은/는 or 이/가? 주제와 주어

Two particles, two jobs. 은/는 marks the topic, what the sentence is about: as for X... 이/가 marks the subject that the sentence picks out: X, that one.

The picture

은/는
eun / neun

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

이것은 → 제 가방이에요.

the news comes after 은/는
igeoseun je gabangieyo. · This is my bag.

이/가
i / ga

the subject
a pointing finger: this one, not the others

이것이 → 제 가방이에요.

the news is the word before 이/가
igeosi je gabangieyo. · **This one** is my bag (not that one).

Which shape? Look at the last block of the word

	after a consonant (받침)	after a vowel
은/는	책은 chaegeun 물은 mureun	차는 chaneun
이/가	책이 chaegi 물이 muri	차가 chaga

Only with 이/가, these four change

나 + 가	너 + 가	저 + 가	누구 + 가
내가	네가	제가	누가
naega	nega	jega	nuga
I	you	I, polite	who

Never 누구가, and never 나가 for I. With 은/는 nothing changes: 나는, 너는, 저는.

Side by side

	은/는 eun / neun	이/가 i / 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, after other particles	question words, new things, 있다, 좋다, 아프다, smaller clauses

Six rules of thumb, and where this sheet explains them

이/가 — Question words
누가? 뭐가?
nuga? mwoga? page 2

이/가 — New, or seen right now
호랑이가 살았어요
horangiga sarasseoyo page 2

은/는 — A contrast, or a not
고기는 안 먹어요
gogineun an meogeoyo page 3

이/가 — 있다, 좋다, 아프다...
고양이가 좋아요
goyangiga joayo page 4

이/가 — Inside a smaller clause
제가 만든 케이크
jega mandeun keikeu page 5

은/는 — Anything else: the topic
저는 학생이에요
jeoneun hakssaengieyo page 1

Sounds and short forms: ㄹ counts as a consonant: 물은, 물이. 네가 sounds like 내가, so people usually say 니가 niga. In speech 이것은 is 이건 igeon, 이것이 이게 ige, 저는 전 jeon.

Often both are right. Then the choice moves the spotlight, not the facts, and this sheet says so. The romanisation spells what you hear, as on the sound changes sheet: 학생 hakssaeng.

New or known 새 정보

The news goes with 이/가. 이/가 puts its word in the spotlight: that's the new part. 은/는 puts its word in the background as something we know, and the news comes after it.

Question words take 이/가 as the subject, and so does the answer

Who came? The person is the news.

누**가** 왔어요?
nuga wasseoyo? · Who came?

→ 민수**가** 왔어요.
minsuga wasseoyo. · Minsu came. (It was Minsu.)

When did Minsu come? Minsu is known.

민수**는** 언제 왔어요?
minsuneun eonje wasseoyo? · When did Minsu come?

→ 어제 왔어요.
eoje wasseoyo. · Yesterday. (He came yesterday.)

What do you fancy? The food is the news.

점심**은** 뭐**가** 좋아요?
jeomsimeun mwoga joayo? · What do you fancy for lunch?

→ 냉면**이** 좋아요.
naengmyeoni joayo. · Cold noodles would be nice.

Where does it hurt? The place is the news.

어디**가** 아파요?
eodiga apayo? · Where does it hurt?

→ 목**이** 아파요.
mogi apayo. · My throat hurts.

A question word as the subject takes 이/가. It's always the news, so it can't be the topic. Say 누가, not 누구는. The same goes for 뭐가 and 어디가, and the answer keeps 이/가: 민수가 왔어요.

Known things drop out. Once everyone knows the topic, Korean leaves it out. The answer to the middle question is just 어제 왔어요, and 저는 학생이에요 **jeoneun hakssaengieyo** is often just 학생이에요 **hakssaengieyo**.

Someone new: first 이/가, then 은/는

옛날 옛날에 호랑이**가** 살았어요.
yennal yennare horangiga sarasseoyo. · Once upon a time there lived a tiger.
new · 이/가

호랑이**는** 아주 컸어요.
horangineun aju keosseoyo. · The tiger was very big.
known · 은/는

어느 날, 토끼**가** 나타났어요.
eoneu nal, tokkiga natanasseoyo. · One day, a rabbit appeared.
new · 이/가

Like a and the in English. A new character walks into the story with 이/가: a tiger. From then on it's known, so it takes 은/는: the tiger. The rabbit is new, so it gets 가.

