Chinese Foundations

Chinese

Six small lessons on Mandarin sounds, pinyin, characters and study habits. Browser playback and examples are available at exercises.lol/learn/hsk0. Use a partner or teacher to hear your speech.

One word, three kinds of information

- Listen to **你好 – hello**. The characters show the written words; **nǐ hǎo** shows pronunciation; the English gives the meaning.
- Mandarin is the spoken variety taught here. Simplified characters are the main writing system used in these lessons.
- Before you start: No Mandarin is required. You will keep writing, pronunciation and meaning separate; the written checks below do not test your ear.

Pinyin is a sound guide

- Pinyin uses letters, but they do not always sound like English letters. Read **mā**, **nǐ**, **hǎo** by listening and repeating, not by guessing from English.
- A syllable has a main vowel sound and may begin with a consonant and end in n or ng. The mark over the vowel indicates its tone.



Listen, pause, repeat

- Play one phrase, pause, then repeat. Start slowly and aim for a clear whole phrase.
- Listen again and compare. It is normal to need several tries; do not aim for perfect speech before using a greeting.

你好 → nǐ hǎo → hello. These are written form, sound guide, and meaning for the same phrase.

Work through a decision: For 你好 / nǐ hǎo / hello, first ask what you need. Choose 你好 when finding the written greeting, nǐ hǎo as a pronunciation guide and hello for its English meaning. Then use the recording to check the sound; the labels alone cannot show whether you said it clearly.

Compare a near miss: Seeing hello does not tell you the Mandarin sounds. Reading

nǐ hǎo does not show the character shapes. Recognising any one form also does not prove that you can produce the other two without help.

Meet words as units

- **学生 xuésheng – student** has two characters and two syllables. **老师 lǎoshī – teacher** also has two.
- A character and a word are not always the same thing. Learn useful whole words before studying their parts.

Pinyin is not an English translation. Chinese characters are not pictures you can reliably guess; a component can be a clue, but the word still needs to be learned.

A first small success

- Close the page and say hello. Open it again if you need a reminder.
- Keep characters, pinyin, and meaning available while you learn. Next, practise the four tones.

Characters show writing, pinyin guides sound, and translation gives meaning. Listen before copying the sound.

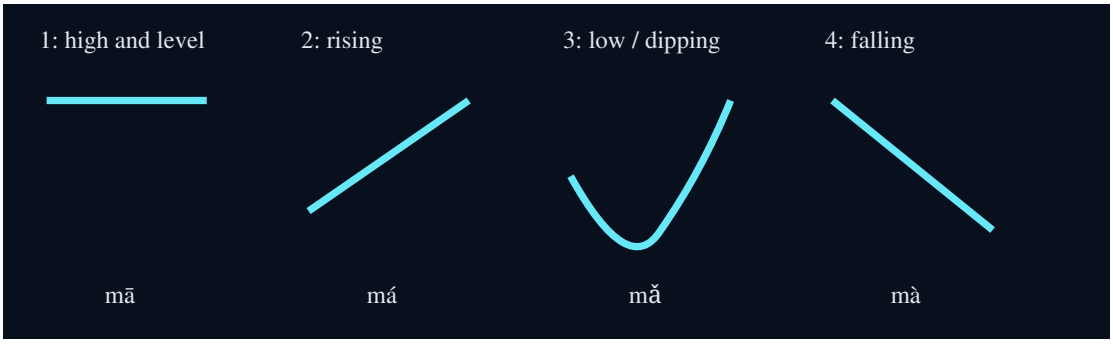
Later recall: Tomorrow, recall the writing, pinyin and meaning jobs using a different familiar card. Say the greeting before replaying its model. A few days later, retry the thanks phrase; revisit the representation step if you mistake pinyin for translation.

