

LEARN TO  
RECOGNIZE AND WRITE

# CHINESE CHARACTERS

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TIPS & TOOLS  
COLLECTION



## LEARN CHINESE CHARACTERS

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# Introduction

Chinese characters (汉字, hànzì) comprise the oldest continuously used system of writing in the world, but their complex structures and formations often terrify many modern learners. To add to the confusion, certain countries (mainland China, Singapore, and Malaysia) use the Simplified version of certain characters (简体字), while others (Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and, to a limited extent, South Korea) use the corresponding Traditional version (繁体字).

But have no fear: If you are determined to learn Chinese and master the writing of Chinese characters, we have the tools and techniques for you here to help you overcome your anxiety and achieve success in your learning journey.

## 1. Overview of Chinese Characters

### i. Are Chinese Characters Worth Learning? How Do I Get Started?

As we all know, Chinese uses characters as the basis of its written system. This aspect makes it quite different from most other languages. This characteristic has also become a barrier for westerners to learn Chinese. Some individuals decide not to learn the language at all because they think they could never master it. Others are brave enough to get started but decide to learn only to speak. Every year I get students who ask me the same question: "Should I learn characters?" So

first we will talk about learning characters. Hopefully, it will help you to decide on a strategy!

### Should I learn characters?

To answer this question, first ask yourself what your goal is.

1. If your goal is short term, i.e. a trip or greeting to your Chinese business partner, the answer is “NO”. Obviously, you only need some survival phrases. It just isn't worth it.
  
2. For a long-term purpose, i.e. mastering the language or passing the HSK test, the answer is “YES”. You might think you don't need to master the language 100% if you just plan to spend 1-2 years in China, so do you really need to learn characters? The answer is still “yes”. Despite what you might think, it will make your Chinese learning easier and not the other way around. A few reasons here:

- 1). You can't survive in China without reading characters. Although we all learn pinyin, you seldom see anything written in pinyin in China. You can't even recognize a sign without knowing characters.



2). The spoken language is more confusing if you don't know characters.

致癌(zhì'ái) and 治癌(zhì'ái) are exactly the same in pinyin, but one means "to cause cancer" and the other means "to treat cancer". The more words you learn, the more trouble you will have.

3). Understanding new words will be easier if you've studied the writing. If you know characters, you can guess the meaning of new words. For example, if you know "车 chē" (vehicle, A1 level) and "马 mǎ" (horse, A1 level), you can probably get "马车(mǎchē)" is "carriage". If you only know pinyin, there are six characters marked as "mǎ"; it will be hard for you to figure out which one is relevant. As you see, you will be able to make out Chinese words when you are able to recognize the characters. So, I suggest you learn characters from the very beginning!

## How should I learn characters?

Now you make your decision. Writing characters is a bit like drawing a picture. Even Chinese kids need to learn for several years before they master it. You may be wondering, "How can I do it?"

1. Learn rules and strokes for handwriting first. Although there are thousands of characters, there are only 4 main types of Chinese characters and only 8-40 (depending on how you count) strokes used to write these characters, and the order is rule based. For example: always write from left to right, from top to bottom, and from outside to inside.
2. Learn radicals and components second. Along with strokes, radicals and components are also very helpful. For example: the radical "三点水" (three drops of water) is always on the left side of a character and it usually implies the character is somehow related to water. If you learn a new character with it, you can memorize it as "the left part is three drops of water".
3. Recognizing characters is much easier and more important than handwriting.

Two reasons here:

- 1) Before you can write, you need to know how to read. That's the same principle in language learning.
- 2) You can type characters if you can recognize them. Like this:



You only need to choose which one you want. Even Chinese people type characters more than they handwrite nowadays. This can save you a lot of time and energy.

Of course, handwriting is still useful for memorizing what characters look like, so having a piece of paper and a pencil around is still a good idea.

## ii. Four Main Types of Chinese Characters

Chinese characters have been used for about 3300 years, and the earliest Chinese characters were oracle bone inscription. Before New China was founded in 1949 people used traditional characters, but after that people started to try to make traditional Chinese characters easier and more convenient to use and learn, so they invented simplified Chinese characters which have been used in the mainland up to now. But traditional Chinese characters are still being used in Hong Kong and Taiwan at present.

Before you learn Chinese characters, you need to know the six categories of Chinese characters: pictographs, pictophonetic characters, associative compounds, self-explanatory characters, phonetic loan characters, and mutually explanatory characters. Here we only introduce the common four categories, because the other two categories are unusual.

## 1. Pictographs

Some Chinese characters were created from pictures of real things,

like “kǒu 口 mouth.”

Picture	Oracle Bone Inscription	Traditional	Simplified
		口	口

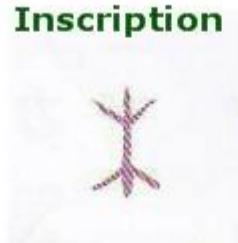
“mǎ 马 horse”

Picture	Oracle Bone Inscription	Traditional	Simplified
		馬	马

“mén 门 door”

Picture	Oracle Bone Inscription	Traditional	Simplified
		門	门

“mù 木 tree”

Picture	Oracle Bone Inscription	Traditional	Simplified
		木	木

You can see that some simplified Chinese characters are still the same as traditional Chinese characters.

## 2. Pictophonetic characters

Pictophonetic characters are always made from a radical and a single Chinese character.

Pictophonetic characters can be divided into 8 types. The most common type is “left radical right phonetic.” The left part of the Chinese character is a radical; it shows you the possible meaning this Chinese character might be related to, and from the right part, you can guess how to read this Chinese character.

Like “ma 呀 a question word”

The left part is a radical, “kǒu 口 mouth;” you need to ask questions by mouth, so the left part shows you the possible meaning, and the pronunciation of the right part “mǎ 马 horse” is similar with “ma 呀 a question word.” So “吗” is the meaning side “口” plus the phonetic side “马.”

“mā 妈 mother”

The left side is a radical, “nǚ 女 female” shows the meaning; the right side shows the phonetic, because “mǎ 马 horse” and “mā 妈 mother” have similar pronunciations.

The other types are “right radical left phonetic,” “up radical down phonetic,” “down radical up phonetic,” “outside radical inside phonetic,” “inside radical outside phonetic,” and so on.

### 3. Associative compounds

These Chinese characters can be divided into two parts: One part is about figure, the other part is about meaning.

For example in “xiū 休 rest,” the left part is the radical of person, the right part means tree; it’s like a man leans against the tree. In ancient times, people worked in the field, and when they felt tired, they could have a rest beside a tree. When you see this Chinese character, you can think of this figure naturally.

“dàn 旦 daybreak, dawn,” can also show you a figure. The upper part is “rì 日 the sun,” and the lower part is like the horizon line; when the sun rises from the horizon line it’s daybreak.

“nán 男 male, man,” can be understood by the meaning. The upper part is “tián 田 farm field,” the lower part is “lì 力 strength,” for people who work in the field with strength are just men.

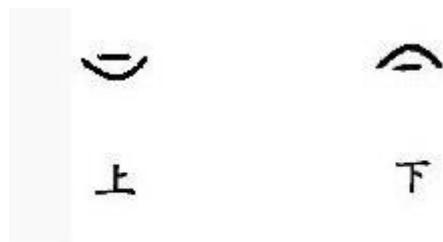
### 4. Self-explanatory characters

These types of Chinese characters are not convenient to be drawn as a concrete image, so they are shown by a single abstract symbol, line, or a Pictograph and an abstract symbol.

For example “yī 一 one,” “èr 二 two,” “sān 三 three,” one line represents the

number “one,” two abstract lines are just the abstract image of two things, and so is three.

“shàng 上 on, up,” the short line shows the position; it’s up the long line “xià 下 down, below,” the short line is below the long line.



