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

答
Putonghua pronunciation: da1, da2
Cantonese pronunciation: daap3
Meanings: answer

答 = 回答 (hui2 da2 = return-reply = answer). Exam scripts pose 問題 (wen4 ti2 = ask-title = questions), require 答題 (da2 ti2 = answer-title = answers). Quizzes have 答案 (da2 an4 = reply-case = answers).

At 口試 (kou3 shi4 = mouth/oral-examination), smart student 對答如流 (dui4 da2 ru2 liu2 = respond-answer-resemble-stream = answers unhesitatingly), poor student 答非所問 (da2 fei1 suo3 wen4 = answer-not-what-is-asked = gives irrelevant answer).


by Diana Yue