

A PRACTICAL GUIDE TO LEARNING CHINESE (OR ANY LANGUAGE) WITH EASE, EFFICIENCY AND ENJOYMENT

# MASTERING MANDARIN IN THE MODERN WORLD

LUKE NEALE & PHIL CRIMMINS



MANDARIN  
BLUEPRINT

## About The Authors

### Luke Neale

Luke struggled early on with traditional learning methods and eventually, through a lot of trial and error, found far better ways of acquiring Chinese, using various tools and memory techniques.

Luke's strength is his native-like pronunciation; having placed a strong focus on it early on.



### Phil Crimmins

In Spring 2017, Phil graduated from Sichuan University with a bachelor's degree in the Chinese language, and he was also awarded an "Outstanding Thesis Award" for his dissertation titled "Chinese Acquisition Methods from the Perspective of a Mandarin Learner."

Phil's strength in Mandarin is reading and writing; having started his study with a heavy focus on Chinese characters.



## Complementary Curriculum Collaborators

We met back in 2013 and quickly discovered that we were both equally passionate about learning Chinese. As well as becoming great friends, we started sharing the various memory techniques and learning tools we found helpful for language acquisition. As a result, we found ourselves improving many times faster than others in our peer group, all while investing less time and seemingly having a lot more fun along the way.

After both passing the HSK 6 in a quarter of the allotted time, we knew we were onto something big. We decided to join forces and create a crash course on how to learn Chinese, sharing our knowledge with the local community of Chengdu. It became so popular that we began teaching online and creating awesome video courses. We now have a total of 16 years of experience both learning and teaching Chinese, and in that time we have become acutely aware of the problems Chinese learners continue to face, and how to solve them.

In late 2018, we were both given inventor status for the US patent application titled "Method of Teaching Chinese Characters, Vocabulary, and Grammar as a Second Language to Non-native Speakers" (pat # PCT/US18/57921). This became the basis for our ground-breaking video curriculum that we call "The Mandarin Blueprint Method".

Learning Chinese changed our lives forever. We discovered that those who embark upon this learning journey are rewarded with knowledge & wisdom that comes not just from the language itself, but more importantly from the hearts and minds of Chinese people. It is as enlightening an experience as we could have ever hoped for, and now it is your turn.

Let's get to it!

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This is where you learn step-by-step how to acquire Mandarin Chinese. Most of these concepts and techniques can also be applied to learning other languages.

5. Learn Pronunciation First
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### Section Three - Bonus Chapters

These chapters are just as important but concern the less tangible aspects of language learning. The final chapter contains a **huge** list of resources for learning Mandarin Chinese.

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## Foreword

The evolution happened right under your nose.

Foreign language learning has been masquerading as an academic pursuit for centuries. People can even get university degrees in a language (I did), which betrays that we've made a category error when it comes to language acquisition.

Achieving literacy and fluency in a language is NOT an academic subject, and therefore, using techniques derived from academia to acquire a new language is a mistake.

**Here's the bad news:** The legacy momentum of our educational systems has prevented foreign language departments from upgrading their curriculums. If you go to a university to study Japanese, you'll end up in one of the worst environments you could ask for to properly acquire a language: The classroom with a whiteboard, teachers, and textbooks.

That's not going away, and it's only going to go from "horribly expensive" to "prohibitively expensive," but **here's the good news:** Technological and theoretical evolution in language learning has eliminated the need for academia to play any part.

The resources and technology available today are far more powerful tools of education that classrooms ever were. For a fraction of university tuition, you can reach far higher levels of fluency and pass state-certified exams, therefore rendering the "higher" education of university obsolete.

Here's the rub...the evolution is decentralized. A new book here, a web-app there, and countless online courses all with different levels of exposure. As a result, many people simply don't realize that they have other options. They see an overwhelming ocean of content online, throw up their hands and say, "Welp, I can't make heads or tails of this, might as well bite the bullet and go to a university!"

Stop punishing yourself.

Let us remove the obstacle called "I don't know how to navigate this ocean of online content." We'll tell you exactly what works and what doesn't, and we'll use Mandarin to make the most persuasive case. If you can learn frikkin' Mandarin with only free or affordable online resources, then you can learn any language.

Treat this book as an opportunity. It will be your guide to all the resources, technologies, and mindsets necessary to master language acquisition in general, and Mandarin in

particular.

Not only can you master Mandarin, but the tools at your fingertips have made it faster & more fun than ever before. The best part is, after reading this book, you'll even be able to do it without leaving your house.

**Phil Crimmins**

Co-Founder of Mandarin Blueprint



# SECTION 1

## The Basics

**1**

**Acquire Mandarin The  
Easy Way**

## 1. Acquire Mandarin the Easy Way










When I started learning Mandarin, I didn't look into what world-class [polyglots](#) thought or what the [most cited linguistic research](#) had discovered until way too late into my 'study.' Only when I began to become so stressed out with failure to the point of quitting did I start to look outward and see what the *real* experts had to say on language acquisition. What I learned was so simple and glaringly obvious that I was shocked that **none** of my teachers had ever told me before:

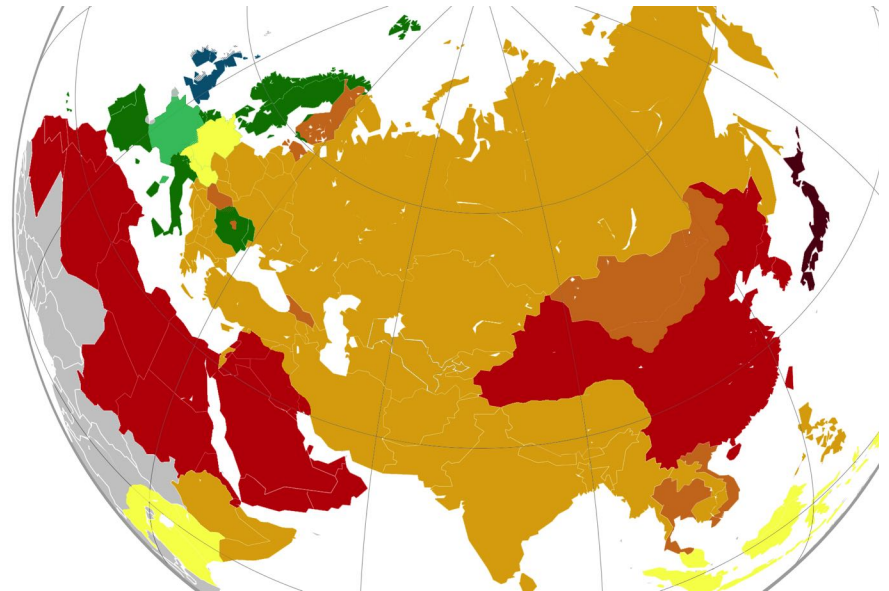
You learn a second language the same way as your native language: **Through reading and listening to content that you can understand.** This is also known as '**comprehensible input.**'

Although individual attention is still required, speaking and writing, or 'output,' mainly come naturally as a **by-product** of comprehensible input. Therefore, if you focus **less** on producing Mandarin and **more** on consuming it, you will progress much faster and enjoy the process a whole lot more.

This does beg an important question, though: If language acquisition is really so simple, **why does Mandarin still have this reputation as being insanely difficult to learn?**

According to the [Foreign Service Institute](#) (FSI), Mandarin is among the most challenging languages to learn in the world, and the reason given is ‘the writing system.’

-  - Category 0 (English Speaker)
-  - Category I (24 Weeks, 600 Hours)
-  - Category II (30 Weeks, 750 Hours)
-  - Category III (36 Weeks, 900 Hours)
-  - Category IV (44 Weeks, 1100 Hours)
-  - Category IV\* (More than 44 Weeks)
-  - Category V (88 Weeks, 2200 Hours)
-  - Category V\* (More than 88 Weeks)
-  - Category I (Not taught by FSI)



[Source: Reddit](#)

This is certainly true, to some extent. Before you can start to get comprehensible input in Chinese, you need to learn hundreds (and eventually thousands) of characters, **and there isn't any way to avoid this**. This requirement makes the early foundation-building period of Mandarin much longer than other languages, and the language as a whole very intimidating. But, I propose the problem is more complicated than that.

These studies done by the FSI use the traditional classroom environment across the board. Traditional methods rarely

teach a language based on the principle of comprehensible input, and if you end up opting for this route for acquiring Mandarin, you are guaranteed to be subjected to some or all of the following:

1. You will be trained in pronunciation **poorly** (or not at all).
2. You will be taught characters **poorly** (or not at all).
3. You will learn **about** Mandarin, instead of genuinely acquiring it.
4. You will be taught by people who **never** had to learn Chinese as adults.
5. You will waste a lot of time using techniques that **do not work**.
6. You will experience **boring** textbooks, **repetitive** drills, **distracting** classrooms, and **stressful** exams.
7. You will learn in ways your brain doesn't like, **forcing** the language into your head with **limited** foundational understanding.
8. You will find it very difficult to **retain** what you learn for very long.

So you see, traditional language learning is painful no matter what, but because Chinese has so much more you need to learn early on, this pain increases considerably.



Once you get past the foundation-building period, however, Chinese is more straightforward than most languages. Here are a few reasons why:

### **1. There are far fewer sounds**

The entire Mandarin language contains around **420 syllables**, and as many as 1200 if you include the five tones. Compared to the 10,000+ syllables found in English, this is nothing! You can, therefore, learn everything you need to know about Mandarin pronunciation in a very short time.

## 2. Chinese characters are logical

That's right, characters aren't just funny squiggles! Character components either contribute to the meaning or the sound of the character. There are exceptions where meanings have been lost over time or through the [simplification process](#) in the 1950s, but these are rare. We will be delving into what characters are and how to learn them easily in later chapters.

## 3. Chinese words are easier to learn

The majority of Mandarin words are logical compound words similar in structure to the English words “playground” or “seatbelt,” making them relatively easy to learn, as long as you know their characters. Even if the structure of a Chinese word is not immediately obvious, you can create your own connection through your knowledge of the constituent characters. With English, however, unless you happen to have a deep knowledge of old English, Latin, Norse, and ancient Greek, you won't be able to recognize the underlying logic of most words on sight.

## 4. Chinese grammar is easy

Mandarin Chinese has...

...**No conjugations** (-ed, ing, etc.)

...**No declensions** (go, going, gone, etc.)

...**No contractions** (we're, I've, etc.)

...**No plurals** (mouse, mice, etc.)

...**No genders**

**...and a straightforward word order!**

## The Best Part...

**Getting you 'over the hump' of the Chinese writing system is what Mandarin Blueprint does best.** We have the fastest methods available for learning Chinese characters, vocabulary and grammar, and we will share everything you need to know in the chapters that follow. For specifics on the individual steps of mastering Mandarin, check out section two.

# 2

## Learn Holistically

## 2. Learn Holistically

To learn holistically is to **build upon what you already know**, which happens to be the most effective and enjoyable way to learn **anything**. The best way to learn holistically is to create a **harmonious balance** between "bottom-up" and "top-down" learning. Let's explore these a little more.

### Bottom-Up Learning

Learning Mandarin bottom-up means starting from the smallest parts and working your way up to more complex pieces. If Mandarin is a big, beautiful house you are building, think of bottom-up learning as the production of the building materials. For example, learning pinyin initials, finals, and tones before entire syllables, learning character components **first** before characters, or learning characters before words and phrases.

**Bottom-up learning is unavoidable** during the foundation-building period of Mandarin due to all of those characters and components you have to learn.

### Top-Down Learning

Learning top-down means trying to learn something without having a full understanding of all of its component parts. For example, learning whole phrases without first learning the characters or words within them, or learning Chinese



characters without knowledge of their components. Top-down learning could be thought of as getting to work and building your Mandarin house.

Learning top-down can be useful if you want **fast results**, and you don't care if you can't remember what you learn for long. For example, if you visit China, you may learn “厕所在哪里? cèsuǒ zài nǎlǐ” (“Where is the bathroom?”) through repetition, without knowing any of the pronunciation rules or characters, because being in China will demand this. Besides this practical benefit of top-down learning, you also get to use Chinese in real life, which feels great.

## Balance is Key

If you focus too much of your time and energy on bottom-up learning, you will end up with a **brickyard**. You will have knowledge of lots of characters and words without being able to understand or use them effectively. Remember, your goal is **not** to know lots of pieces of Mandarin, it is to **consume content** and **successfully communicate** using the language.

On the other hand, if top-down learning is your primary focus, you will end up with a shoddy house that will collapse easily. Due to a lack of a solid foundation, you will find it very difficult to understand and remember new information.

Traditional methods are far too top-down, creating many challenges for learners. Teachers generally do not know how to help you build a solid foundation of pronunciation, characters, and vocabulary, which leaves lots of gaps in your knowledge that grow over time. If you can't attach new information to a previously formed foundation, you are simply **rote learning** (forcing information into your head), which is a recipe for misery.

## Never Learn Anything “By Rote”

**Rote learning means learning by repeatedly writing or reviewing without a full understanding.** Unfortunately, it is the most common method used for teaching language, and it sucks. Here are three reasons why:

### 1. It does not build upon what you already know

Purely top-down learning doesn't work long-term, and it doesn't get anymore top-down than rote learning. If you try to **force** information into your memory **without a foundation to build upon**, you will likely forget it soon after.

### 2. It takes too much time

Chinese people learn characters by rote, so we know that rote learning **does** work with enough repetition. But, remember this it takes them twelve hours a day, 6 days a week, for at least ten years in an entirely Chinese environment to achieve this. Plus, they **still** forget how to write characters all the time anyway!

### 3. It is too much, too often

When lifting weights, there is always a point where doing more repetitions does not yield any further results. **The same goes for reviewing information.** Your brain needs time to build connections and process information subconsciously, which means you can only make so much progress in a single



session. Why do you think they call flashcard reviews '**reps**' anyway?

As I will explore further in the upcoming chapter on spaced repetition, the interval between reviewing a new piece of information should grow longer as your memory of it strengthens. Rote learning completely ignores this principle, which wastes an **unacceptable** amount of your time.

Rote learning is still the go-to method for traditional learning options such as private classes and university courses, most likely due to its simplicity and ease of application. The

persistence of rote learning is also a symptom of the lack of flexibility and ability to innovate inherent in these educational institutions. **Rote learning is a motivation killer, and it does not work, so please don't ever do it.** There is always a better way to learn something.

## My Troubled Journey with Chinese

It isn't just schools, universities and private classes you need to watch out for. Going it alone can also be a **big** problem if you don't know what you're doing. To illustrate how **not** learn holistically, here's a quick rundown of my first 18 months learning Mandarin (no laughing, please):

- 1.** I began by learning pronunciation. I learned the initials, finals and tones first, and then practiced them extensively **in context** using an audio course. A great start! **Holistic.**
- 2.** I used the same audio course to learn basic phrases. Although this course was great for my pronunciation, I didn't hold on to the words I learned for more than a few months because I had no foundation. **Too top-down.**
- 3.** I tried to decipher walls of Chinese text with a meager vocabulary and no knowledge of characters. Ahhh, the wonders of textbooks. **Too top-down.**

4. I "learned" characters by reviewing them over and over, without knowledge of their components or their frequency of use. My first tutor and a flashy website both taught me characters in this way. **Too top-down.**

5. I "learned" thousands of words individually, out of context, without properly learning their characters first. I truly believed I was acquiring vocabulary by regurgitating the definition repeatedly. **Too top-down** (limited knowledge of characters) **and too bottom-up** (no context).

6. I focused on speaking a lot, but without doing much listening or reading. I would often guess how to use words based on a simple definition. Me: "I've never seen this word in context, but I'm going to use it how I think it should be used" - How arrogant can you be?! **Too top-down.**

7. I then tried to acquire grammar by writing out grammar points in note form over and over again. **Neither top-down or bottom-up, just dumb.**

8. I Learned how to read, write, and pronounce 3,000 characters using what is now The Hanzi Movie Method (pat. pending). I learned the most common ones first and learned their components. Although this was a **huge** step in the right direction, I still wasn't seeing any of the characters in context of words or sentences, so it still wasn't ideal. **Too bottom up.**

9. I started reading and listening to comprehensible sentences and longer-form content as a primary method of learning new words. There were still lots of words I didn't know, but not so many that it affected my understanding of the content. **Holistic.**

As you can see, it's a bit of a mess, and not necessarily because all of the individual steps were inherently harmful ways of learning the language. My biggest mistake was learning things without the foundational knowledge necessary to understand them. **I was either creating a brickyard or a shoddy house.**

Only when I finally began to develop a **balance** between bottom-up and top-down learning did my study turn into a fruitful and fun process. Learning words became easy because I knew the characters, and I acquired grammar by reading understandable content. I was finally learning **holistically.**

As a beginner, learning holistically is an **enormous** challenge, but it is possible with the right methods and expert guidance. Check out section 2 for steps on how it can be done.

