

Complements

Ref Hsk5 Grammar

形容词 + 得 + 很 / 不得了 / 要命 / 不行 — advanced degree complements

After **Adj + 得**, a fixed phrase like **很 / 不得了 / 要命 / 不行** cranks the quality to an extreme — “... terribly, ... like crazy.” (You already know -死了 and -极了; these are the other common ones.)

Structure: Adjective + 得 + 很 / 不得了 / 要命 / 不行

{zh: 这个 |zhè ge|this / 孩子 |hái zi|child / 自私 |zì sī|selfish / 得很 |de hěn|terribly / 。 }

This child is terribly selfish.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|my / 爸爸 |bà ba|father / 固执 |gù zhí|stubborn / 得 |de / 不得了 |bù dé liǎo|awfully / 。 }

My father is awfully stubborn.

Remember: a kit of “...like crazy” tails after **Adj + 得**: 得很, 得不得了, 得要命, 得不行 (all “... to death / unbearably”). They sit alongside the -死了 / -极了 you already know.

Watch out

- These all need the 得 (自私**得**很); the -死了 / -极了 forms attach bare.

动词 + 得了 / 不了 — advanced potential complements

得了 / 不了 (here 了 reads **liǎo**) after a verb asks whether the action **can be managed or pulled off** — often hinting at an outside factor. 不了 ≈ “can’t (because of circumstances).”

Structure: Verb + 得了 / 不了

{zh: 这么 |zhè me|so / 多 |duō|much / 菜 |cài|food / , 我 |wǒ|I / 吃 |chī|eat / 不了 |bù liǎo|can’t manage / 。 }

So much food — I can’t finish it all.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 那么 |nà me|so / 老 |lǎo|old / , 走 |zǒu|walk / 得了 |de liǎo|can manage / 那么 |nà me|that / 多 |duō|far / 路 |lù / 吗 |ma / ? }

He’s so old — can he walk that far?

Remember: 了 here = **liǎo** (“manage / finish”) — V 得了 / V 不了 = “can / can’t *pull it off*,” usually due to circumstances (吃不了 “can’t finish,” 去不了 “can’t make it”). Different from 不能 (“not allowed”).

Watch out

- Mind the reading: 了 = *liǎo* here, not the *le* of completion.

动词 + 住 / 开 / 出 (来) — advanced result complements

Three handy result complements: **住** = hold firm / come to a halt (记住, 停住); **开** = apart / away, or relief from a worry (走开, 想开 “let it go”); **出 (来)** = come into being / figure out (想出来, 看出来).

Structure: Verb + 住 / 开 / 出 (来)

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 记 |jì|remember / 不 |bù|can’t / 住 |zhù|hold / 这么 |zhè me|so / 多 |duō|many / 生词 |shēng cí|new words / 。 }

I can’t retain so many new words.

{zh: 想 |xiǎng|let / 开 |kāi|it go / 一点 |yì diǎn|a bit / , 别 |bié|don’t / 难过 |nán guò|be sad / 了 |le / 。 }

Try to let it go — don’t be sad.

Remember: picture each complement: **住** = grip/stop (记住 “hold in memory,” 停住 “halt”); **开** = part/away (走开 “go away,” 想开 “open up the knot = get over it”); **出 (来)** = bring forth (想出来 “think up,” 看出来 “make out”).

Watch out

- 想开 (“let it go”) vs 想出来 (“think up”) — same 想, opposite results from the complement.

动词 + 坏了 — “... terribly, ... to bits”

The complement 坏了 (like 死了) means a feeling has hit an **overwhelming** pitch — “... terribly, ... to bits.” Despite 坏 (“bad”), it just means “extremely,” and can even be positive.

Structure: Adjective / psych-Verb + 坏了

{zh: 大家 |dà jiā|everyone / 都 |dōu / 累 |lèi|tired / 坏了 |huài le|out / 。 }

Everyone was worn out.

{zh: 孩子 |hái zi|the child / 不见 |bú jiàn|went missing / 了 |le / , 妈妈 |mā ma|the mother / 急 |jí|frantic / 坏了 |huài le / 。 }

The child went missing — the mother was frantic.

Remember: 坏了 = “...to bits,” not “broken” — pure intensity, even for good feelings: 累坏了 (worn out), 饿坏了 (starving), 急坏了 (frantic), 高兴坏了 (thrilled to bits).

Watch out

- Don’t read 高兴坏了 as “happiness broke” — 坏了 is just “extremely.”

动词 + 着 — the result complement 着 (zháo)

着 (read zháo) after a verb means the action **hit its mark** — “succeeded in, managed to.” Don’t confuse it with the aspect particle 着 (*zhe*). Its potential forms are 得着 / 不着.

Structure: Verb + 着 (zháo)

{zh: 宝宝 |bǎo bao|the baby / 刚 |gāng|just / 睡着 |shuì zháo|fell asleep / 。 }

The baby just fell asleep.

{zh: 昨晚 |zuó wǎn|last night / 我 |wǒ|I / 没 |méi|didn’t / 睡着 |shuì zháo|manage to sleep / 。 }

I couldn’t fall asleep last night.

Remember: 着 = zháo here = “hit the target, succeeded” — 睡着 (managed to sleep), 找着 (found), 买不着 (can’t get hold of). A world away from the *zhe* of an ongoing state (门开着).

Watch out

- Two readings, two jobs: 睡着 (*zháo*, “fell asleep,” a result) vs 开着 (*zhe*, “is open,” a state).

动词 + 到 — tricky uses of 到

到 after a verb makes **achievement** explicit: 找 (“look for”) vs 找到 (“find”); 做 vs 做到 (“accomplish”); 买 vs 买到 (“succeed in buying”). Without 到, a verb can shade into “try to.”

Structure: Verb + 到

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 一定 |yí dìng|must / 要 |yào / 找到 |zhǎo dào|find it / 。 }

You must find it.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 没 |méi|didn’t / 想到 |xiǎng dào|expect / 你 |nǐ|you / 也 |yě|too / 来 |lái|came / 了 |le / 。 }

I didn’t expect you’d come too.

Remember: 到 stamps “achieved” onto the verb: 找 (search) → 找到 (find), 买 → 买到 (succeed in buying), 想 → 想到 (think of / expect). A bare verb can mean just “try to.”

Watch out

- 找 vs 找到 is the classic pair: 找了半天 (“searched for ages”) doesn’t say you 找到 (“found”) it.

动词 + 来 + 动词 + 去 — “...ing this way and that”

Wrap one verb in 来 ... 去 to paint a **repeated, aimless** action — “...ing back and forth, over and over.” The same single-syllable verb repeats on both sides.

Structure: Verb + 来 + (same) Verb + 去

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 在 |zài / 考场 |kǎo chǎng|the exam hall / 外面 |wài miàn|outside / 走来走去 |zǒu lái zǒu qù|paced back and forth / 。 }

He paced back and forth outside the exam hall.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 想来想去 |xiǎng lái xiǎng qù|thought it over and over / 都 |dōu|still / 想不明白 |xiǎng bù míng bai|couldn’t work it out / 。 }

I thought it over and over but still couldn’t work it out.

Remember: V 来 V 去 = “back and forth, round and round” — the same one-syllable verb on both sides, painting restless repetition: 走来走去 (pacing), 想来想去 (mulling), 说来说去 (going on about it), 翻来覆去 (tossing and turning).

Watch out

- It carries a faintly *futile* / *restless* tone — lots of motion, often no result.