

# Japanese Particles

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Particles in Japanese act like the “cement” of a structure, holding the major components together and serving as indicators for the words they follow or are stuck between. There are even times when they have their own meaning, usually as prepositions. They can be friendly at times and pesky at others, and some can even be omitted in familiar conversation.

This is a *general* guide for using the particles. I trust that it will serve nicely for daily conversation and writing, but I really must emphasize *general* here because of the many exceptions and surprises that do exist. In fact, there are some exceptions that defy all reason. While some particles more or less follow certain rules regarding use, others do not and must be learned “case by case” and remembered as such. I have spent hours with native speakers trying to get straight, logical answers concerning the strange behavior of some of the particles, but I often just get blank stares and the “case by case” answer. I will do my best to point these out, but it will be impossible to cover everything here.

One thing that is nice about Japanese is that it's not as “grammatically fussy” as English: If you happen to omit or make a mistake concerning particles, you won't sound as ridiculous or illiterate speaking this “broken Japanese” as you would if you did the same thing in English. (That's not meant to be an excuse; it's just to assure you that it's okay to make mistakes along the way.)

## Subject indicators *wa* and *ga*

*Wa* and *ga* indicate subjects by coming after them. You could say that *wa* is the “standard” subject indicator. It indicates the general topic and, if anything, emphasizes what comes after it:

日本の夏は暑いです。  
(*Nihon no natsu wa atsui desu.*)  
Summers in Japan are hot.

In this example, *wa* tells us that the topic of conversation is *summers in Japan*, and that the important thing about them is the fact that they are *hot*.

紀美子は毎日英語を勉強しています。  
(*Kimiko wa mainichi eigo o benkyou shite imasu.*)  
Kimiko studies English every day.

Here we are talking about Kimiko, and want her diligence concerning English studies to be made known.

*Ga* points to “active” subjects, emphasized subjects, and subjects within a larger topic:

ジョンがする仕事は難しいです。  
(*John ga suru shigoto wa muzukashii desu.*)  
The job that John does is difficult.

In this one, *wa* tells us that we're talking about a job, and that it's a difficult one, and *ga* tells

us that it's not just any job we're talking about, but the job that John does.

今聖子がしています。  
(*Ima Seiko ga shite imasu.*)  
Seiko is doing it now.

This one, which is a reply to someone's question, needs to point to Seiko as the person doing whatever, so **ga** is used. The thing she is doing is already known, so it needs no emphasis.

**Ga** is used with simple question subjects in many cases:

だれがこの牛乳を零した？  
(*Dare ga kono gyuunyuu o koboshita?*)  
Who spilled this milk?

何が食べたいの？  
(*Nani ga tabetai no?*)  
What do you want to eat?

いつがいい？  
(*Itsu ga ii?*)  
When is a good time?

And **ga** is used to emphasize the answers to those questions:

トミーがやった。  
(*Tommy ga yatta.*)  
Tommy did it.

餃子が食べたい。  
(*Gyouza ga tabetai.*)  
I want to eat *gyouza*.

3時がいい。  
(*Sanji ga ii.*)  
Three o'clock's good.

...unless there's something still indefinite about it:

餃子を食べましょうか。  
(*Gyouza o tabemashou ka.*)  
Shall we have *gyouza*?

餃子はどうですか。  
(*Gyouza wa dou desu ka.*)  
How about some *gyouza*?

6時はどう？  
(*Rokuji wa dou?*)  
How about six o'clock?

As you can see, it can really get confusing. More than trying to remember set rules, I've found that memorizing “set phrases” is the safest way to go, even though it does take some time. Here's where learning “case by case” becomes necessary, because the particle used will sometimes change depending on what is being emphasized, as well as the verb tense and conjugation used.

**Ga** sometimes indicates “but”:

私達はピクニックを楽しみにしていたが、雨が降った。  
(*Watashitachi wa pikuniku o tanoshimi ni shite ita ga, ame ga futta.*)  
We looked forward to the picnic, but it rained.

