How a word works 汉字和拼音

Characters build words

One character is one syllable. Most words are one or two characters, and the parts often explain the word. Learn the parts, and new words start to make sense on their own.

中国	电脑	火车	手机
Zhōngguó	diànnǎo	huǒchē	shǒujī
China	computer	train	mobile phone
中 middle + 国 country	电 electric + 脑 brain	火 fire + 车 vehicle	手 hand + 机 machine

Pinyin is the reading line

Under every word on these pages is its pinyin: how to say it in Latin letters. The mark is the tone. No mark means a light, short tone. Here each character keeps its own tone. 一, 不 and two 3rd tones in a row change when you speak, and the free pinyin chart shows how.

No spaces: Chinese writes words without gaps, so a subtitle line looks like one long string. In Kitsumi, hover a word in Chinese subtitles to see what it means.

Measure words: number + measure word + thing

一个人	两本书	三杯茶
yī gè rén	liǎng běn shū	sān bēi chá
one person	two books	three cups of tea
个 the all-purpose one	本 books	杯 cups and glasses

四只猫	五张票	一件衣服
sì zhī māo	wǔ zhāng piào	yī jiàn yīfu
four cats	five tickets	a piece of clothing
只 most animals	张 flat things	件 clothes, matters

Not sure which one? 个 gè works for most things, and people will understand you. 这 this and 那 that take one too: 这本书, this book.

No plurals, no verb endings

我吃	他吃	我们吃	一本书	三本书
wǒ chī	tā chī	wǒmen chī	yī běn shū	sān běn shū
I eat	he eats	we eat	one book	three books

Words never change. Time words tell you when: 我明天吃, I'll eat tomorrow. Word order is like English, 我爱你, I love you, but time and place come before the verb.

Three little words

了 le
after a verb: it's done.
我吃了。 **Wǒ chī le.** I ate.

吗 ma
at the end: a yes or no question.
你好吗? **Nǐ hǎo ma?** How are you?

的 de
like 's or of: it links.
我的书 **wǒ de shū** my book

The first 227 words 常用词

How: learn five a day, then look for them in Chinese subtitles. *Pink italics* say how a word is used, not what it means.

Greetings and survival

你好 **nǐ hǎo**
hello

您好 **nín hǎo**
hello *(polite)*

早上好 **zǎoshang hǎo**
good morning

晚安 **wǎn'ān**
good night

再见 **zàijiàn**
goodbye

拜拜 **bàibài**
bye-bye *(casual)*

谢谢 **xièxie**
thank you

不客气 **bù kèqi**
you're welcome

对不起 **duìbuqǐ**
I'm sorry

没关系 **méi guānxi**
it's OK, no problem

不好意思 **bù hǎoyìsi**
sorry, excuse me *(a bit embarrassed)*

请 **qǐng**
please

请问 **qǐngwèn**
excuse me, may I ask

是的 **shì de**
yes, that's right

对 **duì**
right, correct

好的 **hǎo de**
OK, sure

不是 **bù shì**
no, it isn't

认识你很高兴 **rènshi nǐ hěn gāoxìng**
nice to meet you

欢迎 **huānyíng**
welcome

我不懂 **wǒ bù dǒng**
I don't understand

我不知道 **wǒ bù zhīdào**
I don't know

干杯 **gānbēi**
cheers!

生日快乐 **shēngrì kuàilè**
happy birthday

好久不见 **hǎojiǔ bù jiàn**
long time no see

Question words

什么 **shénme**
what

谁 **shéi**
who

哪儿 **nǎr**
where

什么时候 **shénme shíhou**
when

为什么 **wèishénme**
why

怎么 **zěnme**
how

多少 **duōshao**
how many, how much

几 **jǐ**
how many *(small numbers)*

哪 **nǎ**
which

怎么样 **zěnmeyàng**
how is it? how about?

Pointing words

这 **zhè**
this

那 **nà**
that

这儿 **zhèr**
here

那儿 **nàr**
there

Me and you

我 **wǒ**
I, me

你 **nǐ**
you

您 **nín**
you *(polite)*

他 **tā**
he, him

她 **tā**
she, her

它 **tā**
it

我们 **wǒmen**
we, us

你们 **nǐmen**
you *(more than one)*

他们 **tāmen**
they, them

名字 **míngzi**
name

叫 **jiào**
to be called

他, 她 and 它 all say tā: he, she and it sound the same. Only the writing tells them apart. 您 nín is the polite you, for older people and strangers.