Like “xiōng 凶 deadly trap ”

**凶** = **匚** (cupped pit) + **X** (crossed thorn), when people fell into a trap or pit, the scared feeling and the bad situation is just represented by “**X**.”

We have six categories, but not every Chinese character can be classified into a certain category, because they have experienced a long-term process of evolution. However, knowing the principles of making Chinese characters can help you memorize more easily and make it fun.

### iii. Top 10 Most Common Chinese Characters

There are around eighty thousand Chinese characters. To the new Chinese learner, this can seem daunting. However, just like many words in English, the majority of these characters are not used in day-to-day vocabulary. If you can recognize even one thousand characters, you would be able to read and comprehend up to 80%

of Chinese writing.

Not to worry, we're here for you. We've compiled a quick list on the top 10 most common Chinese characters and how to use them.

## 1. 的 (de)

Known as one of the three “de” particles of Chinese, “的” is used to indicate possession as well as attribute adjectives.

Examples:

小明的狗 (xiǎo míng de gǒu)

Xiao Ming's dog

红色的花 (hóng sè de huā)

Red Flowers

## 2. 一 (yī)

“一” means one. The reason why “一” is so common is because it can also mean the following: first, best, a little, once, only, etc. So many phrases require the 一 character, which bumps it to second place on this list. It is also a component of many ChengYu, or Chinese idioms.

我吃了一个苹果。 (wǒ chī le yī gè píng guǒ)

I ate one apple.

我拿了第一名。 (wǒ ná le dì yī míng)

I got first place.

你是我的唯一。 (nǐ shì wǒ de wéi yī)

You are my one and only.

### 3. 了 (le)

“了” is loosely used to indicate tenses, specifically past-tense or ongoing incidents.

It can also be used to intensify adjectives.

Example:

我吃晚饭了。 (wǒ chī wǎn fàn le)

I ate dinner.

我来到美国两年了。 (wǒ lái dào měi guó liǎng nián le)

I've been in America for two years.

你的中文太好了。 (nǐ de zhōng wén tài hǎo le)

Your Chinese is too good!

### 4. 是 (shì)

“是” is closest to the meaning of “to be,” in English. Because Chinese doesn't have conjugations, there are no other forms of this basic word. It is mostly used to link

two nouns together.

Example:

我是中国人。 (wǒ shì zhōng guó rén)

I am [a] Chinese [person]."

这是一本书。 (zhè shì yī běn shū)

This is a book.

她的鞋是红色的。 (tā de xié shì hóng sè de)

Her shoes are [the color] red.

## 5. 我 (wǒ)

"我" means "I," so it is not surprising that this is a very common word. It also appears in phrases such as "us," and "we."

Examples:

我回家了。 (wǒ huí jiā le)

I went home.

我们一起去的。 (wǒ men yī qǐ qù de)

We went together.

## 6. 不 (bù)

“不” means “no” or “not,” and is used to negate other words. It is commonly used with “是” as in, “不是” to mean “isn’t.”

他不是美国人。 (tā bù shì měi guó rén)

He is not American.

我不想去。 (wǒ bù xiǎng qù)

I don't want to go.

## 7. 在 (zài)

“在” is a preposition that can be confusing for many Chinese learners. It is mostly commonly used to indicate location, similar to how “at” is used in English. In Chinese, it also follows verbs to describe the place of an action. It can also be used on its own to describe an ongoing action.

我在机场。 (wǒ zài jī chǎng)

I am at the airport.

你住在哪里? (nǐ zhù zài nǎ lǐ)

Where do you live?

我在学习。 (wǒ zài xué xí)

I am studying.

## 8. 人 (rén)

Another common Chinese character, “人” means “people,” “person,” or “man.”

You may have noticed in #4 that “人” is often used to describe people from a specific country. Instead of “Chinese” as an adjective, we say “中国人” or “Chinese people.” It also appears in words such as “夫人 (wife),” and “男人 (men)” and many other nouns that relate to people. Another word for the Chinese currency, “元 (yuán)” is “The People’s Currency” or “人民币 (rén mǐn bì).”

你是外国人吗? (nǐ shì wài guó rén ma)

Are you a foreigner?

人生的目的什么?( rén shēng de mù dì shì shén me)

What is the meaning of [human] life?

## 9. 们 (mén)

As you may have seen in number 5, “们” is used as a plural for human nouns, as well as human pronouns such as the three “tas” of Chinese: 他, 她, 它. However, you do not usually use “们” with numbers or precise measurements. They can be

used with imprecise quantifiers such as “some,” or “a lot”.

女士们, 先生们, 大家晚上好! (nǚ shì men , xiān sheng men , dà jiā wǎn shàng hǎo)

Ladies and Gentlemen, good evening!

我和朋友们一起吃了饭。 (wǒ hé péng yǒu men yì qǐ chī le fàn)

I ate with my friends.

他们去哪里了? (tā men qù nǎ lǐ le)

Where did they go?

## 10. 有 (yǒu)

The main meaning of “有” is “have,” to indicate possession. “Not have” or “don’t have” is “没有。” However, “有” is also used to establish the existence of something, like “there is” in English. Another common Chinese phrase that includes “有” is “所有,” which means “all” or “everything.”

你有问题吗? (nǐ yǒu wèn tí ma )

Do you have a question?

我没有钱。 (wǒ méi yǒu qián)

I don't have money.

这里有个错误。 (zhè lǐ yǒu gè cuò wù)

There is a mistake here.

#### iv. 多音字(duō yīn zì) – Chinese Polyphonic Characters

While studying Mandarin, one feature of the language you have to remember is that you can have a specific character in mind, but you can also have several different ways of pronouncing it. These kinds of characters are called polyphones, or 多音字 in Chinese. The English equivalent is called a homograph, which are words that are spelled the same but are different in meaning and/or pronunciation. Depending on the context, a different pronunciation can alter the intended meaning of that Chinese character. This is why proper listening and pronunciation is so important in Mandarin.

For example, did you know that there are actually two ways to pronounce the character 好? You can say it using the third tone (hǎo), or the fourth tone (hào), and both ways have different meanings.

Here we will present 好 and nine other characters — 折 空 着 看 和 行 把 会 乐 — each of which can be pronounced in different ways, which can then change the meaning and usage of the character. ([Our new e-book, we listed top](#)

## 50 commonly used polyphones or 多音字 for you to learn.)

Practice your pronunciation of these characters, and you will certainly impress others with how well you can use them in different situations and contexts!

### #1: 好

This is one of the first characters that any beginner learning Chinese will encounter.

Most of the time it is pronounced as the third tone, “hǎo”, and it means “good” or “easy”, as in 很好(very good) or 好人 (a good person). However, in a handful of words and expressions it is pronounced as the fourth tone, “hào,” and it then becomes a verb which means “to like”, as in 爱好(hobby), 好奇(curious) etc.

#### **hǎo**

(Nǐ de xiǎng fǎ hěn hǎo, dàn shì bù hǎo shí xiàn.)

你的想法很好，但是不好实现。

Your idea is very good, but not easy to achieve.

#### **hào**

(Wǒ hěn hào qí, tā wèi shén me yǒu nà me duō ài hào.)

我很好奇，她为什么有那么多爱好。

I'm curious why she has so many hobbies.

### #2 折

This character becomes prominent during sales season at the mall. Most of the

time it is pronounced as the third tone “zhé” and it means “discount”, as in 打折 (have discount). As a verb, it means “break”, as in 折断 (break off). However, in a handful of words and expressions, it is pronounced as the first tone “zhē” and it's a verb which means “roll over”, as in 折腾 (toss about). The third way to pronounce this character is “shé”. The meaning for it is to “lose money in business”.

### **zhé**

(Rú lì jí fù kuǎn kě dǎ jiǔ zhé .)

如立即付款可打九折。

A 10% rebate for immediate payment.

### **zhē**

(Shuì yī huìr, bié zhē teng le.)

