

Character Builder 您好學? 呀

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:

- 1st tone: 1 = diacritical mark — pitch: 5 to 5, highest prolonged
- 2nd tone: 2 = diacritical mark / pitch: 3 to 5, middle to high
- 3rd tone: 3 = diacritical mark U pitch: 2 to 1 to 4, low to lowest to high
- 4th 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 senile dementia

Putonghua pronunciation: *bai2*

Cantonese pronunciation: *baak6*

Meaning: white, blank

Ideogram 白 (slant over 日 *ri4*, sun) means since sunrise, white/clear: 白色 (*bai2 se1* = white-colour), 白天 (*bai2 tian1* = white-sky = daytime), 白雲 (*bai2 yun2* = white-clouds), 清白 (*qing1 bai2* = clean-white/innocent/faultless). US's 白宮 (*bai2 gong1* = white-palace) = the White House.

Western 白酒 (*bai2 jiu3* = white-wine) is not Chinese 白酒 (*bai2 jiu3* = baijiu), clear, strong distilled spirits e.g. 茅台 (*mao1 tai1* = Maotai). 白紙黑字 (*bai2 zhi3 hei1 zi4* = white-paper-black-words) means clearly written, unmistakable/undeniable.

一張白紙 (*yi1 zhang1 bai2 zhi3* = one-sheet-white-paper) describes innocent child susceptible to good/bad influences. 白髮 (*bai2 fa4* = white-haired) dementia patient's mind 一片空白 (*yi1 pian4 kong1 bai2* = one-piece-empty-white = is a complete blank).

by Diana Yue