

Quick Japanese Lesson 1: Proper Use of “-San”

In this quick Japanese language lesson, I will explain the proper use of "-San" in Japanese. "-San" is frequently misused by beginning learners of Japanese, but there is a simple rule you can follow that will ensure you get it right every time.

When to Use the "-San" Form of Address in Japanese

"-San," as in Tanaka-san or Smith-san, is a form of Japanese address that just about everyone is familiar with, whether or not they are a learner of the language. "-San" is used to address someone in a polite, somewhat formal manner.

Just as in English we would address someone we don't know that well or someone with a somewhat higher status than us as "Mr." or "Ms.," in Japanese we would use "-San" in much the same way, with one important difference: in Japan, there is a much greater emphasis on formality and politeness, so unless the person you are communicating with is a very close friend or intimate, you should ALWAYS use the "-San" form of address.

In the West, where we tend to be much more informal, we may initially address a person we have just met as "Mr." or "Ms." and then after a few minutes take the liberty of addressing that person by their first name. In Japan, this is a big no-no. Never eliminate the "-san" form of address when speaking to a Japanese person unless specifically invited to do so by that person.

The Most Important Rule on Using "-San" in Japanese

In addition to the above advice, there is one essential rule you must follow regarding the use of "-San" in Japanese. When introducing or referring to yourself, NEVER call yourself "XX-San." So if your name is Mary and you're introducing yourself in Japanese, or even to a Japanese person speaking English, you must never say "I'm Mary-San." In Japanese, you simply never refer to yourself using "-San."

Similarly, and this becomes a bit more complicated, you never address members of your own group using "-San" when speaking to persons outside of your own group. For example, when interacting with a business client or counterpart from another company using "-San," you would never address yourself or someone from your own company as "XXX-San!"

Forms of address in Japanese are actually quite complex and there is much more to the story, so I'll go into more depth in another article. For now, just remember this basic advice on the use of "-San" and you'll be assured of impressing your Japanese counterparts as a well-informed and well-mannered gaijin!

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