

# 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:

- 1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
- 2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
- 3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
- 4<sup>th</sup> 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 pine-trees

材

Putonghua pronunciation: *cai2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *choi4*

Meanings: log, material

材 (木 *mu4*, wood/tree + 才 *cai2*, talent) means usable log/material: 材料 (*cai2 liao4* = materials~ingredients), 器材 (*qi4 cai2* = utensils/equipment~materials), woman's 身材 (*shen1 cai2* = body~log = figure). Builders need 木材 (*mu4 cai2* = wood~material), 鋼材 (*gang4 cai2* = steel~material).

Forests supply 樹材 (*shu4 cai2* = tree~materials = usable wood). Lumberjacks 伐材 (*fa2 cai2* = chop-down~logs). 就地取材 (*jiu4 di4 qü3 cai2* = adjust-to~land~take~material) = use whatever is available there and then.

Teacher compiles 教材 (*jiao4 cai2* = teaching~materials). Writer collects 素材 (*su4 cai2* = raw~materials) for novel's 題材 (*ti2 cai2* = title~materials = story-line/theme). 蠢材 (*chun3 cai2* = stupid~material) = dumb guy. Hardworking guy 成材 (*cheng2 cai2* = becomes~useful-material = achieves success/stature).

by Diana Yue