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 \ 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 self-improvement

格
Putonghua pronunciation: ge2
Cantonese pronunciation: gaak3
Meaning: square, check, grid, quality, standard, contend, reason

格 (radical 木 mu4, wood/tree + 各 ge2, +-shape) means 方格 (fang1 ge2 = square-square), 資格 (zi1 ge2 = quality-standard), 格式 (ge2 shi1 = standard-format), Student 合格 (he2 ge2 = match-standard = passes-test/qualifies). Prolific Chinese writers 爬格子 (pa2 ge2 zi3 = climb-squares-diminutive = fill grid-printed manuscript paper with Chinese characters).

Artists having 性格 (xing4 ge2 = nature-standard = character) create works with 風格 (feng2 ge2 = wind-standard = style). Music/poetry follows 格律 (ge2 lü4 = standards-laws = prosody). Confucianism proposes 格物 (ge2 wu4 = contend-matter = applying reason/analysis to things) as basis of acquiring knowledge. Sage quotes 格言 (ge2 yan2 = standard-saying = maxims), stresses importance of 人格 (ren2 ge2 = person's-style = personal integrity).

by Diana Yue