Keigo basics 敬語（けいご）

Keigo means polite speech. Japanese has three kinds. You need the first to speak. The other two you mostly need to understand, because shops, offices and anime butlers use them all day.

丁寧語（ていねいご） teineigo

Polite to anyone

です and ます. Safe with strangers, teachers, shop staff and anyone older. It raises no one: it's simply a polite tone.

明日行（あした い）きます。

ashita ikimasu. · I'll go tomorrow.

尊敬語（そんけいご） sonkeigo

Raising them

Special words for what the other person does: a customer, a boss, a guest. Never about yourself.

先生（せんせい）がいらっしゃいました。

sensei ga irasshaimashita. · The teacher is here.

謙譲語（けんじょうご） kenjōgo

Lowering yourself

Humble words for what you do for them. Making yourself small makes them bigger.

明日（あした）、伺（うかが）います。

ashita, ukagaimasu. · I'll come by tomorrow.

One question, four levels

plain friends, family	食（た）べる？	taberu?	Want to eat?
polite anyone	食（た）べますか。	tabemasu ka.	Will you eat?
honorific a guest, a customer	召（め）し上（あ）がりますか。	meshiagarimasu ka.	Would you care to eat?
humble you, accepting	いただきます。	itadakimasu.	I'll gladly have some.

Heard that last one before? The word you say before every meal, いただきます, is humble keigo: you humbly receive the food.

Who uses which

Shop and restaurant staff: all three levels, to every customer, all day long.

Teachers, strangers, older people: です and ます are plenty. This is where learners live.

At work: honorific to bosses and clients, humble about yourself and your own company.

Friends and family: plain speech. Keigo here sounds cold, or like a joke.

Where you hear it in anime

- **Butlers and maids** お帰（かえ）りなさいませ, welcome home
- **Shop clerks and waiters** いらっしゃいませ, welcome in
- **Servants and knights at court** 申（もう）し訳（わけ）ございません, I'm deeply sorry
- **Office workers** お疲（つか）れ様（さま）です, thanks for your hard work
- **The polite-to-everyone character** ます to everyone, even best friends
- **A villain being sarcastic** extra-polite words that sound like a threat

How much do you need? Speak with です and ます. That's polite, and nobody expects more from a learner. Learn to recognise the rest, so the shop clerk and the butler make sense. Many Japanese people only learn workplace keigo at their first job. **New to ます?** The verb forms guide builds it from any verb.

Special keigo verbs

Learn to recognise these. Common verbs swap for a new word. Honorific is for what **they** do, humble for what **you** do.

meaning	plain	polite ます, anyone	honorific what they do	humble what I do
be, stay	いる iru	います imasu	いらっしゃる irassharu	おる oru
go	行く iku	行きます ikimasu	いらっしゃる irassharu	参る 伺う mairu ukagau
come	来る kuru	来ます kimasu	いらっしゃる irassharu	参る mairu
say	言う iu	言います iimasu	おっしゃる ossharu	申す 申し上げる mōsu mōshiageru
eat, drink	食べる 飲む taberu nomu	食べます 飲みます tabemasu nomimasu	召し上がる meshiagaru	いただく itadaku
see, look	見る miru	見ます mimasu	ご覧になる goran ni naru	拝見する haiken suru
do	する suru	します shimasu	なさる nasaru	いたす itasu
know	知っている shitte iru	知っています shitte imasu	ご存じだ gozonji da	存じている zonjite iru
ask, hear	聞く kiku	聞きます kikimasu	お聞きになる okiki ni naru	伺う ukagau
give me	くれる kureru	くれます kuremasu	くださる kudasaru	*none*
receive	もらう morau	もらいます moraimasu	*none*	いただく itadaku
there is, have	ある aru	あります arimasu	ございます gozaimasu extra-polite ある, about no one in particular. Shops use it all day, and です becomes でございます.	