睡一会儿, 别折腾了。

Sleep for a while. Don't toss and turn restlessly.

### **shé**

(Tā jīn nián shé le hěn duō qián .)

他今年折了很多钱。

He lost a lot of money in his business this year.

## **#3 空**

There are two pronunciations for this character. The first way is “kōng”. As an adjective, it means “empty” or “hollow”, as in 空房间 (empty room). As a noun, it

means “air” or “sky”, as in 晴空(a bright sky). As an adverb, it means “in vain”. The second way to pronounce it is “kòng”. As a verb, it means “to leave empty or blank”. As an adjective, it means “unoccupied”, as in 空座位(unoccupied seat). As a noun, it means “free time”, as in 没空(not available).

## **kōng**

(Zhú zi hěn qīng , yīn wei tā zhōng jiān shì kōng de .)

竹子很轻，因为它中间是空的。

Bamboo is light because it is hollow.

## **kòng**

(Měi duàn kāi tóu yào kòng liǎng gé .)

每段开头要空两格。

Leave two blank spaces at the beginning of each paragraph.

## **#4 着**

This is a frequently used character and there are four ways to pronounce it. The first way is “zháo”; it means “burn”, as in 着火 (be on fire). It also means “fall asleep”, as in 睡着 (fall asleep). The second way to pronounce it is “zhe”. It means “the action or the state is ongoing”, as in 看着 (is / was looking). The third way is “zhuó”. The meaning of it is “wear”, as in 着红色衣服 (be dressed in red clothes). The fourth way to pronounce it is “zhāo”. We use it as a noun frequently. The meaning is “move”, as in 走错一着 (make a false move).

## zháo

(Lú huǒ zháo dé hěn wàng .)

炉火着得很旺。

The stove is burning briskly..

## zhe

(Tā tí zhe xiāng zi zǒu le jìn qù .)

他提着箱子走了进去。

He went in carrying his suitcase.

## zhuó

(Tā shēn zhuó yì tiáo piào liàng de qún zi.)

她身着一条漂亮的裙子。

She is wearing a beautiful dress.

## zhāo

(Shū tā yì zhāo.)

输他一着。

Lose a move to him.

## #5 看

This is one of the first verbs that any student of Chinese will learn. Most of the time it is pronounced as the third tone, “kàn”, and it means “look” or “read”, as in 看电视(watch TV) or 看书 (read book). However, in a handful of words and

expressions it is pronounced as the first tone “kān” and it means look after, as in 看孩子(look after children).

## **kān**

(Kān zhù tā , bié ràng tā pǎo le !.)

看住他, 别让他跑了!

Keep an eye on him. Don't let him run away.

## **Kàn**

(Wǒ míng tiān qù kàn tā . )

我明天去看他。

I'll go and see him tomorrow.

## **#6 和**

This is one of the first characters that anyone will learn in Chinese. Most of the time it is pronounced as the second tone “hé” and it means “and”, as in 我和你 (you and me) . However, with some words and expressions it is pronounced as the fourth tone, “hè”, and it's a verb which means “to join in”, for example: 和唱 (join in the singing). The third way to pronounce it is “huò”, it means “mix” or “blend”, as 和水(mix water with something).

## **hé**

(Yì zhāng zhuō zi hé sì bǎ yǐ zi . )

一张桌子和四把椅子。

A table and four chairs .

### huò

(Dòu shā lǐ huò diǎnr táng.)

豆沙里和点儿糖.

Mix a little sugar into the bean paste

### hè

(Tā hè zhe chàng.)

他和着唱。

He is joining the singing.

## #7 行

Just like the character 好, you can also use this character to express "OK". In a majority of words and expressions, this character is pronounced "xíng". As a verb, it means "to go", as in 步行(go on foot). As an adjective, it means "capable". And as a noun, it means "behavior", as in 言行(words and deeds). The second way to pronounce it is "háng", it means "trade and business" when it's used as a noun, as in 各行各业(all trades and professions). As a measure word, it means "a row of", as in 一行树(a row of trees)

### xíng

(Tā yóu yù le hěn jiǔ , rán hòu shuō "xíng".)

她犹豫了很久，然后说“行”。

She hesitated a long time and then she said 'ok'.

### **háng**

(Gàn yī háng ài yī háng. )

干一行爱一行。

love whatever job one takes up.

## #8 把

There are two ways to pronounce this character. First way is “bǎ”. As a noun, it means “handle”, as in 把手(handle). As a measure word, it means “a handful of”, as in 一把米(a handful of rice)。As a verb, it means “to hold”, as in 把住栏杆(hold on to a railing).The second way to pronounce it is “bà”. It means “stem”, as in 梨把(stem of a pear).

### **bǎ**

(Bǎ mén guān shàng .)

把门关上。

Close the door.

### **bà**

(Tā shǒu lǐ yǒu yī xiē huā bà . )

他手里有一些花把。

There are some pedicels in his hand.

## #9 会

More often than not, this character is pronounced “huì”. As an auxiliary word, it means “going to, will”. As a verb, it means “to meet” or “to see”, as in 相会(meet). As a noun, it means meeting, as in 开会(have a meeting). In a handful of words and expressions, it reads “kuài”. It means “compute” or “calculate”, as in 会计(accountant).

### huì

(Jiào shī hé jiā zhǎng zài xīng qī liù xià wǔ jù huì.)

教师和家长在星期六下午聚会。

The teachers and parents got together on Saturday afternoon.

### kuài

(Kuài jì gāng gāng lí kāi .)

会计刚刚离开。

The accountant just left..

## #10 乐

There are two pronunciations for this character. The first way is “lè”. It means “joyful” when it is used as an adjective, as in 快乐(happy). As a verb, it means “enough”, as in 乐此不疲(enjoy doing something without stopping). As a noun, it means “pleasure”, as in 享乐(enjoy life). As an adverb, it means “gladly”, as in

乐于(be happy to). The second pronunciation is “yuè”. It is a noun that means “music”, as in 奏乐(play music).

lè

(Nǐ lè shén me ya ? )

你乐什么呀?

What are you laughing at?

yuè

(Yáo gǔn yuè yǐ jīng jìn rù le yí gè tíng zhì qī .)

摇滚乐已经进入了一个停滞期。

Rock'n'roll had entered a period of stasis.

Learn more 多音字: [50 Commonly Used Chinese Polyphonic Characters \(Ebook\)](#).

## 2. Tips and Tools for Learning to Recognize Chinese Characters

### i. Cool Chinese Character Memorization Methods

It seems like every day a new app comes out that promises to help you learn characters easily. With a growing pool of research in memory and memory competitions on the rise, this article will be a quick round-up of some of these learning methodologies and some of my thoughts on how you can use them to

learn characters quickly.

## **Mnemonic**

A mnemonic (RpE: /nə'ɪmənɪk/, AmE: /nɛ'ɪmənɪk/ the first “m” is silent), mnemonic device, or memory device is any learning technique that aids information retention in the human memory. Mnemonics aim to translate information into a form that the brain can retain better than its original form.

Mnemonics that can be used for character memorization can come in the form of Acronyms, and mental imagery.

## **Acronym**

To remember the names of the American “Great Lakes”, we can use HOMES as an acronym. I.E. Huron, Ontario, Michigan, Erie, Superior

This method is very beneficial because it allows our brain to narrow down possibilities in passive knowledge by giving us prompts in the form of letters. For example, if I said, think of a cartoon character with the initials M.M. it would be pretty easy for you to guess Mickey mouse. Over time using this technique will help us transfer those possibilities to our active knowledge center, improving recall.

I like to employ Acronyms while trying to learn Chengyu or 2/4 character couplings. One of my favorite 成语 (chéngyǔ) , 破釜沉舟 – (pò fǔ chén zhōu) (Eliminate all options for retreat, No turning back. Loosely translated.) could be called PFCZ for example.