# 3

## **Understand What Fluency Is (And Is Not)**

### 3. Understand What Fluency Is (and Is Not)

Before we start getting into the weeds of **how** to achieve fluency in Mandarin, it is important to clarify what fluency means. After all, if you don't have a clear goal, you haven't got much chance of achieving it. Phil and I have heard many definitions of fluency over the years, and this is our favorite one so far:

“When you can take **a relatively small fraction** of Mandarin words and use them **like** a native speaker to **communicate successfully** on a wide variety of topics.”

Awesome. Now, let's be clear on what fluency is **not**:

**Knowing every word (or even most of them)** - This is impossible, even for native speakers. No problem, though. You can use even the most common **one thousand** words to get yourself out of most tough spots. There is always more than one way to express a thought, and with a little creativity you can communicate **far** more than you think.

**Being able to talk about any subject** - If you asked me to use English to discuss my thoughts on 18th-century Russian military history, I can safely say that I would **not** sound fluent.



There are endless topics you and I simply do not have the knowledge or technical vocabulary to discuss.

**Never making mistakes** - Native speakers make mistakes **all the time**. As long as you can communicate what you want to say to a native speaker, you have expressed that thought fluently. It doesn't matter what missteps you make along the way.

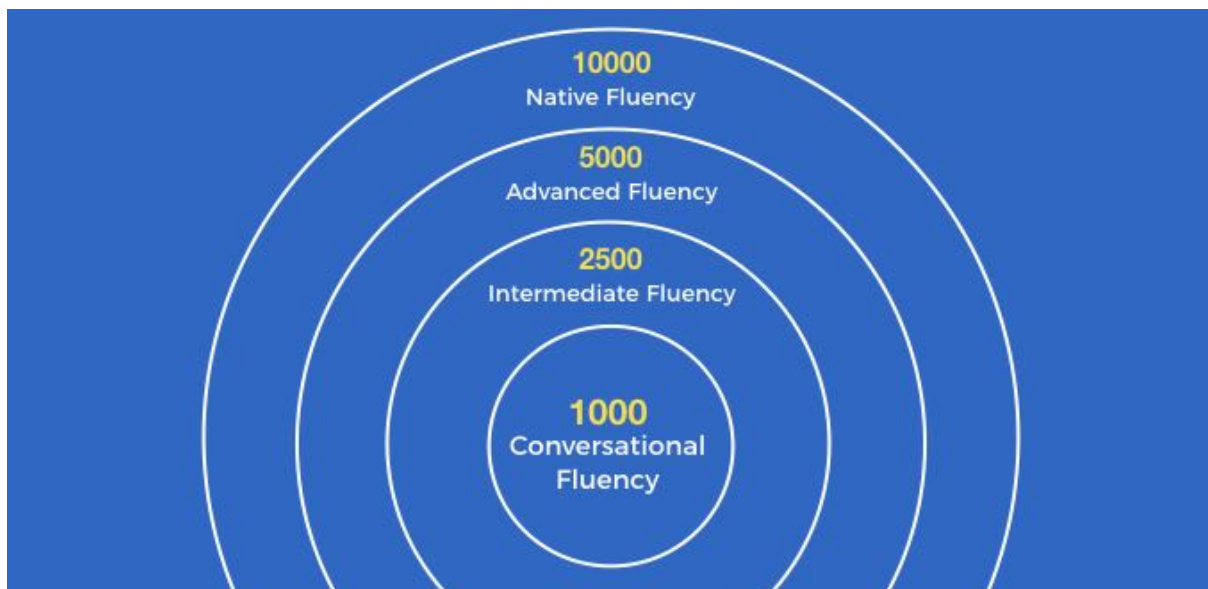
**Never using filler words or phrases** - Native speakers are very liberal with brain farts like "um" and "uh." They also like to use cheeky "filler phrases" like "well, you see, the thing

about that is..." while forming a coherent thought. Using filler phrases doesn't only make it easier to express your thoughts in your own time, but also makes you sound more natural.

[Click here](#) to download a flashcard deck and pdf of 418 of these filler phrases, which we like to call "**conversation connectors.**"

## The Levels of Fluency

Yes, that's right, there are also levels to fluency. Take a look at the image below to see (approximately) how many words you need for each level:



**You only need around one thousand common words to reach basic fluency in Mandarin Chinese**, which makes up around **80%** of written Chinese and as much as **90%** of spoken Chinese.

Learning the most common one thousand words should be your primary focus from the beginning. Once you reach this point, you will have access to a much more extensive range of increasingly engaging content, and learning words becomes more natural and fun. You can focus on achieving higher levels of fluency after you have reached this milestone.

## How Long Does it Take to Reach Fluency?

How fast you reach fluency depends on how much time you invest per day in **high quality input and output**. Learning words and seeing/hearing them in a comprehensible context is primarily how you acquire a **passive understanding**. This is by far the most vital step, but it is not enough to be able to speak comfortably. In order to develop an **active vocabulary** (i.e., spoken fluency), you need to put in **a lot** of speaking and writing practice.

After our latest expansion, we created an infographic that estimates how long it takes to acquire (both passively and actively) the 1,530 characters and 4,000 words in our curriculum, which covers approximately 94% of Mandarin Chinese by frequency. Including 250 hours of speaking and writing practice, we calculate an average of **841 hours** to reach literacy and fluency (from zero), which is **less than half of the FSI's estimate of 2,200 hours!**

[Here's](#) a blog post (with a video by Phil) walking you through each aspect of this infographic. [Here's a link](#) to the infographic itself if you'd like a closer look. Below is a snapshot of the infographic showing the kind of results you can expect depending on how much you invest per day:

Your Study Time Per Day (Average)	Your Total Time To Literacy Fluency (4,000 words)
1 Hour	2 Years & 3 Months
2 Hours	1 Year & 1.5 Months
3 Hours	9 Months
6 Hours	5 Months
8 Hours	3 Months

To acquire only the most common 1,000 words, you would just need to finish The Mandarin Blueprint Method **Foundation Course** (levels 1 to 36), which would most likely take **less than 500 hours**, on average.

**Disclaimer:** These figures are estimates based on users of our curriculum. We can't guarantee results from other resources.

# 4

**Set Goals And Review  
Them Regularly**

## 4. Set Goals And Review Them Regularly

Goals must be SMART if you want to have a solid chance of reaching them. In case you've never heard of this concept, or you need a refresher, let's review what SMART goals are, and help you create a few for yourself. **SMART goals are:**

Specific

Measurable

Attainable

Relevant

Timed

Let's go through these one-by-one and see how we can apply these principles to Mandarin learning.

Specific

Go into as much detail as you think is necessary to make a "high-resolution" goal. A great way of doing this is to:

### 1. Make sure all of your words are clearly defined:

Here are some unclear goals I've seen, heard, and made myself over the years:



**Bad Goal 1:** “Become fluent in Mandarin.”

**Bad Goal 2:** “Learn 50 words.”

**Bad Goal 3:** “Improve my pronunciation.”

What does **“fluency”** mean? What does it mean to **“Learn”** a word? How about **“Improve”**? If you can't define these words, that tells you that you don't have enough information to make this goal a reality yet.

**2. Answer pertinent questions to get to the essence of the goal, such as the 5 W's:**

**Who:** Who is involved in this goal?

**What:** What do I want to accomplish?

**Where:** Where will you achieve this goal?

**When:** When do I want to achieve this goal?

**Why:** Why do I want to achieve this goal?

**Bad Goal 1:** “Become fluent in Mandarin” could become:

**Good Goal 1:** “Be able to use the most common 1000 mandarin words in a sentence upon request without more than a 5-second delay.”

**Bad Goal 2:** “Learn 50 words” could be:

**Good Goal 2:** “Create mnemonics and SRS flashcards for the next 50 words in The Mandarin Blueprint Method foundation course and be able to recall them all with at least 95% accuracy.”

**Bad Goal 3:** “Improve my pronunciation” could be:

**Good Goal 3:** “Successfully identify and produce all Mandarin syllables, tones, and tone pairs through the approval of my native tutor.”

## Measurable

Make sure you have an indicator to a) let you know if you are progressing towards your goal or not, and b) let you know when the goal is completed successfully or not. Let's apply this to the three goals we just made.

**Measuring Good Goal 1:** We can measure basic fluency somewhat reliably by the ability to use each of the 1000 words in a sentence or using them in spoken conversation with a tutor upon request.

**Measuring Good Goal 2:** If you use [Anki](#) or some other SRS software (see chapter 10 for more on this), you will see real-time stats of your recall.

**Measuring Good Goal 3:** There is some subjectivity here from tutor to tutor, but a trained native speaker's approval should be enough of a measure.

If your goal is less tangible, such as doing a certain amount of listening or reading by a specific time, the **time invested per day** will be your measure.

## Attainable

Can you reach the goal with the time and resources you have available? Aim high, but within the realms of possibility. **If aiming high doesn't work, aim low.** Can you do a single flashcard each day? Sure, anyone can do that.

**Good Goal 1:** Whether fluency is attainable within a specific period is tough to gauge if you have limited language learning experience. Take another look at our estimate in the previous chapter based on users of our course and decide how much time you will be able to invest on average per day.

**Good Goals 2 + 3:** These are both 100% attainable.

## Relevant

The goal is what you want to achieve, and the objectives are the actionable steps to achieve the goal.

Hence, a common cause of failure is making an objective to perform an action or series of actions that are not relevant to the goal. Here's a couple of examples to illustrate this:

How about if you aim to sing a song a day in Mandarin (objective) to achieve better pronunciation (goal)? Would that really improve your pronunciation?

What if your goal is to have two online sessions a week (objective) to improve speaking (goal), but your tutor is awful?

What if you want to make flashcards for 3000 characters (objective), but your method for learning characters (goal) doesn't work?

When setting a goal, first ask yourself the following:

**Why do I want to reach this goal?**

**What is the objective behind the goal?**

**Do you have sufficient evidence that your objective will achieve the goal?**

If you can give satisfactory answers to most of these, your goal should be relevant enough.

## Timed

Always end your goals with “by + (specific date).” Once again, **aim high but keep it realistic**. Exactly when you decide you can complete each goal is determined by two factors:

1) How much time is needed to achieve the goal

2) How much time (on average) you can invest each day.

Before you decide on this, you should check out the content in section three, which contains a lot of useful information on time management and efficient learning. You may have more time than you think, and your goals may take less time than you think.

Make short, medium, and long-term goals.

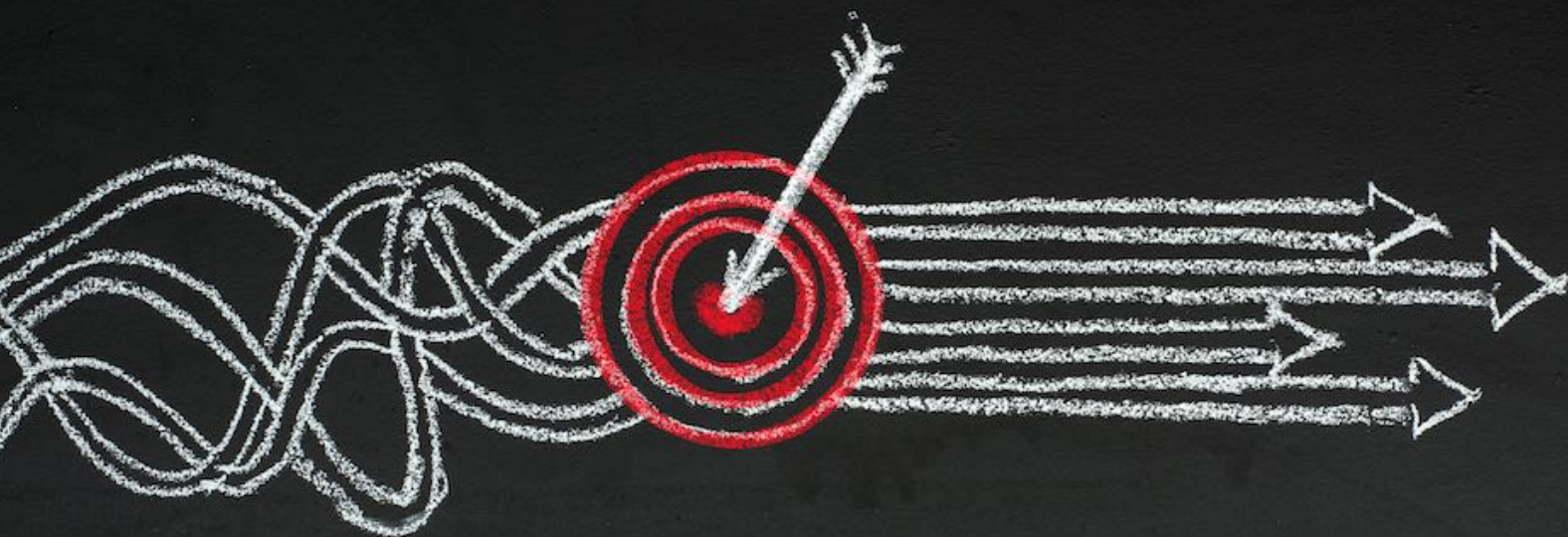
Not only should goals be SMART, but they should also be for graduating lengths of time into the future. Here are some examples of daily, monthly, and yearly goals we've had at some point:

#### **Short-term goal = 1 day - 1 month**

“Finish all Anki reviews by the end of the day.”

“Shadow the audio from episode 3 of [狗熊有话说](#) podcast three times by the end of the week.”

“Read one short story in Chinese ten times by the end of the month.”



### Medium-term goal = 1-12 months

“Recall the reading, writing, and pronunciation of 3000 Chinese characters with at least 90% accuracy by November 1st.”

“Have 100 hours of online tutor sessions in [Italki](#) before August 15th.”

“Write 10 x 500+ character-long journal entries by Christmas.”

### Long-term goal = 1+ years

“Pass the HSK 6 exam by 2022”

“Complete level 57 of The Mandarin Blueprint Method”

“Read the entire Game of Thrones series in Chinese by June 2021” (This is one of mine)

## Some Final Tips on Goals

### Write them down

Writing out your goals by hand can be highly effective. Wildly successful author and motivational speaker [Brian Tracy](#) suggests creating at least ten goals you would like to achieve over the year and **writing them down daily** in the **first person** and in the **present tense**. For example: Instead of “Perform a five-minute speech in Mandarin by June 1st, 2021,” he suggests changing it to “**I perform** a five-minute speech in Mandarin Chinese by June 1st, 2021”. Doing this is rather time-intensive in comparison to just reviewing your goals, but doing so helped me to pass the HSK 6 in a very short time, so I think it is worth trying.

### Make them public

Announce your more long-term goals to your friends, family and even on social media. Perhaps even make a public blog

or take part in challenges available on Mandarin learning forums and blogs. This will make you more accountable and less likely to slip.

### **Make sure you have a daily or weekly goal for a certain amount of reading & listening**

Thirty minutes per day of focused input is the minimum amount to invest in input if you would like to see significant progress quickly. This goal is not that lofty at all if you spread it out over each day.

### **Do not let the perfect be the enemy of the good**

If you fail to reach a goal, draw a line **immediately**, and start again. **Never** dwell on failure because it helps nobody.

Now go and make some SMART goals.

Write out as many long, medium, and short-term goals as you can, and start applying what you've learned to increase your productivity and motivation.

If you need any advice on the specifics, get in touch at [contact@mandarinblueprint.com](mailto:contact@mandarinblueprint.com).



# SECTION 2

The Blueprint

**5**

**Learn Pronunciation  
First**

## 5. Learn Pronunciation First

Pronunciation should be the very first thing you focus on when learning a new language. Here are the most significant benefits you will gain from doing so:

### 1. Gain Confidence and Motivation

Success breeds motivation. Communicating successfully with native speakers provides that rush that will spur you on in your learning. It is a positive circle of **confidence**. More speaking → Improvement → Successful Communication → > More confidence.

### 2. Communicate More Effectively

Did you know that **pronunciation is far more critical than grammar** early on? Even with a limited vocabulary, you can still communicate well as long as you pronounce the words correctly.

### 3. WOW Native Speakers

An incredible accent immediately makes people more responsive to you, which in turn increases your likelihood of **meaningful interactions**.



#### 4. Open Up Opportunities

Excellent pronunciation leaves a **deep impression** on the people you speak to that can positively influence areas such as your career, finances, and personal relationships.

#### 5. Boost Your Listening

You will be able to identify the words you hear more accurately straight away, giving your grammar and vocabulary a **significant** boost.

## 6. Read & Write Faster

Connecting the sounds of Chinese to their written "pinyin" spelling will allow you to **read and type Chinese**. Guess what happens when you start reading, writing, and listening regularly...

## 7. Reach Fluency Faster

All of these benefits mean that you will be able to identify words you hear and read FAR more accurately. **Strong pronunciation** will start a **chain reaction** that will get you to fluency **faster**, and with **less stress** along the way.

