# Time without tenses 时间



| YESTERDAY | TODAY | TOMORROW |
|---|---|---|
| 我昨天很忙。 | 我今天很忙。 | 我明天很忙。 |
| **Wǒ zuótiān hěn máng.** | **Wǒ jīntiān hěn máng.** | **Wǒ míngtiān hěn máng.** |
| I was busy yesterday. | I'm busy today. | I'll be busy tomorrow. |

**The verb never changes.** English changes the verb: I was busy, I'm busy, I'll be busy. Chinese keeps 忙 the same every time and lets a time word say when. There's no past form to learn.

## Time words do the work

They go near the start, before the verb. Once the time is clear, the rest of the sentence doesn't need to show it again.

我现在很累。
**Wǒ xiànzài hěn lèi.**
I'm tired now.

他已经走了。
**Tā yǐjīng zǒu le.**
He's already left.

她以前是老师。
**Tā yǐqián shì lǎoshī.**
She used to be a teacher.

我每天喝茶。
**Wǒ měi tiān hē chá.**
I drink tea every day.

我明天去上海。
**Wǒ míngtiān qù Shànghǎi.**
I'm going to Shanghai tomorrow.

我们下个月见。
**Wǒmen xià ge yuè jiàn.**
See you next month.

## Three little words, straight after the verb

### 了 le — done, or a change

The action happened, or the situation is new.

他来了。
**Tā lái le.**
He's here now.

### 过 guo — ever, at some point

You've done it at least once before.

我去过上海。
**Wǒ qù guo Shànghǎi.**
I've been to Shanghai.

### 着 zhe — a state that lasts

Something stays the way it is.

灯开着。
**Dēng kāi zhe.**
The light's on.

## One verb, four ways

看 never changes. The little word next to it does the work.

我在看。
**Wǒ zài kàn.**
I'm watching.

我看了。
**Wǒ kàn le.**
I've watched it.

我看过。
**Wǒ kàn guo.**
I've seen it before.

他看着我。
**Tā kàn zhe wǒ.**
He's looking at me.

**And 在 zài, before the verb:** it says you're in the middle of doing something: 我在吃饭, I'm eating. Page 5 puts it next to 着.

**Tones on this sheet:** 了, 过 and 着 are light, so they're written le, guo and zhe with no tone mark. 一 and 不 are written as said, like on our measure words sheet: 一本 yì běn, 一个 yí ge, 不去 bú qù. Two 3rd tones in a row keep their dictionary marks: 我买 is written wǒ mǎi but said wó mǎi.

# 了 after a verb 完成



| WHO | VERB + 了 | HOW MANY, WHICH |
|---|---|---|
| 我 | 买了 | 三本书 |
| wǒ | mǎi le | sān běn shū |
| I | bought | three books |

**了 says it happened.** Put 了 straight after the verb and the action is complete: it took place, as a whole. It's about the action being done, not about the past.

## With a number or a detail

This is where verb + 了 feels most at home: how many, how long, or which one.

她喝了两杯咖啡。
**Tā hē le liǎng bēi kāfēi.**
She had two coffees.

我看了那部电影。
**Wǒ kàn le nà bù diànyǐng.**
I saw that film.

我们吃了很多饺子。
**Wǒmen chī le hěn duō jiǎozi.**
We ate loads of dumplings.

他等了一个小时。
**Tā děng le yí ge xiǎoshí.**
He waited for an hour.

## A bare noun sounds unfinished

With just 饭 after it, there seems to be more coming. Add a detail, or put 了 at the end.

我吃了饭……
**Wǒ chī le fàn...**
I ate, and then...?

我吃了一碗饭。
**Wǒ chī le yì wǎn fàn.**
I had a bowl of rice.

我吃饭了。
**Wǒ chī fàn le.**
I've eaten. 了 at the end: page 3.

## 了 isn't the past

It can be in the future, as long as one thing is done before the next. And past habits don't take it.

