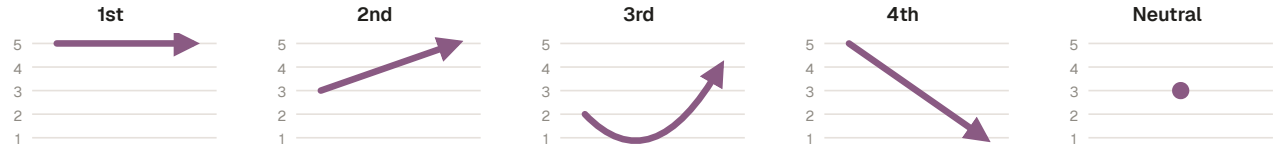
AIkits

LANGUAGES · CHEAT SHEET

Chinese tones cheat sheet

The four tones, the tone changes you hear and the tone pairs

1 Four tones plus neutral: how the pitch moves (1 = low, 5 = high)



1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Neutral
妈 *mā* (mother)	麻 *má* (hemp)	马 *mǎ* (horse)	骂 *mà* (to scold)	吗 *ma* (question particle)
high level · 55	rising · 35	low dipping · 214	falling · 51	short, light

2 Where the tone mark goes

- **a** or **e** takes it: 好 *hǎo* (good), 谢谢 *xièxie* (thank you)
- In **ou** on the o, else the **second vowel**: 六 *liù* (six)
- **ü** keeps its dots: 绿 *lǜ* (green)
- Neutral syllables: no mark: 妈妈 *māma* (mom)

TIP

10 minutes a day on one grid row: listen, shadow, record, compare. Log the weakest pair, e.g. 3-4, 考试 *kǎoshì* (exam), and drill it first tomorrow.

3 Tone changes (tone sandhi)

Change	Written	Said
Two 3rd tones in a row: the first → 2nd	你好 *nǐ hǎo* (hello)	*ní hǎo*
不 *bù* before a 4th tone → *bú*	不是 *bù shì* (is not)	*bú shì*
不 *bù* before tones 1, 2 and 3: no change	不好 *bù hǎo* (not good)	*bù hǎo*
不 *bù* inside an A-not-A question → neutral	是不是 *shì bù shì* (is it or not?)	*shì bu shì*
一 *yī* before a 4th tone → *yí*	一定 *yīdìng* (certainly)	*yídìng*
一 *yī* before tones 1, 2 and 3 → *yì*	一天 *yītiān* (one day)	*yìtiān*
一 *yī* counting, in ordinals, at word end: no change	一二三 *yī èr sān* (one two three) · 第一 *dì-yī* (first)	*yī èr sān* · *dì-yī*
一 *yī* between a repeated verb → neutral	看一看 *kàn yī kàn* (take a look)	*kàn yi kàn*

4 Tone-pair grid: 1st syllable ↓, 2nd syllable →

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Neutral
1st	飞机 *fēijī* airplane	中国 *Zhōngguó* China	开始 *kāishǐ* to begin	音乐 *yīnyuè* music	妈妈 *māma* mom
2nd	明天 *míngtiān* tomorrow	学习 *xuéxí* to study	牛奶 *niúnǎi* milk	学校 *xuéxiào* school	朋友 *péngyou* friend
3rd	老师 *lǎoshī* teacher	美国 *Měiguó* USA	水果 *shuǐguǒ* fruit (said *shuíguǒ*)	考试 *kǎoshì* exam	姐姐 *jiějie* older sister
4th	面包 *miànbāo* bread	问题 *wèntí* question	电脑 *diànnǎo* computer	再见 *zàijiàn* goodbye	爸爸 *bàba* dad