

Character Builder 您好嗎？

The basic unit of the Chinese language is the *zi* (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each *zi* has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string *zi* together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each *zi* is pronounced in one of four tones:

- 1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
- 2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
- 3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
- 4th tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest)

To pronounce each *zi* below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about water

滴

Putonghua pronunciation: *di1*

Cantonese pronunciation: *dik1*

Meanings: drip, drop, droplet

滴 means drop/droplet or dripping: 滴淚 (*di1 lei4* = drop/shed-tears), 淚滴 (*lei4 di1* = tear-drop). 滴水不漏 (*di1 shui3 bu4 lou4* = drop-of-water-no-spill) describes tightly-sealed contained/secrets. 滴血 (*di1 xue3* = drop-of-blood) also describes blood-dripping wound or painfully-grieving heart.

滴's pronunciation resembles liquid 滴下 (*di1 xia4* = dripping-down): Rain's 滴滴瀝瀝 (*di1 di0 li1 li0* = pitter-patter), clock's 滴滴答答 (*di1 di0 da1 da0* = tick-tock). Ancient Chinese used 銅壺滴漏 (*tong2 hu2 di1 lou4* = bronze-flask-drip-spill = bronze clepsydra, water-clock) for measuring minutes/hours.

Children recall 點滴 (*dian3 di1* = point-drop = this and that, tit-bits) from deceased parents' lives. Operated patient 打點滴 (*da3 dian3 di1* = hit/take-point-drip = is put on the drip).