

Chinese Syllables

第一课 汉语音节

VOL. 01 NETCHAI ORIGINAL TEXT

Introductory · Lesson 1

01 Introduction

Mandarin Chinese is written in Chinese characters (hanzi), and the pronunciation of each character is represented in **Pinyin**. Pinyin is a romanized transcription system for Mandarin. For example, the character "妈" is written as "mā" in Pinyin.

Mandarin Chinese has **21 consonants** and **6 basic vowels**. These combine with each other — sometimes with a nasal ending — to form over 400 syllables. For example, the consonant "m" and the vowel "a" combine to produce the syllable "ma".

Mandarin Chinese is also a **tonal language**: each syllable carries a specific pitch pattern called a **tone**, which is part of the meaning. The same syllable pronounced with different tones has entirely different meanings.

For example, the syllable "ma" carries a different meaning for each of the **4 tones** shown below. Ask your teacher to read them aloud so you can hear the difference in pitch and meaning.

mā 妈 (mother)	Consonant ← m
	Vowel ← a
	Tone mark ← ā
	Character ← 妈

má
麻
(hemp)

mǎ
马
(horse)

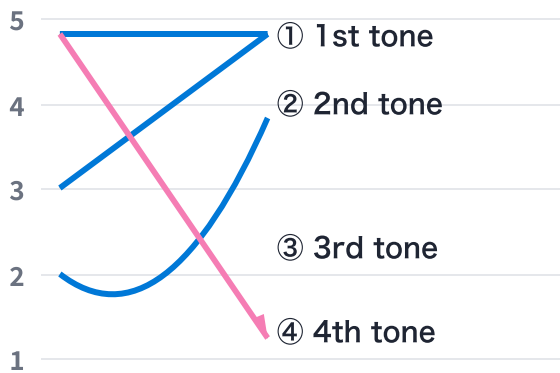
mà
骂
(to scold)

ma
吗
(question particle)

02 Tones

① The Four Tones

Mandarin has 4 tones, collectively called the **four tones**. They are the 1st tone, 2nd tone, 3rd tone, and 4th tone, written with the marks "ˉ" "ˊ" "ˇ" "ˋ" respectively.



1st tone high and flat — hold a steady high pitch

2nd tone rising — like a questioning "Really?"

3rd tone dip low, then rise — like a doubtful "hmm..."

4th tone sharp fall — like a firm "No!"

Tone	Mark	Example	How to pronounce
1st tone	—	<i>mā / ma1</i>	Pronounce at a high, flat pitch.
2nd tone	↗	<i>má / ma2</i>	Start at a mid pitch and rise steadily to a high pitch.
3rd tone	∨	<i>mǎ / ma3</i>	Start mid, dip low, then rise back up.
4th tone	↘	<i>mà / ma4</i>	Start at a high pitch and drop sharply to low.

NOTE: Tone mark notation

There are two ways to write tone marks. The table above shows both: on the left (*mā, má, mǎ, mà*) using diacritic marks, and on the right (*ma1, ma2, ma3, ma4*) using numbers. The diacritic form is standard, but the number form is often used when typing tone marks is inconvenient — for example, in chat messages. (In chat sessions at NetChai, the number notation is used.)

② Neutral Tone

In addition to the four tones above, some syllables lose their original tone and are pronounced short and light. This is called the **neutral tone** (also known as the fifth tone). No tone mark is written for the neutral tone.

Tone	Mark	Example	How to pronounce
Neutral tone	none	<i>ma / ma</i>	Pronounce short and light, with no full tone.

Example

mā ma 妈妈 (mother) — the second "ma" is the neutral tone

03 Practice

First, repeat each combination after your teacher. Then try pronouncing them on your own and ask your teacher to check whether your tones are correct.

	1st tone	2nd tone	3rd tone	4th tone	Neutral tone
1st tone	<i>māmā</i>	<i>māmá</i>	<i>māmǎ</i>	<i>māmà</i>	<i>māma</i> *
2nd tone	<i>mámā</i>	<i>mámá</i>	<i>mámǎ</i>	<i>mámà</i>	<i>máma</i> *

	1st tone	2nd tone	3rd tone	4th tone	Neutral tone
3rd tone	<i>mǎmā</i>	<i>mǎmá</i>	<i>mǎ mǎ</i>	<i>mǎmà</i>	<i>mǎ ma</i> *
4th tone	<i>màmā</i>	<i>màmá</i>	<i>màmǎ</i>	<i>màmà</i>	<i>màma</i> *

*** Pitch of the neutral tone**

The pitch of a neutral-tone syllable has nothing to do with its own original tone; instead, it is determined entirely by the tone of the syllable immediately before it. The neutral tone is generally pronounced low, except after a 3rd-tone syllable, where it is pronounced higher. Use the pitch diagrams below as a guide when practising the neutral tone.

Neutral-tone pitch (varies with the preceding tone)

