は or が? 主題(しゅだい)と主語(しゅご)

Two particles, two jobs. は marks the topic, what the sentence is about: as for X... が marks the subject that the sentence picks out: X, that one. As a particle, は is read wa, never ha.

The picture

は — the topic

wa

a heading: here's what we're talking about

これは → **私(わたし)の本(ほん)です。**

the news comes after は
kore wa watashi no hon desu. · This is my book.

が — the subject

ga

a pointing finger: this one, not the others

これが → 私(わたし)の本(ほん)です。

the news is the word before が
kore ga watashi no hon desu. · **This one** is my book (not that one).

Side by side

	は wa	が ga
It marks	the topic: what the sentence is about	the subject the sentence picks out
The news is	after it, in the rest of the sentence	the word right before it
English feel	as for X, ...	it's X that ..., X and nothing else
It answers	what about X? what is X like?	who? what? which one?
You meet it with	known things, contrasts, not, general facts	question words, new things, 好(す)き and ある, smaller clauses

Six rules of thumb, and where this sheet explains them

が — A question word is the subject
誰(だれ)が？ 何(なに)が？
page 2

が — Something new, or seen right now
おじいさんがいました
page 2

は — A contrast, or a not
肉(にく)は食(た)べますが…
page 3

が — 好(す)き, 上手(じょうず), 分(わ)かる, ある and friends
猫(ねこ)が好(す)きです
page 4

が — Inside a smaller clause
私(わたし)が作(つく)ったケーキ
page 5

は — Anything else you're talking about
私(わたし)は学生(がくせい)です
page 1

Saying は: as a particle it's always wa. Inside a word it keeps its own sound: はな, hana, a flower; はい, hai, yes. こんにちは, konnichiwa, and こんばんは, konbanwa, are spelt with は because they began as the particle: 今日(こんにち)は, as for today...

Often both are right. Then the choice moves the spotlight, not the facts. This sheet shows the usual choice and says so when both work. The particles guide has the other particles.

New or known 新しい情報

The news goes with が. が puts its word in the spotlight: that's the new part. は puts its word in the background as something we know, and the news comes after it.

Question words take が, and so does the answer

Who came? The person is the news.

誰が来ましたか。
dare ga kimashita ka. · Who came?

→ 田中さんが来ました。
tanaka san ga kimashita. · Tanaka came. (It was Tanaka.)

When did Tanaka come? Tanaka is known.

田中さんはいつ来ましたか。
tanaka san wa itsu kimashita ka. · When did Tanaka come?

→ 昨日来ました。
kinō kimashita. · Yesterday. (He came yesterday.)

What's good here? The dish is the news.

何がおいしいですか。
nani ga oishii desu ka. · What's good here?

→ ラーメンがおいしいです。
rāmen ga oishii desu. · The ramen is.

Never は after a question word in a question. A question word is always the news, so it can't be the topic: 誰が来ましたか, never 誰は. The same goes for 何が and どれが.

Known things drop out. Once everyone knows the topic, Japanese leaves it out. The answer to the middle question is just 昨日来ました, and 私は学生です is often just 学生です.

Something new: first が, then は

昔々、おじいさんがいました。
mukashi mukashi, ojiisan ga imashita. · Once upon a time there was an old man. — new · が

おじいさんは山に住んでいました。
ojiisan wa yama ni sunde imashita. · The old man lived in the mountains. — known · は

ある日、川に大きな桃が浮かんでいました。
aru hi, kawa ni ōkina momo ga ukande imashita. · One day, a big peach was floating in the river. — new · が

Like a and the in English. A new character walks into the story with が: an old man. From then on he's known, so he takes は: the old man. The peach is new again, so it gets が.

Describing what you see or hear right now

あ、バスが来ました！
a, basu ga kimashita! · Oh, the bus is here!

電話が鳴っていますよ。
denwa ga natte imasu yo. · The phone's ringing.

Nothing is known yet, so the whole sentence is news and the subject takes が. With は it would sound like a contrast: バスは来ました, the bus has come (but something else hasn't).

Contrast with は 対比(たいひ)

3 · taihi · this one, as opposed to that one

は can set one thing against another: X, at least... and Y is a different story. Two は in one sentence almost always means a contrast.

肉(にく)は食(た)べますが、魚(さかな)は食(た)べません。

niku wa tabemasu ga, sakana wa tabemasen. · Meat I eat, but fish I don't.

Meat and fish are set against each other.

漢字(かんじ)は読(よ)めます。

kanji wa yomemasu. · Kanji I can read.

One は can hint at the rest: writing them is another story.

今日(きょう)は暑(あつ)いですね。

kyō wa atsui desu ne. · It's hot today, isn't it?

