

# Character Builder 您好嗎？

The basic unit of the Chinese language is the *zi* (字), i.e. a Chinese word. Each *zi* has a written form (called a character, made up of strokes), a sound (made up of consonant and vowel) and a meaning (or multiple meanings). When we speak or write Chinese, we string *zi* together to form terms, phrases and sentences.

In Putonghua (the spoken form of Modern Standard Chinese) each *zi* is pronounced in one of four tones:

1<sup>st</sup> tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged

2<sup>nd</sup> tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high

3<sup>rd</sup> tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high

4<sup>th</sup> tone: 4 = diacritical mark \ pitch: 5 to 1, highest to lowest)

To pronounce each *zi* below, follow its pinyin and the given tone number. Light-sound words, which have no definite pitch, carry no diacritical mark and are marked by 0.

This week: Words about capital cities

Putonghua pronunciation: *shou3*

Cantonese pronunciation: *sau2*

Meanings: head, chief, first, head, leading

首 means first/leading/head. 首都 (*shou3 dou1* = leading~capital) = capital city. 首要 (*shou3 yao4* = first~important) = most important. 斬首 (*zhan2 shou3* = chop~head) = decapitation of person's 首級 (*shou3 ji2* = head~class = head).

Enumeration/narrative begins with 首先 (*shou3 xian1* = first~early = firstly... 首次 (*shou3 ci4* = first~time), 首輪 (*shou3 lun2* = first~round). Company has 首席執行官 (*shou3 xi2 zhi2 xing2 guan1* = first~seat~handle~execute~official = chief executive officer = CEO).

首長 (*shou3 zhang3* = head~elder) = state/region's leaders: Nazis' 元首 (*yan2 shou3* = primary/highest~head/leader = Führer), Britain's 首相 (*shou3 xiang4* = Prime~Minister), Hong Kong's 特首 (*te4 shou3* = special-head = abbr. from "head of HK Special Administrative Region" = Chief Executive of HKSAR).