### The damage done by poor pronunciation

You can just take all of those points above and reverse them. When you have poor pronunciation, people misunderstand you a lot more. **This hurts your confidence**. If this happens a lot, you may eventually begin to associate speaking Chinese with negative emotions, and become less and less willing to speak. **This is a vicious cycle of negativity that you must avoid**.

Weak pronunciation also causes you to have more trouble identifying the words you hear. Just think about the **opportunity cost** of this over time. Think of all the Mandarin listening content you consume, and the conversations you take part in. Each missing piece of pronunciation knowledge

represents countless missed opportunities for understanding, especially when extended over months or years.

## How MB Teaches Pronunciation

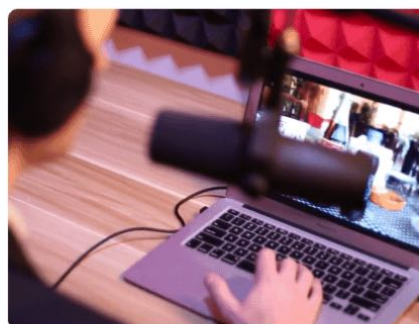
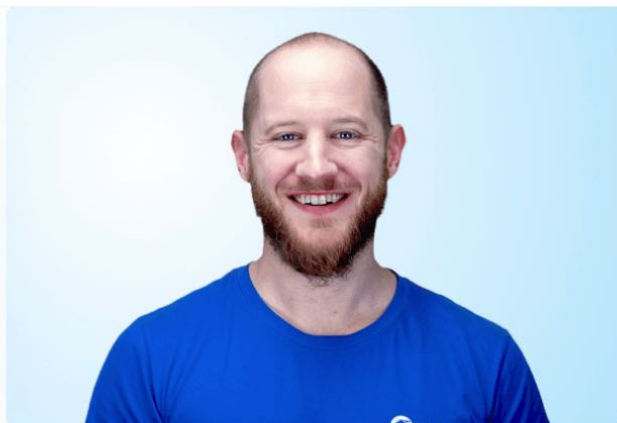
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[Download our pinyin chart here](#)

With only 420 syllables (1200 if you include tones), **Chinese has relatively little to learn in terms of pronunciation**, especially when compared to the 10000+ syllables of English. However, there are many challenging and potentially confusing aspects of Chinese pronunciation, and you still need the right guidance and study materials that don't send you to sleep.



MANDARIN  
BLUEPRINT



Phil and I were always very disappointed with the quality and quantity of pronunciation materials out there on the internet when we were learning Mandarin. Most of it is **tedious** and **confusing**. If you use a tutor, they will often skip over pronunciation because they don't know how to teach it in a way that is even **remotely** entertaining.

This urgent need for concise, entertaining, and well-crafted pronunciation training is why the very first thing we put out to the public was Pronunciation Mastery, a 6-hour video course that contains everything you need to know, with **no fluff, no contradictory information, and no repetitive drills**.

At the same time, you will pick up over 200 survival words and phrases that we use as examples for all of the sounds.

Our character learning method “The Hanzi Movie Method” has also proven to be incredibly helpful in remembering tones, because of the visualization of the tones as a real-life location. Learn more about this in the next chapter.

We have now made both Pronunciation Mastery and The Hanzi Movie Method a part of our free trial, so head [here](#) to access the first 495 lessons and start mastering Mandarin.

# 6

**Learn Characters  
As Soon As Possible**

## 6. Learn Characters As Soon As Possible

To speak **fluently**, you need **vocabulary**.

To **acquire vocabulary**, you need to **read (and listen) a lot**.

To **read**, you need **characters**.

Once you've started to get to grips with pronunciation, you should jump into characters with both feet. Below are a few reasons why:

### 1. Learning a word without knowing its characters first is top-down learning

As you know from reading the chapter on holistic learning, without attaching a new word to foundational knowledge, your brain sees the word as unimportant and will quickly delete it. Learning characters first creates many more connections to the word, and more connections mean less forgetting.

### 2. Knowing characters is far more efficient

As you learned in the introduction, the majority of Chinese words are structured **very** logically compared to English. Most are just as straightforward as the word “outdoors,” “seatbelt,” or “playground.” Now, imagine trying to learn “playground” without knowing what ‘play’ or ‘ground’ meant!

### 3. Characters can be words, too

People like to compare characters to the English alphabet, in terms of their function in Chinese. In reality, however, they are “morphemes.” **Morphemes are the smallest meaningful unit of a language**, which we like to call “mini-meanings.” Here’s an English example:



We can split “unexpected” into “un-expect-ed.” You can’t use either “un-” or “-ed” by themselves, but they both have their meanings and influence the definition of the word. **Chinese characters function in the same way.** Some of them are words, some of them are not, but with rare exception, they are all morphemes.

By learning characters, you will naturally learn many words, and at the same time develop a repertoire of building blocks vital for understanding and memorizing compound words.



#### 4. You can notice how Chinese words are structured

There are a limited number of ways characters can combine to form Chinese words. These ‘word structures’ are a fascinating aspect of Mandarin that sets it apart from many other languages, and being aware of them provides a couple of advantages.

The first benefit is the ability to **notice patterns in words that you may not have seen otherwise**. Let’s take a look at one of the most common Mandarin word structures, which we like to call the “**biased**” structure. We call it that because the first

character always holds the critical piece of information that defines the word. Take a look at these examples:

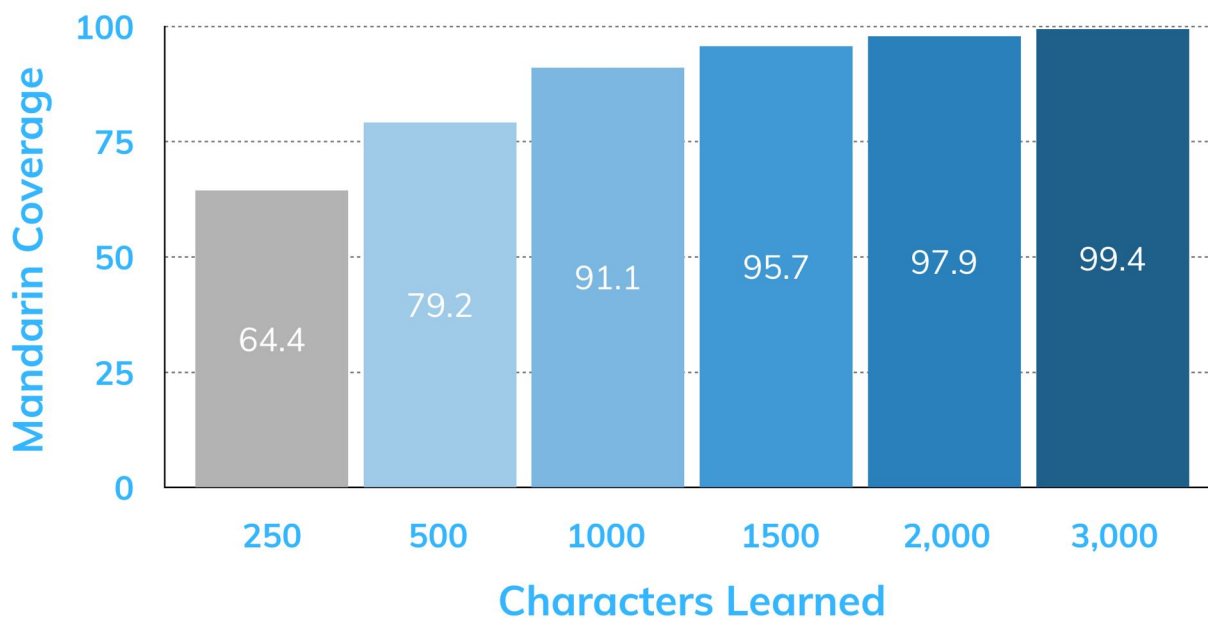
工人 gōngrén	凡人 fánrén	文人 wénrén
富人 fùrén	外人 wàirén	土人 tǔrén
穷人 qióngrén	名人 míngrén	黑人 hēirén
女人 nǚrén	外国人 wàiguórén	白人 báirén
男人 nánrén	大人 dàrén	死人 sǐrén

The **second** character 人 rén means “person,” and the **first** character (or “morpheme”) signifies which **kind** of person. For example, 工人 is a worker (“work person”). 女人 is a woman (female person) 富人 is a wealthy person (“rich person”), etc. Learning patterns like these within Mandarin words will allow you to learn new words a lot faster, and it makes learning vocabulary much less intimidating.

Another benefit of knowing these structures is the ease of creating **mnemonic devices**. For example, 说明 shuōmíng (“Explain”) consists of 说 shuō (“to speak”) and 明 míng (“bright/clear”). This word is a “Verb-Result” structure. Verb-Result words always have a verb as the first character and the result of that verb as the second. When I “speak” until something is “clear”, then I’ve “explained” it. What a cool way of learning a new word!

Even if you weren't aware that 明 míng had the alternative meaning of "clear", you could just create a **mnemonic image** in your mind based on the more common meaning of "bright." For example, you could imagine a light bulb lighting up over someone's head. More on this technique for learning vocabulary in the next chapter.

### How Many Characters Do You Need to Learn?



It is essential to recognize that Chinese, like any other language, has characters and words that are used more frequently than others, and this is where you should start.

The **250** most commonly used characters make up a whopping **64%** of everyday language. Move onto the most common **500** characters, and you've reached around **80%**.

**Getting to 3,000 characters is your ultimate goal**, which is the average amount that a native Chinese speaker can recognize.

Now you know how many characters you need to learn, it's time to share with you the best possible way to learn characters in existence right now.

## How to Learn Chinese Characters Easily

The most effective methods for learning characters employ specific memory techniques that tap into our innate ability to visualize. These same memory techniques are used by world memory athletes to perform such feats as [memorizing a deck of cards in 16.96 seconds](#) or [70,000 numbers of Pi in 17.25 hours](#). The fantastic news about this is that **anyone** can learn how to memorize like a memory athlete with the right coaching.

## Introducing: The Hanzi Movie Method

The Hanzi Movie Method is the technique for speed-memorizing Chinese characters that is the core of our entire 4,200-lesson curriculum. **Each Chinese character becomes a movie scene in your head**, complete with actors, props, sets,



and scripts. All of these directly map onto an element of the character that you want to memorize.

### **Use objects to remember the character components**

You can use our suggestions, those of other course members, or choose a completely new **3D object** that represents the meaning or appearance of the component you need to learn.

We call these objects “**props.**”

### **Use people and places from your life to remember the pinyin and tones.**

Use people to remember the pinyin initials: Choose the people from your life who mean the most to you to be the “**actors**” in your movie scenes. These can be real people or fictional characters from books, movies, or tv shows you love. The better you know them, the easier they will be to remember.

### Use places to remember the pinyin finals

Choose buildings you know well to represent the endings of Chinese syllables known as ‘finals’. These “**movie sets**” can be places you’ve lived, homes of friends and families, workplaces, stores, or any other place you know well.

### Use rooms to remember the five tones

The **rooms** within your sets will represent the tone of the character you are learning. Outside the entrance represents the first tone, in the hallway or kitchen represent the second tone, bedrooms and living room represent the third tone, the bathroom and backyard represent the fourth tone, and the fifth tone is on the roof.

### Shoot a movie scene in your mind to remember any character forever

The movie scenes or “**scripts**” are the most fun part, and it’s where it all comes together. Your actor will interact with the various props within the right room of the right set to visually represent the meaning of the Chinese character you need to learn. Follow our expert guidance and suggestions from

other learners on how to do this for any character to create the most memorable “movie scene” possible.

Using this technique, you will learn how to **read**, **pronounce**, and even **write** any Chinese character **in less than one minute**, and **never** forget it.

**As your skills improve, we will introduce “Special Effects”**

Inspired by the teachings of world memory champions and our own innovations from hundreds of hours of practice. Use different camera angles, extras, explosions, and slow motion to make your mini-movies **even more** vivid and personal to you.

As you can see, there are a lot of moving parts to this method, and it takes between five and twenty characters to get the hang of it. Once you get in the swing of things, you will find that there is no better method for learning characters available. **Start a free trial [here](#) and learn the method in it's entirety right now.**



## In for a Penny, In for a Pound

Once you start learning characters using a method that works, your goal should be to **learn how to read and pronounce the most common 3,000 of them as soon as you can**. Don't try to learn them all at once, though, as too much bottom-up learning gets demotivating. Chip away at characters daily while you move onto the next critical stages in your "blueprint".

**7**

**Learn The Right Words  
At The Right Time**

## 7. Learn The Right Words At The Right Time

When starting with Chinese, it's essential to build a solid foundation of the most common characters and words, **at least a few hundred of each**. Covering the most common (and therefore most useful) words **first** will get you a **lot** more bang for your buck, which will keep you motivated.

A foundation of several hundred characters and one thousand words should bring you into what we call the “[acquisition cycle](#).” At this point, you will be able to learn words and acquire grammar through comprehensible (and increasingly engaging) input.

We will share some excellent resources and techniques for acquiring grammar in later chapters, but first, let's look at which words to learn and when.

The two most common sources of words are:

### 1. Textbooks

Textbooks tend to vary wildly in the relevance of the words they contain. For the absolute beginner level, the vocabulary is usually pretty appropriate, but they tend to get less relevant as you move up in level. You'll learn vocabulary related to making dumplings, the wonders of ping-pong, or the efficacy of Chinese medicine. **My first textbook even tried**



**to teach me a Tang dynasty poem.** The reason this happens is a combination of a lack of empathy for the learner, and the desire to educate (somewhat prematurely) on Chinese culture. Completely understandable, considering the limitations for the authors, but that doesn't make using their books any easier.

## 2. Frequency Lists

Frequency lists are a better option. There are several available in the resources section, but first a word of warning: Lists like these have flaws, and must be applied in the

appropriate way to be useful. Here are some of my main gripes with any frequency list:

### The corpuses used to create frequency lists are flawed

The usefulness of these lists depends mostly on the texts that are analyzed to develop them, which are often suboptimal. Most lists are created from analysis of newspapers, books, and articles because these media are easy to access. Combine this with a lack of human decision making, and you end up with a lot of out-dated and overly-formal terms.

On the other hand, you do **eventually** need to learn more formal words to help you to read native material later on, so using a list just from TV and movie subtitles or social media might not give you what you need either.

### Characters and words are treated separately

No frequency list I've come across takes into account both characters and words **together**. It's always either one or the other. This means that you will need to learn characters and words using a separate frequency list for each, **and they will not sync up**. This is too bottom up.

### Frequency lists rarely supply context

Nor does their name suggest they should, so I'm not mad at them for that. The problem is that most people aren't aware of how **vital** context is. They learn characters or words from

疑问

yíwèn

译文

yìwén

义务

yìwù

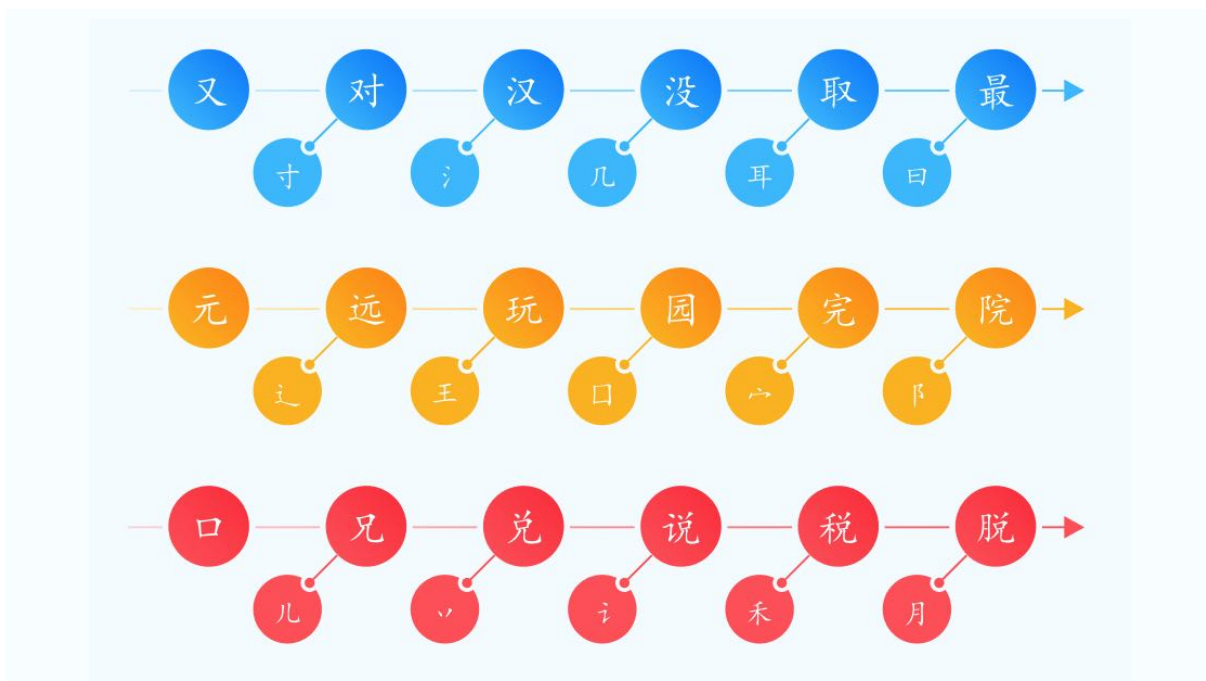
a list using flashcards, thinking they have ‘cracked the code’ of Mandarin...but in reality they are just filling their head with disparate pieces of Mandarin with no way to use them.