### **Visual Imagery / Word Pictures**

The most popular mnemonic for learning Characters is creating a visual image out of the character. The character for Large/Big 大 (dà) can be taken as an example. Imagine a man holding his arms out and telling you “It was this big!!!” while using his arms as a way to demonstrate size.

Or how about 日(rì), the character for Sun. Imagine it as a window, with a blue sky in the background and a Sun on the upper pane. 口(kǒu), the character for Mouth can be imagined as someone yawning. You can put teeth inside the square and a tongue and it will be easily remembered as mouth. These characters are quite simple. But one way to do this is use a building block approach by assigning radicals mental imagery and then coding your characters into these mental images. For example, to return, 回(huí) Could be a mouth within a mouth.

The more vivid the mental imagery the better. Some memory researchers have

also found that adding mental imagery that is dangerous or sexual in nature can evoke a heightened response and create a more lasting imprint. Other ways to do this would be to make something non-congruent. All that means is that it wouldn't make sense in reality. So for example a man floating defies the laws of gravity so it would be memorable as a story because your brain would closely examine it logically on a subconscious level.

## **Memory Palace**

From Wikipedia: The method of loci (loci being Latin for "places"), also called the memory palace or mind palace technique, is a mnemonic device adopted in ancient Roman and Greek rhetorical treatises. In basic terms, it is a method of memory enhancement which uses visualization to organize and recall information. A lot of memory contest champions claim to use this technique to recall faces, digits, and lists of words. These champions' successes have little to do with brain structure or intelligence, but more to do with their technique of using regions of their brain that have to do with spatial learning.

Have you ever moved to a new apartment? How quickly were you able to remember how to find your way home from work? Human beings are excellent locational memorizers. Our brains are built in a way that remembers things effortlessly based on location. A memory palace is a way to exploit this. When

used in combination with a visual image, it can be an extremely powerful technique that can cut down hours of learning time.

Creating a memory palace is easy… pick a place that you know very well, such as your childhood home, or your office. Then, create a visual story in each room of the well-known location, walking through the location in your mind. For example if I wanted to learn the character for “Large” from earlier, I would put a man on my front porch with his arms out holding two oversized pencils, and it would be very easy for me to remember the character meaning. Then after I entered the front door of the house, I would create a visual image for the second character I wanted to learn. After I had filled all of the rooms of the house with word stories, I would walk back through the house and look at all of the character stories that I created.

## ii. Hacking Chinese Characters

Have you ever wondered how much the radical means in Chinese? For example, the “Ice” radical, which contains only two strokes and looks like two drops of water – 冂, **has characteristics of what water is like and what it can do.** The radical mainly appears on the left side of a character, there are some characters where it is on the bottom. The most well-known example is 冬 (meaning “winter”). **In the Kangxi Dictionary, one can find more than 115 characters**

**listed under the “ice” radical.** Some of them are directly related to coldness, frost and freezing like:

氵 + 水 (shuǐ) = 冰 (bing1) (ice)

氵 + phonetic component 令 (lìng) = 冷 (lěng) – cold

氵 + phonetic component 东 (dōng) = 冻 (dòng) – cold

Here is also a visual chart of how the ice radical is used in Chinese characters.

However, there are Chinese characters, which have this radical that may be seen as part of some commonly used words. It will not completely relate to how water feels or what it is state it is. Here are a couple examples of commonly used words:

**情况** (qíng kuàng) – situation, circumstances

况 means “condition” but initially the meaning was “cold water”. 冂

is phonetic in this case.

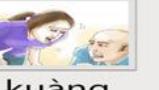
**减价** (jiǎn jià) – to reduce price, to discount

减 derives from ice 氵 and phonetic 咯. The character means, “to decrease” (An act of pouring outlike a waterfall).

**决定** (jué dìng) – to decide, to resolve

*决* is from ice > and phonetic *夬* (also means “to decide”).

As you can see, the radical ice can be directly related to the ice and its characteristics, but it can also be indirect. It is intriguing how the Chinese language is designed to be connected with the radicals to build on simple ideas to express complex concepts. We hope you enjoyed learning about the ice radical.

<b>冰</b>  bīng ice	<b>冱</b>  hù frozen	<b>冷</b>  lěng cold	<b>冬</b>  dōng winter
<b>凉</b>  liáng cool	<b>冻</b>  dòng to freeze	<b>冽</b>  liè very cold	<b>活</b>  huó frost
<b>减</b>  jiǎn to decrease	<b>准</b>  zhǔn level, standard	<b>决</b>  jué to decide	<b>况</b>  kuàng condition

Start building your vocabulary of Chinese characters with a continuous and vivid approach that is both fun and easy. We made a [character channel](#) on our site, you will learn to recognize characters/vocabulary with vivid illustrated flashcards.

<b>面</b>  miàn face	<b>目</b>  mù eye	<b>自</b>  nose, self HOC, сам	<b>首</b>  shǒu head
<b>手</b>  shǒu hand	<b>毛</b>  máo hair, feather	<b>足</b>  zú foot	<b>舌</b>  shé <sup>1</sup> tongue
<b>牙</b>  yá tooth	<b>耳</b>  ěr ear	<b>血</b>  xuè blood	<b>心</b>  xīn heart

As in many other languages, Chinese has multiple words that each have multiple meanings, also known as polysemy. These polysemantic words convey several concepts at once, and can mean one of many things at the same time. One common example is 面 which means “side”, “surface” or “face”.

面(miàn) is not the only important Chinese character related to the body. What is the most interesting about these bodily characters is that their pictographs are often very similar to what they actually mean.

For example, look at the word 口(kǒu). Similarly, the ancient written form of 耳 (ěr) looks like a human ear, and that of 足(zú) reminds a foot. It is commonly thought that 手(shǒu) is written to resemble the shape of a hand's five fingers (but remember not to confuse 手(shǒu) with 毛(máo), which was composed to look closer in resemblance to a feather).

目(mù) looks like a human eye on its side, with its left end at the top and the right end at the bottom. Nowadays, it is not used as a standalone word, but it is still used as a part of some important Chinese words, like the following:

目光 (mù guāng) – vision, sight, view

目标 (mù biāo) – target

Beginners often confuse 目(mù) with 自(zì), which instead refers to one's "nose". The character was derived from the resemblance of a human nose, but its meaning extended over time to also refer to one's "self". This may be because when one speaks about one's self, a person often points to his or her nose. 自(zì) is used as a part of the commonly used word 自己 (zì jǐ) – oneself, one's own.

Another one character that should not be confused with 目(mù) and 自(zì) is 首(shǒu), written to resemble the shape of a human head.

手 — 扌 — 手	足 — 足 — 足
舌 — 舌 — 舌	牙 — 牙 — 牙
心 — 心 — 心	目 — 目 — 目
血 — 血 — 血	自 — 自 — 自
毛 — 毛 — 毛	首 — 首 — 首

The character 心 (xīn), standing for the heart, was probably not a recognizable object in the ancient times. It is most likely a pictograph that originally referred to the entire torso, understood to have the heart inside it. As for 血 (xuě), which means blood, it is probably a pictograph for a basin of sacrificial blood.

### iii. For the Love of Characters! Introducing the Block-Headed Hula Girl and Other Useful Silliness

Chinese characters are beautiful, but there are just so damned many of them.

And only very few are true pictographs that actually look like the thing they represent. 人 (rén) is person, 口(kǒu) is mouth (or opening), 木(mù) is tree (or to be more precise, wood). Even some characters that used to look like the thing they represent—like 水(shuǐ / water), 羊 (yáng / sheep), 馬 (mǎ / horse), 象 (xiàng / elephant)—have evolved over time into more abstract forms.

Next, there are the ideograms, which are still considered to be simple, basic characters that represent concepts. These include numbers such as 一, 二, 三, 四, 五 …; and symbols, like 上 (up), 下 (down), 大 (big), 小 (small).

