

HSK 3 Grammar

English edition

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1 Adjectives

1.1 形容词 + 极了——“to the max” (极了)

When something is **off the charts** —the best, the worst, the most you’ve ever seen — tack **极了** (jílě) onto the adjective. 极 means “**the furthest point, the extreme**” (it’s the 极 of 北极, the North Pole), so 好极了 reads literally as “good —all the way to the pole.” It works for praise and complaints alike, and it lives in casual, spoken Chinese.

Unusually for a degree phrase, 极了 clamps **straight onto the adjective with no 得** —and the 了 is **welded on**: drop it and the sentence is simply wrong.

Structure: Subject + Adjective + 极了 *Literally:* “[subject is] adjective —to the extreme.”

{zh: 这个 |zhè ge|this / 主意 |zhǔ yi|idea / 好 |hǎo|good / 极了 |jí le|extremely / 。 }

This idea is perfect.

{zh: 高考 |gāo kǎo|the college exam / 那天 |nà tiān|that day / , 我 |wǒ|I / 紧张 |jǐn zhāng|nervous / 极了 |jí le|extremely / 。 }

I was incredibly nervous on the day of the gaokao.

{zh: 那个 |nà ge|that / 男孩 |nán hái|boy / 讨厌 |tǎo yàn|annoying / 极了 |jí le|extremely / ! }

That boy is unbelievably annoying!

Remember: 极 = **pole, the furthest point** (北极 = North Pole). 好极了 pushes “good” all the way to the pole —and 极 never travels without its 了.

Watch out

- The 了 is **non-negotiable**: 好极了, never 好极.
- **No 得**—it attaches bare (好极了), unlike most degree complements (好得很).
- 极了 already carries the emphasis, so don’t pile on 很 or 非常: 好极了, never 很好极了.

1.2 形容词重叠—doubling adjectives for warmth (AA / AABB)

Repeat an adjective and it turns **soft, warm, and vivid** —less a cold fact, more a fond little picture. This doubling runs all through friendly, natural Chinese, especially for **physical descriptions**: colours, sizes, shapes.

A **one-syllable** adjective doubles as **AA**, usually with 的 before the noun —大 (“big”) → 大大的 (“nice and big, big and round”):

Structure: A + A + 的 (+ Noun)

{zh: 宝宝 |bǎo bao|the baby / 的 |de / 眼睛 |yǎn jīng|eyes / 大大的 |dà dà de|big and round / 。 }

The baby has big, round eyes.

{zh: 今晚 |jīn wǎn|tonight / 的 |de / 月亮 |yuè liàng|moon / 圆圆的 |yuán yuán de|nice and round / 。 }

The moon is lovely and round tonight.

A **two-syllable** adjective doubles as **AABB** —repeat each character, not the whole word: 高兴 → 高高兴兴, 干净 → 干干净净, 舒服 → 舒舒服服. Used as an **adverb**, the AABB form takes 地 before the verb:

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 想 |xiǎng|want to / 舒舒服服 |shū shū fú fú|comfortably / 地 |de / 躺 |tǎng|lie / 在 |zài|on / 沙发上 |shā fā shàng|the sofa / 。 }

I just want to lie comfortably on the sofa.

Remember: doubling **softens and warms** —大大的眼睛 isn't a flat "big eyes," it's the affectionate "lovely big eyes" a parent would coo. AA + 的 paints a noun; AABB + 地 colours a verb.

Watch out

- **Not every adjective doubles** —好吃, 便宜, 麻烦 are never said as 好好吃吃 / 便便宜宜. Stick to common physical descriptors until you've heard a form used for real.
- A doubled adjective is **already emphatic** —never put 很 in front (很慢慢 is wrong).

1.3 形容词 + 地 + 动词—turning an adjective into "-ly" (地)

To say **how** an action is done, park the particle 地 (de) after an adjective —it is Chinese's "-ly." 高兴 ("happy") → 高兴地 ("happily"); 认真 ("careful") → 认真地 ("carefully"). The adverb always sits **in front of** the verb.

Structure: Adjective + 地 + Verb *Literally: "happy-ly —smiled."*

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 高兴 |gāo xìng|happy / 地 |de / 笑 |xiào|smiled / 了 |le / 。 }

He smiled happily.

{zh: 老师 |lǎo shī|the teacher / 认真 |rèn zhēn|careful / 地 |de / 看 |kàn|read / 了 |le / 我的 |wǒ de|my / 作文 |zuò wén|essay / 。 }

The teacher read my essay carefully.

Remember: 地 = "-ly". Three de's sound identical but split the work: 的 owns a noun (我的书), 地 drives a verb (慢慢地走), 得 rates the result (跑得快). The 地 here even carries 土 "earth" on its left —picture an adverb *grounding* how the verb is done.

Watch out

- This 地 is read **de**, not *dì* —same sound as 的 and 得, different job.
- The adverb phrase comes **before** the verb, never after it.

2 Adverbs

2.1 又 + 动词 + 了—”(did it) again” (in the past)

Something already happened **one more time**? Reach for 又 (yòu) —”again, once more.” It looks **backward** at a repeat that’s done, and it often carries a flick of annoyance, like English “again?!” (For “again” in the *future*, you want 再 instead —see the contrast below.)

Structure: (Subject +) 又 + Verb + 了 *Literally: “again —[verb] —(and it’s happened).”*

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 又 |yòu|again / 迟到 |chí dào|late / 了 |le / 。 }

You’re late again.

{zh: 又 |yòu|again / 下雨 |xià yǔ|rain / 了 |le / ！ }

It’s raining again!

{zh: 今天 |jīn tiān|today / 又 |yòu|again / 要 |yào|have to / 加班 |jiā bān|work overtime / 了 |le / ！ }

We’ve got to work overtime again today!

Remember: 又 looks back, 再 looks forward. 又来了 = “here we go again” (it happened); 再来一次 = “do it once more” (it will). Future 再 takes no 了; past 又 needs it.

Watch out

- 又 also works with negatives: 他又没来 (“he didn’t come *again*”).
- For something about to repeat, pair it with 要: 又要…了 (“here it comes again”).

2.2 一直—”all along, continuously”

一直 is literally “**one straight (line)**” —picture a single, unbroken line drawn through time. It describes an action or state that runs **non-stop** over a stretch —”continuously, the whole time, all along.” English often lands it as “always.”

Structure: Subject + 一直 + Predicate *Literally: “in one straight line, [predicate].”*

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 一直 |yì zhí|all along / 很 |hěn|very / 喜欢 |xǐ huan|like / 你 |nǐ|you / 。 }

I’ve liked you all along.

{zh: 老板 |lǎo bǎn|the boss / 一直 |yì zhí|always / 很 |hěn|very / 忙 |máng|busy / 。 }

The boss is always busy.

{zh: 十八岁 |shí bā suì|eighteen / 以后 |yǐ hòu|after / , 他 |tā|he / 一直 |yì zhí|has … ever since / 一个人 |yí ge rén|alone / 住 |zhù|lived / 。 }

Since he was eighteen, he’s lived alone the whole time.

Remember: 一直 = **one straight line through time** —no breaks. It's *unbroken duration*; for a repeating *habit* ("always does X"), switch to 总是.

Watch out

- It often pairs with 在 (一直在学习) or 都 (一直都不抽烟).
- 一直走 also means "go straight ahead" —the same "straight line" idea, in space.

2.3 总是—"always" (a habit)

总是 is "always" in the sense of a **habit or consistent pattern** —something that just keeps recurring. 总 means "all in all, in every case," so 总是 says "*in every case, it's like this.*" It's neutral in tone and sits before the verb.

Structure: Subject + 总是 + Verb · with an adjective: 总是 + 很 / 特别 + Adj

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 总是 |zǒng shì|always / 迟到 |chí dào|late / 。 }

He's always late.

{zh: 你 |nǐ|your / 家 |jiā|home / 总是 |zǒng shì|always / 很 |hěn|very / 干净 |gān jìng|clean / 。 }

Your home is always so clean.

Remember: 总 = "in every case." 总是 is the **neutral** "always" (a pattern); its grumbling twin 老是 (below) adds the eye-roll.

Watch out

- Before an **adjective** you must add a degree word: 总是**很累** , not 总是累.
- 总是 = a *recurring habit*; 一直 = one *unbroken stretch*. "He's always late" (each time) is 总是; "it rained the whole time" is 一直.

2.4 终于—"finally, at last"

终于 marks something **finally happening after a long wait** —and it glows with **relief or joy**. 终 is "the end / finish line" (the 终 of 终点), so 终于 is "*at the finish line, it came.*" Unlike English "finally," it can't stand alone, move to the front, or end a sentence —and it must team up with 了.

Structure: Subject + 终于 + Predicate + 了

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 终于 |zhōng yú|finally / 到 |dào|arrived / 了 |le / ! }

You're finally here!

{zh: 作业 |zuò yè|the homework / 终于 |zhōng yú|finally / 做 |zuò|done / 完 |wán|finished / 了 |le / ! }

I've finally finished the homework!

Remember: 终 = the **finish line** you've been straining toward —终于 is the sigh of relief as you cross it, always sealed with 了.

Watch out

- The 了 is **obligatory** —终于…了; never 终于 bare like English "finally" on its own.
- It implies a *welcome* outcome. For a flat, neutral "in the end," use 最后.

2.5 几乎—"nearly, almost"

几乎 means "nearly, almost" —it gets you right up to the line without quite crossing it. It loves company: it very often teams up with an **"all" word** (每, 所有, 全…都) or a **"none" word** (没有, 不).

Structure: 几乎 + 每 / 所有…都… · Subject + 几乎 + [不 / 没] + Predicate

{zh: 几乎 |jī hū|almost / 每个人 |měi ge rén|everyone / 都 |dōu|all / 有 |yǒu|has / 手机 |shǒu jī|a phone / 。 }

Almost everyone has a phone.