### Creating the Perfect Vocabulary List

If you wanted to create the perfect list, then it wouldn't be a list at all. It would be more of an **integrated, multi-layered** order of **character components, characters and compound words**, with a **central focus** on characters. This magical list would also supply you with **context** you can understand so

you can see every character and word in action as you progress.

To create the optimal order for all of these layers, you would have to analyze characters from a variety of resources, including newspapers, Chinese social media, movies, and TV shows to get an order of frequency that would be more applicable to modern day-to-day life.



You would also need to analyze **a lot** of characters to get more accurate data. Let's go for **a billion**, just to be sure.

After that, connect with someone who knows Mandarin to make sure that the first one thousand words on the list lean more towards spoken vocabulary, saving the more formal

words for a little later. This will get you to spoken fluency faster.

Then, make sure to start with common character components that are **simple** and **easy to memorize**. As you build up your components, chunk them together into common characters. As your database of components develops, you will be able to 'unlock' more and more characters. Arrange these components and characters so that you learn the most common ones first, and they also unlock the most common compound words.

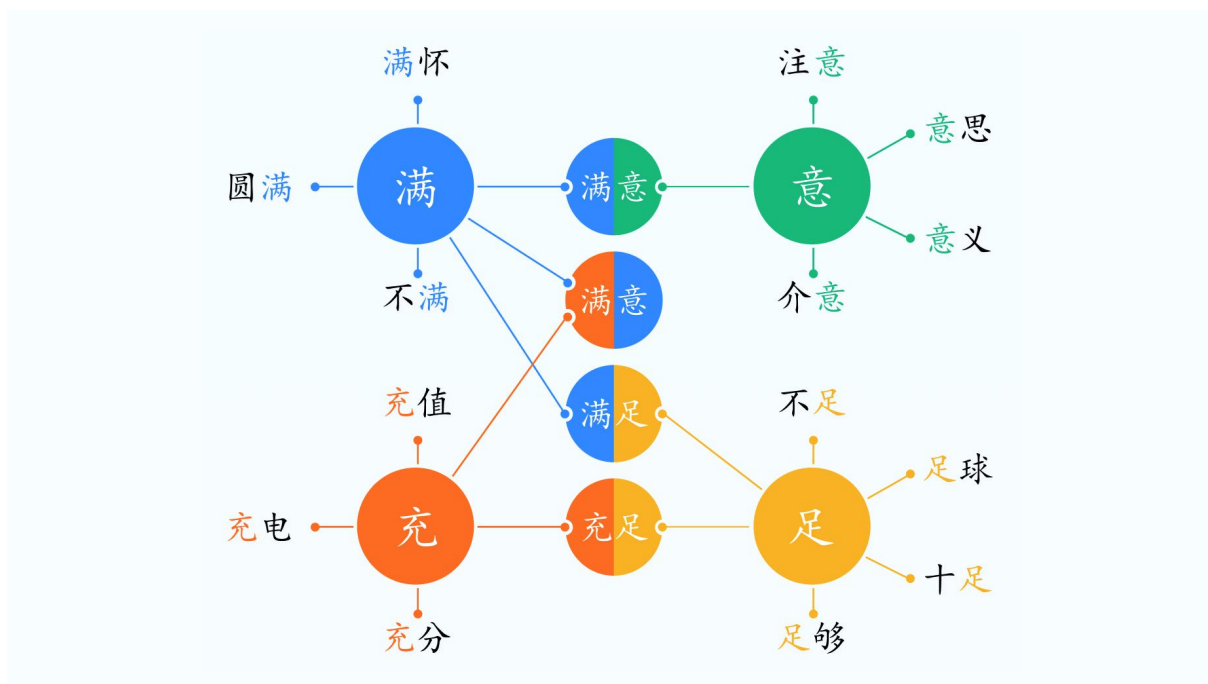
As a final cherry on top, you could also add in example sentences for **every usage of every word**, all of which are made up of characters and words you already know, making them **comprehensible**.

After completing all of these steps, you would create a vocabulary list as close to perfect as humanly possible. So perfect, in fact, that it simply couldn't be done. **Unless...**

...I mean, it **might** be possible if you had two people with advanced knowledge of Mandarin working full-time six days a week for four years straight...but who on earth would be crazy enough to do that?!...

...ahem...

## Presenting: OCLO



Yes, that's right; we have already created an **Optimal Character Learning Order (OCLO)** that does everything I just described. Currently, OCLO (patent-pending) extends to all known character components, unlocking 1530 common characters, which in turn unlock over 4,000 common words. We provide carefully written, comprehensible sentences (over 7000 of them) for each (relevant) usage of every word, and around many longer-form pieces of content such as dialogues and short stories.

All you have to do is follow the step-by-step instructions from the **4200 lessons within the MB curriculum**, and it is possible to acquire

around **94%** of the Chinese language **in just a few months.**

Once you have found a source of words that will make up a solid foundation for you, **it is time to learn them effectively.** The next chapter will supply you with all of the techniques and tools you'll need to do this.

**8**

**Learn Words The  
Smart Way**

## 8. Build Your Base Vocabulary with Mnemonics

Learning words through comprehensible input is the ideal way to build vocabulary. However, herein lies **the catch 22 for beginners**: You need to see words in context to acquire them, but you haven't yet acquired enough words to understand that context.

With OCLO life gets considerably more comfortable for you, but there is still going to be a period where you **must** learn words individually before you can rely on context.

In this chapter, I'm going to share with you a technique you can use to learn individual words quickly and with relatively minimal effort. This method is so good that I still use it today when I see a new word while reading.

### Mnemonics and 'Living Links'

Beginners acquire words by creating links from their memory banks to new vocabulary. These 'living links' draw their power from your life experience, much like character mnemonics do.



**1. Connect the word's characteristics (the definition(s), the characters, the pronunciation, etc.) to your lived experience**

What **people, places, objects, feelings, or events** from your life does the definition conjure up for you? Are they personal memories, or something from a TV show, movie, book, or video game? Does the word sound like another Mandarin word or a word from another language?

**Go with your first instinct**, and remember that any connection (however tenuous) will help.

How about the word “说明” **shuōmíng** - “**To Explain**” sounding a little like Sean Connery saying the word “**Swimming**”? Does that conjure up the image of Mr. Connery giving swimming lessons? Perhaps it reminds you of your **driving instructor**, who explained things in a very quirky fashion. Or maybe you think of that scene from **Harry Potter** when Hagrid reveals to Harry that he is a wizard. Anything goes!

## 2. Reinforce this connection by finding an image that represents it.

You may have difficulty trying to find a picture of a muscle-bound Arnold Schwarzenegger chicken hybrid, but that doesn't matter. Use your Google skills to find an image that reminds you of your connection in some way. Searching the term “muscular chicken” should bring up something pretty close.

If you can't think of any connection or find the image that perfectly represents the connection you had, no problem. Type the Chinese word or the English translation into an image search engine and choose the most interesting image. You can always swap it out for another one while reviewing later on, and **any image (even a boring one) is better than no image.**

### 3. Put your image into a flashcard and move on to the next word.

Maybe the image is so specific that you are worried you will forget the connection somewhere? No problem, just write a concise note in the flashcard explaining the living link. Our flashcards provide a field just for this purpose. They also contain native male and female audio, regardless of whether you are reviewing pinyin spellings, characters, words, sentences, or entire stories. **Audio is vital.**

You can continue to use this technique even after you have surpassed the beginner stage and are learning through context, but it is most useful for beginners. Once you get used to this process, **it can take seconds.**

Check out [this](#) HUGE video of me explaining the mnemonic creation process with a bunch of different examples.

# 9

**Learn Grammar The  
Natural Way**

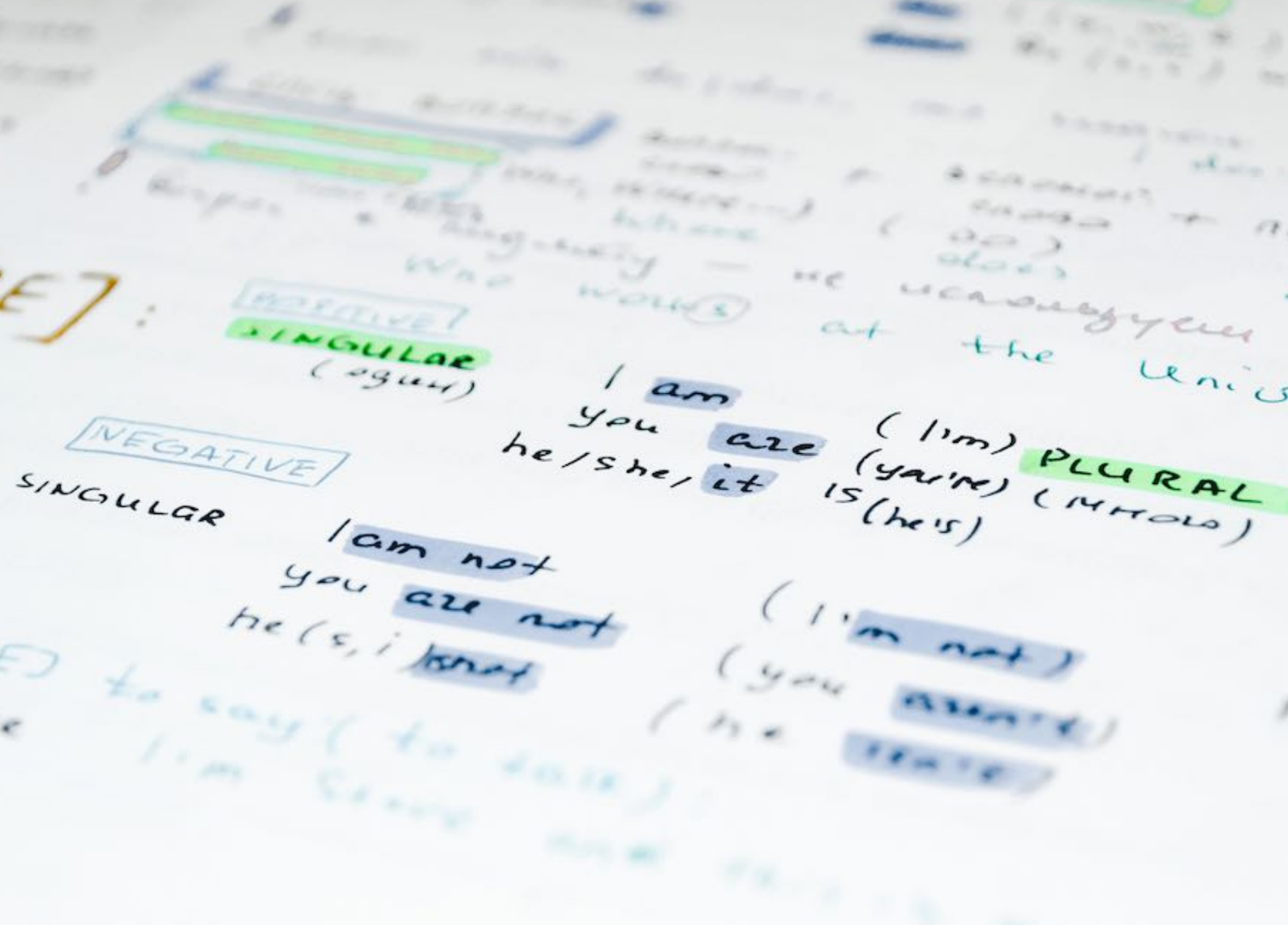
## 9. Learn Grammar the Natural Way

When someone makes a mistake while speaking your native language, you probably can't articulate the broken grammar rule(s), right? That's because **your sense of grammar is subconscious**. Unfortunately, second language grammar is usually taught **consciously** by looking at grammar rules, which goes against our brain's natural process of language acquisition.

Grammar does not tell the language what to do; it is merely an ex-post-facto explanation of how the language works. Therefore, **studying** grammar will only allow you to **explain** how a function in Mandarin works, **but you won't be able to use it**. Linguistic researcher Dr. Stephen Krashen spoke on this in an [interview](#) in the 1980s:

"I'll never forget when I learned (consciously) the subjunctive in french. Every time I say the subjunctive correctly, I rekindle the victory of having first consciously learned it. Of course, it's not there when I need it."

If you try to learn grammar the traditional way, you will either be **bored and frustrated** or **overworked and anxious**, which is the opposite state our brains need to be in to absorb information effectively. Check out chapter 14 on mindset and "flow state" for more on this.



## How Grammar Rules Can Help You

Grammar rules (or “equations”, as I like to call them) can make you aware of specific structures, allowing you to **notice** and **understand** them faster than you would have otherwise.

While you would eventually ‘click’ with any structure after enough exposure (just like you did with your native language), sometimes it is nice to take a little shortcut.

Looking at grammar points is also an excellent way to marvel **consciously** at what you have already acquired **subconsciously**.

## How to Acquire Grammar

To acquire grammar, i.e., understand and use Mandarin words accurately, you need to see and hear words in an understandable context **many** times. This is why the most valuable commodity to you as a learner is **sentences**.

Whether you consume them individually, or as part of a paragraph, or even an entire story, you need a lot of them.

The value of a sentence depends on two key factors: **level of comprehension** and **level of context**.

You must **understand the message** of a sentence to gain any benefit from it, so the more understandable a sentence is, the better. It is also less time-consuming and stressful when you don't have to continually look up words to "decode" what you are reading.

A useful example sentence also contains enough **context** to manifest the unique characteristics of the word(s)/grammar you are trying to acquire. Take a look at the sentences you could use to learn the word 说话 shuōhuà "To Speak" to get an idea of the effect of more context:

### Sentence 1

你别说话了，好吗？

“Stop speaking, okay?”

### Sentence 2

有些鸟，像鹦鹉，能够教会说话，但他们不知道那些话的意思

“Some birds, like the parrot, can be taught to say words, but they don't know what those words mean .”

**Sentence 1** is too short, and you could easily replace the word we are trying to learn with a litany of other common words. **Sentence 2** is of decent length, most of the words used are common, and the word 说话 is not easily interchangeable with any other word. In terms of context and comprehension, sentence 2 is **great**.

Finding sentences and longer-form content that is both comprehensible and rich in context is a luxury that becomes more accessible as your vocabulary expands. As a beginner, just being able to understand most of the words in an example sentence is a win. In The Mandarin Blueprint Method, we provide you with fully comprehensible example sentences for every word you learn after learning as few as **105** characters and **60** common words. You will also eventually unlock long-form content such as short stories and dialogues as you increase your vocabulary.

## Active and Passive Grammar Acquisition

Depending on your mood or schedule, you can use a variety of different resources and techniques to acquire grammar quickly. Sometimes you will do things more **passively**, sometimes more **actively**.

**Passive acquisition means reading, listening, or watching content without doing anything else.** Just pay as much attention as you can to content at your level and enjoy the experience. There is no need to be concerned if you drift in and out of a podcast, or if you don't understand every sentence you read or every scene in a TV show you watch. There is nothing wrong with this approach at all, and if you do this every day, you **will** gradually acquire the language. Check out chapter 15 on immersion for more on this.

Passive consumption is relatively **easy**, but it is **slow**. It is a good idea to make your acquisition more **active** when you can. Here are the most effective methods of active acquisition:

### 1) Save new words as you encounter them

If you want to be a bit more efficient, [save new words in Pleco](#) while you are looking them up. You can then categorize them and export them to create sentence

flashcards in Anki. Pleco has its own flashcard review system, but it isn't anywhere near as good.

## 2) Do “sentence mining”

Sentence mining is a staple acquisition activity for all levels, but especially suitable for intermediates. Search for Chinese words in a “sentence warehouse” such as [Bing.com/dict](https://www.bing.com/dict) (my personal favorite) and find a strong example sentence. Just one should be enough. Check out chapter 17 for more sentence resources.

Create “cloze delete” flashcards for these sentences and review them daily. These cards require you to guess the hidden character each time you see the card, and therefore demand more of you than basic flashcards. This card type takes more energy to review, for the reward of faster acquisition.

**Pro tip:** When making cloze delete sentence flashcards, **only hide one character on each card**. Otherwise, the word can become too difficult to guess.