Describing what you see or hear right now

어, 비**가** 와요!
eo, biga wayo! · Oh, it's raining!

아기**가** 울어요.
agiga ureoyo. · The baby's crying.

Nothing is known yet, so the whole sentence is news and the subject takes 이/가. With 은/는 it would sound like a contrast: 아기는 울어요 **agineun ureoyo**, the baby's crying (but the others aren't).

Contrast with 은/는 대조

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

은/는 can set one thing against another: X, at least... and Y is a different story. Two 은/는 in one sentence usually means a contrast.

고기**는** 먹는데 생선**은** 안 먹어요.
gogineun meongneunde saengseoneun an meogeoyo. · Meat I eat, but fish I don't.

Meat and fish are set against each other.

한국어**는** 조금 해요.
hangugeoneun jogeum haeyo. · Korean, I speak a bit.

One 은/는 can hint at the rest: other languages, not really.

오늘**은** 좀 바빠요.
oneureun jom bappayo. · Today I'm a bit busy.

Time words like 오늘 and 내일 often take 은/는: today, unlike other days.

은/는 takes the place of 이/가 and 을/를, and joins other particles

이/가 → 은/는	날씨**는** 좋아요. **nalssineun joayo.** · The weather's nice, at least.
을/를 → 은/는	숙제**는** 다 했어요. **sukjjeneun da haesseoyo.** · The homework, I've done it all.
에 → 에는	주말에**는** 집에서 쉬어요. **jumareneun jibeseo swieoyo.** · At weekends I rest at home.
에서 → 에서는	한국에서**는** 밥을 숟가락으로 먹어요. **hangugeseoneun babeul sutkkarageuro meogeoyo.** · In Korea you eat rice with a spoon.
하고 → 하고는	친구하고**는** 반말로 얘기해요. **chinguhagoneun banmallo yaegihaeyo.** · With friends I talk in casual speech.
한테 → 한테는	동생한테**는** 비밀이에요. **dongsaenghanteneun bimirieyo.** · It's a secret from my little sister.

Never 이/가 or 을/를 together with 은/는: 은/는 simply takes their place. After 에, 에서, 하고, 한테 and 까지 it joins on: 에는, 에서는, 하고는.

Saying not: 은/는 is very common

돈**은** 없어요.
doneun eopsseoyo. · Money, I haven't got (time, maybe).

돈**이** 없어요.
doni eopsseoyo. · I've got no money. A plain statement.

저**는** 학생**이** 아니에요.
jeoneun hakssaengi anieyo. · I'm not a student.

Both are right. A not often sets one thing against others, so 은/는 is common. 돈이 없어요 just reports that there's no money, and is just as correct.

아니에요 takes both: the person is the topic with 은/는, and what you're not takes 이/가: 저는 학생이 아니에요. More on page 4.

저는 or 제가? Introducing yourself

안녕하세요. 저**는** 수진이에요.
annyeonghaseyo. jeoneun sujinieyo. · Hello, I'm Sujin.

누**가** 수진 씨예요?
nuga sujin ssiyeyo? · Which of you is Sujin?

제**가** 수진이에요.
jega sujinieyo. · I am. (I'm Sujin.)

저는 sets you up as the topic, and the news is your name. 제가 makes you the answer to a who question, or steps forward: 제가 할게요 **jega halkkeyo**, I'll do it (me, not someone else).

민수 씨**는**요?
minsu ssineunyo? · And you, Minsu? What about you?

저**는** 커피요.
jeoneun keopiyo. · I'll have a coffee. (As for me: coffee.)

Set patterns 있다, 좋다, 아프다

These take 이/가 for the thing, not 을/를: having and not having, liking and disliking with 좋다 and 싫다, needing and hurting. They describe a state, not an action. The person is the topic, with 은/는, and is often left out.

있다 itta
have, there is
차**가** 있어요.
chaga isseoyo. · I've got a car.

없다 eoptta
not have
시간**이** 없어요.
sigani eopsseoyo. · I haven't got time.

좋다 jota
like (be good)
저**는** 고양이**가** 좋아요.
jeoneun goyangiga joayo. · I like cats.

싫다 silta
dislike
저**는** 벌레**가** 싫어요.
jeoneun beollega sireoyo. · I don't like insects.

필요하다 piryohada
need
우산**이** 필요해요?
usani piryohaeyo? · Do you need an umbrella?

