

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** (jíle) 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 我有只有一个. 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 |zěn me|why / 老是 |lǎo shì|always / 迟到 |chí dào|late / ? }

Why are you always late?

{zh: 这个 |zhè ge|this / 机器 |jī qì|machine / 老是 |lǎo shì|always / 出 |chū|having / 问题 |wèn tí|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 |èr shí suì|twenty / ? }

You’re only twenty?

{zh: 这家 |zhè jiā|this / 店 |diàn|shop / 才 |cái|only / 开业 |kāi yè|been open / 一个 |yí ge|one / 星期 |xīng qī|week / 。 }

This shop has only been open a week.

{zh: 他们 |tā men|they / 才 |cái|only / 认识 |rèn shi|known each other / 三个月 |sān ge 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 (yǐ qián) *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: 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”).

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 = 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.

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₂) 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 (zhídào) 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 shì|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.

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 / 做得不好). 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 半天个), 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 ...**” — 一 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 — “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 (他不但 ..., 而且 ...); if the subject changes, **不但** moves in front of the subject (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.”