Notice how the three **ga**'s are used here:

ケーキが食べたかったが、お腹がいっぱいだった。  
(*Keeki ga tabetakatta ga, onaka ga ippai datta.*)  
I wanted to have some cake, but I was too full.

**Wa** could replace the third **ga** here.

As a strange particle quirk, subject indicator **wa** is always written using the *hiragana* for **ha** (は). For more about *hiragana*, see my *A Bit of the Language*.

### Direct object indicator **o**

You could call **o** a “limited use” particle. Its only job is to show us what the direct object is:

辞書を貸してくれる？  
(*Jisho o kashite kureru?*)  
Would you please loan me your dictionary?

新しいカメラを買った。  
(*Atarashii kamera o katta.*)  
I bought a new camera.

ピザを食べましょうか。  
(*Pizza o tabemashou ka.*)  
Shall we get a pizza?

However, **ga** is usually preferred when using the *-tai* ending:

ラーメンが食べたい。  
(*Ramen ga tabetai.*)  
I want to eat *ramen*.

Also, use **ga**, not **o**, before the verbs *iru* (to be present; to exist), *iru* (to need), *aru*, *wakaru*, *dekiru*, and the weird quasi-verb/adjectives *suki*, *kirai* and *hoshii*:

ボブの部屋にトカゲがいる。  
(*Bob no heya ni tokage ga iru.*)  
There's a lizard in Bob's room.

僕は新しい傘が要らない。  
(*Boku wa atarashii kasa ga iranai.*)  
I don't need a new umbrella.

しずは自転車がありますか。  
(*Shizu wa jitensha ga arimasu ka.*)  
Does Shizu have a bicycle?

賢治の言っていることが分からない。  
(*Kenji no itte iru koto ga wakaranai.*)  
I don't understand what Kenji's saying.

絵美子は料理ができる？  
(*Emiko wa ryouri ga dekiru?*)  
Can Emiko cook?

中華料理が好きですか。  
(*Chuuuka ryouri ga suki desu ka.*)  
Do you like Chinese food?

トムは飛行機が嫌い。  
(*Tom wa hikouki ga kirai.*)  
Tom hates airplanes.

あのぬいぐるみが欲しい！  
(*Ano nuigurumi ga hoshii!*)  
I want that stuffed animal!

It is sometimes easy to confuse the particle *o* with the *o-* prefix which is used as an honorific indicator for some selected nouns, so be careful. Some of these are:

- お天気 (*o-tenki*)      the weather
- お茶 (*o-cha*)      tea
- お水 (*o-mizu*)      water
- お肉 (*o-niku*)      meat
- お腹 (*o-naka*)      stomach
- お車 (*o-kuruma*)      car

These can be very interesting. Some use the *o-* prefix only in some instances and not others. For example, when talking about your own car or cars in general, you would never use the *o-* prefix. You will probably only hear it when salespeople or servicepeople are talking about the car you are going to buy or have bought from them. Some, like *o-tenki* and *o-cha*, are almost always used with the honorific prefix.

I might as well mention here that there is a verb conjugation that uses this honorific prefix. It's *o-* + Base 2, and has several endings. Here are examples of two:

どうぞ、お茶をお飲みください。  
(*Douzo, o-cha o o-nomi kudasai.*)  
Please, have some tea.

お肉はお食べになりましたか。

(*O-niku wa o-tabe ni narimashita ka.*)

Did you have some meat?

These are very polite constructions. Can you sense the honor and respect oozing from them?

Although this particle is usually written *o* in *romaji* these days, in older documents it may be seen written *wo*. It's the same particle with the same role, but with an alternate spelling in *romaji*. You may also hear some Japanese pronounce it more like *wo* than *o*.

### Indirect object indicator *ni*

*Ni* shows us what the indirect object is — who or what an action is directed to:

ジョンに辞書を貸してくれる？

(*John ni jisho o kashite kureru?*)

Would you please loan John your dictionary?

スーザンに新しいカメラをあげた。

(*Susan ni atarashii kamera o ageta.*)

I gave Susan a new camera.