## 3) Take screenshots

I find this technique most useful when reading a comic on my smartphone or when watching media on my laptop.

When I see a sentence I like, I screenshot it and then review the images later, either by themselves or as flashcards. Every Chinese TV show has hard-coded subtitles, and screenshots are an excellent way of using that to your advantage. The great thing about this is that you don't only have a built-in image for the sentence, but the visual and written contexts combine perfectly!

If you have some extra time on your hands, you could also use the [image occlusion Anki add-on](#) to make cloze deletes by covering up specific characters. Check out the images below for an example:



#### 4) Do “shadowing”

Whenever you are listening to Mandarin, try to speak along with the audio, mimicking the speaker as closely as possible.

Do this repeatedly with the same piece of content and watch yourself improve every single time. If you can do this while reading, then you will simultaneously improve reading, listening, speaking, and pronunciation. You can do this activity with individual sentences, or longer content, too. I made a video a while back explaining the whole process in detail, which you can watch [here](#).

### 5) Listen as actively as you can without burning out

The more you focus on the audio and try to understand it, the more you will learn. However, doing this will also make you tired more quickly than if you listen passively, so be careful not to burn out. When you feel full of energy, try shadowing the audio, or even typing out what you hear to test your pronunciation. [Listeningpractice.org](#) is a great resource if your level is lower. When you are tired, have the audio on in the background and take in what you can.

It's also worth mentioning that meditation can help tremendously with recognizing burn out before it arrives. [Headspace](#) & [Waking Up](#) are both excellent meditation services.

### Choose Digital Reading Materials

In language learning, it is far better to go for digital reading materials over print. Digital formats not only tend to be much cheaper, but they are more portable and (most importantly)



allow you to look up and save words. For digital reading materials for all levels, check out the resources section at the end of this book.

**Pro-Tip:** Trace each line as you read and listen. You'd be surprised how much this helps your understanding.

I made [this](#) video walking you through all kinds of grammar acquisition techniques and tools that I know you'll find useful. It's 35 minutes of pure gold!

Don't forget to also check out reading and listening resources you can apply these techniques to in the final chapter of this book.

## Final thought: Extensive Over Intensive Input

When it comes to mass consumption of longer-form content, you should never expect 100% understanding. **The sweet spot is 98% comprehension for longer-form content**, which falls into the category of “extensive” reading.

There is a lot of [research](#) showing that extensive input (reading or listening at around 98% comprehension) is the optimal level of comprehension for language acquisition. We've found this concept to be so effective that we based [our entire curriculum](#) on it!

If you understand **almost all** of what you read, you don't have to stop to look up new words that much, allowing you to engage more with the content. Any new words you encounter also become easier to acquire because they not only **stand out** a lot more but also are surrounded by more context to help you decode the meaning.

That said, the **level of engagement** you have with a piece of content may be just as important as (perhaps even more important than) **how much you understand**. If you are re-living every scene from the Chinese translation of a beloved

novel or watching a hilarious TV show, feel free to sacrifice some comprehension for the **sheer enjoyment** of consumption.

Try to start with what you like and go from there. Don't know what that is? Try something new. **How much fun you have should be the overarching factor in how you spend your time consuming Chinese.** Remember that, and you're golden.

# 10

**Use Spaced Repetition  
Software Effectively**

## 10. Use Spaced Repetition Software Effectively

Whichever way you slice it, you'll need to learn **a lot** of new pieces of information to become fluent in Mandarin. You are creating an entire foundational structure at this stage, and the **components, characters, words, and grammar, are all brand new to you**. Thankfully, Spaced-Repetition Software (SRS) makes the process of remembering much more straightforward than it used to be.

SRS uses an algorithm that makes sure you see newer flashcards more frequently, and older information less often. It exploits the [spacing effect](#) to make the learning process many times more efficient. Think paper flashcards on the most illegal steroids available.

Here are the most important things to know about SRS:

### 1) SRS is NOT a learning tool; it is a reviewing tool

Before I had my breakthrough realization of the importance of comprehensible input, I wasted many hours using all kinds of methods that didn't work. One of my biggest wastes of time was **'learning'** 5,000 words using very fancy-looking digital SRS flashcards.

When I was ‘learning’ those 5,000 words, I didn’t know how to use the words in context, their characters, or the components that made up the characters. I was merely recognizing the shape of the squiggles and linking that to a single definition. I even had decent mnemonic images to help recall this definition, but that only made it easier to recall that particular flashcard. My **recall** was excellent; **I just lacked understanding**, which meant I couldn’t apply anything I had learned. SRS merely keeps what you have already understood in your mind long enough for it to become a long-term memory. That’s it. **It is a tool for reviewing, not a tool for learning.**

As a result of my shallow and muddled approach, I forgot most of what I learned after a few months of not reviewing, and I couldn’t apply the information in a useful way. **I was rote learning for a long time without knowing it.**

You must learn the information **first**, then use SRS to review it. Reviewing without learning is just rote learning, which is, as you know, very bad. To avoid this same trap, take the following precautions next time you go to review:

For character flashcards, make sure you know at least **one** common meaning for the character, how to **pronounce** it, and preferably how to **write** it. For vocabulary flashcards, you must know the characters, the pronunciation, and at least



one common definition. For sentence/paragraph flashcards, you should know **at least 90%** of the words in the sentence, so you can understand the message of it.

If you can meet these basic requirements, then you understand the information well enough to review it. If not, then perhaps you should correct or deepen your understanding first before reviewing.

## 2) You **MUST** finish your reviews every single day

Anki (and most other SRS) promises a retention rate of 90-95% **with daily use**. The algorithm isn't smart enough

(yet) to know if you have missed days or not, so if you miss too many days, you **will** start to get things wrong. You will also end up with an intimidating build-up of cards if you do not stay on top of things.

Don't be intimidated by this "no zero days" requirement. If you find yourself overwhelmed with how many reviews are due each day, simply add fewer new cards each day, and the burden will ease naturally.

### 3) Getting things wrong is not inherently bad

Whenever you get a card wrong, it means one of the following:

**Your card could be improved** - Perhaps you could add some different media to make it more memorable. Maybe the mental connections you made or the images you used need to be more closely related to the meaning.

**Your understanding is lacking** - Do you know this character/word/sentence according to the standards I laid out in 1) above?

Remember, you will answer incorrectly 5-10% of the time, but getting 90-95% correct answers is still fantastic. Not only that, you only got the card wrong **this** time. After some

tweaks, you will likely remember it next time, which (thanks to the algorithm) will be very soon.

#### 4) Anki is the best SRS overall

Any flashcard app worth using contains SRS algorithms, but they aren't all equal. We use Anki as the SRS for all of our 10,000+ flashcards that come with The Mandarin Blueprint Method, and that alone should be a testament to how good it is. It is unmatched in performance, and its level of customization. We created a comprehensive guide for our clients to get set up and start using Anki, which you can check out [here](#).

#### 5) You don't need to use flashcards forever

I like to see SRS flashcards as a hyper-efficient shortcut from the unknown to long term knowledge. Once you are an intermediate or advanced learner, you can stop reviewing sentences or words individually and start focusing on **real content**.

**Reading and Listening is the best form of Spaced repetition** because you naturally see **more common** (and therefore **more important**) words **more often**. As long as you read and listen a lot to **reasonably modern content around your**

**level, you will pick up useful words and phrases all the time.**

An exception to this would be if you had to learn a lot of specialist vocabulary quickly. If I wanted to improve my business Mandarin, for example, I would mine for high-quality example sentences that contain the words I wanted to learn and start reviewing them with Anki. Check out the next chapter for a guide to sentence mining and cloze deletes.

#### **6) Set realistic goals, and don't burn out.**

Because flashcards are such an efficient way of reviewing information, it's easy to get carried away and add way too many new cards at first. The best approach is to start with a small number of new cards each day (say, twenty) and try it for a few days. Once you feel like you can take on more, increase by small increments week by week until you think you have reached your limit.

**Remember that flashcards, while important, are not your only learning activity.** Make sure to leave enough time and energy for other things.



## How to create incredible SRS flashcards

As well as the above steps, there are some things you should try to include in your flashcards to make them more useful and engaging.

### **Images and Overall Design**

Images are essential for word cards and can also add even more context to sentence cards. You could also include different colors, fonts, and even GIFs to make the whole reviewing process clearer and more entertaining.

## Explore “add-ons”

For Anki users, there are a wide variety of [add-ons](#) for the application that you can install instantly. They are just like mods for video-games. Some of these add-ons offer minimal changes; some are substantial. Check out [this video](#) for some of my favorites.

## Add audio

You are learning a language, so it is ideal to hear the native pronunciation of everything you review. Every single one of our flashcards contains both male and female native audio for this reason. If you are making flashcards and don't have access to a recording studio, you can use the add-on [Awesome TTS](#) to get automated audio for any text, with great accuracy. You can also record your voice (or that of your tutor) by hitting “R” while reviewing.

## Use cloze deletes

This will make reviewing sentence cards longer, but it tests your vocabulary and grammar knowledge with more rigor and precision. I would recommend cloze deletes to beginners and intermediates, whereas more advanced learners might find it unnecessarily labor-intensive.

## Add notes

Don't go crazy with this one, but making little notes in a field on the back of your cards can be very useful. You can use


notes to record your “living link” to words, alternative definitions or pronunciations, or why you chose an image that seems irrelevant at first glance. I really like copying and pasting multiple definitions of words from dictionaries, which usually include example sentences.

### Some examples of awesome flashcards

中  
zhōng

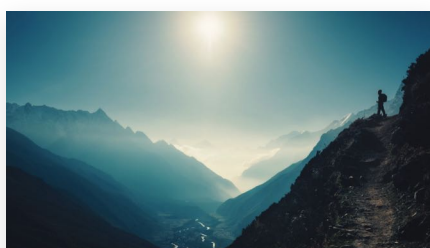


"Middle"

中 中 中 中 中




说明  
shuōmíng

"To Explain"



这里的\_\_景特别美  
zhèlǐ de \_\_ jǐng tèbié měi  
The scenery here is extremely beautiful



#### Why these flashcards rock

All of the flashcards above contain native audio and an image to strengthen the mental connection. The character flashcard also gives you a reminder of stroke order for an added benefit. The sentence flashcard uses a cloze delete function, too.

These cards can be a pain to make, which is why we've made them for you! All of these are card types available at

different phases of the Mandarin Blueprint Method. Gain access by signing up for a free trial [here](#).

# 11

## **Use Tutors The Right Way**

## 11. Use Tutors the Right Way

Tutors are **not** essential when you are starting out, but you will eventually want to work with them. However, there are a lot of misconceptions about tutors that need clearing up before you end up wasting your time and money. Let's first understand what a tutor is for.

### 1. For 'activating' passive vocabulary

Although speaking and writing are predominantly products of input, they still need to be practiced **separately and extensively** if you want to produce the language with fluency and accuracy.

Go into a session and try to have meaningful and exciting conversations using the words you've been learning through listening and reading. Push your limits of what you know and ask a lot of questions about how to use any unfamiliar words.

Note: **Activating** vocabulary takes far less time than accumulating **passive** vocabulary, so the period of activation feels like rapid progress and is absolutely thrilling.

### 2. For pointing out mistakes

The biggest strength of native teachers is their highly attuned sense of the Chinese created by countless hours of immersion in the language. They can tell when something is wrong



**instantly**, just as you can for English. More importantly, they can offer **example sentences** for how to use words correctly. Don't bother asking "why" something is right or wrong, though. If you do, you are likely to get no answer or a made-up one.

Throughout your session, your tutor should be making notes on anything you need to improve, **without** constantly interrupting the flow of the conversation. Once the conversation has either concluded or hit a dead-end, the tutor can go through them with you and do supervised practice to fix any recurring issues.

Don't feel bad about making mistakes, but **don't** try and make up how a word or phrase is used if you don't already know. If you do this too much, your mistakes could turn into bad habits, and you really don't want that. Just ask (using Mandarin) when you don't know how to say something.

### 3. To provide encouragement

Genuine encouragement is when a tutor **notices** where you've improved and tells you at the appropriate time. It is not barking the words “真棒! zhēn bàng” (“Great job”) over and over again. During your first few classes, try to notice how your tutor corrects you.

### 4. To find level-appropriate and engaging content

Most tutors won't do this for you without a direct request. When you do ask for resources, they usually have **a lot** of recommendations, and they are more adept at navigating the Chinese internet. Use them for these valuable resources.

## How to Structure Your Classes

You have to take the reins if you want the most bang for your buck. Figure out a kind of lesson structure that suits your goals and personality. Here are some ideas for structuring a fun class:

**Pick a bunch of words you are learning and try them out.**

**Choose a topic that excites you and discuss it in as much depth as you can.**

**Discuss an article, comic, or tv episode you saw recently.**

**Make a list of questions. Check out [Tandem's](#) random question generator for ideas.**

### **Set ground rules & maintain control**

Consistency is essential, so be sure to work with the tutor to create a lesson style that makes you look forward to every session. Discuss what kind of classes you want to have before you start your first session, and make sure they are on-board with doing the sessions **your** way. The right tutor **listens** to what you want and is **flexible**.

### **Have Your Tutor Take Detailed Notes**

In tutoring sessions, ask your tutor to write down all of your mistakes and send you a report afterward. Doing this also allows them to notice repeated mistakes to work on with you in class. High-rated tutors on [iTalki](#) will often send you a file with things to work on, along with all questions and new words/phrases discussed in the lesson.



### **Start slow**

Once you have decided to start using a tutor, start slow. **One or two 45-minute sessions per week** should be enough to make significant progress, providing you are also consuming listening and reading content daily.

### **Choose tutors with great English**

Any decent tutor will avoid giving you English explanations in class, or at least save the use of English as a last resort. The reason you want a tutor with great English is because, when a tutor speaks English very well **it shows they understand**

**how to acquire a language.** They may be able to offer you advice and resources that other tutors can't.

### Save questions on language learning for language learners

Try to avoid asking native speakers questions about **how** to learn Mandarin. You are unlikely to get any useful information. **Language learning itself is a skill**, so it makes sense to ask non-natives who have acquired the language successfully, or native speakers who speak other languages well. Asking a random native speaker how to become fluent in Chinese is as fruitless as asking a person born into wealth how to become rich.

If you have specific questions about the **Mandarin language** like how to use a particular grammar structure or how to write a character, that's fine. On the other hand, if you ask a native speaker questions like "How should I increase my vocabulary," the advice you will receive is probably at best useless, at worst harmful. You will rarely get the honest answer of "I don't know."

## Where to Find Quality Tutors

The best overall platform for finding high-quality online tutors (both paid and free) is probably [iTalki](#), but you should check out the resources section at the end of this book for more.

Whichever service you choose, consider these points:

- 1) Choose a platform with a rating system and a tutor with high ratings.
  
- 2) The platform should offer some kind of free trial before you make any financial commitment.
  
- 3) Make sure the tutors are open to learning **your** way. You won't be using a textbook, and this can make some less adept at improvising rather uncomfortable.

I prefer to see a quality paid tutor online for regular practice, but setting up free language exchanges on [Hellotalk](#) or [Tandem](#) can also work very well. However, going this route does take more effort to maintain, and you sacrifice a portion of control over how your sessions will go. It all comes down to personal choice, so it's probably best to try both paid and unpaid tutors a few times and see what works for you.

Check out [this](#) detailed walkthrough I made (58 minutes) of the entire process of finding, using and managing tutors, along with some highly valuable (and free!) downloadable resources.

# 12

**Write Chinese  
Regularly**

## 12. Write Chinese Regularly

Writing is the aspect of language learning that arguably involves the most focus and attention. It is impossible to do passively, and you have to get out of your comfort zone to do it. Once you get into the habit of writing regularly, however, it can become the most **satisfying** and **fruitful** part of your language acquisition journey. Here are my favorite reasons why you should write:

### 1) You can take all the time you need to express yourself

Writing is like speaking, **just in slow motion**. Just as with reading, writing gives you all the time you need to formulate thoughts and ponder every word. With speaking, unless you have an incredibly patient (and masochistic) paid tutor, you can't contemplate the precise way of expressing a thought beforehand.

### 2) Writing activates vocabulary very effectively

Writing is slow and painful at first, but after a short period of regular practice, you can almost hear the “clicks” as the words you write become part of your **'active vocabulary,'** i.e., words you can use quickly and accurately. Regular writing may just be the ultimate way to solidify your understanding of the words and phrases you've acquired through reading and listening. It may be even more effective than speaking.



### 3) Writing is personal

After some practice, you can develop your own **personal style**, which naturally makes the process much more enjoyable. Writing a journal, posting on your blog, or social media sharing are excellent ways of capitalizing on this benefit.

### 4) Writing helps you to notice

Because you need to think so much more about the sentences you write, you develop a more intimate knowledge of every word and grammar structure. If you want to write a sentence correctly, you have no choice but to focus on how

each word behaves.