Five verbs bend before ます. いらっしゃる, おっしゃる, なさる, くださる and ござる take い, not り:
いらっしゃいます, おっしゃいます, なさいます, くださいます, ございます.

Your side counts as you. To a client, a worker uses humble words even for their own boss:
社長は今おりません, the president isn't in right now.

Heard in shops, offices and anime

何と**おっしゃいました**か。
nan to osshaimashita ka. · What did you say?

田中と**申します**。
tanaka to mōshimasu. · My name is Tanaka.

資料を**拝見しました**。
shiryō o haiken shimashita. · I saw the papers.

Building keigo

You don't need a new word for every verb. Most verbs turn honorific or humble with a frame around the ます stem. The pink part is the frame.

Frames for verbs

お～になる **o ni naru**	honorific, for what they do: お + ます stem + になる.	先生(せんせい)はもうお帰(かえ)りになりました。 sensei wa mō okaeri ni narimashita. · The teacher has gone home.
お～する **o suru**	humble, for what you do for them: お + ます stem + する.	お荷物(にもつ)をお持(も)ちします。 onimotsu o omochi shimasu. · Let me carry your bags.
ご～する **go suru**	the same with する words: ご + noun + する. Humbler still: いたします for します.	お席(せき)までご案内(あんない)します。 oseki made goannai shimasu. · I'll show you to your seat.
お～ください **o kudasai**	please do, softer than てください: お + ます stem + ください.	こちらでお待(ま)ちください。 kochira de omachi kudasai. · Please wait here.
ご～ください **go kudasai**	please, with する words. Every train station says this one.	足元(あしもと)にご注意(ちゅうい)ください。 ashimoto ni gochūi kudasai. · Please watch your step.
～ていただけますか **te itadakemasu ka**	could you please? A polite favour. いただく is humble もらう.	名前(なまえ)を書(か)いていただけますか。 namae o kaite itadakemasu ka. · Could you write your name?
～させていただく **sasete itadaku**	humbly do, as if with your permission. Heard everywhere, maybe too often.	説明(せつめい)させていただきます。 setsumei sasete itadakimasu. · Allow me to explain.

Short verbs don't fit. 見(み)る and いる are too short for a frame, so they use the special words from page 2:
ご覧(らん)になる, いらっしゃる.

Also heard: the passive shape as light honorific:
先生(せんせい)が書(か)かれた本(ほん), a book the teacher wrote. Softer than お～になる.

お and ご before nouns

お名前(なまえ) onamae **your name**	ご家族(かぞく) gokazoku **your family**	お茶(ちゃ) ocha **tea**	ご飯(はん) gohan **rice, a meal**
お水(みず) omizu **water**	ご住所(じゅうしょ) gojūsho **your address**	お手洗(てあら)い otearai **restroom**	お電話(でんわ) odenwa **a phone call**

Which one? お mostly goes on Japanese words, ご on words borrowed from Chinese: お水(みず), ご住所(じゅうしょ). Some break the rule: お電話(でんわ), お時間(じかん). On their things it shows respect. On everyday words like お茶(ちゃ) it just sounds nice.

Two easy mistakes: never put お on your own name, and never use honorific words about yourself. Don't stack keigo either: おっしゃる is already honorific, so おっしゃられる is too much.

Phrases you hear every day

These come up so often they work like fixed phrases. Learn to catch them first. You'll hear most of them on your first day in Japan, or in the first episode with a shop scene.

いらっしゃいませ

irasshaimase

Welcome in. Shop and restaurant staff as you walk in. No reply needed: a nod is fine.

少々(しょうしょう)お待(ま)ちください

shōshō omachi kudasai

One moment, please. Staff at the counter and on the phone.

かしこまりました

kashikomarimashita

Certainly. A waiter taking your order. Butlers and maids, all the time.

承知(しょうち)しました

shōchi shimashita

Understood. At work, to a boss or client. 承知(しょうち)いたしました is humbler still.

恐(おそ)れ入(い)ります

osore irimasu

Sorry to trouble you. Thank you. Staff, before asking you something or when you help them.

