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 the Olympic Games

失 (shì)
Putonghua pronunciation: shì1
Cantonese pronunciation: sat1
Meanings: lose, loss, err, error, fail, failure

失 = 失去 (shì qū4 = lost-gone): 失敗 (shì bái4 = lost-defeated), 失業 (shì yè4 = lose-occupation = unemployed), 失戀 (shì liàn4 = lose-love = dumped by lover). Businessman suffered 金錢損失 (jīn qian2 sun3 shì1 = gold-money-harm-loss = monetary loss) because partner 失信 (shì xìn4 = failed/broke-promise).

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Archer 患得患失 (huan4 de2 huan4 shì1 = worry-gain-worry-loss = loses confidence), 失手 (shì shou3 = lose-hand/grip = loses mark/target). Team’s 失常 (shì chăng2 = lose-normal = unusually/abnormally poor) performance makes fans 失望 (shì wàng4 = lose-hope = disappointed).

無心之失 (wú xīn1 zhī shì1 = no-heart/intention-’s-error = careless mistake) makes athlete 痛失金牌 (tòng shì1 jīn1 pai2 = pain-lose-gold-plate/tablet = tragically lose gold medal).

by Diana Yue