Sentence order 语序

The order: who, when, where, do, what

WHO	WHEN	WHERE	DO	WHAT
我	今天	在家	吃	饭
wǒ	jīntiān	zài jiā	chī	fàn
I	today	at home	eat	a meal

我今天在家吃饭。 **Wǒ jīntiān zài jiā chī fàn.** I'm eating at home today.

When and where go before the verb. English puts them at the end: I eat at home today. Chinese puts them in front of the verb, time first, then place. The rest is like English: 我爱你, I love you.

他明天在学校学习。
Tā míngtiān zài xuéxiào xuéxí.
He's studying at school tomorrow.

我们晚上在饭馆吃饭。
Wǒmen wǎnshang zài fànguǎn chī fàn.
We're eating at a restaurant tonight.

她周末在家看书。
Tā zhōumò zài jiā kàn shū.
She reads at home at the weekend.

今天我很忙。
Jīntiān wǒ hěn máng.
Today I'm busy. Time can go first too.

Verbs never change: time words do the work

我昨天在家。
Wǒ zuótiān zài jiā.
I was at home yesterday.

我今天在家。
Wǒ jīntiān zài jiā.
I'm at home today.

我明天在家。
Wǒ míngtiān zài jiā.
I'll be at home tomorrow.

Same 在 all three times. No was, no will, no -s for he or she. The time word tells you when, so there's no past form to learn. Page 4 adds the little words for done and doing now.

是 links two nouns

A is B: a person, a thing, a job.

我是学生。
Wǒ shì xuésheng.
I'm a student.

她是我妈妈。
Tā shì wǒ māma.
She's my mum.

这是我的书。
Zhè shì wǒ de shū.
This is my book.

我不是老师。
Wǒ bù shì lǎoshī.
I'm not a teacher.

Describing words take 很, not 是

Not ~~她是高~~. 高, tall, already works like a verb.

她很高。
Tā hěn gāo.
She's tall.

今天很热。
Jīntiān hěn rè.
It's hot today.

中文很难。
Zhōngwén hěn nán.
Chinese is hard.

她不高。
Tā bù gāo.
She isn't tall.

很 is mostly there to link. 她很高 just means she's tall. For a real very, say 非常 fēicháng: 她非常高. In the negative 很 drops out: 她不高.

Meet a word you don't know? In Kitsumi, hover any word in Chinese subtitles to see what it means. Then come back here and spot the pattern.

Asking questions 问句

吗: say it, then add 吗

你是学生。
Nǐ shì xuésheng.
You're a student.

→ 你是学生**吗**?
Nǐ shì xuésheng ma?
Are you a student?

他在家。
Tā zài jiā.
He's at home.

→ 他在家**吗**?
Tā zài jiā ma?
Is he at home?

你喜欢中国菜。
Nǐ xǐhuan Zhōngguó cài.
You like Chinese food.

→ 你喜欢中国菜**吗**?
Nǐ xǐhuan Zhōngguó cài ma?
Do you like Chinese food?

Answering: Chinese has no one word for yes or no. Repeat the verb instead: 是 or 不是, 在 or 不在, 喜欢 or 不喜欢. 对 duì, right, works too.

Question words stay where the answer goes

你去北京。
Nǐ qù Běijīng.
You're going to Beijing.

→ 你去**哪儿**?
Nǐ qù nǎr?
Where are you going?

他是我哥哥。
Tā shì wǒ gēge.
He's my older brother.

→ 他是**谁**?
Tā shì shéi?
Who is he?

你吃饺子。
Nǐ chī jiǎozi.
You're eating dumplings.

→ 你吃**什么**?
Nǐ chī shénme?
What are you eating?

你明天来。
Nǐ míngtiān lái.
You're coming tomorrow.

→ 你**什么时候**来?
Nǐ shénme shíhou lái?
When are you coming?

这个三块钱。
Zhège sān kuài qián.
This is three yuan.

→ 这个**多少**钱?
Zhège duōshao qián?
How much is this?

Nothing moves, and no 吗. English moves where to the front. Chinese leaves 哪儿 in the spot where Beijing was. The question word already makes it a question, so 吗 stays off.

A-not-A: verb 不 verb

The same as 吗, just a bit more direct. 有 takes 没: 有没有.

你去**不去**?
Nǐ qù bù qù?
Are you going or not?

你是**不是**学生?
Nǐ shì bù shì xuésheng?
Are you a student?

好**不好**?
Hǎo bù hǎo?
Is that OK?