{zh: 几乎 |jī hū|almost / 没有 |méi yǒu|no / 人 |rén|one / 相信 |xiāng xìn|believes / 他 |tā|him / 。 }

Almost no one believes him.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|my / 老板 |lǎo bǎn|boss / 几乎 |jī hū|hardly / 不 |bù|ever / 喝酒 |hē jiǔ|drinks / 。 }

My boss hardly ever drinks.

Remember: think of 几乎 as a needle stopping **just short** of the mark. 几乎 + 都 → "almost all"; 几乎 + 没有 → "almost none"; 几乎不 / 几乎没 → "hardly ever."

Watch out

- It points to one extreme (all or none) —pair it with a 都 / 没有 / 不 to land the meaning.

2.6 只—"only"

只 (zhǐ) is the everyday word for "only." It's an **adverb**, so it clings to the **verb** (or an auxiliary like 会 / 能) —never to the noun the way English "only" floats around.

Structure: 只 + Verb · 只 + 会 / 能 + Verb

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 只 |zhǐ|only / 有 |yǒu|have / 一个 |yí ge|one / 哥哥 |gē ge|older brother / 。 }

I only have one older brother.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 只 |zhǐ|only / 想 |xiǎng|want / 跟 |gēn|to be with / 你 |nǐ|you / 在一起 |zài yì qǐ|together / 。 }

I only want to be with you.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 只 |zhǐ|only / 能 |néng|can / 说 |shuō|say / 两 |liǎng|two / 句 |jù|sentences / 中文 |Zhōng wén|Chinese / 。 }

I can only say a couple of sentences in Chinese.

Remember: 只 sits on the verb: 我只有一个 ("I only have one"), never 我有只一个. English "only" wanders; Chinese 只 stays glued to the verb.

Watch out

- 只 (zhǐ, "only") is written the same as 只 (zhī), the measure word for animals (一只猫) —same character, two readings and jobs.

2.7 Duration + 没 + 动词 + 了—how long you *haven't* done something

Here's a word order that trips up English speakers. To say **how long you have NOT done** something, the duration jumps **in front of** the verb: time + 没 + verb + 了. Compare the normal "did it for ten years" (verb first), and you'll see the mirror image.

Structure: Subject + (已经 +) Duration + 没 + Verb + 了

{zh: 我们 |wǒ men|we / 已经 |yǐ jīng|already / 十年 |shí nián|ten years / 没 |méi|haven't / 见 |jiàn|met / 了 |le / 。 }

We haven't seen each other for ten years now.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 一个星期 |yí ge xīng qī|a week / 没 |méi|hasn't / 洗澡 |xǐ zǎo|showered / 了 |le / 。 }

He hasn't showered in a week.

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 多久 |duō jiǔ|how long / 没 |méi|haven't / 回家 |huí jiā|been home / 了 |le / ? }

How long has it been since you went home?

Remember: "have done" puts time after the verb; "haven't done" puts time before it. 看了十年 = "watched for ten years"; 十年没看了 = "haven't watched in ten years." The 了 here means "and counting."

Watch out

- Chinese avoids "since [a time point]." Say a *duration* instead (三年没…了), or 上次…是…("the last time was…").

2.8 Time + 才 + 动词—"not until" (lateness)

才 (cái) drags an action **later than expected**—"not until, as late as." If 就 says "already, sooner than you'd think," 才 is its grumpy opposite: "only then, finally, took its time."

Structure: Subject + Time + 才 + Verb

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 昨天 |zuó tiān|yesterday / 十一点 |shí yī diǎn|eleven o'clock / 才 |cái|not until / 到家 |dào jiā|got home / 。 }

I didn't get home until eleven last night.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 二十五岁 |èr shí wǔ suì|twenty-five / 才 |cái|not until / 上 |shàng|started / 大学 |dà xué|university / 。 }

He didn't start university until he was twenty-five.

Remember: 才 = late / barely (就 = early / already). And 才 takes **no** 了—the lateness is the point, not a completed result: 四十岁才结婚, never 才结婚了.

Watch out

- Same character does double duty: before a *time* it means "late" (this point); before a *number* it means "only a little" (point 2.12 below).

2.9 先…, 再…—"first ..., then ..."

To line events up **in order**, frame them with 先…再…—"first ..., (and) then ...". The trap: here 再 means "**then / next**," not its usual "again."

Structure: 先 + Verb 1, 再 + Verb 2

{zh: 先 |xiān|first / 洗手 |xǐ shǒu|wash hands / , 再 |zài|then / 吃 |chī|eat / 。 }

Wash your hands first, then eat.

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 要 |yào|should / 先 |xiān|first / 做 |zuò|do / 作业 |zuò yè|homework / , 再 |zài|then / 看 |kàn|watch / 电视 |diàn shì|TV / 。 }

Do your homework first, then watch TV.

Remember: in 先…再…, 再 is the "**and then**" of a sequence, not "again." Picture two stepping stones: step on 先 first, then 再.

Watch out

- 先…再说 means "do X first, *then* we'll see" —a "deal with it later" feeling: 先吃饭再说.
- Chain longer sequences with 然后 ("and then") and 接着 ("next").

2.10 一边…一边…—doing two things at once

Two deliberate actions happening **at the same time**? Frame both with 一边…一边…—"do X) while (doing Y)." 边 means "side," so it's literally "*on one side ... on the other side ...*" —two tracks running together.

Structure: Subject + 一边 + Verb 1 (,) 一边 + Verb 2

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 常常 |cháng cháng|often / 一边 |yì biān|while / 洗澡 |xǐ zǎo|showering / , 一边 |yì biān / 唱歌 |chàng gē|sing / 。 }

I often sing in the shower.

{zh: 别 |bié|don't / 一边 |yì biān|while / 开车 |kāi chē|driving / , 一边 |yì biān / 打电话 |dǎ diàn huà|make calls / 。 }

Don't make calls while driving.

Remember: 边 = "**side**" —one action on each side, at once. Casually it shrinks to 边…边…(边走边聊, "chatting as we walk").

Watch out

- Both actions must be **intentional**; for "while X was going on," use …的时候.
- The *main* action is usually the **second** one in Chinese (English often flips the order).

2.11 老是—"always" (a complaint)

老是 (or just **老**) also means "always" —but it's the **grumbling** version, loaded with frustration, like "you're *always* on your phone." Swap it in for **总是** anywhere you want to add an eye-roll.

Structure: Subject + 老 (是) + Predicate

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 怎么 |zěnmē|why / 老是 |lǎoshì|always / 迟到 |chídào|late / ? }

Why are you always late?

{zh: 这个 |zhège|this / 机器 |jīqì|machine / 老是 |lǎoshì|always / 出 |chū|having / 问题 |wèntí|trouble / 。 }

This machine is always breaking down.

Remember: 总是 is neutral; **老是 complains**. If you could add "ugh" to the English, use 老是.

Watch out

- It's a **complaint** —don't use it for something good (use 总是 there).
- Before an adjective, add 不 / 很 / 这么: 老是不高兴.

2.12 才 + 数字—"only" (a small number)

A second job for **才** (cái): drop it before a **number** and it stresses the amount is **smaller than you'd expect** —"only, just, a mere." Where the "lateness" 才 says "late," this one says "barely that much."

Structure: 才 + Number + Measure Word + Noun · 才 + Verb + Number + MW + Noun

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 才 |cái|only / 二十岁 |èrshí suì|twenty / ? }

You're only twenty?

{zh: 这家 |zhèjiā|this / 店 |diàn|shop / 才 |cái|only / 开业 |kāiyè|been open / 一个 |yí ge|one / 星期 |xīngqī|week / 。 }

This shop has only been open a week.

{zh: 他们 |tāmen|they / 才 |cái|only / 认识 |rènshi|known each other / 三个月 |sānge yuè|three months / ! }

They've only known each other three months!

Remember: one 才, two jobs —before a **time** it drags things *late* (2.8); before a **number** it shrinks the amount to *only that much*. Both share the feeling "less than expected."

Watch out

- After 才 + verb, the 了 is optional: 才来了两个月 才来两个月.

3 Adverbs with Adjectives

3.1 这么 / 那么 + 形容词—”so ..., this / that ...”

Put **这么** or **那么** in front of an adjective to dial its degree up —English ”so, this much, that much.” The split mirrors English **this** vs **that**: **这么** points to something **near or happening right now** (”*this* cold”); **那么** points to something **further off or already mentioned** (”*that* clever”).

Structure: Subject + 这么 / 那么 + Adjective

{zh: 今天 |jīn tiān|today / 怎么 |zě me|how come / 这么 |zhè me|so / 冷 |lěng|cold / ?
}

Why is it so cold today?

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 那么 |nà me|so / 聪明 |cōng míng|clever / , 一定 |yí dìng|surely / 能 |néng|can / 猜到 |cāi dào|guess it / 。 }

You're so clever —you'll definitely guess it.

Remember: 这 = **here** / **now**, 那 = **there** / **then**; the 么 turns ”this/that” into ”*this much* / *that much*.” Same split as English this/that.

Watch out

- Both translate as ”so,” but keep the near/far feel: 这么 for what's in front of you, 那么 for what's removed.
- Very common after 怎么 for a surprised ”how come it's so ...?”: 怎么这么贵.

3.2 A + 跟 / 和 + B + 一样—”the same as, as ...as”

To say two things are **alike**, link them with **跟** (or **和**) and **一样**—literally ”one same (shape).” Add an adjective on the end and you get ”equally ..., as ...as.”

Structure: Noun 1 + 跟 / 和 + Noun 2 + 一样 (+ Adjective)

{zh: 你家 |nǐ jiā|your home / 跟 |gēn|as / 我家 |wǒ jiā|my home / 一样 |yí yàng|the same / 大 |dà|big / 。 }

Your place is just as big as mine.

