

Numbers

Ref Hsk3 Grammar

数字 + 数字 — approximating with two numbers in a row

Say **two consecutive numbers** back to back and you get “about, a few” — exactly like English “three or four” or “a day or two.” It’s the quickest way to be vague about a quantity.

Structure: Number + (next Number) + Measure Word + Noun

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 等 |děng|waited / 了 |le / 你 |nǐ|for you / 三四个 |sān sì ge|three or four / 小时 |xiǎo shí|hours / 。 }

I waited three or four hours for you.

{zh: 这个 |zhè ge|this / 词 |cí|word / 我们 |wǒ men|we / 学过 |xué guo|have studied / 两三次 |liǎng sān cì|two or three times / 了 |le / 。 }

We’ve studied this word two or three times now.

Remember: for the productive “N or N+1” approximation the two numbers are **next-door neighbours** — 三四, 七八, 两三. (A few skip-pairs survive only as fixed idioms — e.g. 三五 in 三五成群 / 三五天 “a few” — so learn those as set phrases, not as a pattern to build.) For “ten-odd / a dozen-ish,” use 十几.

Watch out

- 一两 (“one or two”) is the common small one: 一两天 (“a day or two”).

万 / 亿 — big numbers

Here’s where Chinese numbers feel alien: the language counts big in 万 (ten thousand) and 亿 (hundred million), not in thousands and millions. So you have to **group digits in fours**, not threes — and that mental regrouping is the whole skill.

Structure: Number + 万 · Number + 亿

{zh: 一百万 |yì bǎi wàn|one million}

1,000,000 — literally “a hundred 万 (ten-thousands).”

{zh: 十四亿 |shí sì yì|1.4 billion}

1.4 billion — roughly China’s population.

Remember: mentally **shift the comma one digit left**: 12,000 → “1|2000” → 一万两千. Lock in 万 = 10⁴ and 亿 = 10⁸, then regroup in fours: 52,152 = 五万两千一百五十二.

Watch out

- English “million” = 一百万 (a hundred 万); English “billion” = 十亿 (ten 亿). The mismatch is what trips people up.

x 点 y 分 / 刻 / 差 — telling the time (precise)

Once you can say whole hours, add the detail: 分 for minutes, 刻 for quarter-hours, and 差 for the minutes *short of* the hour. One quirk: a single-digit minute needs a 零 (“oh”) to fill the gap.

Structure: x 点 (零) y 分 · x 点 y 刻 · 差 y 分 x 点

{zh: 两点 |liǎng diǎn|two o’clock / 零 |líng|oh / 九分 |jiǔ fēn|nine minutes}

2:09 (零 fills the single-digit minute).

{zh: 差 |chà|to / 五分 |wǔ fēn|five minutes / 三点 |sān diǎn|three o’clock}

Five to three.

Remember: 刻 = a **quarter** (一刻 = :15, 三刻 = :45); 差 = “**short of**,” so 差五分三点 is “five *to* three”; and any minute under 10 takes a 零 (两点零九分).

Watch out

- 差 comes **first**, before the minutes and hour: 差五分八点 = “7:55.”

数字 + 点 (钟) — telling the time (basic)

The whole hour is a number + 点 (“o’clock”), with 半 for half past. A full time-stamp is built **big-to-small**: day → part of day → clock time — the opposite of casual English.

Structure: (上午 / 下午 +) Number + 点 (+ 半)

{zh: 现在 |xiàn zài|now / 下午 |xià wǔ|afternoon / 两点半 |liǎng diǎn bàn|half past two / 。 }

It’s 2:30 pm now.

{zh: 星期天 |xīng qī tiān|Sunday / 上午 |shàng wǔ|morning / 十点半 |shí diǎn bàn|half past ten}

Sunday at 10:30 am.

Remember: there's **no “am/pm” word** — put 上午 (morning) or 下午 (afternoon) *before* the time, and build everything big-to-small (date → part of day → 点). The 钟 in 点钟 is optional and usually dropped.

Watch out

- “2 o'clock” is 两点, not 二点 — use 两 for the hour count.