你**有没有**时间?
Nǐ yǒu méiyǒu shíjiān?
Do you have time?

呢: and you?

After a person or thing, it bounces the question back without repeating it. On its own it asks where something is.

我很好，你**呢**?
Wǒ hěn hǎo, nǐ ne?
I'm good, and you?

他**呢**?
Tā ne?
What about him?

我的手机**呢**?
Wǒ de shǒujī ne?
Where's my phone?

吧: let's, or right?

Two jobs: a soft suggestion, and checking something you think is true.

我们走**吧**。
Wǒmen zǒu ba.
Let's go.

吃饭**吧**。
Chī fàn ba.
Let's eat.

你是老师**吧**?
Nǐ shì lǎoshī ba?
You're a teacher, right?

你饿了**吧**?
Nǐ è le ba?
You're hungry, aren't you?

In speech the 不 in the middle of A-not-A goes light and quick: qù bu qù. In subtitles, questions end in a full-width ？, so they are easy to spot.

Measure words 量词

3 · number + measure word + thing

NUMBER	MEASURE WORD	THING
三	本	书
sān	běn	shū
three	for books	book

Like a cup of tea, but for everything. English says a cup of tea or a pair of shoes. Chinese does it with every noun: a number can't sit right next to a thing, so a measure word goes in between.

个: when in doubt

一个人
yī gè rén
one person

三个苹果
sān gè píngguǒ
three apples

两个朋友
liǎng gè péngyou
two friends

一个问题
yī gè wèntí
a question

个 works for most things, and people will understand you even where another word is usual. In speech it's light: yī ge rén.

Nine more you'll hear all the time

本 běn books

两本书
liǎng běn shū
two books

一本词典
yī běn cídiǎn
a dictionary

张 zhāng flat things: paper, tickets, tables

一张票
yī zhāng piào
a ticket

三张照片
sān zhāng zhàopiàn
three photos

只 zhī most animals

一只猫
yī zhī māo
a cat

两只狗
liǎng zhī gǒu
two dogs

杯 bēi cups and glasses

一杯咖啡
yī bēi kāfēi
a coffee

两杯水
liǎng bēi shuǐ
two glasses of water

件 jiàn clothes, and matters

一件衣服
yī jiàn yīfu
a piece of clothing

一件事
yī jiàn shì
a matter, a thing to do

辆 liàng vehicles

一辆车
yī liàng chē
a car

两辆自行车
liǎng liàng zìxíngchē
two bikes

位 wèi people, politely

一位老师
yī wèi lǎoshī
a teacher

几位?
jǐ wèi?
how many of you? (at a restaurant)

条 tiáo long, thin things

一条鱼
yī tiáo yú
a fish

一条裤子
yī tiáo kùzi
a pair of trousers

双 shuāng pairs

一双鞋
yī shuāng xié
a pair of shoes

一双筷子
yī shuāng kuàizi
a pair of chopsticks

这 this, 那 that, 哪 which take one too

这 or 那, then the measure word, then the thing. Leave the thing off when it's clear.

这个人
zhège rén
this person

那本书
nà běn shū
that book

哪个?
nǎge?
which one?

我要这个。
Wǒ yào zhège.
I'll take this one.

两, not 二, before a measure word

Both mean two. Count with 二 and use it inside bigger numbers. In front of a measure word, it's 两.

两个人
liǎng gè rén
two people

两杯咖啡
liǎng bēi kāfēi
two coffees

十二个人
shí'èr gè rén
twelve people

两点
liǎng diǎn
two o'clock

Done, ever, doing now 了 • 过 • 在

4 · no tenses, just little words

了 le: done, or a change

Not a past tense. 了 says something happened, or that things are now different.

我买了一本书。
Wǒ mǎi le yī běn shū.
I bought a book. Done.

他来了。
Tā lái le.
He's here. He came.

下雨了。
Xià yǔ le.
It's started raining. A change.

我不忙了。
Wǒ bù máng le.
I'm not busy any more.

过 guo: ever done, at some point

For experience: you've done it at least once.

我去过中国。
Wǒ qù guo Zhōngguó.
I've been to China.

你吃过饺子吗?
Nǐ chī guo jiǎozi ma?
Have you ever had dumplings?

我去了北京。
Wǒ qù le Běijīng.
I went to Beijing: this trip.

我去过北京。
Wǒ qù guo Běijīng.
I've been to Beijing: at some point.