{zh: 北京 |Běi jīng|Beijing / 的 |de / 天气 |tiān qì|weather / 和 |hé|and / 上海 |Shàng hǎi|Shanghai / 不 |bù|not / 一样 |yí yàng|the same / 。 }

Beijing's weather isn't the same as Shanghai's.

Remember: 一样 = ”**one-same**” —cut from the same cloth. The adjective rides **after** 一样 (一样大 = ”equally big”), and 不 to negate goes **before** it (不一样).

Watch out

- Word order traps English speakers: it's ...一样大, never 大一样.
- 跟 and 和 are interchangeable here; 跟 is more spoken, 和 a touch more neutral.

3.3 又…又…—”both …and …”

The frame 又…又… stacks two qualities that hold **at the same time** —”both …and ….” The one rule: the two adjectives must share the **same feeling** —both positive, or both negative. Mixing a plus and a minus jars the Chinese ear.

Structure: Subject + 又 + Adjective 1 + 又 + Adjective 2

{zh: 这个 |zhè ge|this / 房子 |fáng zi|house / 又 |yòu|both / 大 |dà|big / 又 |yòu|and / 亮 |liàng|bright / 。 }

This house is both big and bright.

{zh: 这里 |zhè lǐ|here / 的 |de / 咖啡 |kā fēi|coffee / 又 |yòu|both / 贵 |guì|expensive / 又 |yòu|and / 难喝 |nán hē|bad-tasting / 。 }

The coffee here is both pricey and nasty.

Remember: both 又’s must **point the same way** —又便宜又好 (both plus), 又贵又难喝 (both minus), but not 又贵又好 (mixed).

Watch out

- For two simultaneous *actions* rather than qualities, use 一边…一边…instead.

3.4 比较 + 形容词—”fairly, rather, relatively”

比较 literally means ”to compare,” and as an adverb it means ”fairly, rather, comparatively.” It’s a **gentle hedge** —softer and less absolute than 很 or 非常—and it quietly implies ”more so than the rest,” even when nothing else is named.

Structure: Subject + 比较 + Adjective (also 比较 + feeling-verb)

{zh: 这个 |zhè ge|this / 问题 |wèn tí|question / 比较 |bǐ jiào|fairly / 简单 |jiǎn dān|simple / 。 }

This question is fairly simple.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 比较 |bǐ jiào|rather / 喜欢 |xǐ huan|prefer / 坐 |zuò|taking / 地铁 |dì tiě|the subway / 。 }

I rather prefer taking the subway.

Remember: 比较 has ”compare” (比) baked in —it always whispers ”*relatively, compared to the alternatives.*” Use it to sound measured, not gushing.

Watch out

- Works with feeling-verbs too: 比较喜欢, 比较讨厌.

3.5 多 + 形容词—”how …!” (exclamation)

In an exclamation, 多 (or 多么) before an adjective means ”how …!, so …!” —a quick, emotional burst of admiration or complaint. It usually closes with 啊.

Structure: Subject + 多 + Adjective + 啊!

{zh: 你 |nǐ|your / 女儿 |nǚ ér|daughter / 多 |duō|how / 聪明 |cōng míng|clever / 啊 |a / ! }

How clever your daughter is!

{zh: 一个人 |yí ge rén|on your own / 多 |duō|how / 好 |hǎo|nice / ! }

How nice it is to have the place to yourself!

Remember: the same 多 that **asks** about degree —你多大? (“how old?”) —also **exclaims** it: 多大啊! (“how big!”). The 啊 and the “!” are the tell.

Watch out

- It’s an exclamation —pair it with 啊 and a “!”.

3.6 形容词 + 的 + 名词—describing a noun

To stick an adjective in front of a noun, glue them together with 的—Chinese’s all-purpose “of / ’s” link. English just lines the words up (“a beautiful girl”); Chinese threads 的 between them.

Structure: Adjective + 的 + Noun

{zh: 漂亮 |piào liang|beautiful / 的 |de / 女孩儿 |nǚ hái|girl}

a beautiful girl

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 要 |yào|want / 冷 |lěng|cold / 的 |de / 还是 |hái shì|or / 热 |rè|hot / 的 |de / ? }

Do you want a cold one or a hot one?

Remember: 的 clips an adjective onto a noun. A **two-syllable** adjective almost always needs it (漂亮的女孩); a tight one-syllable pairing can drop it (好朋友, “good friend”).

Watch out

- Adj + 的 can stand alone for “the …one(s)”: 我要甜的 (“I’ll have the sweet one”).

4 Conjunctions

4.1 或者——“or” (in statements)

Use **或者** to lay out alternatives in a **statement** —“either ...or.” It tells, it doesn’t ask: “coffee or tea, both fine.” The moment you want the listener to *choose*, you must switch to **还是** (the last point in this topic) —this is the single most-tested “or” trap in Chinese.

Structure: Possibility 1 + 或者 + Possibility 2

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 喝 |hē|drink / 咖啡 |kā fēi|coffee / 或者 |huò zhě|or / 茶 |chá|tea / , 都 |dōu|either / 行 |xíng|is fine / 。 }

Coffee or tea —either’s fine for me.

{zh: 星期六 |xīng qī liù|Saturday / 或者 |huò zhě|or / 星期天 |xīng qī tiān|Sunday / , 都 |dōu|both / 可以 |kě yǐ|work / 。 }

Saturday or Sunday both work.

Remember: **或者** = “or” when you tell; **还是** = “or” when you ask. A statement (“either is fine”) takes 或者; a question (“which one?”) takes 还是.

Watch out

- It often closes with 都行 / 都可以 (“either one is fine”).

4.2 那 / 那么——“then, in that case”

那 (or the fuller **那么**) picks up what was just said and draws a suggestion or conclusion from it —“then, so, in that case.” It opens your reply, reacting to the other person’s remark. (It’s the same **那** as “that” —literally “*that* being so, ...”.)

Structure: Situation , 那 (么) + Suggestion / Decision

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 不 |bù|won’t / 听 |tīng|listen / , 那 |nà|then / 我 |wǒ|I / 应该 |yīng gāi|should / 怎么办 |zěn me bàn|do what / ? }

He won’t listen —so what should I do?

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 不 |bù|don’t / 喜欢 |xǐ huan|like / 这个 |zhè ge|this one / , 那 |nà|then / 我们 |wǒ men|we / 换 |huàn|swap / 一个 |yí ge|for another / 。 }

You don’t like this one —then let’s swap it.

Remember: **那 (么)** = “that being so...” —it *reacts and suggests* in conversation. It is **not** **所以** (“therefore”), which states a cause→effect inside one thought.

Watch out

- A bare **那** is the most natural in speech; **那么** sounds a touch more formal.

4.3 跟…(一起) + 动词——“with (someone)”

Before the verb, **跟** marks the person you do something **with** —“(together) with.” It frequently teams up with **一起** (“together”). **跟** also means “to follow / heel,” which is

why it leans toward doing things *alongside* someone.

Structure: Subject + 跟 + Person + (一起) + Verb

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 要 |yào|want to / 跟 |gēn|with / 我 |wǒ|me / 一起 |yì qǐ|together / 去 |qù|go / 吗 |ma / ? }

Do you want to come with me?

{zh: 跟 |gēn|after / 我 |wǒ|me / 读 |dú|read / 。 }

Read after me.

Remember: 跟 literally "to follow" —so 跟我读 is "read *after* me." The "with" phrase always sits **before** the verb: 跟你见面 , never 见面你.

Watch out

- 跟 和 for plain "with," but only 跟 carries the "follow" sense (跟我来, "come with / after me").

4.4 A + 还是 + B? —"or" (in questions)

When you ask someone to **choose** between options, use **还是**—never 或者. 还是 turns the sentence into an either/or question, and the asker is waiting for you to pick one.

Structure: (Subject + Verb +) A + 还是 + B + ?

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 要 |yào|want / 喝 |hē|drink / 茶 |chá|tea / 还是 |hái shì|or / 咖啡 |kā fēi|coffee / ? }

Do you want tea or coffee?

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 是 |shì|is / 美国人 |Měi guó rén|American / 还是 |hái shì|or / 英国人 |Yīng guó rén|British / ? }

Is he American or British?

Remember: Questions → 还是; statements → 或者. This is the pair to keep glued together —see 或者 at the top of this topic.

Watch out

- Don't repeat 是 before B: 是水还是酒 , not 是水还是是酒.

5 Nouns

5.1 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”).

5.2 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.

5.3 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.

5.4 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.

5.5 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.

5.6 …… , 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.

6 Numbers

6.1 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: the two numbers must be **next-door neighbours** —三四, 七八, 两三— never a skip (not 三五). 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").

6.2 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 = 10 and 亿 = 10, 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.

6.3 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."

6.4 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.

7 Particles

7.1 动词 + 着—an ongoing state

着 (zhe) after a verb freezes the action into a **lingering state** —the door *is* (standing) open, you *are* holding it. Think of 着 as a clip that keeps the verb “switched on.” A second, very common use is **Verb 1 + 着 + Verb 2**: V1 着 sets the posture or manner, and V2 is the real action done in that state.

Structure: Verb + 着 · Verb 1 + 着 + Verb 2

{zh: 你们 |nǐ men|you all / 坐 |zuò|sit / 着 |zhe / , 我 |wǒ|I / 马上 |mǎ shàng|right away / 回来 |huí lái|come back / 。 }

Stay seated —I’ll be right back.

{zh: 她 |tā|she / 喜欢 |xǐ huan|likes to / 站 |zhàn|stand / 着 |zhe / 吃饭 |chī fàn|eat / 。 }

She likes to eat standing up.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 笑 |xiào|smiling / 着 |zhe / 说 |shuō|said / 对不起 |duì bu qǐ|sorry / 。 }

Smiling, he said sorry.

Remember: 着 = the verb **held on, lingering** (门开着 = “the door stays open”); for an action actively *in progress*, use 在 (他在吃饭). In V1 着 V2, V1 is the **backdrop**, V2 the **real action** —站着吃 = “eat *while* standing.”

