



PRONUNCIATION • DEVELOPING BEGINNER

Tone Changes in Everyday Mandarin

A printable guide to the most useful connected-speech tone changes: two third tones, low third tone, 不, and 一, with dictionary and surface cues kept separate.

nǐ hǎo

你好

hello

Dictionary: 3 + 3. Common surface cue: the first syllable rises, roughly 2 + 3.

By the end, you can...

- ✓ Keep a word's dictionary tone separate from a context-driven surface pronunciation
- ✓ Predict the common change in a two-syllable third-tone sequence
- ✓ Predict the beginner-level tone changes for 不 and 一



Developing beginner

45–60 minutes

24 pages

Answer guide

Self-contained print practice. Audio and web tools are optional.



1

Two layers, one phrase

After this page, you can Separate the stable dictionary label from a pronunciation cue for connected speech.

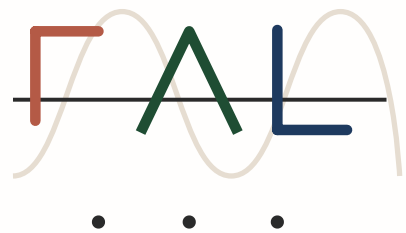
SEPARATE

Do not erase the dictionary tone

Dictionary pinyin tells you the lexical tone to remember and look up. A surface cue describes a common realization in a particular context. In this workbook, “rising-like” and “low” are listening and rehearsal cues, not new dictionary spellings.

Put it in your own words.

Cover this card and explain the idea in one sentence.



A visual anchor for this page's idea



2

Two layers, one phrase CONTINUED

After this page, you can Separate the stable dictionary label from a pronunciation cue for connected speech.

SEPARATE

The four target situations

Use the visual cue, then find the matching row.

Context	Dictionary layer	Common surface cue
Tone 3 + Tone 3	Both remain lexical Tone 3	First sounds rising-like; second remains Tone 3
Tone 3 + Tone 1, 2, or 4	First remains lexical Tone 3	First is commonly low and shortened
不 before Tone 4	不 is dictionary bù	Commonly heard as bú
一 before another numbered tone	一 is dictionary yī	Commonly yí before Tone 4; yì before Tone 1, 2, or 3



Find, cover, recall

Find one useful row. Cover it and reconstruct the target form before checking.



3

Two third tones

After this page, you can Predict the rising-like first syllable in clear 3 + 3 pairs.

PREDICT

Keep 3 + 3 in the dictionary column

The note gives a rough surface cue, not a respelling to memorize.



nǐ hǎo

你好

hello

Common surface cue: ní hǎo, rising-like + third.



hěn hǎo

很好

very good

Common surface cue: hén hǎo, rising-like + third.



kěyǐ

可以

may / can

Common surface cue: kéyǐ, rising-like + third.



shuǐguǒ

水果

fruit

Common surface cue: shuíguǒ, rising-like + third.



Cover + retrieve

Choose one line. Hide it, say it once, then uncover and repair one detail.



4

Two third tones CONTINUED

After this page, you can Predict the rising-like first syllable in clear 3 + 3 pairs.

PREDICT

Choose the surface cue

Use only the short two-syllable rule shown above.

1

WORKED EXAMPLE

你好 (dictionary nǐ hǎo)



First syllable rising-like



First syllable low only



No contextual change

Why it works: A clear 3 + 3 pair triggers third-tone sandhi on the first syllable.

2

很好 (dictionary hěn hǎo)



First syllable rising-like



Second syllable becomes Tone 4



Both become Tone 2

3

水果 (dictionary shuǐguǒ)



Roughly 2 + 3 on the surface



Roughly 3 + 4 on the surface



Roughly 4 + 3 on the surface

4

Which layer still labels 你 in 你好 as Tone 3?



Dictionary layer



Surface cue only



English translation

Finish from memory. Choose one completed response, cover the page, and make it again.



5

The low third tone

After this page, you can Recognize that a third tone before a non-third tone is often low rather than fully dipping and rising.