After these, things get a bit more complicated. To learn a few hundred characters, or more, you'll need a system, a bag of tricks to help you commit them to memory. I'm going to give you a few examples of visual association, a method I have used to wrap my head around some of the more tricky characters. I also want to encourage you to get creative, and learn to trust whatever visual associations work for you. Here is the secret –the more creative & outlandish the association is, the easier it will be for you to remember.

If you have spent time in China or Taiwan, you probably have been in a lot of restaurants. Deciphering menus is one great way to learn characters, and one that you'll see often is:

魚(鱼)

which means “fish” (yú). The character is another pictograph that started out in the shape of a fish, but looks quite abstract now. Maybe the four lines on the bottom are fins. Whatever it is, or was, don’t overthink it. The simplified form (shown in parentheses – this is what you’ll see on restaurant menus in Mainland China and Singapore), replaces the four fins with a single horizontal stroke. The bottom line (pun intended) is that the fish character is so common that you really don’t need any tricks to learn to recognize it.

But, consider another less common character. I started noticing this character while riding around the streets of Shanghai and Taipei, especially on the sides of hospitals:

急

Armed with my knowledge of the fish character, this looked very familiar. I thought to myself, yup, there are the four fins, although one is a bit longer than the others. So I came up with a mnemonic, a way to remember this new character: STRIPED BASS WITH ONE ABNORMALLY ELONGATED FIN. Well it turns out that this character (jí), has nothing to do with fish. It appears in words like “urgent”, “anxious”, “emergency”. But to this day, my random fish analogy helps me recognize it as well as to write it.

Let’s do another. Here is a common Chinese surname, which also happens to be my wife’s family name:

## 吳(吳)

It's pronounced (wú) in Mandarin. It is also the character behind the Cantonese last name Ng, and the Korean last name Oh. But how do I remember it? Well, to me it looks like a stick figure, but not just any stick figure. I call her BLOCK-HEADED HULA GIRL WAVING WITH ONE HAND. Notice that in the simplified form, she looks less friendly – she is no longer waving. Also, her block-head is more prominent – but the analogy still works.

In fact, I see stick figures in many other Chinese characters. For example:

## 是

This is (shì), which basically translates as "is". Look at that extended leg on the bottom – this guy appears to be in a hurry, and he is carrying something on a tray, so I call him: WAITER RUSHING WITH A BIRTHDAY CAKE ON A TRAY.

Here is our friend the hapless waiter again:

## 匙

What is he juggling now in addition to that birthday cake? Another tray – or a ladle? Turns out this character forms part of the word "spoon": 湯匙 (tāngchí).

I don't know about you, but I have particular trouble remembering characters that stack multiple elements vertically on top of one another. Here too, visual association can help. Consider:

樓(樓)

This character is (lóu). It refers to multi-story buildings, common in words such as “high-rise” 大樓 (dàlóu) and “go upstairs” 上樓 (shànglóu). The left side is “wood”, a common building material, but how about the right? Well there is a “woman”, 女 (nǚ), on the bottom. Then there is what looks to me like a lollipop and a pair of sunglasses. So, there you have it: LOLLIPOP-EATING, SUNGLASS-WEARING WOMAN STANDING NEXT TO A TREE. In the simplified form, the lollipop and sunglasses are replaced with 米 (mǐ), the character for uncooked rice. Looks like a mini explosion, ‘no? I’ll leave that one to your imagination.

I hope you’re enjoying my visual associations, but you should also realize that you can make up your own vivid descriptions, something that clicks for you. Remember that the descriptions do not have to do anything with the meaning of the characters.

#### iv. Fun with Chinese Homonyms

“Do you believe my tears can tear up the world?” Well, if you are a native English speaker, you probably feel nothing special about this sentence. An English learner however must contend with the two different meanings of “tear” here before finally arriving at the intended meaning. A group of words that share some same spellings and pronunciations but have many different meanings are called homonyms in linguistics. What about homonyms in Chinese? I dare say there are

so many homonyms in Chinese that would beyond your imagination.

There are two categories of Chinese homonyms, one is that the words share the same characters and pronunciations but have different meanings, such as 生气 (shēng qì) not only means being angry with somebody but also means vigor or vitality in Chinese; the other is that they share the same pronunciations but have different characters and meanings, such as 代价(dài jià) means price or expense and 待嫁(dài jià) which has the same pronunciation means that a girl is waiting to be married.

Because of Chinese homonyms, we often have some jokes that make people laugh. Here is an example: The English translation is as follows:

Just before a test, the teacher was helping the students prepare by pointing out the important parts of the text.

### 猩猩 VS 星星 (xīngxīng)

*Teacher: This topic is very important. Mark this section with a star.*

*老师：这一题很重要，在前面画星星。*

*(Lǎoshī: Zhè yì tí hěn zhòngyào, zàiqián miàn huà xīngxīng.)*

*Xiao Zhi: Can I just use a checkmark? A monkey is too hard to draw…*

*小志：老师…可不可以打勾，‘猩猩’好难画……*

*(Xiǎo Zhī: Lǎoshī, kě bù kěyǐ dǎ gōu , “xīngxīng” hǎo nán huà …)*

In Mandarin, “star” (星星) and “gorilla” (猩猩) have the same sound and tone and they are homonyms. The student was very naughty and naïve to ask this question and that also represents the humors of daily life in Chinese homonyms.

Since there are significant numbers of homonyms in Chinese, we need to learn more to avoid these awkward situations just like the joke. There are also some useful word-homonyms in Chinese that can help you with general Chinese study.

### 悲剧 VS 杯具 (bēijù)

Take “bēijù” for example:

“悲剧”and “杯具”have the same pronunciation “bēijù” but “悲剧” means tragedy and “杯具” means cups. One of my foreign friends once had a funny story about “bēijù”. It was his Chinese girlfriend’s birthday and he knew that she broke many cups a few days ago so he thought she might need a new set of cups. On her Birthday, he took out those cups he bought as a birthday gift and said in Chinese.

*I want to send these cups as a gift for you and I hope you will like them.*

“这是我送你的杯具，希望你喜欢”.

(Zhè shì wǒ song nǐ de bēi jù, xī wàng nǐ xǐ huān)

Well, the problem is that “bēijù” also sounds “tragedy” in Chinese so giving cups to her can be understood as giving a tragedy. So, when the girl heard this, the girl

thought he wanted to end up this relationship and she was really sad without saying any words to him for a long time. He was so confused and did not figure out what was the problem until he told me his unpleasant experience and I told him “你‘杯具’了” (Nǐ ‘bēi jù’le)( You were a tragedy).

### 香蕉 VS 相交 (xiāng jiāo)

Using Chinese homonyms, we can make some brain twisters. Let us see this short conversation:

Do you know why monkeys do not like parallel lines?

A: 你知道猴子为什么不喜欢平行线吗?

(Nǐ zhī dào hóu zi wèi shén me bù xǐ huān píng xiàn ma?)

*I do not know.*

B: 不知道。

(Bù zhī dào.)

*Haha, Because Monkeys love bananas.*

A: 哈哈, 因为猴子爱吃香蕉(相交)呀。

(Hā ha, yīn wèi hóu zi ài chī xiāng jiāo ya.)

In Chinese, 香蕉 (“banana”) and 相交 (“to cross over; to intersect; to make friends”) are both called “xiāngjiāo” in pronunciation.

### 班花 VS 搬花 (bān huā)

Another interesting thing I would like share with you is “bān huā” which can be understood as “班花” (Class Beauty) and “搬花” (move flowers). A teacher came into the class hurriedly and said “来两个人, 我要搬花” (*Lái liǎng gè rén, wǒ yào bān huā*) (*Please find two persons for me to move flowers*). After hearing this, the boys in the class were so excited and they carefully select two beautiful girls to the teacher. Then the teacher said “走, 和我到教务处搬花” (*Zǒu, hé wǒ qù jiào wù chù bān huā*) (*Come to the dean's office and move flowers with me*). The boys thought beautiful girls when the teacher said “bān huā” but they misunderstood just because of the homonyms.

