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 contracts

守 (radical ~ mian2, cover) means guard/keep/wait: 守衛 (shou3 wei4 = guard-defend), 守門 (shou3 men2 = guard-doors), 防守 (fang2 shou3 = fence/defense). Soldiers 死守 (si3 shou3 = die-defend = defend to death) besieged city until it 失守 (shi1 shou3 = lose-defend = falls).

守舊 (shou3 jiu4 = keep-old = traditional-minded) people uphold 保守 (bao3 shou3 = preserve-keep = conservative) principles, 守寡 (shou3 gua3 = remain-single/widow = widowed) mother helps son 守業 (shou3 ye4 = safeguard/continue/family-business).

Drivers 遵守 (zhun1 shou3 = obey-observe) traffic 守則 (shou3 ze2 = observe-item = rules). Well-bred people 守法 (shou3 fa3 = obey/observe/the-law), 守信 (shou3 xin4 = keep-trust/ promises), 守約 (shou3 yue1 = keep/honour-appointments/agreements), 守時 (shou3 shi2 = keep-time = observe punctuality).

by Diana Yue