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 quarrelling

指 (radical 手 = shou3, hand) means 手指 (shou3 zhi3 = hand-point = finger). Actions 指定 (zhi3 ding4 = point-fix = appoint/designate), 指示 (zhi3 shi4 = point-demonstrate = order/instruct) use 食指 (shi2 zhi3 = eat-finger = index finger). General 指挥 (zhi3 hu1 = point-wave = orders/cmds) army.

Professor 指导 (zhi3 dao3 = guides-leads/supervises) students, 指出 (zhi3 chu1 = points-out) mistakes, 指責 (zhi3 ze2 = point-rebuke = denounces/condemns) plagiarism. Fortune-teller 指點迷津 (zhi3 dian3 mi2 jin1 = finger-point-lost-stream-source = suggests ways to seek good fate, avoid ill-luck). However, 指指 點點 (zhi3 zhi3 dian3 dian3 = finger-finger-point-point) means nosy-poker/snob's finger-pointing.

Sly slanderer 指桑罵槐 (zhi3 sang1 ma4 huai2 = point-at-mulberry-tree-rebuke-locust-tree = rebukes A while implying/targeting B).

by Diana Yue