我吃了饭就走。
**Wǒ chī le fàn jiù zǒu.**
I'll go once I've eaten.

明天下了课我去找你。
**Míngtiān xià le kè wǒ qù zhǎo nǐ.**
Tomorrow, after class, I'll come and find you.

他以前每天跑步。
**Tā yǐqián měi tiān pǎobù.**
He used to run every day: the past, and no 了.

## No: 没 or 没有, and the 了 goes

没 already says it didn't happen, so 了 drops out.

~~我没吃了饭~~
not this

我没吃饭。
**Wǒ méi chī fàn.**
I haven't eaten.

他没有来。
**Tā méiyǒu lái.**
He didn't come.

我还没买。
**Wǒ hái méi mǎi.**
I haven't bought it yet.

## 不 or 没?

不 is for won't and don't: now, habits, the future. 没 is for didn't and haven't.

我不去。
**Wǒ bú qù.**
I'm not going.

我没去。
**Wǒ méi qù.**
I didn't go.

## Asking, and answering

Between friends, 你吃了吗? is often just a friendly hello, a bit like how are you.

你吃了吗?
**Nǐ chī le ma?**
Have you eaten?

你吃了没有?
**Nǐ chī le méiyǒu?**
Have you eaten or not?

吃了。
**Chī le.**
Yes, I have.

还没吃呢。
**Hái méi chī ne.**
Not yet.

# 了 at the end 变化

3 · biànhuà · a change, a new situation

**了 at the end says things have changed.** Not that an action is done, but that the situation is new: it wasn't raining, and now it is. Often it means now, already or any more.

下雨了。
**Xià yǔ le.**
It's raining. It wasn't before.

我饿了。
**Wǒ è le.**
I'm hungry now.

他二十岁了。
**Tā èrshí suì le.**
He's twenty now.

不去了。
**Bú qù le.**
I'm not going after all.

天黑了。
**Tiān hēi le.**
It's got dark.

我懂了。
**Wǒ dǒng le.**
Now I get it.

我不喝酒了。
**Wǒ bù hē jiǔ le.**
I don't drink any more.

十点了。
**Shí diǎn le.**
It's ten o'clock already.

## 太 + describing word + 了

So, or too. Excited or complaining, you'll hear it all the time.

太好了！
**Tài hǎo le!**
Great!

太贵了。
**Tài guì le.**
It's too expensive.

太好吃了！
**Tài hǎochī le!**
It's so good!

## 快...了 and 要...了: about to

Here nothing has happened yet: 了 marks the change that's coming.

快到了。
**Kuài dào le.**
We're nearly there.

要下雨了。
**Yào xià yǔ le.**
It's going to rain.

我快好了。
**Wǒ kuài hǎo le.**
I'm nearly ready.

## Both 了 in one sentence

One after the verb and one at the end: done so far, and still going.

我吃了三碗饭。
**Wǒ chī le sān wǎn fàn.**
I had three bowls of rice. That meal, done.

我吃了三碗饭了。
**Wǒ chī le sān wǎn fàn le.**
I've had three bowls so far, and I might have more.

我学了两年中文了。
**Wǒ xué le liǎng nián Zhōngwén le.**
I've been learning Chinese for two years, and still am.

## From shows

Short lines with 了 at the end. 别...了 means stop doing it, and 我走了 is what you say as you leave: the change is about to happen.

好了。
**Hǎo le.**
OK, done.

算了。
**Suàn le.**
Forget it.

我走了。
**Wǒ zǒu le.**
I'm off.

来了！
**Lái le!**
Coming!

别哭了。
**Bié kū le.**
Stop crying.

够了！
**Gòu le!**
That's enough!

**When the verb comes last,** one 了 does both jobs: 他来了 is he came, and he's here now. Native speakers move between the two freely, and you'll hear 了 in places no rule quite explains. Get these two uses down and let the rest come from listening.

# 过 for ever 经历



**过 says you've done it at least once.** Some time before now, it doesn't matter when. It's about experience: it has happened to you, and it's over.