Time words like 今日(きょう), 明日(あした) and 今(いま) usually take は. A light contrast hangs in the air: today, unlike other days.

は takes the place of が and を, and joins other particles

が → は	宿題(しゅくだい)は終(お)わりました。 shukudai wa owarimashita. · The homework's done.
を → は	この本(ほん)はもう読(よ)みました。 kono hon wa mō yomimashita. · This book I've already read.
に → には	日本(にほん)にはコンビニがたくさんあります。 nihon ni wa konbini ga takusan arimasu. · In Japan there are lots of convenience stores.
で → では	家(いえ)では靴(くつ)を脱(ぬ)ぎます。 ie de wa kutsu o nugimasu. · At home we take our shoes off.
と → とは	友達(ともだち)とは日本語(にほんご)で話(はな)します。 tomodachi to wa nihongo de hanashimasu. · With friends I speak Japanese.

Never がは or をは: は simply replaces them. After に, で, と, から and まで it joins on: には, では, とは, からは, までは.

Saying not: は is very common

お金(かね)はありません。

okane wa arimasen. · Money, I haven't got (time, maybe).

お金(かね)がありません。

okane ga arimasen. · I've got no money. A plain statement.

学生(がくせい)ではありません。

gakusei de wa arimasen. · I'm not a student.

Both are right. A not usually sets one thing against others, so は is the common choice: お金(かね)はありません. お金(かね)がありません just reports that the money isn't there, and is just as correct.

ではありません: the は in it is this same particle, read wa. In speech it shrinks to じゃありません or じゃない, and the は disappears into じゃ.

は on its own: and what about...?

田中(たなか)さんは？

tanaka san wa? · What about Tanaka? Where's Tanaka?

私(わたし)はコーヒー。

watashi wa kōhī. · I'll have a coffee. (As for me: coffee.)

A topic with nothing after it asks about it, or leaves the rest to the situation. In a coffee shop, 私(わたし)はコーヒー means as for me, coffee. Nobody thinks you are a coffee.

Set patterns 好き、分かる、ある

These words take が for the thing, not を: liking, being good or bad at, understanding, being able, wanting and having. The person is the topic, with は, and is often left out.

好き suki

like

猫が好きです。

neko ga suki desu. · I like cats.

嫌い kirai

dislike

虫が嫌いです。

mushi ga kirai desu. · I don't like insects.

上手 jōzu

good at

母は料理が上手です。

haha wa ryōri ga jōzu desu. · My mum is a good cook.

下手 heta

bad at

私は歌が下手です。

watashi wa uta ga heta desu. · I'm a bad singer.

分かる wakaru

understand

日本語が分かります。

nihongo ga wakarimasu. · I understand Japanese.

できる dekiru

can do

テニスができます。

tenisu ga dekimasu. · I can play tennis.

ほしい hoshii

want

犬がほしいです。

inu ga hoshii desu. · I want a dog.

ある、いる aru, iru

have, there is

車があります。

kuruma ga arimasu. · I've got a car. There's a car.

上手 is for praising others. About yourself, 得意, your strong point, sounds less boastful: 料理が得意です. ある is for things, いる for people and animals: 公園に子供がいます.

Both work with ～たい and can-forms: 水が飲みたい and 水を飲みたい both mean I want to drink water. 漢字を読めます is fine too. And a contrast still wins: 犬は好きじゃありません.

Four more: seeing, hearing, needing and can-forms like 読める

富士山が見えます。

fujisan ga miemasu. · I can see Mount Fuji.

音楽が聞こえます。

ongaku ga kikoemasu. · I can hear music.

傘が要りますか。

kasa ga irimasu ka. · Do you need an umbrella?

漢字が読めます。

kanji ga yomemasu. · I can read kanji.

The big subject and the small subject

は · the big subject: the whole thing

象は

が · the small subject: one part of it, and what it's like

鼻が長い。

zō wa hana ga nagai.
Elephants have long trunks. (As for elephants, the trunk is long.)

私は頭が痛い。

watashi wa atama ga itai. · I've got a headache.

東京は人が多い。

tōkyō wa hito ga ōi. · Tokyo has a lot of people.

この店はパンがおいしい。

kono mise wa pan ga oishii. · This shop has great bread.

English often turns this into have: elephants have long trunks, I've got a headache. The は word is the whole thing, the が word is one part of it, and the describing word belongs to that part. 私は猫が好きです has the same shape: me, and as for liking, cats.

Smaller clauses 文の中のが

5 · bun no naka no ga · and が in shows

Inside a smaller clause, the subject takes が, not は. は reaches all the way to the end of the sentence. が stays inside its own little clause.