### 5) Even if you are a beginner, you can still write

If you don't have much vocabulary, you can still practice writing. **Just write individual sentences** or phrases. You can even look at example sentences and try to **re-write** them using slightly different vocabulary. Just as **graded readers** can weave entire stories with limited selection of words and characters, it is also possible to write about a wide range of topics, even with a relatively small vocabulary.

## Some Powerful Writing Tips

### 1) Write often to benchmark your progress

The more often you can write, the better. A hidden bonus you get from regular writing is “**benchmarking**” of your progress, allowing you to look back on your previous writing practice after a few weeks or months to marvel at how far you've come.

### 2) The more personal, the better

Writing a shopping list in Chinese, or notes from a meeting or class are great ideas. However, when you write about your experiences, your personality will shine through in your writing, which will make the words and structures you practice far more memorable.



Write about something or someone you love. Write about a problem you're having. Write about your goals and dreams. Describe your actual dreams from last night. Write about a book you read or a youtube video you watched. Write about what you've learned or would like to learn. Write a journal. Write a blog or WeChat post. **The more personal, the better.**

### 3) Aim for zero mistakes

That's right, **zero**. Take your time to think before you put pen to paper or keyboard and lookup example sentences for words you don't quite know how to use. If you do these things, you will produce the correct output, which is fantastic

for your language skills. Consistently poor output leads to bad habits, and bad habits are hard to break. Ryszard Wojcik of [Antimoon](#) expounds on this well:

"It is close to the truth that I have never written an incorrect English sentence. I knew many grammatical structures, and I used only those that I knew. My sentences were similar to sentences which I knew to be correct. I followed good examples, so all my sentences were good.

Because of this approach, I was never reinforcing bad habits. I never had any bad habits! From the beginning, I copied only correct sentences. With every sentence that I wrote, I reinforced my good habits."

#### **4) Get corrections!**

Writing and getting corrections will help you quickly notice the patterns and structures of Chinese. This attentiveness will pay off when it comes to speaking, reading, and listening too. Share your writing with a paid language exchange partner or tutor. [HiNative](#) is a service designed to provide corrections and ask general questions from native Mandarin

speakers.

### 5) Make flashcards out of your mistakes

Create ultra-personalized, reviewable content by making flashcards out of any corrected writing.

### 6) Use a writing software

Try [Flowstate](#), [iA Writer](#), or [Ommwriter](#) to get you into the “flow” of writing. Phil and I both use Flowstate for writing all content for MB, and that includes this ebook!

### 7) Don't just type, write by hand

There is undoubtedly some kind of **special connection** between the hand and the head. What you write by hand allows you to develop muscle memory for Chinese while consolidating your acquired knowledge of vocabulary and grammar.

Go watch [this](#) video on writing practice and follow the instructions. I promise it'll make writing practice 100 times more fun.

# SECTION 3

Bonus Chapters



# 13

**Build And Maintain  
Strong Habits**

## 13. Build & Maintain Strong Habits

Even if you are legendary enough to follow every piece of advice in this book perfectly, you can still have trouble with consistency. **We all do.**

**The best way to guarantee consistency long-term is to build a series of learning habits.**

Then, make these habits so ingrained within you that it feels strange and even uncomfortable when you don't do them.

For a long time, Phil and I were both somewhat apprehensive about preaching consistency due to our perceived advantages over the average learner. After all, we were both unmarried with no kids, dogs, or mortgages, and living in China when we started learning Mandarin. However, after we began interacting with more clients of all ages and living situations, we discovered an interesting trend that caused a change in our perspective. Any guesses which of our clients excelled at our program the most? **Full-time workers with kids, dogs, and mortgages.**

Still to this day, our most successful [case studies](#) are people who appear to have the least amount of spare time, and the most responsibilities. The reason they do so well is because



they build strong learning habits to make better use of the limited spare time they have available.

Creating habits is easy if you follow the habit-building cycle, which consists of four stages. Let's break these down one-by-one and apply them to language learning.

### Stage 1: Cue

The cue is the **sensory trigger** that **begins an action**. It can be the 'ding' sound that causes you to check your Facebook,

or it can be a trigger for something more constructive. Below are what we know to be “the four great triggers”:

### 1) Location

Focusing on Mandarin in the same spot every day can help to create a neural reaction to the location, so **where you choose to study is very important**. When selecting your regular study spot, ask yourself these questions:

What can you do to increase the likelihood of starting to interact with Mandarin when you arrive there in your study location?

Can you rearrange the room to increase your chances of starting?

Can you clean things up to make the space more inviting?

If you ever find the room is starting to become stale, it is reasonable to try a separate spot to spice things up a bit. Your environment can even trigger correct answers for flashcards you review regularly in the same place, so changing your location can also take away those invisible training wheels. I learned this cool little tidbit from [this course](#) on learning and the brain.

## 2) Reactions

Take the time to observe your environment and see what things might distract you and remove them. Turning off your **phone and computer notifications** is a great start. Set a timer for a period where there is no chance you will be distracted by a buzzing or ringing phone. Timeboxing is an excellent way of handling this.

**Pro-tip:** The night before, open [Anki](#) on your computer and open it to the first card you want to start studying. The next day when you power on your machine, start studying **immediately** without being distracted by email, YouTube, messages, etc.

## 3) Time

What time of day are you most likely to want to do a focused study session? Perhaps you could set the alarm to start then? It is also advisable to **get the biggest jobs done first**, which is usually making and reviewing flashcards.

What time of day are you most likely **not** to want to concentrate? Could you prepare a Chinese dub of your favorite movie from Childhood to watch at that time? How about having a meal with a Chinese friend?



#### 4) How You Feel

What could you do to increase the likelihood of interacting with Chinese when you are in a great mood? A bad mood? A focused mood? An indifferent mood?

All of these moods will require the use of language if anyone else is around. Determine the medium you can interact with that engenders the **least resistance** in different emotional contexts.

## Stage 2: Routine

An easy way to start building a habit is to attach the new desirable behavior to a previously created routine. Below are some essential points to consider if you want to achieve this:

### 1) One habit at a time

We **are** capable of creating new habits, but it is not reasonable to expect to make several changes all at once. “The small game” is either a good habit you want to create or a bad habit you want to delete. “The big game” is sticking to your series of small games over many years. If you suddenly try to drop **all** your bad habits and replace them with more than one healthy practice, long-term success becomes unlikely.

### 2) Focus on “starting”

Merely starting an activity is an achievable goal that you can complete with minimal effort and say, “I did it.” Just commit one minute to a task, no matter what it is. **Anybody in any mood can do one minute of Mandarin learning.** 99% of the time, this one minute will turn into many more.

### 3) Piggyback on other habits

Attach a new learning activity with something you are already doing in your daily routine. To do this, complete the



phrase “After I (do some every-day activity), I (start doing some activity) for \_\_\_ minutes.” Update this regularly.

#### 4) Start slow

Invest only **15-20 minutes per day** into any new habits and settle into your routine. Spread out your learning activities throughout the day, instead of trying to get everything done in one go. Do this for 30 days, and try not to add anything else. Whenever you add a new activity to your daily learning routine, do it for 30 days before adding another one. Do that all year you have 12 new habits.

### 5) Never have a zero-day.

You must maintain forward momentum. If you get to the end of a busy day and you realize you haven't done anything to improve your Mandarin, **just do one of something**. "Just do one" is your new mantra. Just one character, reviewing just one flashcard, reading just one page, or even just one sentence. This concept of "just one" will keep you moving towards your goals every single day, no matter what is going on in your life.

## Stage 3: Reward

Rewarding yourself for reaching study goals makes your relaxation time feel **earned**. It can take around 30 days to form a new habit. Would you prefer those 30 days to go by with you being a tyrant towards yourself or a benevolent and fair judge that rewards success?

Here's how to reward your behaviors for effective habit-building:

### 1) Make a reward list

Write down what you like to do that falls into the category of fun/leisure before anything else. These should vary in 'size' to suit the 'size' of your goals. For example, for finishing your goals that day, you could reward yourself with thirty minutes

of your favorite computer game or TV show. If you achieve something much bigger, like fifty sessions with an online tutor, then perhaps a nice meal or spa day is in order.

## 2) Gamble (legally!)

Create some healthy competition with friends by making bets on what you will achieve and when. Whoever wins gets a reward agreed on beforehand by the group. If you don't have any friends learning Chinese with you, make the bet with yourself.

## 3) Reward study streaks

Study streaks offer significant dopamine rushes. Keep a record of your streaks for any resource you are using to acquire Mandarin. You can do this using a pen and paper or utilize an app with a built-in study streak function. Give yourself increasing rewards for longer and longer study streaks.

## Stage 4: Craving

Craving is the final step of the habit-building cycle. A craving is that empty feeling you get when you haven't performed a habitual action for too long. **This craving is what keeps the cycle going**, and really is the lynchpin of your habit-building

process. Here's how you can cultivate a craving for learning Mandarin:

### 1) Have learning methods that you know work

If you know that every minute of your life spent with a resource will *undoubtedly* lead to results in both the short-term and long-term, wouldn't you be jumping out of bed to get a hold of the phone in the morning? Listen to how [Julian Laffey](#) describes this feeling in our interview with him.

### 2) Avoid negativity

If you find yourself in conversation with others who imply that you can't succeed, do not engage, and avoid them entirely if possible. Their negativity either comes from ignorance, bitterness, fear, or some combination of the three. You may be surprised to learn that the most cynical and discouraging people out there are other language learners!

### 3) Identify your keystone habits

Keystone habits are those habits that, when broken, tend to break other habits. On the other hand, they also have the power to maintain many different practices as long as you keep up with them. Exercise is a common keystone habit. Don't exercise regularly? Perhaps that should be the first habit you build...



#### 4) Use an app

Use a habit tracking app to monitor your progress and build momentum. Some great apps are [Habitica](#), [Stickk](#) or [Beeminder](#).

#### 5) Know that habits are powerful

While seemingly negligible in their day-to-day effects, habits cause you to develop **incredible** skills over time. Remember that the price of not developing effective learning habits is losing a brighter future that could have been, and missing a chance to be of real value to the people around you. The reward for building positive habits? How about the

realization that you are far more powerful than you thought,  
and possibly making the world a better place.

Skip to minute fifteen of [this](#) video and learn more about  
habit building process. Watch the rest of the video, too! It's  
packed with useful info on learning Chinese.

**14**

**Maintain A  
Positive Mindset**

## 14. Maintain A Positive Mindset

**Mindset is everything** when it comes to learning a language, **especially** one with as large a time commitment as Mandarin Chinese. As well as gifting you with the motivation to learn every day, your mindset also directly affects how well your brain absorbs the information you learn. Therefore, the **ideal** state of language acquisition is one that is **100% stress-free**, which is yet another reason why traditional language learning methods do not work; they are inherently stressful.

You remember those high school language classes, right? You get pumped with information through repetitive drills and tons of homework. You are expected to regurgitate cold knowledge with great accuracy in exams and quizzes throughout each year. All the while, you are going through the most stressful time in life: Adolescence.

Research has shown that stress or various other negative emotions can create a ‘blockage’ in your mind that can hinder the acquisition process. Dr. Stephen Krashen calls this “[The Affective Filter](#).” His research shows that even if you were to get understandable and engaging content, a high-stress environment would negate a large portion of your gains.



The best way to combat this affective filter is to **maintain a calm and positive state as much as possible**. Here are some great ways to do that:

### **1) Use methods you know work**

If you are spending time with Chinese and you know it is time well-spent, then your fun levels increase, and your stress levels stay way down. The flip-side is also the case. If you have any doubts about the efficacy of your methods or tools, you will not be able to relax for long.

What stressed me out in university was the knowledge that the methods I was using to teach myself **outside** of class were far more effective. When it 'clicked' that university was mostly a giant waste of time in comparison, my boredom and stress levels increased even further.

## 2) See language learning as a fun game

Aim to create the most entertaining and chilled-out learning process you can, all while being in contact with Chinese as much as you can throughout the day. Check out the section on timeboxing for a simple way of turning any activity into a fun (and highly efficient) game.

## 3) Aim for “Flow State”

Stress-free **doesn't** mean challenge-free. If your workload is too low or your tasks too easy, you will become **bored**, and boredom can be just as bad for your progress and motivation as anxiety. You don't want such little challenge and workload in your day-to-day acquisition process that you get bored. Instead, try to hit that sweet spot known as “Flow state.”

**Flow state** is the point between **anxiety** and **boredom** where you forget you are even consuming a foreign language and are just **enjoying the content**.



The difficulty level and length of time spent learning should be decided by what has you in flow state most often.

#### 4) Don't sweat the small stuff

You **will** make mistakes. You **will** look silly. You **will** forget words and phrases you got right perfectly a week before. Guess what? **None of it matters.**

Looking and feeling silly is a necessary part of the language learning process, and **it is a sign you are getting out of your comfort zone.** Roll with the punches and learn to laugh at

yourself, and you will be far better off for it.

### 5) Set realistic expectations

Shoot for the stars, but perhaps one of the closer ones. Take into account as many factors as you can when setting time-based achievement goals and aim high but within the realm of possibility for your situation. See the chapter on goals for a reminder of this.

### 6) Know that fluency is possible

As you learned in chapter 3, fluency is possible within one year (even six months), as long as you have the right methods, habits, and mindset. Phil and I are both fluent in Mandarin, and so are many thousands of other Chinese learners around the world. **We are not especially smart; we just built good habits and showed up every day.**

### 7) Follow your emotions

Let your emotions be your guide. **Feeling energized?** Make some engaging SRS flashcards. **Feeling lazy?** Put on a Mandarin podcast, take a walk, and let your mind wander. Let your unconscious do the heavy lifting of processing the Chinese. **Feeling nostalgic?** Watch a movie from your childhood dubbed in Chinese. **Feeling curious?** Check out a word you saved into [pleco](#) a while back and see how to use it in a sentence.

### 8) Be open-minded...

Be willing to try new tools, techniques, and resources for learning Chinese, because **you never know** what you might end up finding that engages you.

For example, I used to think comics were for nerds and kids until I realized how many high quality comics have been translated into Chinese, all accessible from [smartphone apps](#). If reading comics makes you a nerd-child, then that's what I am now, I guess. The same goes for watching those "cheesy" Chinese TV shows and movies. Man, am I glad I took that leap! Now I've always got one of those crazy shows on, and I'm picking up new words from them all the time.

### 9) ...but also be brutal

Never let yourself be frustrated by a medium or piece of content you don't enjoy. Drop it and go find something else. It may just be that your level isn't high enough to enjoy that particular content **right now**.

### 10) Be around the right people

I firmly believe that we are the average of the five people with whom we spend the most time. Find learning communities on social media platforms or [Meetups](#) in your local area and take part actively.



### **11) Take time to reflect on how far you've come**

Whether you want to keep a journal or blog, record yourself regularly, or just be more mindful, it's a great idea to stop every few weeks or months and take stock of your progress.

You could even do this daily. Think to yourself: "Do I know more Chinese than yesterday?" and make sure the answer is "yes" by never having a zero-day.

### **12) Remember to enjoy the journey**

Us humans adapt to successes very quickly. As soon as we realize a dream, we add another one. On the one hand, this is

how we all have the potential to achieve greatness. On the other hand, it is a bit of a drag because we are rarely satisfied long-term by achieving our goals.

Whatever your goals are with Mandarin, achieving them will become normality sooner than you can blink, so you **must** enjoy the learning process!

**15**

**Immerse yourself**

## 15. Immerse yourself

Immersion is one of the most critical factors for long-term language learning success, and you can achieve it even with a busy schedule. Immersion is a **spectrum** that ranges from completely removing your native language from your life to something a bit more manageable. There are two keys to consistent immersion: **How you manage your environment** and how you manage your time.

### Environment Management

Let's start with the place you will likely end up being most often while studying Chinese: **Your house**.

#### 1) Listen all the time

Wherever you are, and whatever you are doing, put those earphones in/on and consume. Try to avoid turning off the audio if it gets distracting; just turn it down. Make it a challenge to see how many hours a week you can put into this without getting dumped, divorced, or fired.

#### 2) Keep books around you

Make sure you have some reading material within three feet of your body at all times. Kindles can be great, but I particularly enjoy a good old fashioned paperback next to me on my bedside table, desk, coffee table...or toilet.



### 3) Label things

This is rather old-fashioned (and top-down) but it's a tried and true method of learning common words for objects around you that contain rarer characters you aren't ready to learn yet. If this sounds a bit inconvenient and you'd rather do this in a virtual world only, check out the game [Influent](#).

### 4) Keep the place clean

A tidy house is proven to be conducive to learning better. A messy room distracts you and increases anxiety.

### 5) Soundproof your study location

This one is especially useful if you live in a busy city, or if you have children and want a few precious minutes to cram.

### 6) Maintain ideal temperature and lighting

When you are too warm or too cool, it becomes difficult to concentrate. Natural light is ideal, but if that's not an option go for lots of cool white (not yellow) light.

