Laowai

Chinese grammar for beginners

20 patterns, examples and practice



Read a pattern. Say the example aloud.
Open the full lesson when you need more practice.

Study the beginner guide online

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Basic Chinese Word Order: Subject, Verb and Object

Many simple Mandarin action sentences begin with a subject and continue with a verb. If the verb takes an object, that object commonly follows it.

Subj. + Verb (+ Obj.)

你们吃。

Nǐmen chī.

You eat.

Full lesson and examples

Say what something is with 是

Use 是 when you identify someone or something: a person is a teacher, a place is a station, or an object is your ticket. The expression after 是 is normally a noun or noun phrase.

Person or thing + 是 + identity / Person or thing + 不 + 是 + identity

这位是林老师。

Zhè wèi shì Lín lǎoshī.

This is Teacher Lin.

Use this when introducing someone; 位 is a polite classifier for people.

Full lesson and practice

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Describe things with 很

Many Chinese adjectives can act as the main description of a sentence. To say that something is warm, convenient, or expensive, put the adjective after the subject. 很 often links the two in a neutral statement.

Person or thing + 很 + adjective / Person or thing + 不 + adjective

这间教室很亮。

Zhè jiān jiàoshì hěn liàng.

This classroom is bright.

很 makes this a neutral description; it need not mean exceptionally bright.

Full lesson and practice

Say what you have with 有

Use 有 to say that someone has something. It works with objects such as a pen, people in a family, and resources such as time.

Person + 有 + thing / Person + 没有 + thing

我有两张展览票。

Wǒ yǒu liǎng zhāng zhǎnlǎn piào.

I have two exhibition tickets.

张 is the classifier for these flat tickets.

Full lesson and practice

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Saying Where Someone Is with 在 (Zài)

Use 在 to state where a person or thing is located. Start with the subject, then 在, then the location.

在 + Place

我在上海。

Wǒ zài Shànghǎi.

I'm in Shanghai.

Full lesson and practice

Show ownership with 的

的 connects an owner or associated person with a thing. Put the person first, then 的, then the noun: “my friend’s notebook” follows the order friend + 的 + notebook.

Owner + 的 + thing

这是姐姐的相机。

Zhè shì jiějie de xiàngjī.

This is my older sister’s camera.

The owner comes before 的 and the camera comes after it.

Full lesson and practice

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Count people and things with 个

When you count many kinds of nouns in Chinese, a classifier goes between the number and the noun. 个 is a common classifier for people and many everyday things. Learn the three-part unit together: number, classifier, noun.

Number + 个 + noun / 这 / 那 + 个 + noun

我还有两个问题。

Wǒ hái yǒu liǎng ge wèntí.

I still have two questions.

两 comes before 个 in this ordinary counting phrase.

Full lesson and practice

Talk about a whole group with 都

Use 都 when the whole group shares an action or description. The group normally comes before 都: the three of us are ready, both bags are light, or all these shops sell tea.

Group + 都 + verb phrase / Group + 都 + adjective phrase

我们三个都带了水。

Wǒmen sān ge dōu dài le shuǐ.

All three of us brought water.

我们三个 names the group before 都.

Full lesson and practice

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Add “also” with 也

也 adds a statement that shares something with what came before. One person likes cycling, and another person does too; one room is bright, and a second room is also bright.

Subject + 也 + verb phrase / Subject + 也 + 很 + adjective

小林喜欢骑车，我也喜欢。

Xiǎo Lín xǐhuan qí chē, wǒ yě xǐhuan.

Xiaolin likes cycling, and I do too.

The repeated action can be understood after the second 喜欢.

Full lesson and practice

Make a negative statement with 不

Put 不 directly before a verb or adjective to make many everyday statements negative. It is useful for preferences, habits, intentions, and descriptions: someone does not like a drink, does not take a certain bus, or is not tired.

Person + 不 + verb / Thing + 不 + adjective

我不喝加糖的咖啡。

Wǒ bù hē jiā táng de kāfēi.

I do not drink coffee with added sugar.

This describes a preference or habit, rather than one missed drink.

Full lesson and practice

Chinese grammar for beginners

Say “do not have” with 没有

有 has its own standard negative pattern. Instead of adding 不, put 没 before 有 to make 没有.