犬に餌をやりなさい。

(*Inu ni esa o yarinasai.*)

Feed the dog.

*Ni* is also a preposition which indicates destinations, places, dates and times:

日本にこの箱を送りたいです。

(*Nihon ni kono hako o okuritai desu.*)

I want to send this box to Japan.

ジョンは岡山に行きました。

(*John wa Okayama ni ikimashita.*)

John went to Okayama.

猫は椅子の下にいる。

(*Neko wa isu no shita ni iru.*)

The cat is under the chair.

彼は水曜日に来る。

(*Kare wa suiyoubi ni kuru.*)

He'll come on Wednesday.

会議は7月10日にあります。

(*Kaigi wa shichi gatsu touka ni arimasu.*)

The meeting will be on July 10.

ボブは6時半に着く。

(*Bob wa rokuji han ni tsuku.*)

Bob will arrive at six thirty.

*Ni*, not *o*, is used with the verbs *noru* (to ride) and *noboru* (to climb):

早く！電車に乗って！  
(*Hayaku! Densha ni notte!*)  
Hurry! Get on the train!

賢二は自転車に乗ることができる。  
(*Kenji wa jitensha ni noru koto ga dekiru.*)  
Kenji can ride a bicycle.

木に登りましょう。  
(*Ki ni noborimashou.*)  
Let's climb up the tree.

昨日、子供達は山に登った。  
(*Kinou, kodomotachi wa yama ni nobotta.*)  
The kids climbed the mountain yesterday.

*Ni* is often combined with *wa* to show that something exists or is included in the subject:

日本には、小さい島がたくさんあります。  
(*Nihon niwa, chiisai shima ga takusan arimasu.*)  
There are many small islands in Japan.

鈴木さんには、3人の子供がいます。  
(*Suzuki-san niwa, san nin no kodomo ga imasu.*)  
Mrs. Suzuki has three children.

### Destination indicator *e*

While not as flexible as *ni*, *e* is sometimes used in place of it to emphasize a destination:

外へ行きたい。  
(*Soto e ikitai.*)  
I want to go outside.

今日はどこへ？  
(*Kyou wa doko e?*)  
Where are you going today?

(Yes, the verb can be omitted here.)

明日、美術館へ行きます。  
(*Ashita, bijutsukan e ikimasu.*)  
We're going to the art museum tomorrow.

As another strange particle quirk, destination indicator *e* is always written using the *hiragana* for *he* (へ).

## Action indicator *de*

Particle *de* is a preposition that shows us where an action takes place:

今日、家で食べる。  
(*Kyou, ie de taberu.*)  
I'll eat at home today.

子供達は公園で遊んでいます。  
(*Kodomotachi wa kouen de asonde imasu.*)  
The kids are playing in the park.

Some exceptions are: Use *ni* when the verb shows attachment to an object or place, and *o* when the action passes a place or intentionally covers a wide area:

加奈はあの椅子に座っている。  
(*Kana wa ano isu ni suwatte iru.*)  
Kana is sitting in that chair over there.

ビルは名古屋に住んでいます。  
(*Bill wa Nagoya ni sunde imasu.*)  
Bill lives in Nagoya.

二つ目の角を曲がってください。  
(*Futatsu me no kado o magatte kudasai.*)  
Please turn at the second corner.

公園を散歩しましょう。  
(*Kouen o sanpo shimashou.*)  
Let's take a walk in the park.

*De* is used for “among”:

私の友人でピアノを弾ける人がいない。  
(*Watashi no yuujin de piano o hikeru hito ga inai.*)  
There is no one among my friends that can play the piano.

*De* also indicates a method:

お名前はペンで書いてください。  
(*Onamae wa pen de kaite kudasai.*)  
Please write your name with a pen.

現金で払いましょう。  
(*Genkin de haraimashou.*)  
Let's pay with cash.

英語で話してくれる？  
(*Eigo de hanashite kureru?*)  
Would you please speak English?

**De** is sometimes used before *ii* to say that something is good or sufficient as it is:

これでいい。  
(*Kore de ii.*)  
This is okay. (It's good enough.)