### 7) Only Chinese music

If you must listen to music while doing other learning activities, make it either Chinese music or non-Chinese music **without lyrics**, e.g., classical.

### 8) Find Chinese People wherever you are

Chinese people can be found in pretty much every major city or town, which means endless opportunities for Mandarin practice. In my experience, there is no group of people in the world more excited to speak Mandarin with you than **Chinese people living outside of China**. Start speaking Mandarin to some of these people and I guarantee that the positive reaction you receive will be highly motivating for you.

### 9) Use Chinese Social networks

While [Weibo](#) and [Renren](#) are tried and true classics worth visiting regularly, you should also try the insanely popular video sharing platforms [Kuaishou](#) and [Douyin](#). Overall



though, [WeChat](#) is the clear winner for online social interaction. Try the “People Nearby,” “Shake,” and “Drift Bottle” functions to meet and chat with random people.

#### **10) Look for Mandarin versions of content you like**

Replace the media you consume with Mandarin translations. A great way to do this is to make a list of everything you are interested in consuming and search for the Chinese names for them using [Wikipedia](#). Search for what you want in English then switch the language to simplified Chinese in the left menu. If you then search for “[国语配音 guóyǔ pèiyīn](#)” along with the Chinese name of a non-Chinese movie, you

may find a version dubbed in Mandarin. If you don't get lucky enough to find it, you can always settle for Chinese subtitles.

The first things I tried to read once I reached the intermediate level were western comics and novels. I started with my childhood favorite 加菲猫 jiāfēimāo Garfield, and moved onto more difficult comics as my reading ability increased. Check out the input resources in the final chapter of this book for many more examples.

### 11) Change your device languages into Mandarin

Switch your smartphone, laptop, tablet, and smart TV to Chinese. Don't think you're ready for it yet? Maybe you aren't, but making the switch will **force** you to learn the characters and words you need to function.

### 12) Use “focus” apps

Apps like [Self-control](#) and [Freedom](#) block all notifications and even internet connection for fixed periods. You could combine these with your timeboxing app so you don't even have a **chance** to be distracted during your work period. Anki flashcard reviews do not require the internet.

### 13) Leverage the power of your smartphone

Your environment changes as you move around throughout the day, and it is essential to take steps to create an immersive environment you can take with you wherever you



recommended ways of creating and managing your time better.

### 1) Fill the gaps in your day

Fill any gaps in your day with Mandarin, while traveling, at work, at the gym, when the baby is asleep, etc. This is not just a more efficient use of your time, but it also **naturally** breaks up your immersion throughout the day. This is way better than doing everything in one big chunk.

### 2) Listening takes priority

Remember that **listening is the easy win** when it comes to immersion because you can do pretty much anything else at the same time. Listening and reading at the same time is ideal, but of course, involves more focus.

### 3) Save the tougher stuff for mornings

Aside from the rather rare 'night owls,' all of us are more active in the morning. It is a good idea to take advantage of this and get the more intensive acquisition activities taken care of in the wee hours. Save the more chilled-out immersion activities like reading a comic, watching a Chinese tv show, or listening to a podcast for the rest of the day.

### 4) Get up earlier

Want some inspiration for this one? Check out [Jocko Willink](#), the US navy seal, who gets up at 4:45 am every morning to

lift heavy things. After listening to how he lives his life, you'll find setting your alarm thirty minutes earlier every day pretty tame.

### 5) Cut down on other leisure activities

Try to consume less trash TV, Youtube & video games. Not none, just less. Remember what is possible in thirty minutes a day? **That's half an episode of something...**

Please don't feel ashamed of watching your favorite show or zoning out on youtube or your favorite video game once in a while. We all have to chill sometimes. Just know that it is **essential** to set **reasonable** limits if you have the goal of mastering Mandarin.

### 6) Use timeboxing

Timeboxing (also known as the "Pomodoro technique") is a proven technique to create more efficient study sessions. Each timebox consists of a fixed period of work, followed by a shorter rest period. The standard timebox is twenty-five minutes of work, followed by five minutes of rest. Doing this means **every sixty minutes creates fifty minutes of productive focus**. This ratio is **excellent**.

Although the standard time box is just fine, there are many different kinds of timeboxes you can do. It is really fun to experiment with work and rest periods of different lengths. I

would suggest making an extra long rest period of, say, fifteen minutes every third rest period. You can also set yourself a goal of a certain number of timeboxes you want to complete for each day, and tally them up as you go.

There are some great timeboxing apps you can use to automate the whole process. I like [Be Focused](#).

**When the timer is on, you are either 100% working or 100% relaxing.** You should never work with distractions or think about working while resting. After timeboxing for a while, you will notice that you naturally enter a flow state. If you timebox daily, you will figure out the right amount of time to maintain 'flow' for each learning activity. For more on the different types of timeboxing, read [this](#) blog post.

# 16

**Maintain A Healthy  
Lifestyle**

## 16. Maintain A Healthy Lifestyle

Mandarin Blueprint is not a health website, and we don't want to start getting preachy and annoying about this. Still, health is **vital** to your overall performance in life, and that includes how quickly and easily you acquire Mandarin. **If you are healthier, you will have more time, energy, and fun.** Here are the primary health factors that affect your progress the most:

### Diet

A high-carb, high-sugar diet undoubtedly leads to you feeling less alert and more sleepy. Deficiencies in vitamins and minerals such as vitamin E, vitamin B, iodine, and zinc have been shown to inhibit cognitive function and concentration. A lack of iron can decrease dopamine transmission in the brain, which means less of that happy feeling you need to keep you motivated to keep learning. Get those veggies and take supplements if you think you might be lacking.

### Exercise

Researchers at the University of British Columbia found that [aerobic exercise can actually boost the size of your hippocampus](#), which is the part of your brain most responsible for verbal memory and learning. If you want a simple and enjoyable explanation about this process, I'd



recommend watching [this video](#) from the YouTube channel “What I’ve Learned.”

Spending time in the gym one-to-three hours each week will create **more** time in terms of how alert, active, and powerful your brain will become. If that’s not enough for you, you can also listen to Chinese while you work out, and read during rest periods between sets.

### Sleep

On the list of basic human needs, sleep is actually more important than food. Air is number one, second is water, and

third is sleep. In recent years, there have been many discoveries suggesting that our ability to function happily in life is influenced greatly by our sleep quality. Brain function is particularly affected, and this is why good sleep relates to how well you learn a language.

### **Bad habits (Alcohol & other drugs)**

Being a part of two of the biggest drinking cultures on Earth (Uk and China) made giving up alcohol for good pretty tough for me. However, after ditching the booze I found an immediate improvement in my energy levels throughout the day. Giving up smoking also led to a big improvement. I'm not saying you should give up anything for good, but moderating or removing consumption of things you **know** are bad for you will yield immediate results.

**17**

**Diversify Your  
Resources**

## 17. Diversify Your Resources

To guarantee easy and frequent immersion, you should have a diverse, regularly updated selection of learning resources. Have all of your resources available on your phone, computer, or in print format by your bed, sofa, and bathroom.

Finding these resources can be a real pain if you are a less experienced language learner, so I've put together a **huge** list of excellent resources to get you started. Some of these resources cost money, some are free, and they apply to many different devices.

Before you jump in, though, I'd like to share with you a crucial piece of advice:

**When it comes to education, don't be too tight with your wallet.**

**It truly is a beautiful time to learn a language.** The available resources have never been cheaper, more accessible, or more valuable. Thanks to technological breakthroughs, you do not need to sign up for a university class to learn a language any more. That would likely be **detrimental**. Think about that for a second. The fact that you don't have to pay for a university

course means you have already saved yourself **many thousands of dollars** per year. Investing a fraction of that into a few select resources will bring you **far** better results. I used to agonize over a few dollars for a Mandarin website, then proceed to spend the same amount several times over on overpriced beer that evening!

**Are you in it for the long haul?** If the answer is **yes**, then decide on a monthly budget you are willing to set aside for Mandarin. If you set aside just **\$100 per month**, you can gain access to several of the best services out there, with some money left over for a weekly session with a qualified tutor. If you **double** that investment, you will have access to **everything** you'll ever need for fluency and literacy.

There are a lot of resources coming up, so to make things easier for you I've divided them into categories of "Input," "Output," and "Self-Study Resources."

**NOTE: For a more up-to-date version of this list, check out [this](#) post of our blog.**

## Input

**Audiobooks**

**Audio Courses**

**Books**

**Comics**

**Music**

**Online Reading Resources**

**Podcasts**

**Radio**

**Video Content**

**Video Games**

## Output

**Tutors & Language Exchanges**

**Speaking Apps**

**Writing Apps**

## Self-Study Resources

**Blogs & Forums**

**Browser Extensions**

**Dictionaries**

**Flashcard Apps**

**Grammar Guides**

**HSK test preparation**

**Video Courses**

**Vocabulary Lists**

**Reference Tools**

**Note:** Some of the native mandarin apps are inaccessible outside of China. In this case, you will need to sign up for a VPN service and use hong kong or mainland servers. Here are some recommendations for that:

[ExpressVPN](#) - Offers five blazing fast VPNs in Hong Kong.

[PureVPN](#) - Offers twelve Chinese servers.

[Socketpro](#) - Very popular with learners living in China (including us!). Several high-speed Hong Kong servers are available.



# Input

## Audio Books

[Audible \[Mandarin Version\]](#) (Free & Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - These are pretty recent, and it's fantastic that more high-quality audiobooks like these are becoming more widely available. Most are native level, but they also have some graded audiobooks, such as those by Mandarin Companion.

[有声小说大全](#) (Free - iOS, Android) - A vast amount of audiobooks and Mandarin radio stations.

[懒人听书IRTS](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - Similar to the app above, only better designed, and it comes with a large selection of free books to read in-app.

[Ting56.com](#) (Free - Web) - Website doesn't look that great, but there is a massive selection of audiobooks, podcasts, and even soap operas to choose from.

## Audio Courses

For beginners looking to get some initial pronunciation practice and basic immersion, audio courses are a great choice.

[Pimsleur](#) (Paid - iOS, Android) - I used this myself, and the constant repetition of native audio undoubtedly helped my pronunciation in a big way. Certainly not for everyone, however.

[Glossika](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - Uses a spaced repetition algorithm to present you with lots of natural-sounding sentences. 7,000 sentences and 5,000 words covered.

[OptiLingo](#) (Paid - iOS, Android) - Learn 1,500 phrases and over 1,000 words through listening and repeating. They call it 'guided immersion'. Spaced repetition is also applied.

[Listening Practice](#) (Free - Web) - A unique concept that involves (among other things) typing out sentences you hear.

## Books

### For Lower Levels:

[Mandarin Companion](#) (Paid) - Easy to read novels in Mandarin Chinese. They have 14 books available in paperback, e-book, and audiobook format that cover a range of levels. These graded readers are so good that we licensed a huge chunk of every book for use on [our course](#)! Their content is unlocked once you have learned enough characters to reach 98% comprehension.

[Snowflake books](#) (Paid) - Bilingual books in both simplified and traditional Chinese, with pinyin. These seem more designed for a younger audience. Well-illustrated books that ship worldwide.

## Native Books:

[Amazon China kindle books](#)

[Amazon Mandarin Paperback/Hardback Books](#)

[Dangdang](#) - This is where you go for a more extensive selection of books in Chinese if you are in China.

## Comic Books

Comics are a go-to favorite of mine because they provide vivid visual context, use very natural (and relatively simple) language, and there are often hundreds of volumes in a series. Perfect for learners.

### For Lower Levels:

[Manga Mandarin](#) (Paid - iOS, Android) - A lovely idea for an app. A graded reader but for comics instead of novels.

### Native Comics:

Below are some of the more popular sites and apps for comics. Some of them are online-only, some are just apps, some are both. Most of these have a really cool social

function woven into them, where users can leave comments on specific pages, which you can access live as you read.

There are many more of these apps available, some unavailable outside of China, so try searching for “漫画” in your app store and see what comes up.

[哔哩哔哩漫画](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - A relatively newly-released app out of mainland China, and the most well-designed one, in my opinion. Eastern comics only.

[KuaiKan](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - Based in mainland China, with a large selection of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean comics.

[ManHuaGui 漫画鬼](#) (Freemium - Web) - Comics available from both the east and the west.

[Manhuaren 漫画人](#) (Freemium - iOS, Android) - Eastern comics only.

[Manwei wuxian 漫威无限](#) (Free - iOS, Android) - A wide selection of marvel comics translated into simplified Chinese. You can turn on a feature that allows you to read the comic frame-by-frame.

[QQ Comics](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - Eastern comics only. Also a nice selection of anime called “[动画](#)”.

## Music

When it comes to these Mandarin music apps, there's so much to choose from that it will probably be best just clicking on what is popular right now and note down artists you like. I also recommend learning the genres in Chinese and exploring them individually. Below are some reliable places to find Mandarin music:

[5ND](#) (Freemium - Web)

[9sky](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android)

[Kugou](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android)

[Mandarin Music Artists on iTunes](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - Try looking at the genres Chinese Alt, Chinese hip-hop, Mandopop, and Chinese Regional Folk, and Chinese Opera.

[QQ Music](#) - (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android)

[Wangyi](#) 网易云音乐 (Free - Web, iOS, Android)

[Xiami](#) 虾米音乐 (Free - Web, iOS, Android)

## Online Reading Resources

[Chinese reading practice](#) (Free - Web) - Although this hasn't received any updates in a long time, it's still a great resource. There are many stories for you to choose from, with thoughtful explanations for the more difficult sections. Pop-up dictionary and English translations included.

[Chinese text sampler](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - A wide range of texts aimed at the advanced learner.

[Decipher](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - A huge selection of articles for learners dividing by HSK level. Handy pop-up dictionary and ability to save words for review later.

[Du Chinese](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - Very similar to Decipher and The Chairman's Bao (below).

[iChinese Reader](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - An online graded reading platform that offers more than 2000 fiction and interactive non-fiction e-books of different genres, topics, and content areas placed at 20 proficiency levels.

[Justlearnchinese](#) (Free - Web) - Lots of short stories written by a very passionate native teacher. This site helped me out as a learner when I was struggling to find decent intermediate reading content.

[LingQ](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - Pronounced “link”. LingQ is a language learning system created by polyglot Steve Kaufmann. This app has an extensive selection of reading and listening material, and the ability for you to upload your content, even entire ebooks! I have used this app almost every single day for the last three years, and I wish I had found it earlier.

[My Chinese Reading](#) (Free - Web) - This site provides a range of practice reading material (some with audio) for free.

[RuiWen](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - Many articles suitable for practice. Of particular relevance to learners is 作文, containing essays written by Chinese children.

[The Chairman's Bao](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - A huge range of real news articles translated into Chinese, divided by HSK level.

[The Marco Polo project](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - A wide range of interesting articles for advanced learners.

## Native Reading Material:

Obviously, you'll need to have a few thousand words under your belt before you can tackle these. However, you can access most

[17K](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - Online novels.

[BBC News](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - All articles translated into simplified Chinese.

[GuoKR](#) (Free - Web) - Science-related articles.

[JanDan](#) (Free - Web) - Articles.

[List of Mainland Chinese Newspapers Available Online](#)

[List of Hong Kong Newspapers Available Online](#)

[List of Taiwanese Newspapers Available Online](#)

[The 163 Blog](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - Articles.

[The Bible](#) (Free - Web) - This is the link to the simplified Chinese version "with drama". Try with and without.

[The New York Times \[Chinese version\]](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android)

[The QQ Blog](#) (Free - Web) - Articles.

[The Sina Blog](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - Articles.

[The Sohu Blog](#) (Free - Web) - Articles.

[Tianya](#) (Free - Web)- Articles.

[Zhihu](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - China's Quora.

### Reading tools:

[Chinese Text Analyser](#) (Paid - Web) - A tool for segmenting and analyzing Chinese text. We use this to create level-appropriate content on our course.

[Evernote](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - For saving articles.

[Pocket](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - Also for saving articles.

[Feedly](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - For subscribing to blogs.

[Pondy](#) (Freemium - Web) - An online tool that can level imported Chinese articles and generate pinyin, vocab, and grammar lists with a built-in dictionary and library.

## Podcasts

I recommend doing a google search for a decent podcast app to make sure all of your podcasts are in one place. If you are using a podcast designed for learners, then just download the dialogues and read along with the transcripts, where possible. Try to shadow the audio (preferably while reading) for any listening content.

### For Lower Levels:

[ChinesePod](#) (Paid) - An ocean of high quality, and often amusing podcasts. Their video content is also great.

[ChineseClass101](#) (Paid) - Perhaps a little less entertaining than PopupChinese or ChinesePod. However, you can download just the dialogues (no English) along with the transcripts, so that's enough to get my stamp of approval.