The same syllable can mean something different

- Mandarin tone is part of a syllable's pronunciation. **mā** and **mǎ** are not interchangeable.
- First learn the pitch shapes. Then practise them inside useful words and phrases.
- Before you start: Recall how pinyin marks pronunciation from your first sounds. This lesson's written tone-label checks support, but do not replace, listening and spoken comparison.

Four citation-tone shapes

- **First mā:** high and level. **Second má:** rising. Say them gently; tone is pitch movement, not shouting.
- **Third mǎ:** low, often with a dip and rise when said alone. **Fourth mà:** falling.



Use short, clear examples

- The four characters here mean mother, hemp, horse, and scold. They demonstrate a sound contrast; you do not need to memorise all four meanings today.
- Play 马, pause, then repeat it. Compare its low tone with the falling 骂.

mā / má / mǎ / mà show the same letters with four different tone marks.

Work through a decision: Compare mā and mǎ before speaking. The letters m and a remain the same; the mark changes from first tone to third tone. Use that difference to select the sound contrast to hear and practise. A correct written label does not prove that your voice makes the contrast.

Compare a near miss: Making a syllable louder is not the same as changing its tone. Also, the isolated third-tone sketch is not an instruction to force a full dip and rise on every third tone inside a phrase.

Tones change in connected speech

- A third tone is often low without a full final rise when another syllable follows. Two third tones together change too; a later lesson uses 你好.
- Do not force a large dip-and-rise onto every third-tone syllable in a sentence. Listen to the whole phrase.

A question does not turn every syllable into a rising second tone. Keep word tones recognisable while following the sentence's natural intonation.

Compare your own sound

- Record yourself saying mā, má, mǎ, mà, then compare with the examples. Repeat only the contrast you find hardest.
- Next: light syllables and tone changes.

First is level; second rises; third is low; fourth falls. Connected speech can change the surface shape.

Later recall: Tomorrow, read a newly ordered set of the four pinyin forms and label their tones, then practise one audible contrast. A few days later, try the opposite order without the diagram; revisit the citation-tone explanation after a label error and the model sound after a production difficulty.

Listen to a familiar greeting

- **你好 nǐ hǎo** is written with two third tones. In normal speech, the first sounds like a second tone.
- Tone-mark spelling often keeps the original tones. Listen for the spoken form rather than forcing the marks mechanically.
- Before you start: Recall the four citation tones. Here you compare dictionary tone labels with sounds inside a phrase; a written prediction is not a hearing test.

Keep the second syllable light

- **谢谢 xièxie** and **名字 míngzi** end with neutral-tone syllables. They are shorter and less stressed.
- Neutral tone has no tone mark. Its pitch depends on the surrounding syllables; "neutral" does not mean silent or always flat.



不 before a fourth tone

- **不 bù** sounds **bú** before a fourth tone: **不是 bú shì** and **不去 bú qù**.
- Before a third tone, keep bù: **不好 bù hǎo** – **not good**.

bù + shì → bú shì in speech. The characters remain 不是.

Work through a decision: To predict 不 in 不是, inspect the following syllable: 是 shì is fourth tone, so 不 commonly sounds bú here. In 不好, 好 hǎo is third tone, so 不 remains bù. Keep the characters fixed while comparing their spoken readings.

Compare a near miss: A light final syllable in 名字 is neutral tone; the changed

first syllable of 你好 is not. Do not call every surface change a neutral tone or give every neutral syllable a fixed flat pitch.

一 inside a phrase

- **一 yī – one** is first tone when counted alone. Before a fourth tone it commonly sounds yí: **一个 yí ge** (个 is gè, fourth tone, though often light here).
- Before a first, second, or third tone it commonly sounds yì: **一天 yì tiān – one day**.

These examples teach common changes, not every special case. Learn the actual phrase and use its recording as your model.

儿 at the end of a word

- In northern speech many words end in a curled **-r**: **哪儿 nǎr – where**, **一点儿 yìdiǎnr – a little**, **玩儿 wánr – play**. The 儿 is not a separate syllable: it curls the end of the one before it.
- Pinyin adds only **r**: nǎ + r = nǎr. Some speakers, especially in the south, say 哪里 nǎlǐ instead; both are correct.