∞ CONTRAST

Low and compact in connected speech

1

hěn máng

很忙

very busy

Dictionary 3 + 2; the first syllable is commonly low and shortened.

2

wǒ lái

我来

I'll do it / I'll come

Dictionary 3 + 2; keep 我 low before 来.

3

xiǎng qù

想去

want to go

Dictionary 3 + 4; keep 想 low before 去.

4

měitiān

每天

every day

Dictionary 3 + 1; keep 每 low before 天.



Cover + retrieve

Choose one line. Hide it, say it once, then uncover and repair one detail.



6

The low third tone CONTINUED

After this page, you can Recognize that a third tone before a non-third tone is often low rather than fully dipping and rising.

CONTRAST

Low or rising-like?

Choose the cue for the first syllable.

5

WORKED EXAMPLE

很忙 hěn máng (3 + 2)



Low and shortened



Rising-like because another Tone 3 follows



Falling like Tone 4

Why it works: It completes the requested job using the target pattern.

6

想去 xiǎng qù (3 + 4)



Low and shortened



Rising-like



High and level



One more from you

Make a new response with the same target pattern.

Finish from memory. Choose one completed response, cover the page, and make it again.



7

The low third tone CONTINUED

After this page, you can Recognize that a third tone before a non-third tone is often low rather than fully dipping and rising.

CONTRAST

Low or rising-like?

Choose the cue for the first syllable.

7

很好 hěn hǎo (3 + 3)

☐ Rising-like first syllable

☐ Low-only first syllable

☐ Tone 4 first syllable

8

Which context most readily allows a fuller third-tone contour?

☐ In isolation or before a pause

☐ Before every Tone 1

☐ Only before 不


One more from you

Make a new response with the same target pattern.

Finish from memory. Choose one completed response, cover the page, and make it again.



8

The tone change of 不

After this page, you can Predict bú before Tone 4 and bù elsewhere in the target examples.

 MARK

Dictionary bù, context-sensitive surface



bù shì

不是

is not

Before Tone 4: common surface cue bú shì.



bù yào

不要

do not want

Before Tone 4: common surface cue bú yào.



bù máng

不忙

not busy

Before Tone 2: bù stays falling.



bù hǎo

不好

not good

Before Tone 3: bù stays falling.



Cover + retrieve

Choose one line. Hide it, say it once, then uncover and repair one detail.



9

The tone change of 不 CONTINUED

After this page, you can Predict bú before Tone 4 and bù elsewhere in the target examples.

 MARK

Predict the contextual form of 不

Choose bú only when the next syllable has Tone 4.

9

WORKED EXAMPLE

不是 bù shì



bú shì



bù shì

Why it works: It completes the requested job using the target pattern.

10

不来 bù lái



bú lái



bù lái

11

不要 bù yào



bú yào



bù yào

12

不好 bù hǎo



bú hǎo



bù hǎo

Finish from memory. Choose one completed response, cover the page, and make it again.



10

The tone changes of 一

After this page, you can Predict the common surface tone of 一 in short quantity phrases.

CHOOSE

Look at the following numbered tone



yī cì

一次

one time

Before Tone 4: common surface cue yí cì.



yī bēi

一杯

one cup

Before Tone 1: common surface cue yì bēi.



yī nián

一年

one year

Before Tone 2: common surface cue yì nián.



yī diǎn

一点

a little

Before Tone 3: common surface cue yì diǎn.



dì-yī

第一

first

In an ordinal, 一 keeps its Tone 1 cue.



yī, èr, sān

一、二、三

one, two, three

When counting it aloud, 一 keeps Tone 1.



Cover + retrieve

Choose one line. Hide it, say it once, then uncover and repair one detail.



11

The tone changes of 一 CONTINUED

After this page, you can Predict the common surface tone of 一 in short quantity phrases.

CHOOSE

Choose yī, yí, or yì

Use the following syllable and the two keep-Tone-1 cases.