### 沉默 VS 沉没 (chénmò)

Besides some jokes that foreign learners would meet in communication, sometimes you can learn to use them accurately to demonstrate your excellent performance in Chinese. Here is another example. An English guy read the book of “Titanic” in Chinese version. After reading, he wrote a very smart comment, which surprised his Chinese teacher a lot. He wrote “泰坦尼克, 我们可以忍受你暂时的沉默, 但我们不愿看到你最终的沉没” (*tài tǎn ní kè , wǒ men kě yǐ rěn shòu nǐ zàn shí de chén mò , dàn wǒ men bú yuàn kàn dào nǐ zuì zhōng de chén mò*) (*Titanic, we can accept your temporary silence but we do not want to see that you sank into the sea*). In Chinese 沉默 (“silent; taciturn”) and 沉没 (“to sink”) have the same pronunciation “chénmò”. So he cleverly made a sentence with Chinese puns to express the sad feelings.

There are also other useful and practical Chinese homonyms for you to read, such as:

yóuyú: 由于 ("because of; due to") and 鱿鱼 ("squid")

jìyì: 记忆 ("remember") and 技艺 ("skill; art")

jiāodài: 交代 or 交待 ("to hand over; to explain; to make clear; et al") and 胶带 ("tape")

yuányīn: 原因 ("cause; origin; reason") and 元音 ("vowel")

wángguó: 王国 ("kingdom") and 亡国 ("country/kingdom heading for destruction or that has vanished")

quánlì: 权利 ("power; right; privilege") and 权力 ("power; authority")

yìyì: 意义 ("sense; meaning; significance") and 异议 ("objection; dissent"), plus 意译 ("meaning-based translation")

shǒushì: 手势 ("gesture; signal") and 首饰 ("jewellery"), plus 守势 ("defensive position")

gōngshì: 公式 ("formula") and 攻势 ("military offensive")

xíngli(lì): 行李 ("luggage") and 行礼 ("to salute")

lìhai(hài): 厉害 ("ferocious; awesome; et al") and 利害 ("pros and cons")

## 3. Tips and Tools for Learning to Write Chinese Characters

### i. Why Stroke Order is Important and How to Master It

When it comes to Chinese stroke order is surprisingly important. The Chinese take great pride in their language, which includes the complex writing system.

I remember my Chinese teacher cringing every time I used the improper Chinese stroke order for a character and shrieking “倒插笔 (dào chā bǐ)” in my ear. The sole meaning of the phrase “倒插笔” is to criticize someone for using improper stroke order. Other phrases often heard in elementary classrooms are “乱写!(luàn xiě)” or “writing crazily” and “写错了! (xiě cuò le)” which is “You wrote it wrong!”

So, why is Chinese character stroke order so important?

First, let's talk a little bit about strokes themselves. As you can see from the graph below, there are 11 basic strokes that comprise all Chinese characters.

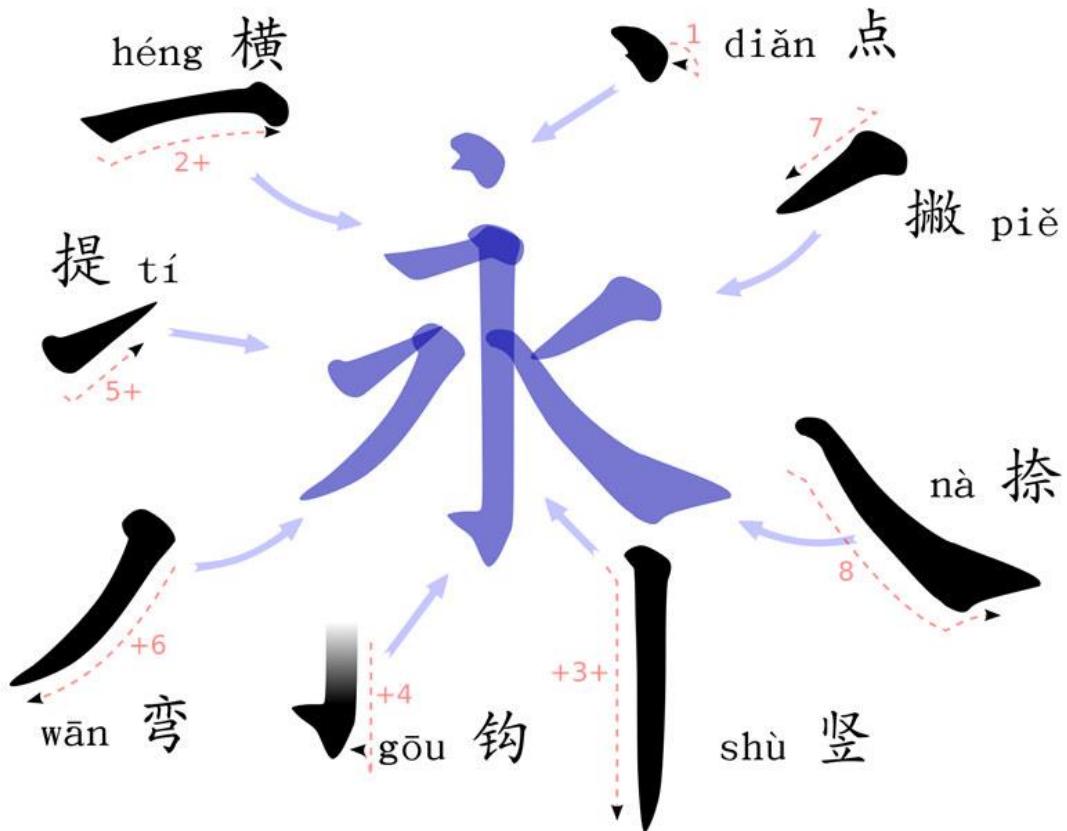
Stroke	Direction	Name	In Context
丶	↘	diǎn	你 字 寫
一	→	héng	言 天 甚
丨	↓	shù	到 田 甚
ノ	↙	piě	你 禾 字
丶	↘	nà	天 禾 變
ノ	↗	tí	漢 我 挑
一	↖	hénggōu	字 愛 電
丨	↙	shùgōu	小 到 你
丶	↙↗	xiégōu	我 戴 戈
フ	↖↓	héngzhé	回 國 要
匚	↖→	shùzhé	忙 甚 緣

Using the wrong stroke order or direction would cause the ink to fall differently on the page. You can see that the “捺 (nà)” stroke has starts out thin, but thickens and thins out again in an elegant sweep. Should you write it backwards, you would not have the same effect. Don't believe me? Try writing the letter “S” on a piece of paper. Now try recreating it, but start from the bottom instead. Do you see how you lose some of that natural flow?

The Chinese have always believed in balance and harmony. For example, when one fell ill, he or she was thought to have an imbalance of yin and yang in his or her body system. Traditional Chinese medicine was produced to restore balance.

Similarly, the Chinese stroke order system was designed to produce the most aesthetical, symmetrical, and balanced characters on a piece of paper. Furthermore, it was also designed to be efficient – creating the most strokes with the least amount of hand movement across the page. You may notice that all Chinese characters fit neatly into a square box. None of them skew dramatically to one direction or the other, which again reflects how much we value symmetry and balance.

“永(yǒng)” the character for eternity, is often the poster-child character for calligraphers. If you examine this character closely, you will notice that this one character has 8 of the most common stroke types that appear in the Chinese writing system. This is why calligraphers are often judged on skill by how well they write the character 永.



