

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 Hurricane Sandy

破

Putonghua pronunciation: *po4*

Cantonese pronunciation: *poh3*

Meanings: break, broken, undo

破 (石 *shi2*, rock + 皮 *pi2*, surface) indicates cracked rock-face: 破碗 (*po4 wan3* = broken~bowl), 破車 (*po4 che1* = broken-down~car), 破爛 (*po4 lan4* = broken~tattered rubbish). Athlete 打破 (*da3 po4* = hits-breaks) record. Mathematician 破解 (*po4 jie3* = breaks~unravels) code. 頭破血流 (*tou2 po4 xue3 liu2* = head~broken~blood~flows) describes bleeding head-wound.

Terrible news 石破天驚 (*shi2 po4 tian1 jing* = rock~breaks~sky~fears = shocks the world). Hurricane 破壞 (*po4 huai4* = break~bad = destroys/ruins) houses. 殘破 (*can2 po4* = dilapidated~broken-down) infrastructures need repair.

Delicate things 易破 (*yi4 po4* = easily-break). Marriages/negotiations 破裂 (*po4 lie4* = break~crack = break down), families 破碎 (*po4 cui4* = break~split-up), ideals 破滅 (*po4 mie4* = break~extinct = die).

by Diana Yue