Practise the whole phrase

- Repeat 你好, 谢谢, 不是, and 一天. Keep each phrase flowing; avoid separating every syllable with a long pause.
- Next: pinyin sounds and spelling.

Light syllables are unstressed. Two third tones change the first; 不 and 一 also have common changes in phrases.

Later recall: Tomorrow, predict 不 before a fourth-tone syllable and before a third-tone syllable, then say the phrases. A few days later, contrast a neutral syllable with the changed first tone in 你好; revisit the relevant step rather than flattening every changed syllable.

Letters are not enough

- **qī 七 – seven** and **chī 吃 – eat** begin differently. Listen before attempting them.
- Pinyin q is not English q. Pinyin x is not the English ks sound.
- Before you start: Recall pinyin's job and tones in phrases. This lesson separates sound production from recognising written spelling conventions.

Practise two sound groups

- **j / q / x:** practise **鸡 jī – chicken**, **七 qī – seven**, **西 xī – west**. Keep the tongue relatively forward.
- **zh / ch / sh:** practise **知 zhī – know**, **吃 chī – eat**, **师 shī – teacher (as in 老师)**. The tongue position is farther back.

Two sound groups that English letters hide

j · q · x (tongue forward)
鸡 jī chicken · 七 qī seven · 西 xī west

zh · ch · sh (tongue farther back)
知 zhī know · 吃 chī eat · 师 shī teacher

Airflow
q and ch have a stronger puff of air than j and zh — test it with a tissue

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Notice the airflow

- Compare **jī** and **qī**: q has a stronger puff of air. A small tissue held near your mouth can make the contrast visible.
- Compare **zhī** and **chī** the same way. Copy the recording rather than adding an English r sound.

七 qī and 吃 chī differ in their starting sound and the vowel quality. Practise the full syllables.

Work through a decision: For jī and qī, keep attention on the starting consonant: q has a stronger puff of air than j in this contrast. For qī and chī, also compare tongue position and vowel quality. A tissue can help you notice airflow, but it cannot judge the whole pronunciation.

Compare a near miss: A stronger puff is useful for j/q, but it does not explain

every difference between qī and chī. Written u after q represents ü, so applying one English "oo" sound to every u spelling misses the convention.

Meet ü and the missing dots

- **女 nǚ – woman** uses ü: keep the tongue near an "ee" position while rounding the lips.
- After j, q, x, and y, written u represents this ü sound: **去 qù – go**. After n and l, the dots distinguish ü from u.

Pinyin i is not pronounced identically after every initial. Compare sì, shī, and xī by ear instead of forcing one English vowel onto them.

Short spellings and where the tone mark goes

- After an initial, **iou, uei, uen** are written **iu, ui, un**: **九 jiǔ – nine**, **水 shuǐ – water**, **论 lùn – discuss**. Without an initial they are spelled **you, wei, wen**.
- The tone mark goes on **a** if there is one, otherwise on **e**, on **o** in **ou**, and on the **last** vowel in **iu** and **ui**: hǎo, xiè, dōu, liù, guì.

Practise one contrast at a time

- Alternate qī / chī, then jī / qī. Listen back to a recording and choose one difference to improve.
- Next: recognise and build characters.

Pinyin letters have Mandarin sound values. Listen to whole syllables; practise tongue position, airflow, and ü.

