

MANDARIN CHINESE · BEGINNER REFERENCE

The Mandarin Tones Cheatsheet

The four tones plus neutral — pitch contours, example syllables, common confusions and tone-change rules. Master tones early and your spoken Mandarin instantly sounds correct.

TONE 1

ā

High flat

TONE 2

á

Rising

TONE 3

ǎ

Dipping

TONE 4

à

Falling

NEUTRAL

a

No mark

轻声普通话

01 The 4 tones + neutral

Each Mandarin syllable carries a tone — a controlled rise, fall, or hold of pitch. The same syllable with a different tone is a different word. Drill these five contours daily.

TONE 1	TONE 2	TONE 3	TONE 4	NEUTRAL
ā	á	ǎ	à	a
High flat	Rising	Dipping	Falling	Light, short
				
妈 mā mother	麻 má hemp	马 mǎ horse	骂 mà to scold	吗 ma question particle

One syllable, five meanings — the famous "ma" example

妈

mā

mother

麻

má

hemp

马

mǎ

horse

骂

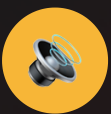
mà

to scold

吗

ma

question?



Hear every tone — native pronunciation, instantly

Tap each "ma" syllable to hear native audio (Microsoft Xiaoxiao neural). Includes drill-mode for confused pairs.

willychina.com/resources/mandarin-tones-cheatsheet/

02 Tone change rules (sandhi)

Mandarin tones don't stay fixed — they shift when certain combinations meet. Three rules cover 95% of the changes you'll hear.

Rule 1 — Two 3rd tones

When two 3rd tones meet, the first becomes a 2nd tone. Always written with the original tone marks — but pronounced with the rise.

nǐ hǎo → ní hǎo
you good · "hello"

Rule 2 — "Bù" (不)

"Bù" (4th tone, "not") changes to 2nd tone when followed by another 4th tone. Otherwise stays 4th.

bù · báo → bú báo
not · newspaper

Rule 3 — "Yī" (一)

"Yī" (1st tone, "one") becomes 4th tone before 1st/2nd/3rd tones, and 2nd tone before another 4th tone.

yī · diǎn → yì diǎn
one · a bit

03 Most-confused tone pairs

2nd · 3rd

The classic confusion. **2nd tone** is a steady rise. **3rd tone** dips down first, then rises (often pronounced as just the dip in real speech).

1st · 4th

1st tone is a high HOLD — same pitch throughout. **4th tone** starts high and falls sharply — like an angry command.

3rd · 4th

3rd tone dips low then rises. **4th tone** only falls. Listen for the rise at the end — that's 3rd.

No tone · Neutral

No tone marked = the neutral tone (still meaningful). Don't read "ma" as a flat 1st tone — neutral is shorter and unstressed.

How to practise tones daily

- Drill the 5 "ma" examples (mā má mǎ mà ma) until you can produce all five without hesitation.
- Always practise with audio — native recordings are non-negotiable. Apps like Pleco and HelloChinese have them.
- Record yourself and compare to native audio. Tones are the area where self-perception is most unreliable.
- Treat tone changes (sandhi) as automatic — not separate to learn. Listen for the pattern in natural speech.
- Get live feedback from a teacher. Tones are the one thing apps genuinely can't correct.



FROM THE WILLYCHINA RESOURCE LIBRARY

Want a real teacher to fix your tones?

PDFs only go so far. Tones are the one thing self-study apps can't correct in real time — you need a native ear listening and pushing back when you're off. WillyChina pairs you with native and professional Mandarin teachers. Book a free 15-minute intro lesson and see if it's a fit.

[Book a Free Intro Lesson →](#)

MORE MANDARIN RESOURCES FROM WILLYCHINA

01

Complete Pinyin Chart

willychina.com/resources/pinyin-chart

02

HSK 1 Vocab List

willychina.com/resources/hsk-1-vocabulary-list

03

Chinese Numbers 1-100

willychina.com/resources/chinese-numbers-1-100