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 studying and exams

考
Putonghua pronunciation: kao3
Cantonese pronunciation: haau3
Meanings: test, examination

考 = ponder/examine/check. Scientists 考證 (kao3 zheng4 = test-prove = examine) hypothesis. Police 考察 (kao3 cha4 = examine~observe = study) crime scene. CEO 考慮 (kao3 lü4 = test-worry = consider) proposals. Archaeologists 考古 (kao2 gu3 = examine-antiquity = study archaeological sites/relics).

Students attend 考試 (kao3 shi4 = test-try = tests/exams): 小考 (xiao3 kao3 = small-exam = tests), 大考 (da4 kao3 = big-exam = examinations). Job applicants attend 面試 (mian4 shi4 = face-exam = interviews).

Examiners read 考卷 (kao3 juan4 = test/exam-scrolls/scripts), assess student’s performance: 優 (you1, excellent), 良 (liang2, good), 常 (chang2, average), 可 (ke3, OK/passable), 劣 (lie4, bad/poor), decide 及格 (ji2 ge2 = reach-status = pass) or 不及格 (bu4 ji2 ge2 = not-reach-status = fail).

by Diana Yue