

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 grasslands

Putonghua pronunciation: *cao* 3

Cantonese pronunciation: *cho* 2

Meanings: grass, herb

草 = grass: 青草 (*qing1 cao3* = green~grass), 草叢 (*cao3 cong2* = grass~clusters), 草地 (*cao3 di4* = grass~land = meadow/lawn), 野草 (*ye2 cao3* = wild~grass = weeds). 稻草人 (*dao4 cao3 ren2* = padi-stem~grass-person = hay human figure) = scarecrow.

Animals graze on 草原 (*cao3 yuan2* = grassy~plains). Nomads 逐水草而居 (*zhu2 shui2 cao3 er2 ju1* = chase/follow~water~grass~and~live/stay = move around to where water and grass are plentiful). Observers watch for 風吹草動 (*feng1 chui1 cao3 dong4* = wind~blow~grass~move = signs of disturbance/action).

Poor peasants wear 草鞋 (*cao3 xie2* = grass/straw~shoe = straw sandals). 草根階層 (*cao3 gen1 jie1 ceng2* = grass~roots~tier~level) means grassroots/lower classes. 草包 (*cao3 bao1* = grass~bag/bun) means illiterate/ignorant person.