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 Hurricane Sandy

破
Putonghua pronunciation: po4
Cantonese pronunciation: poh3
Meanings: break, broken, undo

破 (石 shi2, rock + 皮 pi2, surface) indicates cracked rock-face: 破碗 (po4 wan3 = broken-bowl), 破車 (po4 che1 = broken-down-car), 破爛 (po4 lan4 = broken-tattered rubbish). Athlete 打破 (da3 po4 = hits-breaks) record. Mathematician 破解 (po4 jie3 = breaks-unravels) code. 頭破血流 (tou2 po4 xue3 liu2 = head-broken-blood-flows) describes bleeding head-wound.

Terrible news 石破天驚 (shi2 po4 tian1 jing = rock-breaks-sky-fears = shocks the world). Hurricane 破壞 (po4 huai4 = break-bad = destroys/ruins) houses. 破築 (can2 po4 = dilapidated-broken-down) infrastructures need repair.


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