13

WORKED EXAMPLE

___ 次 (cì, Tone 4)

☐ yī

☒ yí

☐ yì

Why it works: It completes the requested job using the target pattern.

14

___ 杯 (bēi, Tone 1)

☐ yī

☐ yí

☐ yì

15

第 ___ (ordinal “first”)

☐ yī

☐ yí

☐ yì

16

___ 年 (nián, Tone 2)

☐ yī

☐ yí

☐ yì

Finish from memory. Choose one completed response, cover the page, and make it again.



12

Mixed annotation

After this page, you can Identify the rule and write one concise surface cue.

LABEL

Rule labels

Label	Use it when	Cue
A	Tone 3 + Tone 3	First syllable rising-like
B	Tone 3 + Tone 1, 2, or 4	First syllable low and shortened
C	不 + Tone 4	bù is commonly heard as bú
D	一 + Tone 4	yī is commonly heard as yí
E	一 + Tone 1, 2, or 3	yī is commonly heard as yì



Find, cover, recall

Find one useful row. Cover it and reconstruct the target form before checking.



13

Mixed annotation

CONTINUED

After this page, you can Identify the rule and write one concise surface cue.

LABEL

Name the rule

Choose A, B, C, D, or E for the underlined first syllable or word.

17

WORKED EXAMPLE

很好 hěn hǎo



Why it works: It completes the requested job using the target pattern.

18

想去 xiǎng qù



19

不看 bù kàn

**One more from you**

Make a new response with the same target pattern.

Finish from memory. Choose one completed response, cover the page, and make it again.



14

Mixed annotation CONTINUED

After this page, you can Identify the rule and write one concise surface cue.

 LABEL

Name the rule

Choose A, B, C, D, or E for the underlined first syllable or word.

20

一件 yī jiàn

☐ A☐ B☐ C☐ D☐ E

21

一张 yī zhāng

☐ A☐ B☐ C☐ D☐ E

One more from you

Make a new response with the same target pattern.

Finish from memory. Choose one completed response, cover the page, and make it again.



15

Cold check and cautious transfer

After this page, you can Apply the core rules while respecting the limits of a printed cue.

ANNOTATE

Do this before looking back

Choose the best description; the dictionary pinyin stays unchanged.

22

WORKED EXAMPLE

可以 kěyǐ

- ☒ First syllable rising-like
- ☐ First syllable becomes lexical Tone 2
- ☐ No tone interaction

Why it works: Do not relabel the dictionary tone.

23

每天 měitiān

- ☐ First syllable commonly low and shortened
- ☐ First syllable rising-like
- ☐ First syllable becomes Tone 4

24

不去 bù qù

- ☐ Common surface cue bú qù
- ☐ Common surface cue bù qù
- ☐ Common surface cue bǔ qù



One more from you

Make a new response with the same target pattern.

Finish from memory. Choose one completed response, cover the page, and make it again.



16

Cold check and cautious transfer CONTINUED

After this page, you can Apply the core rules while respecting the limits of a printed cue.

ANNOTATE

Do this before looking back

Choose the best description; the dictionary pinyin stays unchanged.

25

一条 yī tiáo

☐ Common surface cue yì tiáo☐ Common surface cue yí tiáo☐ Keep yī because every quantity does

26

A long string contains three or more third tones.

☐ Check word grouping and prosodic boundaries before predicting☐ Always change every syllable to Tone 2☐ Never apply tone sandhi

One more from you

Make a new response with the same target pattern.

Finish from memory. Choose one completed response, cover the page, and make it again.



17

Cold check and cautious transfer CONTINUED

After this page, you can Apply the core rules while respecting the limits of a printed cue.

ANNOTATE

Annotate one phrase you already know

27

Write a two- to four-syllable phrase in dictionary pinyin. Under it, label only the common surface cue you can justify from this workbook. If the grouping is uncertain, write “check with audio or a teacher.”

Success looks like Accept a phrase with dictionary tones preserved and a separate, correctly scoped cue; uncertainty should be stated rather than hidden.