[Popup Chinese](#) (Freemium) - A personal favorite of mine. You can access all of the lessons for free from their website, and

you only pay if you want to download. Some of the lessons are so weird and amusing that I can still recite the scripts after several years.

[Slow Chinese](#) (Free) - High-quality Mandarin audio on a variety of topics varying in difficulty. Transcripts are available.

[听故事学中文 Learning Chinese through Stories](#) (Free) - Stories in Mandarin covering a wide range of topics and proficiency levels (Novice, Intermediate, Advanced). Every story has two parts: story (A) and story explanation (B), accompanied by annotated vocabulary and transcript.

#### **Native Podcasts:**

[得到](#) (Freemium)- Another personal favorite. This app is packed with audiobooks, articles, and podcasts from many different creators.

[ChinesePodcasts.com](#)

[iTunes Podcasts China](#)

[iTunes Podcasts Taiwan](#)

## Radio

Just as with podcasts, it can be more convenient to do a search for a radio app you like, so you can keep everything in one place.

### [Mainland China Radio Stations on Tuneln](#)

### [Taiwan Radio Stations on Tuneln](#)

There are many of apps for individual stations available, each with their own vast selection of content. Here are some more popular ones:

[LizhiFM](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android)

[QingtingFM](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android)

[QieFM](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android)

[XimalayaFM](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android)

## Video Content

Video is one of the best formats of input. It provides powerful visual context to what is being said and pretty much all Chinese video content comes with subtitles.

### For Lower Levels:

[FluentU](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - Learn Mandarin through hundreds of real video clips. Analyze subtitles and save words for SRS review later. A very cool idea.

[Yabla](#) (Paid - Web, iOS) - A site with videos including hanzi, pinyin, and English captions.

[Learn Chinese From Movies](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - LCFM features unique subtitles, glossaries, and transcripts for 30+ movies – including professionally-dubbed Mandarin-audio children’s movies as well as Mainland, Hong Kong, & Taiwanese films (Mandarin audio).

### Native Viewing:

[Bili-Bili](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - This has a lot of everything. Live-streaming, documentaries, music, games, movies, TV shows, and anything else video-related.

### [Chinese Movies & TV Shows on Major Streaming Services](#)

(Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - Choose from Hulu, Netflix, HBO, and any other streaming service you have access to.

[iQiyi](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - A Chinese movie and TV streaming site.

[PPS](#) (Freemium - Web) - A Chinese movie and TV streaming site.

[QQ Video](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - A Chinese movie and TV streaming site.

[Youku.com](#) and [Tudou.com](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - Both similar to YouTube.

## Video Games

Mandarin video games are a favorite choice of mine. Because you are getting so much great input, you get the same enjoyment you would normally, but far less of the guilt that usually comes with it.

### **For Lower Levels:**

[Influent](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - Walk around a virtual apartment and learn hundreds of words for everyday objects

by hovering over them. Native audio and flashcards for 18 different languages included.

[Wordswing](#) (Free - Web) - A series of text adventure games for a variety of levels. Comics, dialogues, and SRS flashcards also available.

### **Native Chinese Games:**

You should go for dialogue-heavy genres like RPGs, Visual Novels, and MMORPGS, and make a rule for yourself that you are not allowed to continue playing until you at least attempt to read every dialogue box that comes up. Doing this allows you to play games as an adult (almost) guilt-free!

[Steam Games in Simplified Chinese](#)

[Steam Games in Traditional Chinese](#)

[iOS Games](#)

[Android Games](#)



# Output

## Speaking Apps

[Bilingua](#) (Free - iOS, Android) - Chat, play, and learn with native speakers.

[HelloTalk](#) (Freemium - iOS, Android) - Very similar to the wechat app. A great resource for free language exchange partners.

[Idyoma](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - Users match with one another to practice languages, taking turns speaking in one another's languages to reach fluency.

[Oral Chinese Test](#) (Paid - Web) - The only official online Chinese oral test certified by the Confucius Institute Headquarters.

[Speaky](#) (Free - iOS, Android) - Another solid resource for language exchanges.

[Tandem](#) (Freemium - iOS, Android) - My favorite thing about this app is the random question generator, so you can avoid the repetitive introductions and get straight down to meaningful interactions.

## Tutors & Language Exchanges

When you decide you are ready to get a competent tutor, here are some great resources:

[Chinese Language Meetup Groups](#) (Free - Web) - Find out what's happening in Chinese language Meetup groups around the world and start meeting up with the ones near you.

[Conversation Exchange](#) (Free - Web) - Practice your second language by meeting up with natives in your area for free.

[Hinative](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - A question and answer community for language learners. Ask any questions you like about Mandarin and Chinese culture, send in voice messages for pronunciation correction, and find tutors.

[iTalki](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - Top choice for paid and unpaid tutors.

[LingQ](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - Lots of tutors that will correct your writing and speaking.

[My Language Exchange](#) (Free - Web) - Over 3 million members from over 175 countries, practicing 164 languages.

[Polyglot Club](#) (Free - Web) - Find language exchange partners close to you and get your written Chinese corrected for free.

[The Mixxer](#) (Free - Web) - A free virtual language exchange site using Skype.

[Verbling](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - Similar to italki.

[Wyzant](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - Private Chinese tutoring with pay-as-you-go pricing.

## Writing Apps

You can practice writing with any tutor from the tutor section, but here's a couple of sites that focus purely or mainly on helping you with writing:

### For practicing writing:

[Idiomatic Forest](#) (Free - Web) - You are shown random images and asked to write about what you see. Tutors are supposed to give you corrections for free, but I submitted a piece of writing and at this point it's been 10 days with no reply. Just send your writing to your tutor or a language exchange partner instead.

### For practicing characters:

[Hanzi Grids](#) (Free - Web) - Hanzi Grids lets you create custom Chinese character worksheets and grid paper templates that you can download and print out for handwriting practice.

[Skritter](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) - A smooth writing program that gets pretty addictive. A substantial selection of flashcards is available, plus you can make and import your own.

[Inkstone](#) (Paid - Android) - Similar to Skritter. Has a built-in database of Pinyin, meanings, and compositions.

A hiker with a backpack is silhouetted against a bright sunrise over a mountain range. The sun is low in the sky, creating a warm glow. The hiker is on a dirt path that winds along a steep, rocky slope. In the background, there are more mountains and a valley with a river.

# Other Resources

## Blogs & Forums

### **Mandarin-focused forums:**

[Chinese-forums](#) - A great choice for learning advice and input recommendations. The dedication of some of the main contributors to this forum is inspiring.

[Word Reference](#) - Another forum for advice and discussion around Mandarin (and lots of other languages).

[Reddit.com/r/ChineseLanguage](https://www.reddit.com/r/ChineseLanguage) - If you want something translated, advice from some veteran learners, or you just want to catch up on the latest Mandarin memes going around, this is your spot.

[Stack Exchange](#) - Extensive detailed posts on lots of Mandarin-related topics.

### **Mandarin-focused blogs:**

[CarlGene](#) - This guy has pretty much taken his Chinese to the highest level you can go. This blog doesn't have heaps of content, but much of the content he creates isn't available anywhere else.

[Chineseboost](#) - Not a huge blog, but the creator has the right idea about learning mandarin. Lots of valuable advice on learning techniques, mindset, and flashcard creation.

[Hacking Chinese](#) - The most popular Chinese blog out there, and for good reason.

[East Asia Student](#) - Made by the same guy who created Chineseboost. Lots more high-quality articles on Mandarin grammar and Chinese learning.

[Living a dream in China](#) - More about life in China than language, but it has both.

[MandarinHQ](#) - Consistently high-quality posts with thoughtful free downloads such as audio and flashcard files. Great videos, too.

[Sapere De Cina](#) - More of an all-rounder. Lots of articles on learning Chinese, but also a decent information resource for living and working in China.

[Sinosplice](#) - Made by John Pasden of ChinesePod and Mandarin companion. High-quality posts on a variety of topics related to Mandarin learning.

[The Linguist](#) - LingQ creator Steve Kaufman's blog. Steve was an essential inspiration for Phil and I as we were creating MB. We are big fans.

[The Mandarin Corner](#) - Articles on pronunciation, grammar, and self-study.

[The World of Chinese](#) - A bi-monthly English magazine and web portal dedicated to Chinese language and culture. I like their "On the Character..." series, where they delve deep into the various usages of individual characters.

## General Language learning:

[All Japanese All The Time](#) - Must-read articles on language acquisition. Reading these posts will charge your batteries and fill you with motivation.

[All things linguistic](#) - General articles on linguistics for those of you who want to get a bit more technical.

[Antimoon](#) - Brilliant articles aimed at English learners, but applicable to any language. The writers heavily endorse high-quality input and output for effective language acquisition.

[Brave Learning](#) - Valuable articles on language learning.

[Fluent Forever](#) - Gabriel Wyner is another key inspiration of ours. His book, app, and pronunciation trainers are also highly recommended.

[FluentU](#) - More focused on quantity than quality, but enough of both to make it well worth checking out.

[Fluent in Three Months](#) - Benny Lewis puts a heavy focus on speaking as soon and as much as possible. His positivity is contagious.

[Glossika Blog](#) - Solid articles ranging in depth from learning certain phrases to language acquisition principles.

[Italki](#) - Lots of articles to choose from on a range of topics relating to Mandarin.

[I Will Teach You A Language](#) - Olly is an experienced polyglot who learns languages using the story-based method. Many articles on language learning strategy.

[Luca Lampariello](#) - A world-class polyglot who creates great videos and articles on language learning.

[The Mezzofanti Guild](#) - Another top polyglot known for taking on the more difficult and obscure languages.

## Browser Extensions

Installing just a few free browser extensions can greatly improve your online language learning experience. Here are a few of the best:

[Zhongwen Popup Dictionary](#) (Free - Chrome, Firefox) - Probably the most popular pop-up dictionary plugin for Chinese.

[新同文堂 Traditional & Simplified Chinese Converter](#) (Free - Chrome, Firefox) - Yep, you guessed it. This extension helps you switch between traditional and simplified on the fly.

[PinyinBrowser](#) (Freemium - iOS, Android) - A web browser for iPhone and iPad that shows you Pinyin or Bopomofo to Chinese web pages.

[Frill](#) (Free - Safari) - A pop-up dictionary for Safari.

## Dictionaries

Each of the following dictionaries have their advantages and disadvantages; just try out a few and see which work best for you:

### Character and Word Dictionaries:

[Chinasmack glossary](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - Fantastic (and hilarious) resource for learning Mandarin slang. Viewer discretion is HIGHLY advised.

[Google Images](#) (Free - Web) - Can be used as a visual dictionary, or for choosing images for your flashcards.

[HanDian \(汉典\)](#) (Free - Web) - Chinese only. The most comprehensive Chinese dictionary on the Internet.

[Hanping Chinese Dictionary Pro](#) (Paid - Android) - As good (if not better) than Pleco, but for android only.

[Linguee English-Chinese Dictionary \(英中词典\)](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - Extensive translation database. English-Chinese and Chinese-English.

[Pleco](#) (Freemium - iOS & Android) - An absolute must-have resource. The paid add-ons are worth it, too. There are thousands of example sentences that are rather hit or miss in terms of quality. You can categorize, and export bookmarked words/sentences very easily, however.

[Wikipedia](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - Use this as a way of finding out the Chinese name for anything you need. First, look up the thing you want in your native language, then switch the language to “中文” by clicking on the left.

[Wiktionary](#) (Free - Web) - Searchable using pinyin or hanzi.

[Wisetalk](#) (Freemium - iOS) - An idiom dictionary with explanations of 4880 chengyu.

[WordBuddy](#) (Free - Web) - A dictionary for exploring characters that allows you to save word lists.

[YellowBridge](#) (Freemium - Web) - Also has a small selection of example sentences, but requires a paid subscription to access the pop-up dictionary for them.

### Best Dictionaries for Sentence Mining:

[Baidu](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - China's biggest search engine. Search for your word in Chinese and add 造句 (zàojù) "sentence-making/syntax" or 例句 (lìjù) "example sentence" for better results.

[Bing Dictionary](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - Surprisingly, one of the best resources out there for sentence mining. Not only does it contain example sentences with correct pinyin and English translations, but it also allows you to categorize the sentences by difficulty and style.

[Chinesepod Glossary](#) (Freemium - Web) - This is great just by itself, but if you use Chinesepod as a service it's even more useful. Words you search bring up actual sentences from the respective Chinesepod lesson, with links to the audio and transcript.

[Iciba](#) (Free - Web)- Pinyin accessible via a built-in popup dictionary.

[Jukuu](#) (Free - Web) - Lots of example sentences with decent English translations.

[Line Dict](#) (Free - Web & iOS) - A popular choice. Lots of example sentences with decent English translations.

[Tatoeba](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - Mixture of Simplified and traditional, without any obvious way of dividing them, which could get frustrating for lower levels.

[Youdao](#) (Web, iOS, Android) - Lots of example sentences with decent English translations.

## Flashcard Apps

Pretty much every learning app has SRS flashcard capability built into them nowadays, but having a dedicated SRS to make your own cards is also useful. There is only one I would recommend:

[Anki](#) (Paid & Free Versions - Web, iOS, Android) - The best flashcard app around. Free for desktop and android, paid for iOS and iPad.

## Grammar Guides

If you've read up to here, you'll know by now that you don't learn grammar by looking at grammar rules. However, looking at them can help you 'click' with grammar through listening and reading faster than you would have otherwise.

[Chinese Grammar Wiki](#) - Pretty much all you'll ever need for grammar explanations online.

## HSK Test Preparation

[Chinese Test](#) (Free - Web, iOS, Android) - This is where you apply for the HSK test and do practice papers.

[HSChinese](#) (Freemium - Web, iOS, Android) - An online learning platform for Chinese with HSK-based courses. It features Listening, Reading, and Writing practice, a test for your proficiency-level, and exams to test what you've learned during lessons.

## Pronunciation

**Pinyin Charts:**

[Allset learning pinyin chart](#) (Free - Web, iOS)

[Mandarin Blueprint Pinyin Chart](#) (Free - Pdf)

[Yabla pinyin chart](#) (Free - Web)

### Other:

[Pin1yin1](#) (Free - Web) - Converts Chinese characters into pinyin.

[Pinyin.info](#) (Free - Web) - In case you need to know more about the rules of pinyin.

[Speechling](#) (Free - Web) - Get your speaking corrected by native speakers.

## Video Courses

[Chinese Zero To Hero](#) (Paid - Web) Largely based on the HSK, these guys have created a pretty comprehensive selection of courses.

[DigMandarin](#) (Paid - Web) - Lots of cheap courses on a variety of topics.

[Domino Chinese](#) (Paid - Web) - Interesting (and cheap) video courses from as little as \$2/month. The presenter is funny and

promotes a very laid-back attitude towards learning languages.

[Pronunciation Mastery](#) (Paid & Free - Web iOS, Android) -

This is the very first video course we made, and it is the perfect start to Mandarin. Learn how to understand, pronounce and read (in pinyin) every Mandarin sound in around six hours. This can be [purchased individually](#) or [accessed for free](#) with any subscription of The Mandarin Blueprint Method.

[The Mandarin Blueprint Method](#) (Paid - Web, iOS, Android) -

Our 100% unique video curriculum can take you step-by-step from zero to literacy and fluency in Chinese in just a few months. We currently have **850** videos, **4,200** lessons. By following our system, you can acquire **1,530** characters and **4,000** common words in just a few months, even weeks, if you invest the right amount of time daily. A guaranteed path to success.

[Yoyo Chinese](#) (Paid - Web) - Well-produced video courses designed for basic to intermediate levels.

## Vocabulary Lists

[A Frequency Dictionary Of Modern Chinese](#) - This book provides a list of 5,000 words and 2,000 Chinese (simplified) characters commonly used in the language. Based on a fifty-million-word corpus composed of spoken, fiction, non-fiction and news texts in current use.

[Internet Word Frequencies](#) - A collection of Chinese corpora and frequency lists based on web content.

[Memrise](#) - Phil and myself have both spent many hours on this site. Useful for vocabulary acquisition.

[Modern Chinese Character Frequency List](#) - A list of 10,000 simplified characters based on written Chinese.

[SubtleX - CH](#) - Word Frequency List Based On Movie Subtitles

## Reference Tools

[Arch Chinese](#) (Free - Web) - Great for checking the stroke order and pronunciation of characters and words. Includes a dictionary, flashcards, games and quizzes.

[Hanzi Craft](#) (Free - Web) - Great for learning more about the structure and frequency of Chinese characters and words.

[HanziYuan](#) (Free - Web) - Formerly “Chinese Etymology”, this site delves into the etymology of many characters. We used

[HSK Graphs](#) (Free - Web) - Cool graphs showing how the vocabulary and characters within the HSK connect to each other.

[Outlier Linguistics](#) (Paid - iOS, Android) - A paid add-on for Pleco dictionary.

# Thank You For Reading

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