Watch out

- 着 is a state, not a play-by-play —pair it with 在/正在 only when you really mean “is currently …”.

7.2 ……了—a change of state

Sentence-final 了 can announce a **new situation** —something has *become* the case that wasn’t before. This “change” 了 (often called 了) is a different beast from the 了 that marks a *completed action*; here it means “**now**.”

Structure: Subject + Adjective + 了 · Subject + Verb + 了

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 饿 |è|hungry / 了 |le / 。 }

I’m hungry (now).

{zh: 下雨 |xià yǔ|raining / 了 |le / 。 }

It’s raining (it wasn’t before).

{zh: 宝宝 |bǎo bao|the baby / 会 |huì|can / 说话 |shuō huà|talk / 了 |le / 。 }

The baby can talk now.

Remember: this 了 = “**now, a new state**” (饿了 = “hungry *now*”), **not** “did and finished.” Whenever you’d add “now” in English, this is the 了 you want: 他当经理了 (“he’s a manager now”).

Watch out

- Same character, two jobs: change-of-state 了 (新情况) vs completed-action 了 (做完了). Context and position tell them apart.

7.3 ……呢? —”and you? / what about …?”

呢 at the end lobs a question **back** without you having to repeat it —”and …? what about …?” A neat extra: a bare noun + 呢 (with no prior question) asks **”where is …?”**

Structure: Topic + 呢?

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 很 |hěn|very / 好 |hǎo|well / , 你 |nǐ|you / 呢 |ne / ? }

I’m well —and you?

{zh: 我 |wǒ|my / 的 |de / 手机 |shǒu jī|phone / 呢 |ne / ? }

Where’s my phone?

Remember: 呢 = ”…and X?” —it bounces the last question back (你呢? ”and you?”). With nothing asked before, noun + 呢 means **”where is X?”** (钱呢? ”where’s the money?”).

Watch out

- It rides on context —without a prior question or a ”where is” sense, a bare 呢 has nothing to bounce off.

7.4 的 / 得 / 地—the three structural ”de”

Three different characters, all pronounced **de**, each with exactly one job. Keeping them straight is the single most common slip in written Chinese —so sort them by **what comes next**.

Structure: 的 + Noun · Verb + 得 + Complement · Adjective + 地 + Verb

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 做 |zuò|did / 得 |de / 很 |hěn|very / 好 |hǎo|well / , 因为 |yīn wèi|because / 你 |nǐ|you / 认真 |rèn zhēn|carefully / 地 |de / 听课 |tīng kè|listened / 。 }

You did well, because you listened attentively in class.

{zh: 妈妈 |mā ma|Mom / 的 |de / 新 |xīn|new / 手机 |shǒu jī|phone / 跑 |pǎo|runs / 得 |de / 特别 |tè bié|especially / 快 |kuài|fast / 。 }

Mom’s new phone runs especially fast.

Remember: sort them by what **follows**: **的** → a **noun** (漂亮的衣服); **地** → a **verb**, building an adverb (认真地听); **得** → sits **after** a verb, rating the result (做得很好).
Tip: 地 has 土 ”earth” (it *grounds* the verb); 得 leans on the verb to tell you *how well*.

Watch out

- A true adverb (不, 也, 都) needs **no** 地—only an *adjective* used adverbially does (认真地, but just 都, never 都地).

8 Prepositions

8.1 关于——“about, regarding, as for”

关于 (guānyú) flags the **topic** a sentence is about —“about, regarding, as for.” Used this way it opens the sentence, setting the subject up before you say anything about it: “As for X, …”.

Structure: 关于 + Topic , ……

{zh: 关于 |guān yú|as for / 中国 |Zhōng guó|Chinese / 历史 |lì shǐ|history / , 我 |wǒ|I / 知道 |zhī dào|know / 的 |de / 不多 |bù duō|not much / 。 }

As for Chinese history, I don't know much.

{zh: 关于 |guān yú|as for / 你 |nǐ|your / 的 |de / 建议 |jiàn yì|suggestion / , 老板 |lǎo bǎn|the boss / 还 |hái|still / 在 |zài / 考虑 |kǎo lǜ|considering it / 。 }

As for your suggestion, the boss is still thinking it over.

Remember: 关于 + topic = a **headline** at the front of the sentence (“Regarding X, …”). It can't sit mid-sentence like English “about.”

Watch out

- Many English “about”s are **baked into the Chinese verb** —say 聊你的工作 (“talk about your job”), not 聊关于….

8.2 直到…才…——“not until”

直到 (zhí dào) means “all the way until (a point).” Pair it with **才** and you get the emphatic “**not until** X did Y happen” —the 才 is what stamps on the “and that’s surprisingly late.”

Structure: 直到 + Time / Event , Subject + 才 + Verb

{zh: 直到 |zhí dào|not until / 十二点半 |shí èr diǎn bàn|half past twelve / , 我 |wǒ|I / 才 |cái|only then / 做完 |zuò wán|finished / 作业 |zuò yè|the homework / 。 }

I didn't finish my homework until half past twelve.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 直到 |zhí dào|not until / 医生 |yī shēng|the doctor / 来 |lái|came / 了 |le / , 才 |cái|only then / 放心 |fàng xīn|relaxed / 。 }

He didn't relax until the doctor came.

Remember: 直到 sets the **deadline**, 才 delivers the “**finally** / **only then**.” Drop the 才 and you lose the “annoyingly late” punch.

Watch out

- The subject may also go before 直到: 我直到十二点半才….

8.3 向—”towards, to (and sometimes from)”

向 (xiàng) aims an action **towards** a person or direction —no actual movement required (向他笑, ”smile at him”). The twist English speakers must memorise: a few verbs that take **”from”** in English use 向 (”toward”) in Chinese —向…借钱 (”borrow *from*”), 向…学习 (”learn *from*”).

Structure: 向 + Direction / Person + Verb

{zh: 向 |xiàng / 前 |qián|forward / 看 |kàn|look / 。 }

Look ahead.

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 必须 |bì xū|must / 向 |xiàng|to / 他 |tā|him / 道歉 |dào qiàn|apologise / ! }

You must apologise to him!

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 不 |bù|don't / 喜欢 |xǐ huan|like / 向 |xiàng|from / 朋友 |péng you|friends / 借钱 |jiè qián|borrowing money / 。 }

I don't like borrowing money from friends.

Remember: 向 = an **arrow** pointing at someone. Even ”learn / borrow **from**” is framed as aiming *toward* the source in Chinese: 向老师学习 (”learn toward the teacher”).

Watch out

- Use it with verbs of facing or directing: 向前走 (”walk forward”), 向我求助 (”turn to me for help”).

9 Verbs

9.1 看起来——“looks, seems, appears”

看起来 (kànqǐlái) reports a snap **impression from what you can see** —“(it) looks / seems / appears” —and comes right before the description. Best of all, the whole sense-family works the same way: swap in 听 (“sounds”), 吃 (“tastes”), 用 (“feels to use”) and you’ve got a free set of patterns.

Structure: Subject + 看起来 + Adjective

{zh: 蛋糕 |dàn gāo|the cake / 看起来 |kàn qǐ lái|looks / 很 |hěn|very / 好吃 |hǎo chī|tasty / 。 }

The cake looks delicious.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 看起来 |kàn qǐ lái|looks / 很 |hěn|very / 累 |lèi|tired / 。 }

He looks tired.

Remember: sense verb + **起来** = “comes across as …”. 看起来 (looks), 听起来 (sounds), 吃起来 (tastes), 用起来 (handles) —learn the frame once, reuse it everywhere.

Watch out

- For an *inferred* “it seems” (a conclusion, not a look), reach for 好像 or 似乎 instead.

9.2 没(有) ——“not as …as” (comparison)

没(有) is the flip side of 比: “A 没有 B + Adjective” means “A is **not as** [Adjective] **as** B.” Yes —it’s the very same 没有 as “not have,” moonlighting as a comparison word.

Structure: Noun 1 + 没(有) + Noun 2 + Adjective

{zh: 小张 |Xiǎo Zhāng|Xiao Zhang / 没有 |méi yǒu|not as / 小李 |Xiǎo Lǐ|Xiao Li / 高 |gāo|tall / 。 }

Xiao Zhang isn’t as tall as Xiao Li.

{zh: 今天 |jīn tiān|today / 没有 |méi yǒu|not as / 昨天 |zuó tiān|yesterday / 冷 |lěng|cold / 。 }

Today isn’t as cold as yesterday.

Remember: 比 = “more than”; 没有 = “not as much as.” 你比我高 (“you’re taller than me”) flips to 我没有你高 (“I’m not as tall as you”). Add 那么 for force: 没有他那么忙.

Watch out

- The adjective is bare —no 很: 没有你高 , not 没有你很高.

9.3 让 / 叫 / 请 / 使——making someone do something

These **causative** verbs slot a **person** between the verb and what they end up doing —“make / let / ask / cause someone to ….” Pick by tone: 让 is the everyday “make / let,”

叫 a colloquial "tell," 请 a polite "ask / invite," and 使 a formal, written "cause."

Structure: Subject + 让 / 叫 / 请 / 使 + Person + Predicate

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 为什么 |wèi shén me|why / 不 |bù|not / 让 |ràng|let / 我 |wǒ|me / 去 |qù|go / ? }

Why won't you let me go?

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 想 |xiǎng|want / 请 |qǐng|to ask / 你 |nǐ|you / 帮 |bāng|do / 我 |wǒ|me / 一个 |yí ge|a / 忙 |máng|favour / 。 }

I'd like to ask you a favour.

Remember: all four mean "get someone to do something," sorted by politeness: 使 (formal) → 让 (neutral, "make/let") → 叫 (casual, "tell") → 请 (polite, "ask/invite"). 让 is your safe default in speech.

Watch out

- 让 covers both "make" and "let" —context decides which.

