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 leisure

停
Putonghua pronunciation: ting2
Cantonese pronunciation: ting4
Meanings: stop, halt

Ideogram 停 shows 亻 (= person ren2) stopping at 亭 (ting2 = pavilion/kiosk): 停止 (ting2 zhi3 = stop-still), 停留 (ting2 liu2 = stop-stay = remain/continue), 停雨 (ting2 yu3 = stop-rain = rain has stopped), 停電 (ting2 dian4 = stop-electricity = blackout/power-cut), 停車 (ting2 che1 = stop-car).

When project 停頓 (ting2 dun4 = stops-halts), workers 停工 (ting2 gong1 = stop-work), 手停止停 (shou3 ting2 kou3 ting2 = hands-stop-mouth-stops = unemployed, starve).

Workaholics 忙個不停 (mang2 ge4 bu4 ting2 = busy-themselves-a-non-stop), but if 思想停滯 (si1 xiang3 ting2 zhi4 = ideas-concepts-stop-sluggish = brain slackens) they should 慢下來 (man4 xia4 lai2 = slow-down-come = slow down), 停下來 (ting2 xia4 lai2 = stop-down-come = stop).

by Diana Yue