Person + 没有 + thing / Person + 没 + thing

我的包里没有纸巾。

Wǒ de bāo lǐ méiyǒu zhǐjīn.

There are no tissues in my bag.

A place can come first when you are saying something is absent there.

Full lesson and practice

Ask a yes-no question with 吗

To ask a neutral yes-no question, begin with the statement you want to check and add 吗 at the end. You do not need to move the verb or add an equivalent of English “do.” Statements about people, objects, or actions can all become this kind of question.

Statement + 吗?

这辆车到博物馆吗?

Zhè liàng chē dào bówùguǎn ma?

Does this bus go to the museum?

The ordinary statement order stays in place.

Full lesson and practice

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Keep question words in the answer's place

Chinese question words usually stay where the answer would go. Imagine a complete statement, find the information you do not know, and replace that part.

Subject + verb + 什么？ / 谁 + verb + object？ / Subject + 去 + 哪儿？

你在画什么？

Nǐ zài huà shénme?

What are you drawing?

什么 stays after 画, where the thing being drawn would appear.

Full lesson and practice

Ask a yes-no question with A-not-A

Repeat a verb with 不 between the two copies to make a yes-no question. The listener can choose the positive form or the negative form in the answer.

Subject + verb + 不 + verb / Subject + 有没有 + object

周末你去不去书店？

Zhōumò nǐ qù bu qù shūdiàn?

Are you going to the bookshop this weekend?

去不去 offers going and not going as the two possibilities.

Full lesson and practice

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Offer a choice with 还是

Use 还是 when a question offers alternatives: noodles or dumplings, the underground or walking, a visit or a rest. You are asking which option the listener chooses, so an answer will usually name one of the options.

Option A + 还是 + option B / Subject + verb + A + 还是 + B

午饭你想吃面条还是饺子?

Wǔfàn nǐ xiǎng chī miàntiáo háishi jiǎozi?

Would you like noodles or dumplings for lunch?

吃 applies to both food choices.

Full lesson and practice

Ask “what about…?” with 呢

After a clear statement or question, 呢 can help you ask “what about…?” Name the new person or thing, then add 呢. The listener uses the conversation to recover the missing words.

Person or thing + 呢?

我坐公交车去，你呢?

Wǒ zuò gōngjiāochē qù, nǐ ne?

I am going by bus. What about you?

The follow-up asks about the other person’s way of getting there.

Full lesson and practice

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Making Suggestions in Chinese with 吧 (Ba)

Adding 吧 to an action phrase can make it sound like a suggestion or a softened request. When the subject includes the speaker and listener, English often uses “let's” for the same purpose.

Command + 吧

我们走吧。

Wǒmen zǒu ba.

Let's go.

Full lesson and practice

Ask permission with 可以

可以 before a verb can say that an action is allowed or acceptable. Add 吗 to ask permission: 我可以坐这里吗 means “May I sit here?” The request names a specific action, so the other person knows what they are agreeing to.

subject / 可以 / verb phrase + 吗

请问，我可以坐这里吗?

Qǐngwèn, wǒ kěyǐ zuò zhèlǐ ma?

Excuse me, may I sit here?

The question asks whether taking this seat is acceptable.

Full lesson and practice

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Learned Skills with 会 (Huì): Saying Can in Chinese

会 can mark an ability acquired through learning or practice. It precedes the action describing the skill, such as speaking a language, cooking, or writing.

会 + Verb

他会说中文。

Tā huì shuō Zhōngwén.

He can speak Chinese.

Full lesson and practice

Going Somewhere with 去 (Qù) in Chinese

去 describes going away toward a destination. Put the person first and the destination after 去; the verb can connect directly to a place name.

去 + Place

我去公司。

Wǒ qù gōngsī.

I'm going to the office.

Full lesson and practice

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Put the patterns to use

Choose one short reading. Read it once for meaning, then find a pattern from this guide. Say a sentence about your own day using that pattern.

Read Tea or coffee?

Read Two cups, one guest

Read A chair in the sun

Check a sound

Listen to a syllable and its tone in the pinyin chart. In a sentence, follow the word recording or reading audio where available.

Open the pinyin chart with recordings

Sources and further study

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