Choose your mode Write in Hanzi · write in tone-marked pinyin · say and record it



18

Check your work

After this page, you can compare your response, understand the repair, and choose one item to replay later.

✓ ANSWER GUIDE

Answers with useful feedback

Closed tasks have a direct answer. Open tasks include a model or success criteria; your response does not need to match word for word.

1

你好 (dictionary nǐ hǎo)

First syllable rising-like

Why: A clear 3 + 3 pair triggers third-tone sandhi on the first syllable.

2

很好 (dictionary hěn hǎo)

First syllable rising-like

3

水果 (dictionary shuǐguǒ)

Roughly 2 + 3 on the surface

Why: The first syllable remains lexical Tone 3 despite the rising-like realization.

4

Which layer still labels 你 in 你好 as Tone 3?

Dictionary layer

5

很忙 hěn máng (3 + 2)

Low and shortened

6

想去 xiǎng qù (3 + 4)

Low and shortened

Do not stop at checking. Circle one repair and make that response again with the answer covered.



19

Check your work CONTINUED

After this page, you can compare your response, understand the repair, and choose one item to replay later.

✓ ANSWER GUIDE

Answers with useful feedback

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Rising-like first syllable

8

Which context most readily allows a fuller third-tone contour?

In isolation or before a pause

9

不是 bù shì

bú shì

10

不来 bù lái

bù lái

11

不要 bù yào

bú yào

12

不好 bù hǎo

bù hǎo

Do not stop at checking. Circle one repair and make that response again with the answer covered.



20

Check your work CONTINUED

After this page, you can compare your response, understand the repair, and choose one item to replay later.

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Closed tasks have a direct answer. Open tasks include a model or success criteria; your response does not need to match word for word.

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___ 次 (cì, Tone 4)

yí

14

___ 杯 (bēi, Tone 1)

yì

15

第 ___ (ordinal "first")

yī

16

___ 年 (nián, Tone 2)

yì

17

很好 hěn hǎo

A

18

想去 xiǎng qù

B

Do not stop at checking. Circle one repair and make that response again with the answer covered.



21

Check your work CONTINUED

After this page, you can compare your response, understand the repair, and choose one item to replay later.

✓ ANSWER GUIDE

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不看 bù kàn

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一件 yī jiàn

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一张 yī zhāng

E

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Why: Do not relabel the dictionary tone.

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First syllable commonly low and shortened

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Common surface cue bú qù

Do not stop at checking. Circle one repair and make that response again with the answer covered.



22

Check your work CONTINUED

After this page, you can compare your response, understand the repair, and choose one item to replay later.

✓ ANSWER GUIDE

Answers with useful feedback

Closed tasks have a direct answer. Open tasks include a model or success criteria; your response does not need to match word for word.

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一条 yī tiáo

Common surface cue yì tiáo

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A long string contains three or more third tones.

Check word grouping and prosodic boundaries before predicting

Do not stop at checking. Circle one repair and make that response again with the answer covered.



23

Check your work CONTINUED

After this page, you can compare your response, understand the repair, and choose one item to replay later.

✓ ANSWER GUIDE

Answers with useful feedback

Closed tasks have a direct answer. Open tasks include a model or success criteria; your response does not need to match word for word.

27

Write a two- to four-syllable phrase in dictionary pinyin. Under it, label only the common surface cue you can justify from this workbook. If the grouping is uncertain, write “check with audio or a teacher.”

ONE POSSIBLE ANSWER

hěn hǎo (dictionary tones; in connected speech, the first syllable has a rising-like shape)

很好—dictionary pinyin hěn hǎo (3 + 3). Surface rehearsal cue: the first syllable is rising-like before the second Tone 3; keep the dictionary labels unchanged.

Why: Do not respell dictionary pinyin as if the context-driven surface cue were a new lexical tone.

Success criteria: Accept a phrase with dictionary tones preserved and a separate, correctly scoped cue; uncertainty should be stated rather than hidden.

Do not stop at checking. Circle one repair and make that response again with the answer covered.