明日でいい。  
(*Ashita de ii.*)  
Tomorrow will be okay.

**De** is sometimes combined with **wa** to show that something is done within the subject:

徳島では、毎年有名な祭りが行われる。  
(*Tokushima dewa, maitoshi yuumei na matsuri ga okonawareru.*)  
A famous festival is held in Tokushima every year.

### Possession indicator **no**

This one also has many roles in Japanese grammar. It shows possession:

それは恵子の傘です。  
(*Sore wa Keiko no kasa desu.*)  
That's Keiko's umbrella.

ジャックの犬の名前はアキです。  
(*Jack no inu no namae wa Aki desu.*)  
Jack's dog's name is Aki.

It can sometimes replace **ga**, and is used especially in clauses that modify a noun:

本当に問題のない旅でした。  
(*Hontou ni mondai no nai tabi deshita.*)  
It really was a trouble-free trip.

私の教える学生は、英語のできない子ばかりです。  
(*Watashi no oshieru gakusei wa, eigo no dekinai ko bakari desu.*)  
None of the kids that I teach can speak English.

It comes after some adjectives:

京都の祭りにたくさんの人がいた。  
(*Kyoto no matsuri ni takusan no hito ga ita.*)  
Many people were at the festival in Kyoto.

久美は緑の風船が欲しい。  
(*Kumi wa midori no fuusen ga hoshii.*)  
Kumi wants a green balloon.

It makes informal questions:

夕食は食べないの？  
(*Yuushoku wa tabenai no?*)



Aren't you going to eat dinner?

何時に来るの？

(*Nanji ni kuru no?*)

What time will you come?

And it is also used between prepositions and nouns to make the noun the object of the preposition. Compare the following sentences:

この手紙は優子から来た。

(*Kono tegami wa Yuuko kara kita.*)

This letter came from Yuuko.

これは優子からの手紙です。

(*Kore wa Yuuko kara no tegami desu.*)

This is a letter from Yuuko.

And these:

この手紙を優子に送る。

(*Kono tegami o Yuuko ni okuru.*)

I'm going to send this letter to Yuuko.

これは優子への手紙です。

(*Kore wa Yuuko e no tegami desu.*)

This is a letter to Yuuko.

Note: *Ni* is not used with *no* in this way.

### Connectors *to* and *ya*

These work like “and” in English. Use *to* to include only what is actually mentioned, and *ya* to include other things which are not mentioned but may be relevant or supposed:

明日、帽子と運動靴を持って来てください。

(*Ashita, boushi to undou gutsu o motte kite kudasai.*)

Bring a hat and athletic shoes tomorrow.

学校が始まったら、ペンやノートや辞書が必要です。

(*Gakkou ga hajimattara, pen ya nooto ya jisho ga hitsuyo desu.*)

When school starts, you'll need things like a pen, a notebook, and a dictionary.

*To* also indicates quotes and thoughts, whether they are direct or indirect:

ジェーンは今晚外食したいと言った。

(*Jane wa konban gaishoku shitai to itta.*)

Jane said she wants to eat out tonight.

それはとてもいい計画だと思います。

(*Sore wa totemo ii keikaku da to omoimasu.*)

I think that's a very good plan.

Some oddball adverbs use **to** optionally:

賢ははっきり(と)断った。  
(*Ken wa hakkiri [to] kotowatta.*)  
Ken flatly refused.

もっとゆっくり(と)話してくれる？  
(*Motto yukkuri [to] hanashite kureru?*)  
Would you please speak more slowly?

Sometimes **to** is used to mean “with”:

だれと公園に行く？  
(*Dare to kouen ni iku?*)  
Who are you going with to the park?

紀美子はサリーと一緒に買い物に行きました。  
(*Kimiko wa Sally to issho ni kaimono ni ikimashita.*)  
Kimiko went shopping with Sally.

Note: *Issho (ni)* means “together (with)” and is often used after **to**. Use it when there's a chance that **to** alone might not be clearly understood.