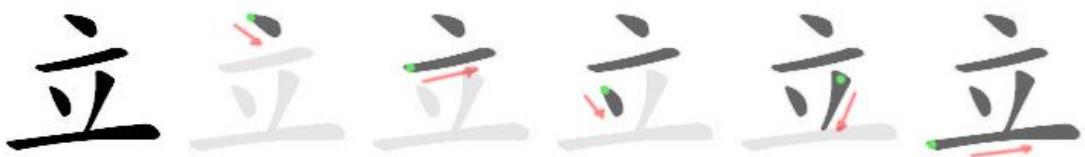
When children are learning to write at a young age, Chinese stroke order is often taught to them using the “Eight Principles of Yong,” which are the 8 different strokes combined in this one character. Frequent practice of this character can improve basic handwriting.

Even in today’s technological age, knowing the proper stroke order can go a long way to helping you master Chinese. A lot of Chinese input methods and dictionary apps have a handwriting feature that requires the proper stroke order to recognize the character. Knowing Chinese stroke order will also help you understand “草书 (cǎo shū)” or “Chinese cursive writing.” My knowledge of stroke order has helped me decipher messy Chinese handwriting on more than one occasion.

Here are some tips on mastering stroke order.

### 1. Top to bottom

When a Chinese character is “stacked” vertically, like the character 立 (lì) or “to stand,” the rule is to write from top to bottom.



### 2. Left to right

When a Chinese character has a radical, the character is written left to right. The same rule applies to characters that are stacked horizontally. Take a look at the “吃 (chī)” example below, which means “to eat.”



### 3. Symmetry counts

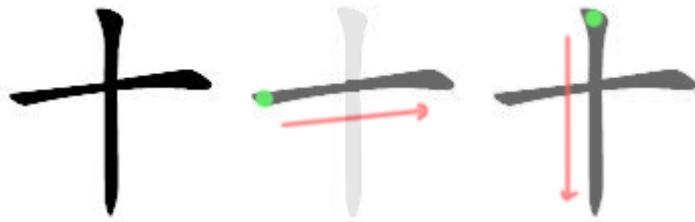
When you are writing a character that is centered and more or less symmetrical (but not stacked from top to bottom) the general rule is to write the center stroke first. Check out the character “小(xiao)” which means “small.”



### 4. Horizontal first, vertical second

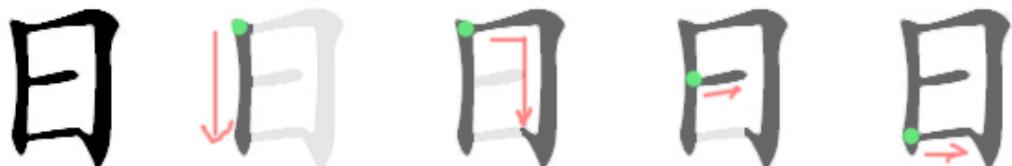
Horizontal strokes are always written before vertical strokes. Check out how to

write the character “十(shí)” or “ten.”



## 5. Enclosures before content

You want to create the frame of the character before you fill it in. Check out how to write the character 曰(rì) or “sun.”



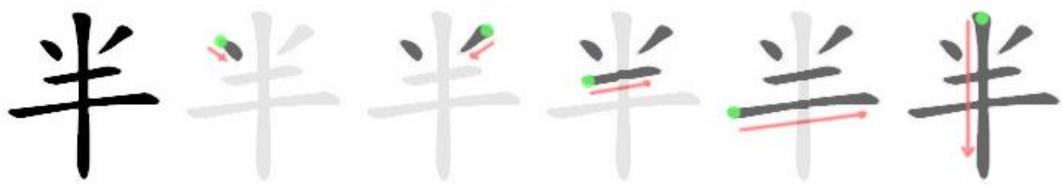
## 6. Close frames last

My mom used to teach me this concept by saying “you want to fill the closet before you close the door.” After you write the middle strokes, close the frame, such as in the character “回(huí)” or “to return.”



## 7. Character spanning strokes last

For strokes that cut across many other strokes, they are often written last. For example, the character 半 (bàn), which means “half.” The vertical line is written last.



There are always small exceptions to the rule, and Chinese stroke order can vary slightly from region to region. However, these variations are very minuscule; so by following these general tips, you'll have an astute grasp on stroke order!

Personal handwriting is also important in Chinese culture. In Chinese, we have a saying called “字如其人(zì rú qí rén),” which means “the handwriting reflects the person.” You can start your character training from [Hands On Writing Guide Course](#).

## ii. The Best Resources to Improve Your Chinese Handwriting

Writing anything down helps us to remember it better. A quick web search will yield a plethora of websites, software and mobile applications that all promise to significantly improve your Chinese handwriting skills. With all the options out there, it can be confusing to find those that are the most effective – that's where this article comes in!

### Websites

The most well-known resource to improve one's Chinese handwriting is [Skritter](#). The website itself, as well as its companion iOS and Android apps, is a very

enjoyable and effective way of learning. Skritter is fun and engaging (if not downright addicting!). Its repetition-based system is very well scheduled. If you've failed to write a particular character more often than another, it will be shown again at an increased rate. Similarly, a character which has been written multiple times without mistakes will be shown at a greatly reduced frequency.

Skritter's handwriting recognition system checks whether your stroke order is correct or not, and if you are lost, a quick tap on the screen will show you a hint as to the next step.

Another tool that allows you to boost your writing skills is [Arch Chinese Handwriting Practice](#). It uses handwriting recognition technology to provide instant feedback about the stroke order and form of various components of Chinese characters.



Unfortunately, one must pay to get the most of both resources. If you are a cash-strapped learner, consider the free [Chinese Time School's Writing Tool](#):

## 汉字学习词典

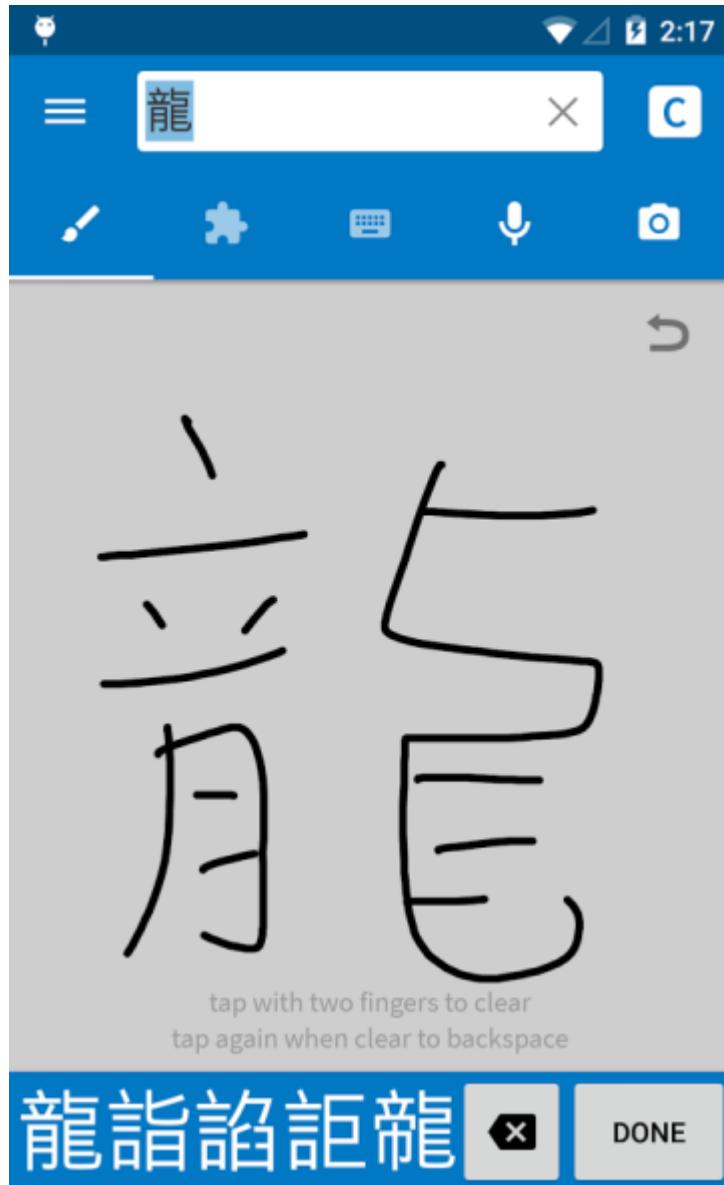
The screenshot shows a search bar at the top with the placeholder text '输入汉字, 拼音或部首, 例如: 好; 或者 'hao3'; 或者 女+3'.' Below the search bar is a large red character '成' (chéng) with stroke order hints. To the right of the character are the Pinyin 'chéng' and a red circular icon with a play symbol. Below these are the meanings '重复' (repeated) and '下一笔' (next stroke) with the same '重复' label. Below the character is a green rectangular area for '临摹练习' (imitation practice) with a dashed grid. To the right of this area is a small icon of a pen and the text '清除' (clear). At the bottom right of the page is the text 'Frequency: 37.219‰'.

