

# Nouns

## Ref Hsk3 Grammar

### Time / 动词 + 以前—”before (a specific point)”

Place 以前 (yǐqián) *after* a time or an action to mean ”before” it. The trap for English speakers is the **order**: the reference point comes **first**, then 以前—the exact reverse of ”before eating,” which Chinese says as ”eating-before.”

**Structure:** Time / Verb Phrase + 以前, ……

{zh: 吃饭 |chī fàn|eating / 以前 |yǐ qián|before / , 你 |nǐ|you / 洗手 |xǐ shǒu|wash hands / 了 |le / 吗 |ma / ? }

*Did you wash your hands before eating?*

{zh: 星期五 |xīng qī wǔ|Friday / 以前 |yǐ qián|before / , 你 |nǐ|you / 要 |yào|need to / 做完 |zuò wán|finish / 这些 |zhè xiē|this / 工作 |gōng zuò|work / 。 }

*You need to finish this work before Friday.*

**Remember:** Chinese stamps the time-word **after** the event: 吃饭以前 = ”eating-before.” Flip the English order and tack 以前 on the end.

#### Watch out

- ”Verb + 以前” means ”before [doing] the action” (做作业以前 = ”before doing homework”).

### 以前, ……—”in the past, before” (general)

Drop 以前 at the **front** of a sentence and it means ”in the past, back then” —a general earlier time, no specific event attached. It can also slip in right after the subject.

**Structure:** 以前 + Subject + Verb · Subject + 以前 + Verb

{zh: 以前 |yǐ qián|in the past / , 我 |wǒ|I / 不会 |bú huì|couldn't / 说 |shuō|speak / 中文 |Zhōng wén|Chinese / 。 }

*I couldn't speak Chinese before.*

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 以前 |yǐ qián|used to / 是 |shì|be / 厨师 |chú shī|a chef / 。 }

*He used to be a chef.*

**Remember:** one 以前, two spots —**after an event** it's ”before X” (吃饭以前); **at the front** it's ”in the past, used to.” It usually contrasts the past with now (often with a 了 marking the change).

#### Watch out

- Front position or after-the-subject —both are correct.

## 刚才——“just now, a moment ago”

**刚才** (gāngcái) is a **time word** for the very recent past —“just now, a moment ago.” Don’t confuse it with the adverb **刚**: **刚才** is a *noun* (a moment that just passed) and can stand alone, while **刚** (“just”) clings to the verb.

**Structure:** (Subject +) 刚才 + Verb

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 刚才 |gāng cái|just now / 说 |shuō|said / 什么 |shén me|what / 了 |le / ? }

*What did you just say?*

{zh: 刚才 |gāng cái|just now / 谁 |shéi|who / 来 |lái|came / 了 |le / ? }

*Who came just now?*

**Remember:** **刚才** = a **noun** (a moment in the past, can sit anywhere); **刚** = an **adverb** (glued to the verb). 我**刚**到 (“I just arrived”) vs **刚才**谁来了? (“who came a moment ago?”).

**Watch out**

- 刚才 can take a 了 / 的 on the verb (刚才到的); 刚 + verb usually doesn’t.

## Time / Event + 时——“when, at the time of”

**时** is a compact, **formal** stand-in for 的时候——“when, at the time of” —placed after a time or event. The thing to remember: it drops the 的.

**Structure:** Time / Event + 时, ……

{zh: 考试 |kǎo shì|exam / 时 |shí|during / 不要 |bú yào|don’t / 说话 |shuō huà|talk / 。 }

*Don’t talk during the exam.*

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 面试 |miàn shì|interviews / 时 |shí|during / 经常 |jīng cháng|often / 问 |wèn|ask / 这个 |zhè ge|this / 问题 |wèn tí|question / 。 }

*I often ask this question during interviews.*

**Remember:** 时 is **的时候 in its Sunday best** —same meaning, formal register, and **no 的**: 考试时, never 考试的时. In speech you’d just say 考试的时候.

**Watch out**

- Reserve it for writing or set phrases; everyday speech uses 的时候.

## 以后, ……——“in the future, from now on”

At the start of a sentence, **以后** means “in the future, from now on, later.” It mirrors **以前** exactly: it can sit at the front (“from now on”), after the subject, or after an event (“after …”).

**Structure:** 以后 + Subject + Verb · Event + 以后, ……

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 以后 |yǐ hòu|from now on / 不 |bù|won't / 喝酒 |hē jiǔ|drink / 了 |le / 。  
}

*I won't drink from now on.*

{zh: 下课 |xià kè|class ends / 以后 |yǐ hòu|after / , 我们 |wǒ men|we / 去 |qù|go / 吃饭 |chī fàn|eat / 。 }

*After class, let's go eat.*

**Remember:** 以后 is the perfect **mirror of 以前**—after an event = "after X" (下课以后 / 下课以前); at the front = "from now on" / "in the past." But it points to an *indefinite* future, **not** "in a moment" (that's 一会儿).

**Watch out**

- Don't let "later" mislead you into using it for "shortly" —以后 is the open-ended future.

## ……, 后来……—“afterwards, later” (past only)

**后来** (hòulái) sequences **past** events —“afterwards, later on.” The hard limit: both events must have **already happened**. 后 (after) + 来 (came) —it has, by definition, *already come*.

**Structure:** [Past Event 1] , 后来 [Past Event 2]

{zh: 开始 |kāi shǐ|at first / 我 |wǒ|my / 父母 |fù mǔ|parents / 不 |bù|didn't / 同意 |tóng yì|agree / , 后来 |hòu lái|later / 同意 |tóng yì|agreed / 了 |le / 。 }

*At first my parents disapproved; later they came round.*

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 以前 |yǐ qián|used to / 是 |shì|be / 厨师 |chú shī|a chef / , 后来 |hòu lái|later / 当 |dāng|became / 了 |le / 老板 |lǎo bǎn|the boss / 。 }

*He used to be a chef; later he became the boss.*

**Remember:** 后来 = a **PAST** “and then” (both events done and dusted). For a *future* “and then,” switch to 然后. The 来 (“came”) tells you it has already arrived.

**Watch out**

- Never use 后来 for a plan or future sequence —that's 然后.