基础一 · Find your first sounds

Chinese Foundations

A name you can recognise

You meet someone called 林安, Lín Ān. Listening for the syllables helps you recognise the name next time. Pinyin represents Mandarin sounds; reading its letters as English will often give the wrong sound.

Find the initial and final

A syllable has a final, a tone, and often an initial consonant. In **妈 mā**, m is the initial and a is the final. In **安 ān**, there is no initial consonant; an is the final. Write and say each syllable as one unit.

Example	Initial	Final	Tone
妈 mā, mother	m	a	first
中 zhōng, middle	zh	ong	first
安 ān, peaceful	none	an	first

The two letters zh represent one initial. The final ong is a whole sound pattern, not three English letter names.

zhōng: two letters, one initial; the tone mark sits on the final

Feel the air, then listen

Mandarin p, t and k are aspirated: a noticeable puff of air follows the release. Their partners b, d and g are normally unaspirated; the difference is not simply English voiced versus voiceless consonants.

Pair	Unaspirated example	Aspirated example
b / p	八 bā, eight	怕 pà, afraid
d / t	大 dà, big	他 tā, he
g / k	哥 gē, older brother	渴 kě, thirsty

Hold a tissue loosely in front of your mouth. Compare the puff, then compare with a Mandarin model. These words also differ in tone or final, so the tissue activity is a consonant comparison, not a tone test. English p, t and k vary with position: the p in spin is less aspirated than the p in pin.

Keep s, sh and x distinct

四 sì, four; **是 shì**, be; **西 xī**, west.

For s, keep the tongue near the front teeth. For sh, move the tongue tip farther back. For x, keep the tongue tip low and bring the front of the tongue close to the hard palate. Avoid turning x into English z or ks. The vowel written i in si and shi differs from the i in xi; copying one English vowel for all three loses that distinction.

A short practice loop

Listen to a model, repeat one word, record yourself, and compare a single feature. First compare the initial; then compare the final and tone. A partner or teacher can help identify what changed. A paper exercise cannot certify pronunciation.

A fresh situation

R1. Interpret and repair. A learner splits zhōng into initial z and final hong. Repair the split. Then explain why ān needs no invented initial.

R2. Use it yourself. Analyse mā and tā, then describe how you would check the aspiration contrast in dā and tā.

Write your responses before opening the key. Compare meaning as well as form; a different valid answer need not copy the model.

Answers and explanations

Check after your attempt. For open tasks, compare the message and the stated criteria, then revise one detail.

■ Fresh-situation answers

R1. zh is one initial and ong is the final; the tone is first. Ān has final an and no initial consonant. Written letters are not separate Mandarin sounds.

R2. One possible response. Mā: m + a, first tone. Tā: t + a, first tone. Compare dā/tā with a tissue and a Mandarin model; t has aspiration. A written analysis does not establish accurate pronunciation.

Recall later. Tomorrow, split one new syllable and compare one aspirated pair without looking.