

Verb phrases

Ref Hsk3 Grammar

难 + 动词—”hard to ...”

Stick **难** (“difficult”) in front of a verb and you get **”hard to ...”** —难学 (“hard to learn”), 难找 (“hard to find”). Its mirror image is **好** (“easy to”: 好学 “easy to learn”). With sense verbs, 难 fuses into fixed adjectives: 难吃 (“bad-tasting”), 难听 (“unpleasant to hear”).

Structure: Subject + (很) 难 + Verb

{zh: 汉语 |Hàn yǔ|Chinese / 很 |hěn|very / 难 |nán|hard to / 学 |xué|learn / 。 }

Chinese is hard to learn.

{zh: 这里 |zhè lǐ|here / 的 |de / 咖啡 |kā fēi|coffee / 很 |hěn|very / 难喝 |nán hē|bad-tasting / 。 }

The coffee here tastes bad.

Remember: 难 = ”hard to,” 好 = ”easy to.” Bolt either onto a verb: 难懂 / 好懂 (“hard / easy to understand”), 难看 (“ugly,” lit. ”hard to look at”), 好看 (“good-looking”).

Watch out

- With sense verbs it forms set adjectives: 难吃, 难听, 难闻 (“smells bad”), 难看 (“ugly”).

动词 + 了 + 时长—”did ...for (a length of time)”

To say **how long** a finished action lasted, drop the **duration after the verb** —Chinese has no ”for” preposition, so the word order does the carrying. If there’s an object too, slip 的 in front of it.

Structure: Subject + Verb + 了 + Duration (+ 的 + Object)

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 学 |xué|studied / 了 |le / 一年 |yì nián|a year / 中文 |Zhōng wén|Chinese / 。 }

He studied Chinese for a year.

{zh: 我们 |wǒ men|we / 坐 |zuò|took / 了 |le / 十五个 |shí wǔ ge|fifteen / 小时 |xiǎo shí|hours / 的 |de / 飞机 |fēi jī|flight / 。 }

We took a fifteen-hour flight.

Remember: no ”for” word —the slot does it. Duration goes *after* the verb (学了 一年, ”studied *for* a year”), and an object hangs off a 的 (看了一天的电视, ”watched TV all day”).

Watch out

- Contrast 一年没学了 (“haven’t studied *in* a year”), where the same duration flips to *before* the verb.

动词 + 了 + 时长 + 了—”has been …ing (and still is)”

Tag a **second 了** onto the very end and the action stretches **up to now and keeps going** —”have been …ing for X (and still am).” When the verb has an object, you **repeat the verb**.

Structure: Subject + Verb + 了 + Duration + 了 · (with object) Subj + Verb + Obj + Verb + 了 + Duration + 了

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 在 |zài|in / 北京 |Běi jīng|Beijing / 住 |zhù|has lived / 了 |le / 两年 |liǎng nián|two years / 了 |le / 。 }

He’s been living in Beijing for two years (and still is).

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 学 |xué|learning / 中文 |Zhōng wén|Chinese / 学 |xué|have learned / 了 |le / 一年 |yì nián|a year / 了 |le / 。 }

I’ve been learning Chinese for a year now.

Remember: one 了 = a finished stretch; two 了 = still going. That trailing 了 means “…and counting.” With an object, double the verb: 学中文学了。一年了。

Watch out

- Without the final 了, 住了两年 reads as “lived there two years (then left)” —the second 了 is the whole “still ongoing” difference.

没办法 + 动词—”no way to, can’t”

没办法 is “there’s **no way**.” Standing alone it’s a shrug —”it can’t be helped, what can you do.” In front of a verb it means “have no way to …, can’t possibly ….”

Structure: Subject + 没办法 + Verb

{zh: 今天 |jīn tiān|today / 太忙 |tài máng|too busy / 了 |le / , 中午 |zhōng wǔ|at noon / 没办法 |méi bàn fǎ|no way to / 出去 |chū qù|go out / 吃饭 |chī fàn|for lunch / 。 }

It’s too busy today —no way to go out for lunch.

{zh: 没有 |méi yǒu|without / 密码 |mì mǎ|the password / , 我们 |wǒ men|we / 没办法 |méi bàn fǎ|have no way to / 打开 |dǎ kāi|open / 这个 |zhè ge|this / 文件 |wén jiàn|file / 。 }

Without the password, we have no way to open this file.

Remember: 办法 = “a way / method,” so 没办法 = “no way (to)” and 有办法 = “have a way.” Alone, 没办法 is the all-purpose “what can you do.”

Watch out

- It’s stronger and more resigned than 不能—it says the door is simply shut.

动词 + 动词—softening by reduplication

Double a verb and the action turns **brief, light, "give-it-a-go"** —"have a quick look," "talk it over." It warms the tone, perfect for soft suggestions and polite requests.

Structure: Verb + Verb (one-syllable, AA) · ABAB (two-syllable)

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 想 |xiǎng|want to / 出去 |chū qù|go out / 走走 |zǒu zou|for a little walk / 。 }

I'd like to go out for a bit of a walk.

{zh: 这件 |zhè jiàn|this / 事 |shì|matter / 我们 |wǒ men|we / 商量 |shāng liang|discuss / 商量 |shāng liang / 。 }

Let's talk this over.

Remember: doubling a verb adds a "just a little / give it a try" softness. One-syllable doubles **AA** (看看), two-syllable doubles **ABAB** (商量商量) —*not* the adjective's AABB. 看一看 and past 看了看 are common variants.

Watch out

- It only fits actions you can do "a bit of" —you wouldn't reduplicate a one-off like 死 or 完成.

很 + 动词—feelings take 很

A small club of **feeling / mental verbs** (喜欢, 想, 爱, 希望, 了解, 讨厌…) act like adjectives and take **很**—which is exactly why beginners end up saying "very like!"

Structure: Subject + 很 + [feeling verb]

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 很 |hěn|really / 喜欢 |xǐ huan|like / 这部 |zhè bù|this / 电影 |diàn yǐng|film / 。 }

I really like this film.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 很 |hěn|well / 了解 |liǎo jiě|understands / 中国 |Zhōng guó|Chinese / 文化 |wén huà|culture / 。 }

He understands Chinese culture well.

Remember: feelings behave like adjectives, so they take 很 (很喜欢, 很想). Action verbs don't —there's no 很吃 or 很走. If it's an emotion or a state of mind, 很 is welcome.

Watch out

- As with adjectives, this 很 is often just the plain positive form, not a strong "very."