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 \ 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 plans and timetables

計 Putonghua pronunciation: ji4
Cantonese pronunciation: gai3
Meaning: measure, calculate, plan, scheme, plot, tick

計 (radical 言 yan2, word) means 計量 (ji4 liang4 = calculate-measure/gauge), 計數 (ji4 shu4 = calculate/work-sum/arithmetic). 計算機 (ji4 suan4 ji1 = calculate/work-sum/calculations) = calculator/computer. 生計 (sheng1 ji4 = living-plan/calculations) = livelihood. 斤斤計較 (jin1 jin1 ji4 jiao4 = catty-catty-calculate-compare) describes miserly/mean person.

計謀 (ji4 mou2 = plan-conspiracy) = plot/scheme. 工於心計 (gong1 yu1 sheng1 ji4 = crafty-at-heart-scheme = scheming) person devises. 毒計 (du2 ji4 = poisonous/evil-plot/trick). Enemy 中計 (zhong4 ji4 = hit-mark-plot/trick = is tricked/trapped).