失礼(しつれい)します

shitsurei shimasu

Excuse me. Coming into a room, leaving, hanging up. 失礼(しつれい)いたします is humbler.

お世話(せわ)になっております

osewa ni natte orimasu

Thank you for your support. The first line of almost every work email and call.

よろしくお願(ねが)いいたします

yoroshiku onegai itashimasu

Thank you in advance. The last line of every work email. Humbler than お願(ねが)いします.

～でございます

de gozaimasu

It is. Here is. Extra-polite です: こちらでございます, here it is.

おっしゃる通(とお)りです

ossharu tōri desu

You're quite right. Agreeing with a boss, a client or a teacher.

申(もう)し訳(わけ)ございません

mōshiwake gozaimasen

I'm terribly sorry. Staff apologising to a customer. Far stronger than すみません.

お疲(つか)れ様(さま)です

otsukaresama desu

Thanks for your hard work. Coworkers, all day: hello, goodbye and well done in one.

Answering a clerk? You don't need keigo back. A nod, はい or ありがとうございます is perfect.

You already know some: ありがとうございます and おはようございます both end in ございます, the polite ある.

Practice

5 · ten lines · cover the right side

How: cover the right side with a strip of paper. Read each line out loud, say what it means and how a friend would say it, then slide the strip down to check.

1	**いらっしゃいませ**、何名様(なんめいさま)ですか。 irasshaimase, nanmeisama desu ka.	いらっしゃい。何人(なんにん)? irasshai. nannin?	**Welcome! How many of you?** shop phrase
2	少々(しょうしょう)**お**待(ま)ち**ください**。 shōshō omachi kudasai.	ちょっと待(ま)って。 chotto matte.	**One moment, please.** お〜ください
3	**かしこまりました**。 kashikomarimashita.	分(わ)かった。 wakatta.	**Certainly.** humble: understood
4	**お帰(かえ)りなさいませ**、お嬢様(じょうさま)。 okaerinasaimase, ojōsama.	お帰(かえ)り。 okaeri.	**Welcome home, my lady.** a butler's welcome
5	何(なに)を**召(め)し上(あ)がります**か。 nani o meshiagarimasu ka.	何(なに)を食(た)べる? nani o taberu?	**What would you like?** honorific: eat
6	田中(たなか)と**申(もう)します**。 tanaka to mōshimasu.	田中(たなか)って言(い)うんだ。 tanaka tte iu n da.	**My name is Tanaka.** humble: say
7	社長(しゃちょう)が**いらっしゃいました**。 shachō ga irasshaimashita.	社長(しゃちょう)が来(き)た。 shachō ga kita.	**The president is here.** honorific: come
8	明日(あした)、**伺(うかが)います**。 ashita, ukagaimasu.	明日(あした)、行(い)くね。 ashita, iku ne.	**I'll come by tomorrow.** humble: go, visit
9	もう**ご覧(らん)になりました**か。 mō goran ni narimashita ka.	もう見(み)た? mō mita?	**Have you seen it yet?** honorific: see
10	**申(もう)し訳(わけ)ございません**。 mōshiwake gozaimasen.	ごめん。 gomen.	**I'm terribly sorry.** humble apology

Your turn: make it keigo, for them or for me

1	見(み)る **them** miru	ご覧(らん)になる goran ni naru	2	言(い)う **me** iu	申(もう)す mōsu	3	待(ま)つ **please** matsu	お待(ま)ちください omachi kudasai
4	食(た)べる **them** taberu	召(め)し上(あ)がる meshiagaru	5	持(も)つ **me** motsu	お持(も)ちします omochi shimasu	6	行(い)く **me** iku	参(まい)る mairu

Go back when you need to: the verb forms guide builds the ます stem these frames use, and the N5 grammar sheet has てください and the rest of the polite basics.

Meet a word you don't know? In Kitsumi, hover any word in Japanese subtitles to see its reading and meaning.