9.4 经过—"pass by / after going through"

经过 (jīngguò) wears two hats. As a **verb** it means "pass by / through (a place)"; as a **preposition** it sets up "after going through (a process or time), ..." before you state the result.

Structure: 经过 + Place (verb) · 经过 + Process / Time , Result

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 每天 |měi tiān|every day / 上班 |shàng bān|to work / 都 |dōu / 经过 |jīng guò|pass by / 这里 |zhè lǐ|here / 。 }

I pass by here every day on my way to work.

{zh: 经过 |jīng guò|after / 努力 |nǔ lì|hard work / , 她 |tā|she / 考上 |kǎo shàng|got into / 了 |le / 大学 |dà xué|university / 。 }

Through hard work, she got into university.

Remember: 经过 always means "go through" —through a *place* (the verb) or through a *process* (the preposition). Compare 通过 ("by means of, via"): 经过 rides a journey/process, 通过 rides a method/agent.

Watch out

- As a preposition it opens the sentence: 经过 + process, then the result.

10 Auxiliary verbs

10.1 应该 / 该—“should, ought to”

应该 (yīnggāi, often clipped to **该**) is the everyday “should, ought to” —what’s **right, advisable, or expected**. It’s an auxiliary verb, so it leans on the main verb that follows. A handy second meaning: it also covers “**ought to be the case / probably**” (an expectation, not a duty).

Structure: Subject + 应该 + Verb (+ Object)

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 应该 |yīng gāi|should / 多 |duō|more / 休息 |xiū xi|rest / 。 }

You should rest more.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 应该 |yīng gāi|should / 给 |gěi|give / 你 |nǐ|you / 多少 |duō shao|how much / 钱 |qián|money / ? }

How much should I give you?

{zh: 在 |zài|in / 中国 |Zhōng guó|China / , 你 |nǐ|you / 应该 |yīng gāi|should / 试试 |shì shi|try / 白酒 |bái jiǔ|baijiu / 。 }

In China, you ought to try baijiu.

Remember: 应该 has two flavours —“**should**” (advice: 你应该休息) and “**should be / probably**” (expectation: 他应该到了, “he should be there by now”). Same word, told apart by context.

Watch out

- Negate with **不应该** (“shouldn’t”): 你不应该这样做.
- The clipped **该** is the casual spoken form: 你该走了 (“you’d better get going”).

11 Verb phrases

11.1 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”).

11.2 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.

11.3 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。学了。

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.

11.4 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.

11.5 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.

11.6 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."

12 Complements

12.1 动词 + 来 / 去—direction complements

Tag 来 ("towards me") or 去 ("away from me") onto a verb to show **which way** the action moves relative to *you, the speaker*. These build into handy compounds —进来 ("come in"), 出去 ("go out"), 起来 ("up"), 过来 ("over here").

Structure: Verb + 来 / 去 · Verb + compound (上来 / 出去…)

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I'm / 在 |zài / 楼上 |lóu shàng|upstairs / , 你 |nǐ|you / 上来 |shàng lái|come up / 。 }

I'm upstairs —come up.

{zh: 请 |qǐng|please / 站 |zhàn|stand / 起来 |qǐ lái|up / 。 }

Please stand up.

Remember: 来 = toward me, 去 = away from me —anchored to wherever the speaker stands. 进来 ("come in," I'm inside) vs 进去 ("go in," I'm outside).

Watch out

- With a **place** object, the place sits *between* the verb and 来 / 去: 回美国去 / 回美国 —never 回去美国.

12.2 动词 + 得 / 不 + 结果—potential complements

Slot 得 ("can") or 不 ("can't") between a verb and its result to ask whether that result is **achievable** —看得懂 ("can understand") vs 看不懂 ("can't"). They're built straight from result complements (懂, 完, 到, 见…).

Structure: Verb + 得 / 不 + Complement

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 听 |tīng|hear / 得 |de|can / 懂 |dǒng|understand / 上海话 |Shàng hǎi huà|Shanghainese / 吗 |ma / ? }

Can you understand Shanghainese?

{zh: 这种 |zhè zhǒng|this kind of / 手机 |shǒu jī|phone / 现在 |xiàn zài|now / 买 |mǎi|buy / 不 |bù|can't / 到 |dào|get / 了 |le / 。 }

You can't get this kind of phone any more.

Remember: 得 = can, 不 = can't, wedged right after the verb (做得好 / 做不好). It asks about *reaching a result* —subtly different from 能 ("be allowed / have the chance to").

Watch out

- The negative 不 form is far more common in speech than the 得 form —you'll hear 看不懂 constantly.

12.3 动词 + 下去—“keep on ...ing”

The complement 下去 means **carry on** with something already under way —“keep ...ing, go on ...ing.” Picture the action continuing *downward and onward* into the future.

Structure: Subject + Verb + 下去

{zh: 说 |shuō|talk / 下去 |xià qù|keep on / 。 }

Keep talking.

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 再 |zài|keep / 喝 |hē|drinking / 下去 |xià qù|on / 就 |jiù|then / 醉 |zuì|drunk / 了 |le / 。 }

If you keep drinking, you'll get drunk.

Remember: 下去 = “**carry on from here**” with something already started. Its potential form 不下去 = “can’t carry on”: 我听不下去了 (“I can’t bear to keep listening”).

Watch out

- It’s specifically about *continuing* —don’t use it to *start* something.

12.4 动词 + 好 / 完 / 错—result complements

A short word right after the verb tells you **how it turned out** —完 (“finished”), 好 (“done well / ready”), 错 (“wrong”). It usually takes a 了, and the object is often pulled to the front as a topic.

Structure: Verb + 好 / 完 / 错 (+ 了)

{zh: 这个 |zhè ge|this / 字 |zì|character / 写 |xiě|wrote / 错 |cuò|wrong / 了 |le / 。 }

You wrote this character wrong.

{zh: 房间 |fáng jiān|the room / 打扫 |dǎ sǎo|cleaned / 干净 |gān jìng|spotless / 了 |le / 吗 |ma / ? }

Is the room all cleaned up?

Remember: the **verb is the action, the complement is the outcome**. 写 = “write,” but 写错 = “wrote *wrong*,” 写完 = “wrote *to the finish*.” Common ones: 完, 好, 错, 懂, 到, 见, 干净, 清楚.

Watch out

- Negate the *whole* thing with 没 (没写完, “didn’t finish writing”), not 不.

13 Conditional Statements

13.1 只要…就…—“as long as”

只要…就… sets out a **sufficient condition** —“as long as A, (then) B.” A on its own is **enough** to trigger B, even if it isn’t the *only* route to B. Read 只要 as “you only need…” and 就 as “…then, right away.”

Structure: 只要 + Condition , 就 + Result

{zh: 只要 |zhǐ yào|as long as / 你 |nǐ|you / 努力 |nǔ lì|hard / 学习 |xué xí|study / , 就 |jiù|then / 会 |huì|will / 有 |yǒu|make / 进步 |jìn bù|progress / 。 }

As long as you study hard, you’ll make progress.

{zh: 只要 |zhǐ yào|whenever / 下雨 |xià yǔ|it rains / , 她 |tā|she / 就 |jiù|then / 心情 |xīn qíng|mood / 不好 |bù hǎo|bad / 。 }

Whenever it rains, she’s in a bad mood.

Remember: 只要 = “you only NEED…” (enough, maybe one of several ways); 只有 = “ONLY if…” (the sole way). 只要 pairs with 就; 只有 pairs with 才. The 一 vs the 才 is the tell —see 只有 below.

Watch out

- 只要 reaches for 就 (“then, immediately”); swapping in 才 quietly changes the meaning to “only if.”

13.2 …… , 才……—“only then, only after”

才 between two clauses says the second happened **only after** / **only because of** the first —usually after real time, money, or effort was spent. English: “not until …, only after ….”

Structure: Condition , 才 + Result

{zh: 那本书 |nà běn shū|that book / 我 |wǒ|I / 看 |kàn|read / 了 |le / 两遍 |liǎng biàn|twice / 才 |cái|only then / 看懂 |kàn dǒng|understood it / 。 }

I only understood that book after reading it twice.

{zh: 她 |tā|she / 做完 |zuò wán|finished / 了 |le / 功课 |gōng kè|homework / 才 |cái|only then / 睡觉 |shuì jiào|went to bed / 。 }

She didn’t go to bed until she’d finished her homework.

Remember: 才 spotlights “how much it took” before the result came —two readings, lots of effort, a late hour. The result clause usually ends in a result complement (看懂, 买到), reporting what was finally achieved.

Watch out

- This 才 takes **no 了** on its verb —the effort, not a tidy completion, is the point.

13.3 只有…才…—“only if”

只有…才… names the **one essential condition** —“only if A (can) B happen.” No A, no B, full stop. The 才 is very often followed by 能.

Structure: 只有 + Condition , 才 (能) + Result

{zh: 只有 |zhǐ yǒu|only if / 努力 |nǔ lì|you work hard / , 才 |cái|only then / 能 |néng|can / 做好 |zuò hǎo|do well / 工作 |gōng zuò|the job / 。 }

Only by working hard can you do the job well.

{zh: 只有 |zhǐ yǒu|only if / 多 |duō|more / 吃饭 |chī fàn|you eat / , 才 |cái|only then / 能 |néng|can / 长高 |zhǎng gāo|grow tall / 。 }

Only if you eat more will you grow tall.

Remember: 只有 = the **ONLY door** (a *necessary* condition) → pairs with 才; 只要 = **ANY door that works** (a *sufficient* condition) → pairs with 就. Lock the pairs together: 只有…才…, 只要…就….

Watch out

- 才 here very often carries 能: 只有…才能….

14 Noun Phrases

14.1 有的…有的…—”some …(others) …”

有的 picks out **part** of a group —”some (of them).” It shines in **pairs or sets**, contrasting one slice of a group against another: ”some are …, some are ….” It can sit before the noun or right after the subject, and the noun is often dropped once context is clear.