你去过北京吗?
**Nǐ qù guo Běijīng ma?**
Have you ever been to Beijing?

你吃过北京烤鸭吗?
**Nǐ chī guo Běijīng kǎoyā ma?**
Have you ever had Peking duck?

我看过这部电影。
**Wǒ kàn guo zhè bù diànyǐng.**
I've seen this film before.

我学过一点儿中文。
**Wǒ xué guo yìdiǎnr Zhōngwén.**
I've learnt a bit of Chinese.

我见过他。
**Wǒ jiàn guo tā.**
I've met him before.

我以前学过钢琴。
**Wǒ yǐqián xué guo gāngqín.**
I've had piano lessons before.

## No: 没...过, and 过 stays

没 pushes 了 out, but 过 keeps its place. 从来没 makes it never ever.

我没去过上海。
**Wǒ méi qù guo Shànghǎi.**
I've never been to Shanghai.

我从来没吃过。
**Wǒ cónglái méi chī guo.**
I've never ever had it.

你看过没有?
**Nǐ kàn guo méiyǒu?**
Have you seen it or not?

## 过 or 了?

了 is one event. 过 is experience, and it's over.

他去了上海。
**Tā qù le Shànghǎi.**
He's gone to Shanghai. He may still be there.

他去过上海。
**Tā qù guo Shànghǎi.**
He's been to Shanghai. He's back now.

我看了那本书。
**Wǒ kàn le nà běn shū.**
I read that book. That one time.

我看过那本书。
**Wǒ kàn guo nà běn shū.**
I've read that book. I know it.

## Short answers

Answer with the verb and 过. No yes or no needed.

你去过几次?
**Nǐ qù guo jǐ cì?**
How many times?

去过。
**Qù guo.**
Yes, I have.

没去过。
**Méi qù guo.**
No, never.

去过两次。
**Qù guo liǎng cì.**
Twice.

## You'll also hear 过 for already done

Ask 你吃了吗? and the answer is often this. Here 过 is close to 了: the meal is behind you.

我吃过了。
**Wǒ chī guo le.**
I've already eaten.

**过 goes well with 以前 and 从来.** 以前, before, and 从来没, never ever, are its usual partners. With an exact time like 昨天, 了 is usually the one you want: one event at one time.

# 着 and 在 持续

5 · chíxù · a state that lasts, or doing it now

**着 says a state is lasting.** Something was done, and now it just stays that way: someone opened the window, and now it's open. It describes a scene more than it tells a story.

窗户开着。
**Chuānghu kāi zhe.**
The window's open.

墙上挂着一张画。
**Qiáng shang guà zhe yì zhāng huà.**
There's a picture on the wall.

桌子上放着一本书。
**Zhuōzi shang fàng zhe yì běn shū.**
There's a book on the table.

她戴着眼镜。
**Tā dài zhe yǎnjìng.**
She's wearing glasses.

他拿着一杯咖啡。
**Tā ná zhe yì bēi kāfēi.**
He's holding a coffee.

门口站着一个人。
**Ménkǒu zhàn zhe yí ge rén.**
There's someone standing at the door.

## Verb + 着, then another verb

The first verb with 着 says how you do the second.

他躺着看书。
**Tā tǎng zhe kàn shū.**
He reads lying down.

我们坐着聊吧。
**Wǒmen zuò zhe liáo ba.**
Let's sit down and chat.

## In commands, and 说着说着

Doubled, verb + 着 says while you were at it, something happened.

你等着！
**Nǐ děng zhe!**
Just you wait!

听着！
**Tīng zhe!**
Listen to me.

说着说着，她就哭了。
**Shuō zhe shuō zhe, tā jiù kū le.**
She was talking, and then she burst into tears.

## 在 and 正在: in the middle of doing

Before the verb. 正在 stresses right this moment, and 呢 at the end is common in speech.

我在看电视。
**Wǒ zài kàn diànshì.**
I'm watching TV.