Unlike the Skritter app, though, Chinese Time School's tool doesn't provide any feedback. Furthermore, Skritter's vocabulary lists include thousands of items, while this website has only 500 basic Chinese characters. However, it is better than nothing, especially for beginners.

### Apps

On the iOS App Store and Google Play, more free alternatives may be found. The [HelloChinese](#) mobile app, for example, contains a long list of characters in order to practice handwriting and learn Chinese quickly. Its hand-picked vocabulary is vast, but unfortunately not customizable. Additionally, advanced learners may find the hints about the correct stroke order a little bit annoying. However, the app is completely free!

If you need more flexibility, try out the [Pleco](#) app. It's primarily a dictionary, but it comes with a built-in handwriting recognition technology. Pleco lets you write characters by yourself, which is useful for learning new characters, but is tolerant of stroke order mistakes, so you won't get any feedback about your accuracy.



[TrainChinese's Chinese Writer](#) is styled more similar to a game. Characters fall from the top of the screen, and you have to draw them correctly to don't let them reach the bottom. This is really fun!



All the apps and websites mentioned above are strong alternatives to writing on paper. They are particularly helpful when you need:

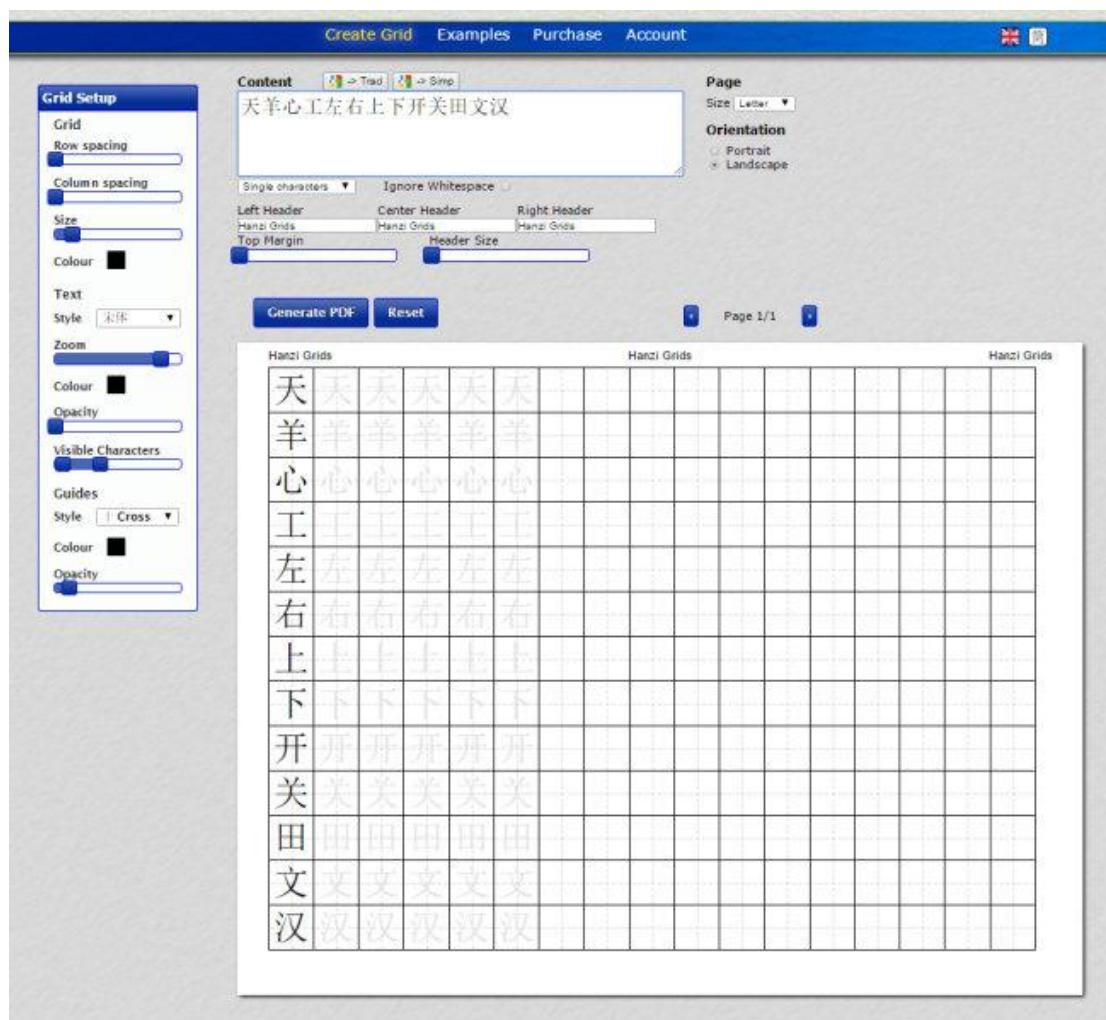
- to get used to the rules of writing Chinese characters.
- to understand the importance of the correct stroke order.
- to learn how to distinguish commonly confused characters.

The only limitation is that most handwriting recognition systems used in those resources are not perfect yet. Despite their general accuracy, sometimes they pick up incorrect strokes, for example, a vertical line may be recognized as a hook. On the contrary, components correctly written, but slightly in the wrong direction or location are sometimes not “accepted” as correct.

## Worksheets

If you believe using an application would somehow impede your learning, you're probably more interested in practicing your writing skills on paper. Of course, there are many workbooks and worksheets available in bookstores, but what if you prefer to practice characters from a customized list? Fortunately, there are a lot of online tools that help you to create your own grids: from the [pretty simple](#) to the rather sophisticated.

Some services, like [Hanzi Grids](#), provide customizable fonts, background guides, grid colors, and other customizable features.



The screenshot shows the Hanzi Grids website interface. On the left, a 'Grid Setup' sidebar contains various adjustable settings: Grid (with a slider for Row spacing), Column spacing, Size, Colour, Text (style set to '宋体'), Zoom, Colour, Opacity, and Guides (style set to 'Cross', with sliders for Colour and Opacity). The main content area has tabs for 'Content' (set to Traditional Chinese), 'Page' (size set to 'Letter', orientation to 'Portrait'), and 'Generate PDF' (button). The 'Content' section contains input fields for text, including 'Single characters' and 'Ignore Whitespace' checkboxes, and header/footer settings for 'Left Header', 'Center Header', 'Right Header', 'Top Margin', and 'Header Size'. Below these is a preview area showing a grid of 12 columns and 12 rows, with the first 10 columns filled with the characters '天', '羊', '心', '工', '左', '右', '上', '下', '开', and '关'. The last two columns are empty. The preview area also includes a 'Page 1/1' indicator.

Just type in the content you need, adjust the settings, and print out your custom-

generated PDF file!

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