Structure: 有的 + (Subject) + Predicate , 有的 + (Subject) + Predicate

{zh: 有的人 |yǒu de rén|some people / 在 |zài|are / 喝酒 |hē jiǔ|drinking / , 有的人 |yǒu de rén|some people / 在 |zài|are / 跳舞 |tiào wǔ|dancing / 。 }

Some are drinking, some are dancing.

{zh: 外国人 |wài guó rén|foreigners / 有的 |yǒu de|some / 很 |hěn|very / 有钱 |yǒu qián|rich / , 有的 |yǒu de|some / 没钱 |méi qián|not / 。 }

Some foreigners are rich, some aren't.

{zh: 这些 |zhè xiē|these / 苹果 |píng guǒ|apples / 有的 |yǒu de|some / 甜 |tián|sweet / , 有的 |yǒu de|some / 酸 |suān|sour / 。 }

Some of these apples are sweet, some are sour.

Remember: 有的…有的…**splits a group you already have** (”some of *them*…”). For ”some” as a vague amount you want or buy, switch to 一些 (买**一些**水果).

Watch out

- It can sit **after the subject** (外国人**有的…有的…**) or **before the noun** (有的人…) —both are fine.

15 Numbers and Measure Words

15.1 半—“half” (and where it sits)

The word 半 means “half.” The only thing to master is **where it sits** relative to the **measure word**, and it follows one clean rule: “**half a** [unit]” puts 半 *first*; “[X] **and a half**” puts 半 *after* the measure word —exactly where the fraction lands in the English too.

Structure: 半 + Measure Word + Noun (half a ...) · Number + Measure Word + 半 + Noun (X and a half)

{zh: 半个 |bàn ge|half a / 小时 |xiǎo shí|hour}

half an hour

{zh: 半瓶 |bàn píng|half a bottle of / 酒 |jiǔ|wine}

half a bottle of wine

{zh: 三个 |sān ge|three / 半 |bàn|and a half / 小时 |xiǎo shí|hours}

three and a half hours

Remember: 半 **mirrors English word order**. “*Half an hour*” → 半 first (半个小时); “*three and a half hours*” → 半 after the measure word (三个半小时). Say the English and 半 lands in the same spot.

Watch out

- 天 and 年 are *themselves* measure words —use **no 个**: 半天 (not 半个天), 半年 .

16 Sentence Patterns

16.1 一 + 量词 + 也 / 都 + 不 / 没……—“not even one”

To say **not a single one**, build a total, emphatic negative: 一 + **measure word** (+ **noun**) + 也 / 都 + 不 / 没 + **verb**. The 也 / 都 is the muscle here—it’s what turns “one” into “not *even* one.” The object can also be pulled to the front as a topic.

Structure: (Topic +) 一 + MW + (Noun) + 也 / 都 + 不 / 没 + Verb

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 一句 |yí jù|a single / 话 |huà|word / 都 |dōu|even / 没 |méi|didn’t / 说 |shuō|say / 。 }

He didn’t say a single word.

{zh: 这个人 |zhè ge rén|this person / 我 |wǒ|I / 一次 |yí cì|even once / 也 |yě|even / 没 |méi|haven’t / 见过 |jiàn guo|met / 。 }

I’ve never met this person, not even once.

Remember: the shape is “one …not even …” — sets up the smallest possible amount, and 也 / 都 + negative knocks even *that* out. Drop the 也 / 都 and the “not even” force collapses.

Watch out

- 也 and 都 are interchangeable here; for an uncountable “not at all,” use 一点也不.

16.2 越…越……—“the more …the more …”

越 A 越 B ties two things that **rise together** — “the more A, the more B.” Picture two dials geared to the same shaft: turn one up and the other climbs with it. Both halves take 越, and the two clauses can even have different subjects.

Structure: Subject + 越 + Verb + 越 + Adjective / Verb

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 越 |yuè|the more / 看 |kàn|look / 越 |yuè|the more / 喜欢 |xǐ huan|like it / 。 }

The more I look at it, the more I like it.

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 越 |yuè|the more / 让 |ràng|push / 孩子 |hái zi|the kid / 学 |xué|to study / , 孩子 |hái zi|the kid / 越 |yuè|the less / 不想 |bù xiǎng|wants to / 学 |xué|study / 。 }

The more you push the kid to study, the less he wants to.

Remember: two 越’s, **rising together**. Don’t confuse it with 越来越 (“more and more over time,” next file): 越…越…links *two things*, 越来越 tracks *one thing across time*.

Watch out

- Both halves need 越; the second names what **grows** as the first does.
- The two halves can have different subjects: 你越说, 他越不听.

16.3 把—“take it and…” (the 把 construction)

Chinese grammar’s famous hurdle—but the core idea is simple. 把 literally means “**take / grab**,” so a 把 sentence is just “**take [this specific thing] and [do something] to it.**” Reach for it when you want to spotlight **what happens to an object**—where it ends up, how it’s changed, what’s done with it.

The trap for English speakers: the object jumps **in front of** the verb, and the verb can never stand alone—it must be followed by the **result** (a complement, 了, a location…). ”把书放” lands on a Chinese ear like “put the book…” and then trailing off.

Structure: Subject + 把 + Object + Verb + (result) *Literally:* “I —take —the book —put —on the table.” (我把书放在桌子上。)

{zh: 请 |qǐng|please / 把 |bǎ / 门 |mén|the door / 关上 |guān shàng|close / 。 }

Please close the door.

{zh: 她 |tā|she / 把 |bǎ / 我 |wǒ|my / 的 |de / 手机 |shǒu jī|phone / 放 |fàng|put / 在 |zài|in / 包里 |bāo lǐ|her bag / 了 |le / 。 }

She put my phone in her bag.

Remember: 把 carries the **hand radical 扌**—picture a hand reaching out, **grabbing** the object, and dragging it in front of the verb. Grab it → then say what you did to it.

Watch out

- The object must be **specific / known** (the door, *my* phone), and the verb must report **what happened to it**—a bare verb won’t do: 把书放在桌子上。
- Negation goes **before 把**: 别把它扔了, 没把作业做完—never inside the 把 phrase.
- Feeling / perception verbs (喜欢, 想, 看见, 听) **can’t** take 把—there’s no “result” to a feeling.
- (把 is also a measure word for handled things —一把伞 “an umbrella” —a different word entirely.)

16.4 被—“got done to” (the passive)

A **被** sentence flips the focus to the **receiver**: “(it) got …ed (by …).” The thing acted upon becomes the subject, and the doer is optional. Like 把, the verb can’t stand bare—it needs a result—and 被 sentences lean toward **unfortunate** events (things done *to* you).

Structure: Receiver + 被 + (Doer) + Verb + (了 / result)

{zh: 我 |wǒ|my / 的 |de / 手机 |shǒu jī|phone / 被 |bèi|got / 偷 |tōu|stolen / 了 |le / 。 }

My phone got stolen.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 被 |bèi|by / 警察 |jǐng chá|the police / 抓 |zhuā|caught / 了 |le / 。 }

He was caught by the police.

Remember: 把 leads with the doer, 被 leads with the victim. 小偷把手机偷了 (“the thief took the phone”) 手机被小偷偷了 (“the phone got taken by the thief”). 被

even hides 衣 (a quilt/cover) —picture the action *laid over* the subject.

Watch out

- The verb can't be **bare** —it needs a 了 or result: 咖啡被我喝完了 , not 咖啡被我喝.
- The **doer is optional**: 我被骗了 ("I was tricked"), doer unknown or unimportant.
- Negate **before 被**: 没被发现 ("wasn't discovered").
- These sentences usually report something **bad** happening to the subject.

17 Basic/Simple Sentence Patterns

17.1 Place + 动词 + 着 + 名词—saying what's where

To paint **what is where**, Chinese runs **place —verb —着—thing**: "(at the place) there sits / lies / hangs a …." The verb tells you *how* the thing is positioned (lying, standing, hanging). A close cousin is **Place + 是 + thing**, meaning "all there is at the place is …."

Structure: Place + Verb + 着 + Noun Phrase

{zh: 桌子上 |zhuō zi shàng|on the table / 放 |fàng|lies / 着 |zhe / 一本 |yì běn|a / 书 |shū|book / 。 }

There's a book lying on the table.

{zh: 大厅里 |dà tīng lǐ|in the hall / 站 |zhàn|are standing / 着 |zhe / 一些 |yì xiē|some / 警察 |jǐng chá|police / 。 }

Some police are standing in the hall.

Remember: the **place comes first** (the camera pans to a spot), then the verb + 着 freezes how the thing sits there. English starts with "there's a …"; Chinese starts with the *location*.

Watch out

- The verb is **stative** (放, 站, 坐, 挂) —it describes a position, not an active action.
- The 是 version says the place holds *only* that: 墙上都是照片 ("the wall is all photos").

17.2 想 + 疑问词 + 就 + 疑问词—"do whatever you like"

Echo a question word on both sides of **就** and you get "(do) **whatever / wherever / whenever** you like." The **same** question word appears twice —once setting the choice, once cashing it in.

Structure: 想 + Verb + QW + 就 + Verb + QW

{zh: 想 |xiǎng|want / 吃 |chī|eat / 什么 |shén me|what / 就 |jiù|then / 吃 |chī|eat / 什
么 |shén me|whatever / 。 }

Eat whatever you want.

{zh: 想 |xiǎng|want / 去 |qù|go / 哪儿 |nǎr|where / 就 |jiù|then / 去 |qù|go / 哪儿
|nǎr|wherever / 。 }

Go wherever you like.

Remember: the **same question word both times** —什么…就…什么, 谁…就…谁, 哪儿…就…哪儿. Read it as "whatever you pick, that's what you get." It's the language of total freedom.

Watch out

- Keep the question word identical on both sides —mixing 什么 with 哪儿 breaks it.