在 zài, 正在 zhèngzài: doing it now

Put it before the verb. 正在 stresses right this moment.

我在吃饭。
Wǒ zài chī fàn.
I'm eating.

他正在睡觉。
Tā zhèngzài shuìjiào.
He's sleeping right now.

我在家。
Wǒ zài jiā.
I'm at home. 在 + place: at.

我在看书。
Wǒ zài kàn shū.
I'm reading. 在 + verb: doing.

要 will, want · 会 can, will · 想 would like

All three go before the verb, and the verb never changes.

我要一杯茶。
Wǒ yào yī bēi chá.
I want a tea.

明天要下雨。
Míngtiān yào xià yǔ.
It's going to rain tomorrow.

我会说中文。
Wǒ huì shuō Zhōngwén.
I can speak Chinese. A skill you learned.

他明天会来。
Tā míngtiān huì lái.
He'll come tomorrow.

我想去中国。
Wǒ xiǎng qù Zhōngguó.
I'd like to go to China.

要 or 想? 要 is firm, 想 is softer. 我要喝茶 is I want tea. 我想喝茶 is I'd like some tea. 想 also means miss: 我想你, I miss you.

不 or 没: not, or didn't

不 bù **not, don't, won't** now, habits, the future	没 méi **didn't, haven't** the past, what didn't happen
我不去。 **Wǒ bù qù.** I'm not going. I won't go.	我没去。 **Wǒ méi qù.** I didn't go.
我不吃肉。 **Wǒ bù chī ròu.** I don't eat meat.	我没吃肉。 **Wǒ méi chī ròu.** I didn't eat meat.
他不来。 **Tā bù lái.** He won't come.	他没来。 **Tā méi lái.** He didn't come. He hasn't come.
他不是老师。 **Tā bù shì lǎoshī.** He isn't a teacher. 是 always takes 不.	我没有时间。 **Wǒ méiyǒu shíjiān.** I don't have time. 有 always takes 没.

没 replaces 了: 我去了, I went, turns into 我没去, I didn't go, with no 了. Describing words take 不 like 是 does: 不忙, not busy.

Practice 练习

5 · ten lines from Chinese dramas · cover the right side

How: cover the right side with a strip of paper. Read the line out loud, say what it means and which pattern the pink part is, then slide the strip down to check.

1	你吃饭**了吗**?	**Nǐ chī fàn le ma?** **Have you eaten?** 了 done + 吗 question. A friendly hello, not an invite.
2	我**不**知道。	**Wǒ bù zhīdào.** **I don't know.** 不 + verb: not
3	你去**哪儿**?	**Nǐ qù nǎr?** **Where are you going?** the question word sits where the answer goes
4	我们走**吧**。	**Wǒmen zǒu ba.** **Let's go.** 吧: a suggestion
5	我**没**听懂。	**Wǒ méi tīngdǒng.** **I didn't catch that.** 没: didn't. 听懂 is listen + understand
6	你来**过**这儿**吗**?	**Nǐ lái guo zhèr ma?** **Have you been here before?** 过: ever done, then 吗
7	我**在**等你。	**Wǒ zài děng nǐ.** **I'm waiting for you.** 在 + verb: doing it now
8	我想你**了**。	**Wǒ xiǎng nǐ le.** **I miss you.** 想 is miss here. 了: a feeling that has set in
9	你**是谁**?	**Nǐ shì shéi?** **Who are you?** 是 links, and 谁 sits where the answer goes
10	**别**走。	**Bié zǒu.** **Don't go.** 别: don't, when you tell someone not to

Your turn: make the sentence

1	他是老师。 **ask with 吗**	他是老师吗? **Tā shì lǎoshī ma?**
2	你去。 **ask with verb 不 verb**	你去不去? **Nǐ qù bù qù?**
3	你吃饺子。 **ask what**	你吃什么? **Nǐ chī shénme?**
4	我去了。 **say you didn't**	我没去。 **Wǒ méi qù.**
5	一 + 书 **add the measure word**	一本书 **yī běn shū**
6	2 + 咖啡 **two cups**	两杯咖啡 **liǎng bēi kāfēi**
7	她 + 漂亮 **she's pretty**	她很漂亮。 **Tā hěn piàoliang.**
8	我去北京。 **you've been there**	我去过北京。 **Wǒ qù guo Běijīng.**

Next: listen for these in a drama you like. Once you've heard 你去哪儿 and 我没听懂 a few times, the patterns start to jump out on their own.