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 talents

記 = 記號 (ji hao 44 = record-sign/number = mark/sign), 記錄 (ji lu 44 = remember-record = records), 記憶 (ji yi 41 = remember-recall = memorize/memories/reminiscences). 日記 (ri ji 44 = day-record) = diaries, 遊記 (you ji 24 = travel-records) = travelogues. 記者 (ji zhe 43 = record-person = reporters) write in 記敘體 (ji xu ti 443 = record-narrative-form = narrative form).

Studying requires 記憶力 (ji yi li 444 = memory-power): 牢記 (lao ji 24 = firmly-remember), 死記 (si ji 34 = dead-memorize = rote-learning without understanding). 過目不忘 (guo mu bu wang 4424 = pass-eyes-no-forget) means having photographic memory.

“別忘記!” (bie wang ji 242 = don’t-forget-remember) = “Don’t forget!”

by Diana Yue