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 IDs

證 (radical yan2, speech/word) means 證據 (zheng4 jü4 = proof/evidence). 证人 (zheng4 ren2 = proof-person/witness) recognizes 證物 (zheng4 wu4 = evidence-articles), 指證 (zhi3 zheng4 = point-prove = testifies against) accused.

證件 (zheng4 jian4 = proof-documents) 證明 (zheng4 ming2 = prove/show-clearly) identity/status: 身份證 (shen1 fen1 zheng4 = body-status-document = ID card), 工作證 (gong1 zuo2 zheng4 = work-do-document = work permit), 登機證 (deng1 ji1 zheng4 = ascend-airplane-document = boarding pass). 鐵證如山 (tie3 zheng4 ru2 shan1 = iron-proof-resemble-mountain) = solid/irrefutable evidence. 死無對證 (si3 wu2 dui4 zheng4 = dead-no-check/matching-proof) means with suspect/victim/witness dead, no cross-examination/proof-verification is possible.

Passport with 簽證 (qian1 zheng4 = sign-evidence = entry visa/permit) enables traveler to cross border.

by Diana Yue