People and time 人和时间

Family

妈妈 **māma**
mum

爸爸 **bàba**
dad

哥哥 **gēge**
older brother

姐姐 **jiějie**
older sister

弟弟 **dìdi**
younger brother

妹妹 **mèimei**
younger sister

爷爷 **yéye**
grandpa *(dad's dad)*

奶奶 **nǎinai**
grandma *(dad's mum)*

儿子 **érzi**
son

女儿 **nǚ'ér**
daughter

孩子 **háizi**
child

家 **jiā**
home, family

老公 **lǎogōng**
husband *(casual)*

老婆 **lǎopo**
wife *(casual)*

People

人 **rén**
person

朋友 **péngyou**
friend

男人 **nánrén**
man

女人 **nǚrén**
woman

男朋友 **nánpéngyou**
boyfriend

女朋友 **nǚpéngyou**
girlfriend

老师 **lǎoshī**
teacher

学生 **xuésheng**
student

同学 **tóngxué**
classmate

医生 **yīshēng**
doctor

老板 **lǎobǎn**
boss

先生 **xiānsheng**
Mr, sir; husband

小姐 **xiǎojiě**
Miss, young lady

中国人 **Zhōngguórén**
Chinese person

When

今天 **jīntiān**
today

明天 **míngtiān**
tomorrow

昨天 **zuótiān**
yesterday

现在 **xiànzài**
now

早上 **zǎoshang**
morning

中午 **zhōngwǔ**
noon

下午 **xiàwǔ**
afternoon

晚上 **wǎnshang**
evening, night

天 **tiān**
day; sky

年 **nián**
year

月 **yuè**
month; moon

点 **diǎn**
o'clock

分钟 **fēnzhōng**
minute

时间 **shíjiān**
time

周末 **zhōumò**
weekend

Days of the week

星期一 **xīngqīyī**
Monday

星期二 **xīngqī'èr**
Tuesday

星期三 **xīngqīsān**
Wednesday

星期四 **xīngqīsì**
Thursday

星期五 **xīngqīwǔ**
Friday

星期六 **xīngqīliù**
Saturday

星期天 **xīngqītiān**
Sunday

Older or younger: there's no one word for brother or sister. 哥哥 is an older brother, 弟弟 a younger one. Grandparents change too: 爷爷 and 奶奶 are on your dad's side.

Days are numbers: 星期 means week, so Monday is week one, 星期一, up to 星期六. Sunday is 星期天. Months work the same way: 一月 January, 十二月 December.

Numbers and food 数字和食物

Numbers

零 **líng**
0

一 **yī**
1

二 **èr**
2

两 **liǎng**
2 *(before a measure word)*

三 **sān**
3

四 **sì**
4

五 **wǔ**
5

六 **liù**
6

七 **qī**
7

八 **bā**
8

九 **jiǔ**
9

十 **shí**
10

百 **bǎi**
100

千 **qiān**
1,000

万 **wàn**
10,000

Money

钱 **qián**
money

块 **kuài**
yuan *(spoken)*

元 **yuán**
yuan *(written)*

多少钱 **duōshao qián**
how much is it?

Food and drink

饭 **fàn**
meal; cooked rice

米饭 **mǐfàn**
cooked rice

面条 **miàntiáo**
noodles

饺子 **jiǎozi**
dumplings

包子 **bāozi**
steamed bun

菜 **cài**
dish; vegetable

肉 **ròu**
meat

鸡 **jī**
chicken

鱼 **yú**
fish

鸡蛋 **jīdàn**
egg

水果 **shuǐguǒ**
fruit

苹果 **píngguǒ**
apple

水 **shuǐ**
water

茶 **chá**
tea

咖啡 **kāfēi**
coffee

牛奶 **niúnǎi**
milk

啤酒 **píjiǔ**
beer

好吃 **hǎochī**
tasty *(food)*

好喝 **hǎohē**
tasty *(drinks)*

饿 **è**
hungry

渴 **kě**
thirsty

二 or 两: both mean two. Count with 二, and use it inside bigger numbers: 十二, 二十. Before a measure word, say 两: 两个人, two people. 两点, two o'clock.

Build the rest: 11 is 十一, 20 is 二十, 25 is 二十五, 300 is 三百. Big numbers go in ten thousands, so 50,000 is 五万, five ten thousands.

Places, things, verbs 地方、东西、动词

Verbs never change: 去 is go, goes, went and will go. Say not with 不: 不去, not going. For the past, use 没: 没去, didn't go. 有 always takes 没: 没有.