他正在开会。
**Tā zhèngzài kāi huì.**
He's in a meeting right now.

他们在吃饭呢。
**Tāmen zài chī fàn ne.**
They're eating.

## 在 or 着?

在 is the action going on. 着 is the state it leaves behind.

他在开门。
**Tā zài kāi mén.**
He's opening the door: the action.

门开着。
**Mén kāi zhe.**
The door's open: the result.

他在穿衣服。
**Tā zài chuān yīfu.**
He's getting dressed: the action.

他穿着红衣服。
**Tā chuān zhe hóng yīfu.**
He's wearing red: the result.

## From shows

Two with 着 you'll hear in dramas all the time, and two with 在.

慢着！
**Màn zhe!**
Hold on! Wait!

走着瞧！
**Zǒu zhe qiáo!**
We'll see about that!

我在听。
**Wǒ zài tīng.**
I'm listening.

你在说什么？
**Nǐ zài shuō shénme?**
What are you talking about?

**着 needs a verb that can go on:** sitting, standing, holding, wearing, being open. A verb that's over in a moment, like 到, arrive, doesn't take it.

# Practice 练习



**How:** cover the answers on the right with a strip of paper. Read each line out loud with the word you think fits, then check. Where the gap is tells you a lot: 在 goes before the verb, the other three after it.

1 他喝____三杯咖啡。
**Tā hē ____ sān bēi kāfēi.**
He drank three coffees.
了 done p2

2 你____干什么?
**Nǐ ____ gàn shénme?**
What are you doing?
在 now p5

3 下雪____!
**Xià xuě ____!**
It's snowing!
了 change p3

4 我从来没坐____飞机。
**Wǒ cónglái méi zuò ____ fēijī.**
I've never been on a plane.
过 ever p4

5 灯还亮____。
**Dēng hái liàng ____.**
The light's still on.
着 state p5

6 我买____一辆新车。
**Wǒ mǎi ____ yí liàng xīn chē.**
I've bought a new car.
了 done p2

7 妈妈____做饭呢。
**Māma ____ zuò fàn ne.**
Mum's cooking.
在 now p5

8 这个太大____。
**Zhège tài dà ____.**
This one's too big.
了 太...了 p3

9 我们以前见____吗?
**Wǒmen yǐqián jiàn ____ ma?**
Have we met before?
过 ever p4

10 我们走____去吧。
**Wǒmen zǒu ____ qù ba.**
Let's walk there.
着 how p5

11 电影已经开始____。
**Diànyǐng yǐjīng kāishǐ ____.**
The film's already started.
了 done p2

12 孩子们____睡觉。
**Háizimen ____ shuìjiào.**
The children are sleeping.
在 now p5

13 火车快到____。
**Huǒchē kuài dào ____.**
The train's nearly here.
了 快...了 p3

14 拿____，这是给你的。
**Ná ____, zhè shì gěi nǐ de.**
Here, take it, it's for you.
着 state p5

15 他没去____北京。
**Tā méi qù ____ Běijīng.**
He's never been to Beijing.
过 ever p4

16 我困____。
**Wǒ kùn ____.**
I'm sleepy now.
了 change p3

17 他____打电话，你等一下。
**Tā ____ dǎ diànhuà, nǐ děng yíxià.**
He's on the phone, hang on.
在 now p5

18 我还没听____这首歌。
**Wǒ hái méi tīng ____ zhè shǒu gē.**
I haven't heard this song before.
过 ever p4

19 他笑____说没关系。
**Tā xiào ____ shuō méi guānxi.**
He said with a smile that it was fine.
着 how p5

20 我昨天看____两个小时电视。
**Wǒ zuótiān kàn ____ liǎng ge xiǎoshí diànshì.**
I watched two hours of TV yesterday.
了 done p2

**Hear a 了 you can't place?** In Kitsumi, hover any word in subtitles to see what it means. Then come back to pages 2 and 3 and see which 了 it is.