

Character Builder

您好學? 好

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 making selections

質

Putonghua pronunciation: *zhi4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *jat1*

Meaning: matter, quality, nature, substance

質 (radical 貝 *bei4*, seashe) means nature/quality. Physicist explains universe's 本質 (*ben3 zhi4* = original-nature), 物質 (*wu4 zhi4* = thing-quality) = physical matter/substance. Water is 流質 (*liu2 zhi4* = flowing-matter/substance = liquid). Red meat has 鐵質 (*tie3 zhi4* = iron-substance/content). But 貪愛物質 (*tan1 ai4 wu4 zhi4* = greed-love-for-thing-material) means materialistic/materialism.

質檢 (*zhi4 jian3* = quality-check/control) shows imported oil's 質素 (*zhi4 su4* = quality-element = quality) is 高質 (*gao1 zhi4* = high-quality), not 劣質 (*lie4 zhi4* = poor-quality). Deli guarantees steaks' 肉質 (*bu4 zhi4* = meat-quality).

Beauty contest's highly-selective 性質 (*xing4 zhi4* = nature-quality = nature/purpose) puts strict requirements on competitors' 資質 (*zi1 zhi4* = resources-quality = talents), 氣質 (*qi4 zhi4* = air-quality = temperament).

by Diana Yue