

Persistent Puzzles Cheat Sheet

The top 5 persistent puzzles in Japanese are は & が, わけ, 気, かける, and いう.

I'll start off by explaining a few general principles to keep in mind, and then jump into the 3 sentence guideline for each puzzle as well as some examples to help make it clear how the guideline applies.

I recommend reading the guideline, then reading through the example sentences, and then reading through the guideline once more.

Notes to Keep in Mind:

- In Japanese, words that represent physical objects or actions are often used metaphorically to refer to abstract concepts. This is often the case for persistent puzzles.
- In Japanese, there are many “set phrases” which have specific and unpredictable meanings. For example, “気になる” means “to be concerned about something”. But, it wouldn't be possible to predict this meaning just by understanding what “気” and “なる” each mean individually. Because of this, you need to memorize the meaning of set phrases on a case-by-case basis.
- When a persistent puzzle occurs within a set phrase, it still represents the same core concept. Although set phrases must be learned on a case-by-case basis, keeping the core concept in mind will make it easier to understand and remember.

は & が

Guideline:

The は particle marks the topic, while the が particle marks the subject. Regardless of what anyone else tells you, this is *always* the case. When thinking in those terms aren't helpful, keep in mind that, in general, は **emphasizes what comes after it, while が emphasizes what comes before it.**

Examples:

- ● わたしは学生です = What am I? I am a student!
- ←
● わたしが学生です = Who's a student? It is I who is a student!

訳(わけ)

Guideline:

The core concept behind わけ is “logic”. I don't mean “logic” in the sense of sitting down and thinking through a problem. I specifically mean it in the sense of **“the underlying reasons or cause that went into creating an action, state or situation.”**

Examples:

- やったわけを教えろ = Explain the reason you did it (explain the logic behind why you did it)
- 妹がこんなに可愛いわけがない = My little sister can't be this cute (there is no logic that says my sister is this cute)

- お母さんは美人だね！妹がかわいいわけだ = Your mom is beautiful! No wonder your little sister is so cute (that must be the **logic** behind your little sister being so cute)
- 妹がなに言ってるのかわけがわからない = What my little sister is saying makes no sense (I don't understand the **logic** behind what my sister is saying)
- 妹が好きなわけじゃない = It's not the case that I like my little sister ("liking my little sister" is not the **logic** of the situation)

気(き)

Guideline:

The core concept behind 気 is “qi”, which in Eastern philosophy is "believed to be a vital force forming part of any living entity" (source: [Wikipedia](#)). Basically, think [Dragonball Z](#). **Most often, it's used metaphorically to refer to thoughts and feelings.**

Examples:

- 気づく = To notice (to have **qi** come about)
- そんな気はない = I don't have any **intention** of doing that (I don't have that kind of **qi**)
- 彼女に気がある = He has a crush on her (he has **qi** towards her)
- そんな気がする = I have a hunch that is the case (I sense that kind of **qi**)
 - In this case, する means “to experience” or “to sense”
- 点数を気にする = To care about your score (to turn your score into **qi**)
 - “Xにする” means to “to turn into X”

- 点数が気になる = To be concerned about your score (to have your score turn into *qi*)
 - While “気にする” has the nuance of *choosing* to care about something, “気になる” has the nuance of simply being bothered by something *involuntarily*.

掛(か)ける

Guideline:

The core concept behind かける is the *physical motion* of “placing something on top of something else”. Oftentimes かける is used metaphorically. When confused about a specific usage of かける, try to view the usage as a metaphor for a physical action.

Examples:

- 醤油をかける = To pour soy sauce (to *place* soy sauce *on top of* rice, etc.)
- 掃除機をかける = To vacuum (to *place* a vacuum *on top of* the floor)
- 腰かける = To sit down (to *place* your hips *on top of* a chair, etc.)
- 橋をかける = To build a bridge (to *place* a bridge *on top of* water)
- メガネをかける = To put on glasses (to *place* glasses *on top of* your face)
- 声をかける = To talk to someone (to *lay* your voice *upon* someone)
- 電話をかける = To make a phone call (to *place* a call *upon* someone)
- 金をかける = To spend money on (to *place* money *down on top of* a metaphorical table, etc.)

- 時間をかける = To spend time on (to metaphorically place time down on top of a table, as if it were something physical like money)

言(いう)

Guideline:

The core concept behind 言う is “say”. Its literal usages are straightforward: “to say” and “to be said”. **It’s also used metaphorically within the construction “XというY”, which means “the Y that is called X”** (literally, “the Y that is said as X”).

Examples:

- おはようと言った = He said “good morning”
- あの街には誰も住んでいないと言う = It is said that nobody lives in that town
- 人間という生き物はバカだな = Humans sure are dumb (the living creatures that are called humans are stupid)
 - Another way to translate this sentence might be: “within the category of living creates, the ones called humans are stupid”.
 - By specifying “Humans” as part of the category of “living creatures”, the perspective of the sentence shifts to that of some kind of alien creature who is looking down upon earth.
- 先生という仕事は生徒が思うほど楽じゃない = Being a teacher isn’t as easy as the students think (the job called “teacher” isn’t as easy as the students think)
 - The context this sentence would be used in is a teacher remarking about how difficult their job is.

- If we removed “**という仕事**” from the sentence, the word “**先生**” would become a 2nd person pronoun which refers to the individual teacher making the statement.
- By specifying that “teacher” is a “job”, the sentence becomes a generic statement about being a teacher *in general*, rather than simply referring to the experience of this particular individual teacher.
- **こういう食べ物が好きだ** = I like this kind of food (the food which **is called** “like this” I like)
 - **こう** literally means “like this”
 - Although this doesn’t make sense in English, because this use of **いう** is metaphorical, it’s perfectly fine in Japanese