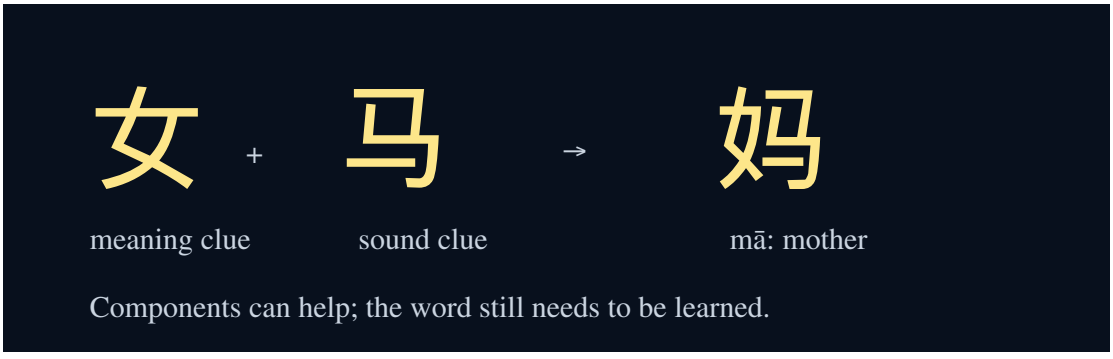
Later recall: Tomorrow, recall the j/q contrast and the missing-dot convention without reading. A few days later, inspect a different x + u spelling and record the isolated-word order again. Revisit airflow for the consonant contrast and the ü step for the spelling question.

One word may use two characters

- **人 rén – person** is one character. **学生 xuésheng – student** is a two-character word.
- Recognising a word, typing it, and handwriting it are separate skills. Practise the one you need without assuming the others are automatic.
- Before you start: Recall that writing, pronunciation and meaning do different jobs. You can begin shape practice without fluent speech; recognising a shape does not establish handwriting skill.

Look for reusable parts

- **口 kǒu – mouth** appears as a component in **吗 ma**, the question particle. A component may suggest a meaning area or a sound.
- **女 nǚ – woman** appears in **妈 mā – mother**. The right-hand 马 mǎ gives a sound clue, though its tone differs.



Write carefully, not endlessly

- Copy 人 and 口 slowly, looking at shape and proportion. Use a reliable stroke-order model if practising handwriting.
- Then cover the model and try once from memory. Compare and correct the part you missed.

女 + 马 gives 妈 in this character. That is a component analysis, not a claim that every character can be guessed from its parts.

Work through a decision: In 妈, locate 女 on the left and 马 on the right. The right component gives a sound clue, yet mǎ and mā have different tones. Use the component to focus attention, then check the learned word; do not replace that word's reading with the component's reading.

Compare a near miss: A component clue is not a guaranteed pronunciation or a historical story. Likewise, 人 and 入 need attention to stroke shape and where the

strokes meet; a familiar overall outline is not enough to distinguish them.

For the paper task, open the 人 stroke model and the 入 stroke model. These selected models support shape comparison; their list levels do not change this beginner task.

Notice similar characters

- **人 rén – person** and **入 rù – enter** look similar. Look at where the strokes meet rather than guessing from overall shape.
- Learn a character inside a word or phrase. **入口 rùkǒu – entrance** gives 入 and 口 a useful context.

A memorable story about a character is a memory aid unless supported as historical etymology. Components are clues, not guaranteed definitions.

Recognise, recall, use

- Find 人, 口, and 妈 on this page. Close it, recall one, and check the model.
- Next: type your first sentences.

Learn whole words, notice recurring components, and separate recognition from typing and handwriting.

