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 storytelling

起
Putonghua pronunciation: qi3
Cantonese pronunciation: hei2
Meaning: start, begin

起 (radical 走 zou3, walk/leave) = begin/start/rose: 起源 (qi3 yuān2 = original-source), 起點 (qi3 dian3 = starting-point), 起錨 (qi3 mao2 = lift-anch 绳 = start voyage/quest). 說起 (shuo1 qi3 = say-rise) = mention. 想起 (xiang3 qi3 = think-rise) = remember. 萬事起頭難 (wan4 shi4 qi3 tou2 nan2 = ten-thousand-things-start-head-difficult = first step is hardest). 起來 (qi3 lai2 = arise-get-up)! 起碼 (qi3 ma3 = starting/lowest-weight = at least) make an attempt!

Story has 起承轉合 (qi3 cheng2 zhuān3 he2 = beginning-continuation-turning-point-conclusion = structural development): “起初 (qi3 chu1 = at-first) he was poor; went through 起落 (qi3 luo4 = ups-and-downs); finally 白手起家 (bai2 shou3 qi3 jia1 = white/bare-hands-rise-home = established family fortune/status from scratch).”

by Diana Yue