

Mr. Pole

shirimasen I don't know wakarimasen

When I want to say "I don't know" in Japanese, I always say shirimasen. But I've noticed many Japanese people use wakarimasen more often. These two phrases are supposed to have the same meaning, so what's the difference? Is wakarimasen politer than shirimasen? I'm afraid that I may have been using shirimasen in inappropriate situations.



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5 minute Japanese Class by Hitomi Hirayama

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■■■ As you say, wakarimasen means the same as shirimasen. But there is a difference: If you use shirimasen in conversation, it can sound cold in some cases. But there is no need to worry when you don't know which phrase is more appropriate in a particular situation. The information below may answer your questions concerning these two phrases. But if the difference is still not clear, it may be safer to just use wakarimasen.

"I don't know" in Japanese can be...

- | | |
|--|---|
| <p>しりません
shirimasen
(I don't have any knowledge/information)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can sound abrupt if used too much • can imply "That's not my concern," said in a strong tone of voice |
| <p>わかりません
wakarimasen
(I have no idea)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • can be used in just about any situation • will not be misunderstood as long as not used in a strong tone of voice • can be used in any case concerning the five senses; see below |

e.g.,

Q: Do you know Mr. Kijima?

A: No, I don't know him. しりません shirimasen (implying: "I don't have any information about him.")

Q: $5 \div 0.215 \times 8 \div 24 = ?$

A: I don't know. わかりません wakarimasen (implying: "I learned it before, but I can't answer it.")

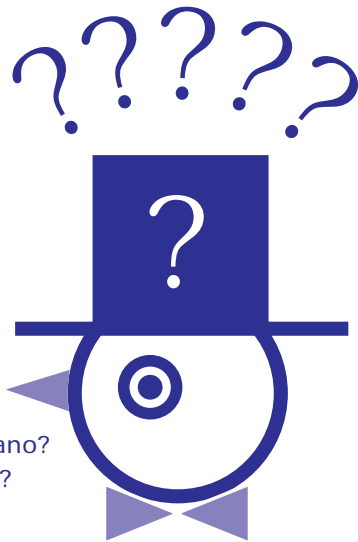
[five senses : sight / hearing / smell / taste / touch]

- sight Q: How high is that mountain?
- hearing Q: Is this the sound of a harpsichord or a piano?
- smell Q: Something smells good. Is that yakitori?
- taste Q: Is this French wine?
- touch Q: Is this carpet wool or synthetic?

Answer : I don't know.

ううん... わかりません
Hssss... wakarimasen

Japanese people often make a "Hsssss" sound when thinking by sucking in their breath through their teeth.



Client : I hear you are going to Kyoto next week.

来週 京都に ① hear you will go 。
raishū Kyoto ni (this information is uncertain)
next week

Are you staying in a hotel or an inn?

ホテルですか。 ② or 旅館ですか。
Hotel desu ka ryokan desu ka

Mr. Pole : Hummmm...I don't know.

③ I don't know. (implying: "I am still thinking about it.")

④ I don't know. (implying: "Someone else is making the decision.")

Client : I see...

Do you know of a good fish restaurant in Kyoto?

京都で魚の美味しいレストラン御存知ですか。
Kyoto de sakana no oishī restaurant gozonji desu ka
polite form of "Do you know"

Mr. Pole : Hummmm...I don't know.

⑤ I don't know. (implying: "I don't know anything about restaurants in Kyoto.")

⑥ I don't know. (implying: "I know a good restaurant in Kyoto, but it is not a fish restaurant.")

"toka" is used to mark uncertain information heard from someone else.
(I hear .. / Someone says...)

-verb (dictionary form)
-noun
-i-adjective
-na-adjective (omit "na")

+ とか toka

e.g., I hear it's impossible.

無理 とか... (言ってみました)
muri toka... (itte-mashita)
impossible someone said

can be omitted

Answers

- ① 行くとか iku toka ② それとも soretomo ③ わかりません wakarimasen ④ 知りません shirimasen ⑤ 知りません shirimasen ⑥ わかりません wakarimasen



知

知る
しる
shiru
aware; know; intelligence

- 私の知る限りでは (as far as I know)
watashi no shiru kagiri dewa
- 知り合い (acquaintance)
shiriai
- 知名度 (degree of fame)
chimēdo
- 世間知らず (be ignorant of the ways of the world, naive)
seken shirazu

A This commodity is not well known, but somehow sells well.

この商品は ① degree of fame が低いです。
kono shōhin wa this commodity ga hikui desu ga, low

なぜかよく売れています。
nazeka yoku ureteimasu
somehow well well-sold

B My father has a wide circle of acquaintances,

父は ② acquaintance が多いですから
chichi wa my father ga oi desu kara many so

so heaps of New Year's cards arrive for him every year.

毎年 年賀状は山のように来ます。
maitoshi nengajō wa yama no yōni kimasu
every year new year card huge amount of arrive

C As far as I know, it has nothing to do with that company.

③ as far as I know あの会社は関係ないですよ。
ano kaisha wa kankē nai desu yo
that company nothing to do with

D Recently, the number of people who are ignorant of the world has been increasing.

最近 ④ be ignorant of the ways of the world, naive
saikin recently

人が増えてきました。
no hito ga fuate-kimashita
person has been increasing

Perhaps it's because they were overprotected when growing up. 多分 過保護で育ったからでしょう。

tabun kahogo de sodatta kara deshō
perhaps overprotection grew up

Answers

- A - 3 B - 2 C - 1 D - 4

With cooperation from Akiko E. Yasukawa