in a sentence can become the topic of the sentence.

Step-3

- '**wa**' is also used to contrast a word with another word in a sentence.

Step-4

- '**ga**' shows the subject of the sentence. The subject means that the person or thing that performs the action of the verb, or the person or thing which something is stated about by be-verb (is, are, am, be, etc.) in Japanese grammar. And we often use '**ga**' to show 'discovery'.

Step-5

- '**ga**' is also used right after the subject of the sentence when we simply report or state the fact without any opinion or judgement.

Step-6

- To describe the characteristic of something or someone, we often use a '(A) **wa** (B) **ga** (adjective)' structure.

Step-7

- When we translate, '(A) likes (B)', '(A) dislikes (B)', '(A) is good at (B)', '(A) is poor at (B)' or '(A) wants (B)' into Japanese, we also use a '(A) **wa** (B) **ga** (adjective)' structure.

Step-8

- In a subordinate clause or a noun phrase, we use '**ga**' as the subject.

Step-9

- When an interrogative such as '**nani** (what)', '**dare** (who)', '**doko** (where)', '**dochira** (which)', '**dore** (which)' and '**itsu** (when)' comes to the position of the topic, we cannot use '**wa**', but we must use '**ga**' as the subject.

Step-10

- In some expressions, we use '**ga**' instead of '**o**' as a direct-object of the verb.

Step-11 advanced usage 1

Step-12 advanced usage 2

Step-13 advanced usage 3

Please read as many Japanese sentences as possible and grab the usage of '**wa**' and '**ga**'.

A list of references:

- Nihon-go no kiso (The Association for Overseas Technical Scholarship)
- Nihon-go Journal 1995 September issue Explanations of Grammar Points by Toyoko toyoda
- Longman Contemporary English Dictionary