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 graduation

**Putonghua pronunciation: bi3**
**Cantonese pronunciation: bat1**
Meanings: end, complete, accomplish, conclude, exhaust, completely

畢 (田 tian2, field + net-handle, symbolizing farmer’s animal-catching net) means 完畢 (wan2 bi3 = end-completed/over). 語畢 (yu3 bi3 = words-completed) = having finished saying... 閱畢 (yue4 bi3 = read-completed) = having read... 禮畢 (li3 bi3 = ceremony-completed) = having performed salute/ceremony.

Writing 畢業論文 (bi3 ye4 lun4 wen2 = complete-work-discuss-essay = graduation thesis/dissertation), attending 畢業試 (bi3 ye4 shi4 = graduating-test/exam) make 畢業生 (bi3 ye4 sheng1 = complete-task-student = graduating student) 頑態畢露 (tui2 tai4 bi3 lu4 = tired-form-all-show = tired out).

Speaker at 畢業典禮 (bi3 ye4 dian3 li3 = graduation-rite-ceremony = congregation) encourages students to 畢生進取 (bi3 sheng1 jin4 qü3 = whole-life-forward-acquire = set lifelong goals to attain achievements).

by Diana Yue