아프다 apeuda
hurt
다리**가** 아파요.
dariga apayo. · My leg hurts.

되다 doeda
become
가수**가** 되고 싶어요.
gasuga doego sipeoyo. · I want to be a singer.

아니다 anida
not be
제 가방**이** 아니에요.
je gabangi anieyo. · It isn't my bag.

되다 and 아니다: what you become or aren't takes 이/가: 가수가 되다, 학생이 아니다. The plain is, 이에요 or 예요, takes no particle at all: 학생이에요 **hakssaengieyo**.

좋아하다 is different. 좋아해요 and 싫어해요 are doing verbs and take 을/를: 고양이를 좋아해요 **goyangireul joahaeyo**. Same meaning, and both are everyday. A contrast still wins: 벌레는 싫어요 **beolleneun sireoyo**.

Feelings work the same way: scared of, missing, jealous of, curious about

저**는** 개**가** 무서워요.
jeoneun gaega museowoyo. · I'm scared of dogs.

고향**이** 그리워요.
gohyangi geuriwoyo. · I miss home.

네**가** 부러워.
nega bureowo. · I'm jealous of you.

그게 궁금해요.
geuge gunggeumhaeyo. · I'm curious about that.

These describe your own feelings, or ask about the listener's. For someone else, Korean adds -어하다 and switches to 을/를: 동생은 개를 무서워해요 **dongsaengeun gaereul museowohaeyo**, my sister is scared of dogs.

The big subject and the small subject

은/는 · the big subject: the whole thing

코끼리**는**

이/가 · the small subject: one part of it, and what it's like

코**가** 길어요.

kokkirineun koga gireoyo.
Elephants have long trunks. (As for elephants, the trunk is long.)

저**는** 머리**가** 아파요.
jeoneun meoriga apayo. · I've got a headache.

서울**은** 사람**이** 많아요.
seoureun sarami manayo. · Seoul has a lot of people.

이 가게**는** 빵**이** 맛있어요.
i gageneun ppangi masisseoyo. · This shop has great bread.

English often turns this into have: elephants have long trunks, I've got a headache. The 은/는 word is the whole thing, the 이/가 word is one part of it, and the describing word belongs to that part. 저는 고양이가 좋아요 has the same shape: as for me, cats are what's good.

Smaller clauses 문장 속 문장

Inside a smaller clause, the subject takes 이/가, not 은/는. 은/는 reaches all the way to the end of the sentence. 이/가 stays inside its own little clause.

엄마는 | 제가 만든 | 케이크를 | 먹었어요.

은/는 Mum … ate: to the end of the sentence

이/가 I … made

eommaneun jega mandeun keikeureul meogeosseoyo. · Mum ate the cake I made.

Describing a noun

이건 엄마**가** 좋아하는 노래예요.

igeon eommaga joahaneun noraeyeyo. · This is a song my mum likes.

If: -면

비**가** 오면 집에 있어요.

biga omyeon jibe isseoyo. · If it rains, I stay at home.

When: -ㄹ 때

제**가** 어렸을 때 강아지를 키웠어요.

jega eoryeosseul ttae gangajireul kiwosseoyo. · When I was little, we had a dog.

So: -아서

배**가** 고파서 라면을 먹었어요.

baega gopaseo ramyeoneul meogeosseoyo. · I was hungry, so I had some ramyeon.

So in a clause it's 제가 or 내가, not 저는: 제가 만든 케이크 **jega mandeun keikeu**, the cake I made; 내가 아는 사람 **naega aneun saram**, someone I know.

From dramas: 이/가 and 은/는 on screen

누**가** 그랬어?

nuga geuraesseo? · Who did this? Who said that?

A question word, so 가. 그랬어 covers both did it and said it.

내**가** 할게!

naega halkke! · I'll do it!

가 picks out who: me, nobody else. 내가 is 나 + 가.

나**는** 괜찮아.

naneun gwaenchana. · I'm fine. (Don't worry about me.)

는 makes me the topic, often with a hint: but what about you?

네**가** 뭘 알아?

nega mwol ara? · What would you know?

Spelt 네가, but usually said 니가, so it doesn't sound like 내가.

그게 아니라…

geuge anira… · That's not it… It's not like that…

그게 is 그것이 cut short: the 이/가 that goes with 아니다.

이게 뭐야?

ige mwoya? · What's this?