Places

中国 **Zhōngguó**
China

北京 **Běijīng**
Beijing

学校 **xuéxiào**
school

公司 **gōngsī**
company, office

饭馆 **fànguǎn**
restaurant

商店 **shāngdiàn**
shop

超市 **chāoshì**
supermarket

医院 **yīyuàn**
hospital

厕所 **cèsuǒ**
toilet

洗手间 **xǐshǒujiān**
restroom *(more polite)*

机场 **jīchǎng**
airport

地铁 **dìtiě**
metro, subway

Things

手机 **shǒujī**
mobile phone

电脑 **diànnǎo**
computer

书 **shū**
book

东西 **dōngxi**
thing, stuff

衣服 **yīfu**
clothes

车 **chē**
car, vehicle

票 **piào**
ticket

猫 **māo**
cat

狗 **gǒu**
dog

Verbs

是 **shì**
to be *(am, is, are)*

有 **yǒu**
to have; there is

没有 **méiyǒu**
not have; there isn't

去 **qù**
to go

来 **lái**
to come

吃 **chī**
to eat

喝 **hē**
to drink

看 **kàn**
to look, watch, read

听 **tīng**
to listen

说 **shuō**
to speak, say

做 **zuò**
to do, make

买 **mǎi**
to buy

要 **yào**
to want; will

想 **xiǎng**
to want to; think; miss

喜欢 **xǐhuan**
to like

爱 **ài**
to love

知道 **zhīdào**
to know *(a fact)*

认识 **rènshi**
to know *(a person)*

学习 **xuéxí**
to study

工作 **gōngzuò**
to work; a job

睡觉 **shuìjiào**
to sleep

等 **děng**
to wait

会 **huì**
can *(a learned skill)*; will

Describing words

大 / 小 **dà / xiǎo**
big / small

多 / 少 **duō / shǎo**
many / few

好 / 坏 **hǎo / huài**
good / bad

热 / 冷 **rè / lěng**
hot / cold

贵 / 便宜 **guì / piányi**
expensive / cheap

快 / 慢 **kuài / màn**
fast / slow

新 / 旧 **xīn / jiù**
new / old *(things)*

忙 **máng**
busy

累 **lèi**
tired

漂亮 **piàoliang**
pretty

可爱 **kě'ài**
cute

高兴 **gāoxìng**
happy, glad

很 **hěn**
very *(often just links)*

太 **tài**
too, so

No 是 before a describing word: 我很忙 wǒ hěn máng is I'm busy. 很 is there to link, so it hardly means very at all.

Words you hear in shows 剧里的词

Reactions

加油 **jiāyóu**
come on! you've got this! *(literally: add oil)*

好吧 **hǎo ba**
fine, OK then

真的吗 **zhēn de ma**
really?

怎么了 **zěnme le**
what's wrong? what happened?

没事 **méi shì**
it's nothing, I'm fine

天哪 **tiān na**
oh my god!

我的天 **wǒ de tiān**
oh my god! *(literally: my heavens)*

哇 **wā**
wow!

走吧 **zǒu ba**
let's go

等一下 **děng yīxià**
wait a moment

算了 **suàn le**
forget it, never mind

不会吧 **bù huì ba**
no way!

哎呀 **āiyā**
oh no! ugh!

是啊 **shì a**
yeah, right

厉害 **lìhai**
amazing, so good

放心 **fàngxīn**
don't worry

小心 **xiǎoxīn**
careful!

快点 **kuài diǎn**
hurry up

救命 **jiùmìng**
help!

我爱你 **wǒ ài nǐ**
I love you

Rude: on screen only

笨蛋 **bèndàn**
idiot, dummy

闭嘴 **bì zuǐ**
shut up

讨厌 **tǎoyàn**
so annoying *(often playful)*

The light endings: 吧 ba, 了 le, 吗 ma and 啊 a have no tone of their own. They add the mood: 吧 suggests, 了 says something changed, 啊 adds feeling. The word in front keeps its tone, even shouted: 加油 is still jiā, high and flat, then yóu, rising.

Practice: read it before you peek

How: cover the grey lines with a strip of paper. Read the characters out loud, then slide it down to check. 在 means at or in, 也 also, 都 all, and 不 is not.

1. 你叫什么名字?
Nǐ jiào shénme míngzi?
What's your name?

2. 我是学生。
Wǒ shì xuésheng.
I'm a student.

3. 厕所在哪儿?
Cèsuǒ zài nǎr?
Where is the toilet?

4. 这个多少钱?
Zhège duōshao qián?
How much is this?

5. 我要一杯咖啡。
Wǒ yào yī bēi kāfēi.
I'd like a coffee.

6. 我喜欢吃饺子。
Wǒ xǐhuan chī jiǎozi.
I like eating dumplings.

7. 今天太热了!
Jīntiān tài rè le!
It's so hot today!

8. 明天我去北京。
Míngtiān wǒ qù Běijīng.
Tomorrow I'm going to Beijing.

9. 你吃饭了吗?
Nǐ chī fàn le ma?
Have you eaten? (a friendly hello)

10. 我会说一点儿中文。
Wǒ huì shuō yīdiǎnr Zhōngwén.
I can speak a little Chinese.