

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 speech-making

問

Putonghua pronunciation: *wen4*
Cantonese pronunciation: *man6*
Meaning: ask, question, query

問 (radical 門 *men2*, door + 口 *kou3*, mouth) means ask: 問號 (*wen4 hao4* = question-mark), 問路 (*wen4 lu4* = ask-road = ask for road direction), 問好 (*wen4 hao3* = ask-good = convey fond regards). Nosy person 問長問短 (*wen4 chang2 wen4 duan3* = ask-long-ask-short = asks various/ endless questions),

問題 (*wen2 ti2* = ask-subject) = questions/problems. Investment-fund 出問題 (*chu1 wen4 ti2* = issue-problem = gets into trouble). Investors 質問 (*zhi4 wen4* = challenge-question) fund-manager. Police detains him for 審問 (*shen3 wen4* = trial-questioning).

Street-vendor distributes 問卷 (*wen4 juan4* = ask-scroll = questionnaires), invites passers-by to 提問 (*ti2 wen4* = raise-questions), but 無人過問 (*wu2 ren2 guo4 wen4* = no-person-pass-ask = nobody pays attention).

by Diana Yue