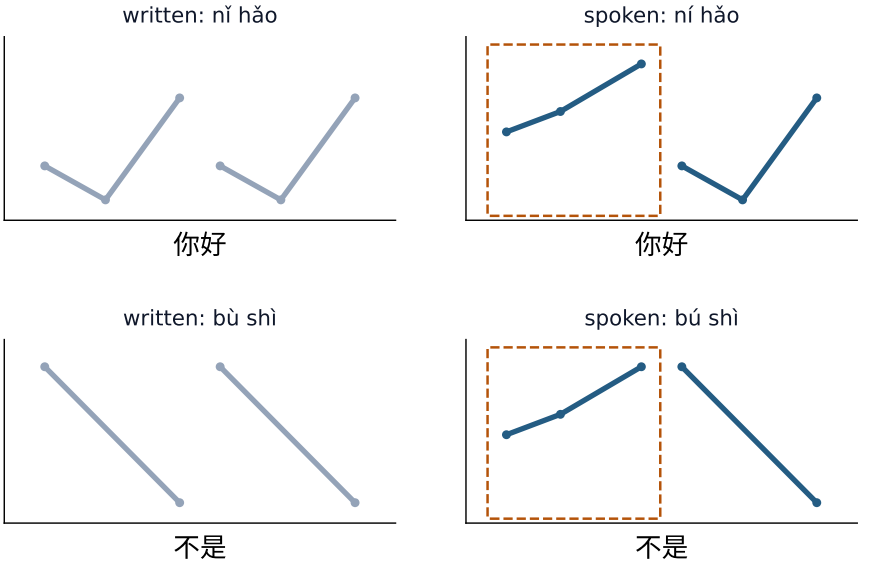
基础三 · Light syllables and common tone changes

Chinese Foundations

Why 你好 does not sound like two full dips

Written pinyin often shows **nǐ hǎo**, but the first syllable sounds rising in ordinary speech: approximately **ní hǎo**. The written word and its spoken tone in a phrase need not look identical. Learn the base tone and practise the phrase together.



The changed first syllable is boxed. Learn the word with its written tones; say the phrase as a whole.

Neutral tone is light, not a fixed fifth tune

妈妈 māma, mother; **谢谢 xièxie**, thank you; **爸爸 bàba**, father.

The second syllable is unstressed and normally shorter. Its pitch depends partly on the preceding tone; it is not always lower or simply a full tone whispered quietly. Compare whole words with a Mandarin model. The particle 吗 ma is also normally neutral in an ordinary yes-no question.

不 before a fourth tone

不 has base reading bù. Before a fourth-tone syllable it is commonly pronounced bú: **不是 bú shì**, is not; **不去 bú qù**, not go. Before other full tones it normally stays bù: **不喝 bù hē**, not drink; **不好 bù hǎo**, not good. Some weak forms have further changes in natural speech; these examples teach the main contrast.

一 in useful phrases

Context	Common spoken reading	Example
Alone, counting, or in 第一	yī	一 yī; 第一 dì-yī, first
Before fourth tone	yí	一次 yí cì, once
Before first, second or third tone	yì	一天 yì tiān, one day; 一年 yì nián, one year; 一本 yì běn, one volume

A lightly pronounced 个 in 一个 can obscure the following tone; learn **一个 yí ge** as a common whole phrase. Spelling conventions differ on whether to show changed tones for 一 and 不. Here the phrase readings show ordinary surface pronunciation; dictionary forms remain useful for lookup.

Two third tones and longer groups

In **很好 hěn hǎo**, very good, the first third tone becomes rising in the two-syllable group: approximately hén hǎo. Keep the base tones when identifying the words. With three or more third tones, grouping and speech rhythm matter; do not change every third tone mechanically from left to right.

Listen, imitate, compare

Record 不是, 一天 and 你好 separately, then in a short message. Identify the base tones and predict the main change before listening. A written prediction checks your understanding of the rule; a listener must hear your recording to assess how you said it.

A fresh situation

R1. Interpret and repair. Someone says neutral tone is always lower than the preceding syllable. What should you change in that explanation?

R2. Use it yourself. Give the base reading and common phrase reading of 不 in 不是 and 一 in 一天. Explain what happens in 你好.

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. Neutral syllables are unstressed and usually shorter; their pitch depends on the preceding tone and context. They are not always lower and have no single fixed contour.

R2. One possible response. 不 has base bù and is commonly bú before shì; 一 has base yī and is yì before tiān. In nǐ hǎo the first third tone sounds rising in the two-syllable group. Base forms and surface readings serve different purposes.

Recall later. Tomorrow, predict three phrase readings before listening to their models.