17.3 疑问词 + 都 / 也 — “every / any”

A question word + **都** (or **也**) sweeps over **all** cases — “everyone, anything, anywhere.” Add a **不 / 没** and it flips to the total negative: “none, nothing, nowhere.”

Structure: Question Word + 都 / 也 + Predicate

{zh: 谁 |shéi|everyone / 都 |dōu|all / 喜欢 |xǐ huan|likes / 美食 |měi shí|good food / 。 }

Everyone loves good food.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 什么 |shén me|anything / 都 |dōu|at all / 不 |bù|don't / 想 |xiǎng|want / 吃 |chī|to eat / 。 }

I don't want to eat anything.

Remember: question word + **都** = “all / every”; add **不 / 没** = “none / nothing.” 谁都喜欢 (“everyone likes”) → 谁都不信 (“nobody believes”). **也** stands in for **都**, especially in negatives (什么也没说, “said nothing”).

Watch out

- The question word here is *not* asking anything — it's the indefinite “any,” swept up by **都 / 也**.

17.4 越来越 + 形容词 — “more and more”

越来越 before an adjective (or verb) means a quality **keeps climbing as time passes** — “more and more ...” Literally “more-comes-more.” It usually closes with **了** to mark the change in motion.

Structure: Subject + 越来越 + Adjective + 了

{zh: 天气 |tiān qì|the weather / 越来越 |yuè lái yuè|more and more / 冷 |lěng|cold / 了 |le / 。 }

The weather is getting colder and colder.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 越来越 |yuè lái yuè|more and more / 不 |bù|don't / 相信 |xiāng xìn|trust / 他 |tā|him / 了 |le / 。 }

I trust him less and less.

Remember: 越来越 = “more-comes-more” — one thing changing over *time*. Its look-alike 越...越... (previous file) links *two* things (“the more A, the more B”). Time → 越来越; pairing → 越...越....

Watch out

- With a **negative** verb, English flips to “less and less”: 越来越不懂 (“understand less and less”).

17.5 疑问词 — “some / a certain”

A bare question word can quietly mean a vague **“some / a certain”** — 哪儿 (“some-where”), 谁 (“someone”), 什么 (“something”), 什么时候 (“sometime”). It isn't a question

at all; tone and small cues (过, 点儿, 吧) flag the difference.

Structure: Question Word (used as "some")

{zh: 这个人 |zhè ge rén|this person / 我 |wǒ|I / 在 |zài / 哪儿 |nǎr|somewhere / 见过 |jiàn guo|have met / 。 }

I've met this person somewhere before.

{zh: 我们 |wǒ men|we / 应该 |yīng gāi|should / 做 |zuò|do / 点儿 |diǎnr|a bit of / 什么 |shén me|something / 。 }

We should do something.

Remember: a question word with no rising "question" tone = "some." 谁 ("who?") vs 谁 ("someone"); 什么 ("what?") vs 什么 ("something"). Cues like 过, 点儿, or 吧 confirm the "some" reading —什么时候…吧 = "sometime," not "when?".

Watch out

- Context does the work —there's no extra word; only the falling tone and the cues distinguish "some" from a real question.

17.6 为了—"in order to, for the sake of"

为了 spells out a **purpose** or beneficiary —"in order to, for the sake of." It usually opens the sentence ("In order to X, ..."), or appears as "...是为了..." ("the reason is to ...").

Structure: 为了 + Purpose , Subject + Action · Action + 是为了 + Purpose

{zh: 为了 |wèi le|for the sake of / 钱 |qián|money / , 他 |tā|he / 什么 |shén me|anything / 都 |dōu|at all / 愿意 |yuàn yì|is willing / 做 |zuò|to do / 。 }

For money, he'll do anything.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 这么 |zhè me / 做 |zuò|did this / 是 |shì / 为了 |wèi le|in order to / 帮 |bāng|help / 你 |nǐ|you / 。 }

I did all this in order to help you.

Remember: 为了 = the goal you're aiming AT (forward-looking); 因为 = the cause you're coming FROM (backward-looking). "为了 health, I exercise" (purpose) vs "因为 I'm ill, I rest" (reason). The 了 here is glued into the word —not the aspect particle.

Watch out

- The 为了 phrase usually sits at the **front** of the sentence.

18 Comparison Patterns

18.1 跟…比 (起来) — “compared with”

To **lead with** a comparison, open with **跟 A 比 (起来)**, then comment on B — “compared with A, B is ….” It sets the yardstick first, then makes the point. (跟 和 here; 跟 is slightly more common.) B can also start the sentence.

Structure: 跟 + A + 比 (起来) , B + Comment

{zh: 跟 |gēn|compared with / 上海 |Shàng hǎi|Shanghai / 比 |bǐ / , 我 |wǒ|my / 老家 |lǎo jiā|hometown / 的 |de / 物价 |wù jià|prices / 很 |hěn|very / 低 |dī|low / 。 }

Compared with Shanghai, prices in my hometown are very low.

{zh: 妹妹 |mèi mei|the younger sister / 跟 |gēn|compared with / 姐姐 |jiě jie|the elder / 比起来 |bǐ qǐ lái / 有点 |yǒu diǎn|a bit / 害羞 |hài xiū|shy / 。 }

Compared with her elder sister, the younger one is a bit shy.

Remember: 跟 A 比 = “**holding it up against A**…” —the benchmark first, the verdict second. Note that unlike a bare 比 sentence, this framing *allows* 很 (物价**很**低), because it’s a comment, not a direct A-比-B.

Watch out

- For a plain “A is more X than B,” the basic 比 is enough: A 比 B 高.

18.2 比…更 / 还 — “even more”

In a 比 comparison, drop **更** or **还** before the adjective to mean the first thing is **even more** so —often with a sly hint that “(B is already very …, and A beats it).”

Structure: Noun 1 + 比 + Noun 2 + 更 / 还 + Adjective

{zh: 上海 |Shàng hǎi|Shanghai / 比 |bǐ|than / 纽约 |Niǔ yuē|New York / 人口 |rén kǒu|population / 更 |gèng|even / 多 |duō|bigger / 。 }

Shanghai’s population is even bigger than New York’s.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 比 |bǐ|than / 姚明 |Yáo Míng|Yao Ming / 还 |hái|even / 高 |gāo|taller / 。 }

He’s even taller than Yao Ming.

Remember: 更 / 还 = “**even more**.” 还 especially smuggles in “(and the other is already sky-high)” —比姚明还高 quietly admits Yao Ming is already a giant. Crucial rule: a 比 sentence **never** takes 很 / 非常—degree comes from 更 / 还 / 多了.

Watch out

- 比 + 很 is a classic mistake: say 比他高 or 比他更高, never 比他很高.

18.3 比…形容词 + 多了一”much more”

To stress a **big** gap, close a 比 comparison with **多了** (or 得多 / 很多) —”much more …”. 多了 also works on its own: 好多了 (“much better”).

Structure: Noun 1 + 比 + Noun 2 + Adjective + 多了 / 得多 / 很多

{zh: 拼音 |pīn yīn|pinyin / 比 |bǐ|than / 汉字 |Hàn zì|characters / 容易 |róng yì|easy / 多了 |duō le|much / 。 }

Pinyin is much easier than characters.

{zh: 坐 |zuò|taking / 高铁 |gāo tiě|the bullet train / 比 |bǐ|than / 坐 |zuò|taking / 飞机 |fēi jī|the plane / 方便 |fāng biàn|convenient / 得多 |de duō|much more / 。 }

The bullet train is much more convenient than flying.

Remember: size the gap at the end: **big gap** → 多了 / 得多 / 很多; **small gap** → 一点 (容易一点, “a little easier”). And, again, never 很 / 非常 inside a 比 sentence.

Watch out

- 多了 / 得多 / 很多 all sit *after* the adjective: 高多了, 高得多—never 多了高.

18.4 A + 有 + B + 形容词 + 吗? —”as …as?”

有 can do more than “have” —in a comparison it means “as …as”: “A 有 B + Adj” = “A is as [Adj] as B.” It lives mostly in **questions**, where B is the benchmark you’re measuring against, often with 这么 / 那么.

Structure: A + 有 + B + (这么 / 那么) + Adjective + 吗?

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 有 |yǒu|as / 我 |wǒ|me / 帅 |shuài|handsome / 吗 |ma / ? }

Is he as handsome as me?

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 有 |yǒu|as / 姚明 |Yáo Míng|Yao Ming / 那么 |nà me|that / 高 |gāo|tall / 吗 |ma / ? }

Is he really as tall as Yao Ming?

Remember: 有 = “reaches as far as” (as …as); 没有 = “falls short of” (not as …as). The question 有…吗? asks “does A measure up to B?”; the answer is 有 / 没有 (没有你帅, “not as handsome as you”).

Watch out

- Used mainly in **questions and negatives**, not plain statements. For a plain statement use 跟…一样 (“the same as”) or 比 (“more than”).

19 Complex Sentence Patterns

19.1 除了…(以外) —“except” or “besides”

Here’s a word that means **two opposite things** depending on its partner. 除了 X (以外) sets X aside; then the adverb in the second clause decides what happens to it. With 都, X is **left out** (“everyone *except* X”); with 还 / 也, X is **kept and more is piled on** (“*besides* X, also …”). The 以外 is optional.

Structure: 除了 + X (+ 以外) , Subject + 都 / 也 / 还…

{zh: 除了 |chú le|except for / 他 |tā|him / , 我们 |wǒ men|we / 都 |dōu|all / 去过 |qù guo|have been / 。 }

Except for him, we’ve all been there.

{zh: 除了 |chú le|besides / 中文 |Zhōng wén|Chinese / , 他 |tā|he / 还 |hái|also / 会 |huì|can / 说 |shuō|speak / 日语 |Rì yǔ|Japanese / 。 }

Besides Chinese, he also speaks Japanese.

Remember: the second word flips the meaning. 除了…**都** = “except” (X is thrown out); 除了…**还 / 也** = “besides” (X stays, plus more). Read on to the 都 / 还 before you decide which “除了” it is.