After verbs, **to** often means “if” or “when”:

まっすぐ行くと栗林公園が見えます。  
(*Massugu iku to Ritsurin Kouen ga miemasu.*)  
If you go straight you'll see Ritsurin Park.

私は蕎麦を食べると病気になる。  
(*Watashi wa soba o taberu to byouki ni naru.*)  
I get sick whenever I eat buckwheat noodles.

Please see Lesson 39 of my *Japanese Verbs* for more.

### **Includer mo**

Forgive me for making up my own English, but “includer” just works perfectly here because **mo** includes things, the way “also” and “too” do:

私も行きたい！  
(*Watashi mo ikitai!*)  
I want to go, too!

保子も新しいパソコンを買った。  
(*Yasuko mo atarashii pasokon o katta.*)  
Yasuko also bought a new computer.

**Mo** is also used to emphasize “any,” sometimes being combined with other particles:

今私は何も食べれない。  
(*Ima watashi wa nani mo taberenai.*)

I can't eat anything now.

彼はどこにも行きたくない。  
(*Kare wa doko nimo ikitakunai.*)  
He doesn't want to go anywhere.

ポールは何でもできます。  
(*Paul wa nan demo dekimasu.*)  
Paul can do anything.

Note: There are also elongated **mou**'s that have totally different usages. One is used to mean “already,” and another is used for whining about something:

私もうしました。  
(*Watashi mou shimashita.*)  
I already did it.

もう、あなたいつも遅い！  
(*Mou, anata itsumo osoi!*)  
Oh, you're always slow!

By the way, **mou** is what Japanese cows say.

### Question maker *ka*

**Ka** makes questions, both plain and polite:

子供達はもう食べましたか。  
(*Kodomotachi wa mou tabemashita ka.*)  
Have the kids already eaten?

ジェニーの傘を借りたか。  
(*Jennie no kasa o karita ka.*)  
Did you borrow Jennie's umbrella?

When it comes to making questions, there are both written and unwritten rules that will keep you wondering. While **ka** can be used in most instances, there are times when **no** is preferred. These can be interchangeable in some cases, but not in others. Both of them — **no ka** — are even used together sometimes. For more about questions, see Lesson 12 of my *Japanese Verbs*.

### Empasizer *yo*

**Yo** is usually used at the end of a short phrase or sentence. Its nuances are not easy to define, but it generally has two purposes: to emphasize an action, or to brag about one:

部屋を掃除しましたよ。  
(*Heya o souji shimashita yo.*)  
I DID clean the room.

英語の試験、合格したよ。  
(*Eigo no shiken, goukaku shita yo.*)

(Of course) I passed the English exam.

Note: As in English, to correctly use the “brag” version you have to keep a straight, matter-of-fact, “no big deal” face.

### **Terribly overused *ne***

The correct place for *ne* is at the end of a sentence, where it is used to check or request the agreement of the listener:

明日、私達と一緒にいきますね。  
(*Ashita, watashitachi to issho ni ikimasu ne.*)  
You're going with us tomorrow, right?

いいお天気ですね。  
(*Ii otenki desu ne.*)  
Nice weather, isn't it. (with a falling intonation)

However, like “y'know” in English, too many people have the habit of grossly overusing *ne*. I've even heard speeches where it was put between almost every word. Be careful not to overdo it.

### **Quasi-adjective indicator *na***

In the world of Japanese adjectives, there are “true” and “quasi” types. When a “quasi-adjective” modifies a noun in a straightforward manner, *na* goes in between:

その店は便利な場所にある。  
(*Sono mise wa benri na basho ni aru.*)  
That store's in a convenient place.

大きな犬ですね。  
(*Ooki na inu desu ne.*)  
That's a big dog, isn't it. (with a falling intonation)

Changing *na* to *ni* converts quasi-adjectives to adverbs:

だれでも簡単にできますよ。  
(*Dare demo kantan ni dekimasu yo.*)  
Anyone can do it easily.

See my *Japanese Adjectives* for more.

*Na* may sometimes be heard here and there in familiar situations as a substitute for *ne*. This is considered impolite at best, and should be avoided.