이게 is 이것이 cut short. You'll hear 이게 and 그게 far more than the full forms.

Casual speech often drops them: 나 괜찮아 **na gwaenchana**, 너 뭐 해? **neo mwo hae?** So don't expect a particle on every word in subtitles, and keep them when you're being polite.

Practice 연습

How: cover the right side, say each line out loud with 은, 는, 이 or 가 and why, then check. Watch the last block: a bottom letter takes 은 or 이.

1	뭐___ 제일 맛있어요? **mwo __ jeil masisseoyo?** · What's the best thing here?	**가** 뭐가 **mwoga** question word the question word is the news
2	이 식당___ 처음이에요. **i sikttang __ cheoeumieyo.** · It's my first time at this restaurant.	**은** 식당은 **sikttangeun** topic the restaurant is what we're talking about
3	저___ 대학생이에요. **jeo __ daehakssaengieyo.** · I'm a university student.	**는** 저는 **jeoneun** topic a statement about me: I'm the topic
4	옛날에 한 농부___ 살았어요. **yennare han nongbu __ sarasseoyo.** · Once upon a time there lived a farmer.	**가** 농부가 **nongbuga** something new the farmer walks into the story
5	그 농부___ 아주 부지런했어요. **geu nongbu __ aju bujireonhaesseoyo.** · The farmer worked very hard.	**는** 농부는 **nongbuneun** already known now we know the farmer
6	커피는 마시는데 술___ 안 마셔요. **keopineun masineunde sul __ an masyeoyo.** · I drink coffee, but not alcohol.	**은** 술은 **sureun** contrast alcohol set against coffee
7	겨울에___ 눈이 많이 와요. **gyeoure __ nuni mani wayo.** · In winter it snows a lot.	**는** 겨울에는 **gyeoureneun** after 에 only 은/는 can follow 에: 에는
8	오늘은 약속___ 있어요. **oneureun yakssok __ isseoyo.** · I've got plans today.	**이** 약속이 **yakssogi** 있다, 없다 what you have takes 이/가
9	저는 강아지___ 좋아요. **jeoneun gangaji __ joayo.** · I like dogs.	**가** 강아지가 **gangajiga** 좋다, 싫다 with 좋다, what you like takes 이/가
10	물___ 필요해요. **mul __ piryohaeyo.** · I need water.	**이** 물이 **muri** 필요하다 ㄹ counts as a consonant: 물이
11	배___ 아파요. **bae __ apayo.** · I've got a stomach ache.	**가** 배가 **baega** 아프다 what hurts takes 이/가
12	이건 제 휴대폰___ 아니에요. **igeon je hyudaepon __ anieyo.** · This isn't my phone.	**이** 휴대폰이 **hyudaeponi** 아니다 what you're not takes 이/가
13	제 동생은 선생님___ 됐어요. **je dongsaengeun seonsaengnim __ dwaesseoyo.** · My little sister became a teacher.	**이** 선생님이 **seonsaengnimi** 되다 what you become takes 이/가
14	기린___ 목이 길어요. **girin __ mogi gireoyo.** · Giraffes have long necks.	**은** 기린은 **girineun** big subject giraffes are the whole, the neck is the part
15	토끼는 귀___ 길어요. **tokkineun gwi __ gireoyo.** · Rabbits have long ears.	**가** 귀가 **gwiga** small subject the ears are the part that's long
16	이건 친구___ 만든 가방이에요. **igeon chingu __ mandeun gabangieyo.** · This is a bag my friend made.	**가** 친구가 **chinguga** inside a clause the clause's own subject
17	길___ 막히면 지하철을 타요. **gil __ makimyeon jihacheoreul tayo.** · If the roads are jammed, I take the metro.	**이** 길이 **giri** inside a clause the subject inside an if clause
18	동생___ 먹었어. **dongsaeng __ meogeosseo.** · My little brother ate it. (answering who ate it?)	**이** 동생이 **dongsaengi** answer to who? the answer to who? keeps 이/가
19	와, 별___ 많다! **wa, byeol __ manta!** · Wow, look at all the stars!	**이** 별이 **byeori** seen right now something you've just noticed
20	너___? **neo __?** · And you? What about you?	**는** 너는 **neoneun** what about? 은/는 on its own asks what about

Meet an 은/는 or 이/가 you can't explain? Ask what the news is. In Kitsumi, hover any word in subtitles to see what it means.