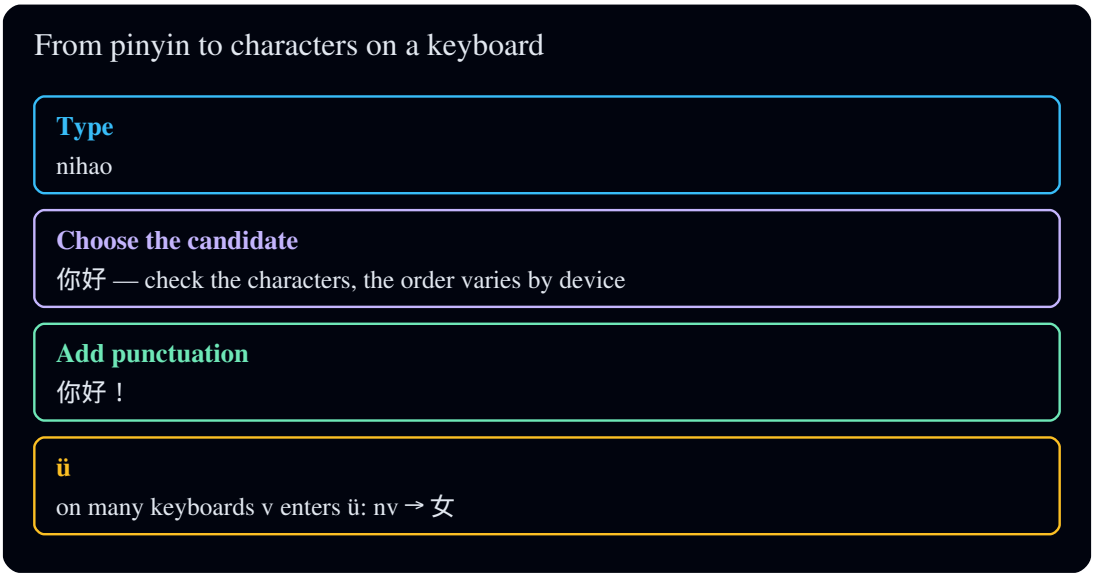
Later recall: Tomorrow, distinguish 人 from 入 in a different order and recall 入口 after covering the model. A few days later, explain what the 马 component does and does not tell you about 妈. Revisit the specific shape or sound clue that you confused rather than copying a whole page.

Your first typed introduction

- Set up a Simplified Chinese pinyin input method in your device's keyboard settings. A pinyin keyboard turns sound spellings into candidate characters.
- Type **nihao**, choose **你好**, and add **！** . Candidate order varies by device, so check the characters instead of choosing blindly.
- Before you start: Recall the difference between recognition, typing and handwriting. Have a Chinese input method available if you want to practise actual typing; copying text remains a different activity.

Choose the intended word

- Type **woshi** and select **我是**, then **xuesheng** and select **学生**. The result is **我是学生。– I am a student.**
- On many pinyin keyboards, v enters ü when needed: nv can find 女. Your keyboard may also offer a dedicated ü key.



A session you can repeat

- **10 minutes:** recall yesterday's phrase, learn one small step, say a fresh example. **20 minutes:** add listening and a short reading.
- **30 minutes:** also write a few lines and review older words. These are flexible routines, not deadlines for reaching an HSK level.

Recall 你好 → listen to 我是学生 → say it → type it → close the page and recall it tomorrow.

Work through a decision: After entering xuesheng, find 学生, then read the complete 我是学生。If you selected a different word, replace that candidate before continuing. Checking only that the pinyin letters were entered correctly leaves the character choice unverified.

Compare a near miss: The first candidate is not guaranteed to be the intended word. A correctly typed sentence also does not show that you said it intelligibly or wrote the characters from memory; those need separate attempts.

Ask for help in Chinese

- **请再说一遍。Qǐng zài shuō yí biàn. – Please say it again.**
- **请说慢一点。Qǐng shuō màn yìdiǎn. – Please speak a little more slowly.**

A correct typed sentence does not prove correct pronunciation. Practise saying it too. These help phrases are useful to memorise now; their grammar is taught later.

Begin the course

- Type 你好！我是学生。Check that the characters match the model, then say the sentence without reading.
- Start your first meeting. Return here whenever a sound or keyboard question needs another look.

Type pinyin, check candidates, say the sentence, and return for spaced review. Small repeatable sessions are useful.

Later recall: Tomorrow, type one of the introductions without copying, then inspect every chosen word. A few days later, change the role and repeat. Revisit candidate selection after a character error; return to a sound lesson for a pronunciation difficulty rather than assuming typing solved it.