兄は | 私が作った | ケーキを | 食べました。

は my brother ... ate: to the end of the sentence

が I ... made

ani wa watashi ga tsukutta kēki o tabemashita. · My big brother ate the cake I made.

Describing a noun

これは母が好きな歌です。

kore wa haha ga suki na uta desu. · This is a song my mum likes.

If: ～たら

雨が降ったら、家にいます。

ame ga futtara, ie ni imasu. · If it rains, I'll stay at home.

When: ～とき

私が子供のとき、犬を飼っていました。

watashi ga kodomo no toki, inu o katte imashita. · When I was a child, we had a dog.

You'll also hear の here: 私の作ったケーキ and 母の好きな歌 mean the same as with が. It only works when the clause describes a noun.

From shows: が and は on screen

すみませんが、駅はどこですか。

sumimasen ga, eki wa doko desu ka. · Excuse me, where's the station?

が after a whole sentence means but, or just softens what comes next. It isn't the subject が at all.

大変だ！ 何が？

taihen da! nani ga? · Oh no! What is?

何が？ asks for the missing subject: what's the trouble?

俺がやる！

ore ga yaru! · I'll do it!

が picks out who: me, nobody else. 俺 is a rough, casual I.

私が悪かった。

watashi ga warukatta. · It was my fault.

Literally I'm the one who was bad. A favourite in dramas.

これがいい！

kore ga ii! · I want this one!

が picks this one out of the rest: this is the good one.

それはちょっと…

sore wa chotto... · That's a bit... (a polite no)

は sets up the topic and the no is never said.

Practice 練習

How: cover the right side, say each line out loud with は or が and why, then check.

1	誰 ___ 窓を開けましたか。 dare ___ mado o akemashita ka. · Who opened the window?	が **question word** the question word is the news
2	山田さん ___ 開けました。 yamada san ___ akemashita. · Yamada did. (the answer to 1)	が **answer to who?** the answer to who? keeps が
3	私 ___ 学生です。 watashi ___ gakusei desu. · I'm a student.	は **topic** a statement about me: I'm the topic
4	昔々、ある村に猫 ___ いました。 mukashi mukashi, aru mura ni neko ___ imashita. · Once upon a time, a village had a cat.	が **something new** the cat walks into the story
5	その猫 ___ とても賢かったです。 sono neko ___ totemo kashikokatta desu. · The cat was very clever.	は **already known** now we know the cat
6	肉は好きですが、野菜 ___ 好きじゃありません。 niku wa suki desu ga, yasai ___ suki ja arimasen. · I like meat, but not vegetables.	は **contrast** vegetables set against meat
7	犬 ___ 好きです。 inu ___ suki desu. · I like dogs.	が **likes** what you like takes が
8	友達は歌 ___ 上手です。 tomodachi wa uta ___ jōzu desu. · My friend is a good singer.	が **good at** what someone is good at takes が
9	明日 ___ 休みです。 ashita ___ yasumi desu. · Tomorrow's my day off.	は **time word** time words usually take は
10	新しい靴 ___ ほしいです。 atarashii kutsu ___ hoshii desu. · I want new shoes.	が **wants** what you want takes が
11	机の上に本 ___ あります。 tsukue no ue ni hon ___ arimasu. · There's a book on the desk.	が **there is** what is there takes が
12	キリンは首 ___ 長いです。 kirin wa kubi ___ nagai desu. · Giraffes have long necks.	が **small subject** the neck is the part that's long
13	私 ___ お腹が痛いです。 watashi ___ onaka ga itai desu. · I've got a stomach ache.	は **big subject** I'm the whole, my tummy is the part
14	これは姉 ___ 作ったケーキです。 kore wa ane ___ tsukutta kēki desu. · This is a cake my sister made.	が **inside a clause** the clause's own subject (の also works)
15	時間 ___ あったら、行きます。 jikan ___ attara, ikimasu. · If I have time, I'll go.	が **inside a clause** the subject inside a たら clause
16	日本に ___ 山がたくさんあります。 nihon ni ___ yama ga takusan arimasu. · In Japan there are lots of mountains.	は **after に** only は can follow に: には
17	先生で ___ ありません。 sensei de ___ arimasen. · I'm not a teacher.	は **ではない** ではありません always has は
18	君 ___ ？ kimi ___? · And you? What about you?	は **what about?** は on its own asks what about
19	あ、雨 ___ 降ってきた！ a, ame ___ futte kita! · Oh, it's started raining!	が **seen right now** something you've just noticed
20	僕 ___ 払います。 boku ___ haraimasu. · I'll pay. (me, not you)	が **the one who** が picks me out: I'm the one paying

Meet a は or が you can't explain? Ask what the news is. In Kitsumi, hover any word in subtitles to see what it means.