Watch out

- 以外 (or 之外) is optional and changes nothing.

19.2 如果…的话—“if”

如果…的话 wraps a condition —“if ….” Think of 的话 as a spoken bracket that **closes** the *if*-clause: 如果 opens it, 的话 shuts it. The 的话 is conversational and **optional** — and it can even appear with no 如果 at all.

Structure: 如果 + Condition + 的话, (就) + Result

{zh: 如果 |rú guǒ|if / 明天 |míng tiān|tomorrow / 下雨 |xià yǔ|rains / 的话 |de huà| , 我们 |wǒ men|we / 就 |jiù|then / 不 |bù|not / 去 |qù|go / 了 |le| 。 }

If it rains tomorrow, we won’t go.

{zh: 不 |bù|not / 想 |xiǎng|want to / 去 |qù|go / 的话 |de huà|if / 就 |jiù|then / 别 |bié|don’t / 去 |qù|go / 了 |le| 。 }

If you don’t feel like going, then don’t.

Remember: 如果 and 的话 are a **pair of brackets** around the condition —and Chinese lets you use *either or both*. You can even drop both and just imply the “if”: 有事给我打电话 (“call me if anything comes up”).

Watch out

- 的话 is conversational —fine to drop it and keep just 如果…就….

19.3 如果…就…—“if …then …”

The backbone conditional is 如果…就…—“if A, then B.” The key placement rule: 就 lives in the **second** clause, opening the result—not next to 如果.

Structure: 如果 + Condition , 就 + Result

{zh: 如果 |rú guǒ|if / 有 |yǒu|have / 困难 |kùn nán|difficulty / , 就 |jiù|then / 给 |gěi / 我 |wǒ|me / 打电话 |dǎ diàn huà|call / 。 }

If you run into any trouble, then call me.

{zh: 如果 |rú guǒ|if / 他 |tā|he / 知道 |zhī dào|knew / , 那 |nà|then / 他 |tā|he / 一定 |yí dìng|surely / 会 |huì|would / 告诉 |gào su|tell / 我 |wǒ|me / 。 }

If he knew, he'd surely tell me.

Remember: 如果 opens the “if,” 就 opens the “then”—and 就 always rides with the *result*, hugging its verb. 那 (么) can stand in for 就 with an “in that case” flavour.

Watch out

- Don't park 就 next to 如果—it belongs in the second clause, before its verb.

19.4 不但…而且…—“not only …but also …”

不但…而且… stacks a second, stronger point on the first —“not only A, but also B.” The two halves share the **same subject**, and B should push *further* than A (more extreme, more surprising).

Structure: Subject + 不但 + A , 而且 + B

{zh: 这个 |zhè ge|this / 东西 |dōng xi|thing / 不但 |bú dàn|not only / 贵 |guì|expensive / , 而且 |ér qiě|but also / 难 |nán|hard / 买 |mǎi|to buy / 。 }

This thing is not only expensive, but also hard to get.

{zh: 这道 |zhè dào|this / 菜 |cài|dish / 不但 |bú dàn|not only / 好看 |hǎo kàn|pretty / , 也 |yě|also / 好吃 |hǎo chī|tasty / 。 }

This dish isn't only pretty, it's tasty too.

Remember: 不但 = “not only,” 而且 = “but also,” and B must out-do A (escalate, don't just repeat). 而且 swaps freely for 也 / 还: 不但…也…, 不但…还….

Watch out

- Keep **one subject** across both halves; if the subject changes, the subject moves *before* 不但 (不但他来了, 而且…).

20 Comparing similar adverbs

20.1 才 vs 就—”late / hard” vs ”early / easy”

These two adverbs are a matched pair pulling in **opposite directions**. Both sit before the verb after a time or condition, but **才** says something happened **later or with more effort than expected** (often a touch impatient), while **就** says it happened **sooner or more easily than expected**.

{zh: 老板 |lǎo bǎn|the boss / 十一点 |shí yī diǎn|eleven / 才 |cái|not until / 到 |dào|arrived / 。 }

The boss didn't get in until eleven.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 六点 |liù diǎn|six / 就 |jiù|already / 到 |dào|arrived / 了 |le / 。 }

He was already here by six.

Remember: 才 drags late (no 了); 就 jumps early (+ 了). A neat tell: the 了 lines up with 就 (”already happened, 就到了”) and avoids 才 (”late, nothing tidily completed, 才到”).

Watch out

- 才 = slower / later / harder than expected (sometimes annoyed); 就 = faster / earlier / easier.
- The verb after 才 takes **no 了**; 就 in the ”already” sense usually **does**.

20.2 刚 vs 刚才—adverb vs time word

Same ”just,” two different word-classes. **刚** is an **adverb** (”just,” sitting right before the verb); **刚才** is a **time noun** (”a moment ago,” roughly the last 1–30 minutes) that can stand on its own and even modify a noun.

{zh: 老板 |lǎo bǎn|the boss / 刚 |gāng|just / 走 |zǒu|left / 。 }

The boss just left.

{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?

Remember: 刚 = adverb, glued to the verb (刚到); 刚才 = noun, free-standing (刚才的事, ”the thing just now”). 刚 often skips 了 when the verb already carries a result; 刚才 is firmly past and pairs with 了.

Watch out

- Before an **adjective**, only 刚 / 刚刚 works: 天刚晴 (”the sky just cleared”) —never 刚才晴.

20.3 有点 vs 一点—“a bit too” vs “a little (more)”

Both translate as “a bit,” but they sit on **opposite sides** of the adjective and carry opposite moods. **有点 (儿)** goes **before** an adjective with a hint of **complaint** (“a bit too …”); **一点 (儿)** goes **after** an adjective to mark a small **amount or degree** (in comparisons or requests).

{zh: 今天 |jīn tiān|today / 我 |wǒ|I’m / 有点 |yǒu diǎn|a bit / 累 |lèi|tired / 。 }

I’m a bit tired today.

{zh: 请 |qǐng|please / 说 |shuō|speak / 慢 |màn|slowly / 一点 |yì diǎn|a little / 。 }

Please speak a little more slowly.

Remember: **有点 + Adj = a grumble before** (“a bit *too* tired”); **Adj + 一点 = a measured amount after** (“a little slower”). Position tells you the mood: before = complaint, after = neutral nudge.

Watch out

- **一点 + Noun = “a little (of)”**: 一点水, 一点钱—有点 can’t do this.
- **一点也不 / 一点也没 = “not at all”**: 一点也不辣.

20.4 再 vs 又—future vs past “again”

Both mean “again,” but they split cleanly on **time**: **再** is “again” for something **not yet done** (a future or intended repeat); **又** is “again” for something that **has already happened**.

{zh: 欢迎 |huān yíng|welcome / 再 |zài|again / 来 |lái|come / ! }

Come again!

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 又 |yòu|again / 迟到 |chí dào|late / 了 |le / 。 }

You’re late again.

Remember: **再** looks forward (plan/intend, no 了); **又** looks back (already repeated, usually + 了). 欢迎再来 (please come again) vs 你又来了 (here you are again). The 了 sides with 又.

Watch out

- **再** also means “another” (再来一个) and “(do A) then (B)” (先…再…); **又** also stacks qualities (又高又帅).

21 Comparing similar conjunctions

21.1 还是 vs 或者—”or” in questions vs statements

This is the single most-tested ”or” distinction in Chinese, so make it automatic. Both words mean ”or” and present a choice, but they split by **sentence type**: **还是** offers the choice in a **question** (you’re asking someone to pick); **或者** lists alternatives in a **statement** (you’re just telling).

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 喝 |hē|drink / 茶 |chá|tea / 还是 |hái shì|or / 咖啡 |kā fēi|coffee / ? }

Do you want tea or coffee?

{zh: 茶 |chá|tea / 或者 |huò zhě|or / 咖啡 |kā fēi|coffee / 都 |dōu|either / 行 |xíng|is fine / 。 }

Tea or coffee —either’s fine.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 不 |bù|don’t / 知道 |zhī dào|know / 他 |tā|he / 支持 |zhī chí|supports / 还是 |hái shì|or / 反对 |fǎn duì|opposes / 。 }

I don’t know whether he’s for or against.

Remember: ? → **还是**, . → **或者**. Asking someone to choose takes **还是**; stating open options takes **或者**. And a *hidden* question —”I don’t know whether A or B” — still counts as a question inside, so it keeps **还是**.

Watch out

- That embedded-question case (不知道…还是…) trips people up —there’s no question mark, but the choice is still being *asked*, so **还是** stays.

22 Comparing similar time words

22.1 以后 vs 然后 vs 后来—three kinds of “after / then”

All three brush against “after / then,” but each owns a different slot —so the trick is to match the situation to the word:

- **以后**—“after / from now on,” and it can point to the **future**: 以后想开公司 (“I want to start a company *someday*”).
- **然后**—“and then,” joining the **next step** in a sequence (any time frame): 先吃饭, 然后看电影.
- **后来**—“later, afterwards,” narrating the **next thing that happened—in the past only**.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 以后 |yǐ hòu|in future / 想 |xiǎng|want to / 开 |kāi|start / 公司 |gōng sī|a company / 。 }

I want to start a company someday.

{zh: 先 |xiān|first / 吃饭 |chī fàn|eat / , 然后 |rán hòu|and then / 看 |kàn|watch / 电影 |diàn yǐng|a film / 。 }

Eat first, and then watch a film.

{zh: 后来 |hòu lái|later / 他 |tā|he / 去 |qù|went / 了 |le / 美国 |Měi guó|the US / 。 }

Later he went to the US.

Remember: the quick test —**future** → **以后**, **next step** → **然后**, **past story** → **后来**. Only 后来 is locked to the past; 以后 can reach into the future, and 然后 chains steps in any time frame.

Watch out

- 以后 and 后来 can both translate as “later,” but 后来 only narrates what has **already** happened —never a future “then.”