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 hospitalization

問 (radical 門 men2, door) = ask/question/request: 問好 (wen4 hao3 = ask-good/well = say hi), 發問 (fa1 wen4 = raise-questions), 問要錢 (wen4 yao4 qian2 = ask-for-money), 問道於盲 (wen4 dao4 yu1 mang2 = ask-road/direction-of/from-blind-man) = ask fool for advice.

答問 (wen4 da2 = question-answer) = Q&A/quiz. 問題 (wen4 ti2 = ask-title) = question/problem. Reporters 訪問 (fang3 wen4 = visit-question = interview) 有問題 (you3 wen4 ti2 = has-question/problem = questionable/problematic/suspected) businesses, 問長問短 (wen4 chang2 wen4 duan3 = ask-long-ask-short = fire lengthy/trite/annoying questions).

Visitor 慰問 (wei4 wen4 = console-ask = consoles) patient, 嘆寒問暖 (xu1 han2 wen4 nuan3 = blow-air-cold-ask-warm = shows intimate care/attention), brings friends’ 問候 (wen4 hou4 = ask-wait-upon = regards/condolences).

by Diana Yue