

Mandarin 101 for Families: A Beginner's Guide

Here are the basics to help you understand what your child is learning:

Simplified vs. Traditional Characters

Mandarin Chinese can be written using two types of characters: Traditional and Simplified. Traditional characters are the original, more complex forms with many strokes, used in places like Taiwan and Hong Kong. Simplified characters were created to make reading and writing easier by reducing the number of strokes, and are used in Mainland China and taught in most schools in Canada.

In our Mandarin bilingual program in BC, students learn **Simplified Chinese characters**.

What Are Strokes in Mandarin?

Mandarin characters are made up of **strokes** — the individual lines used to write each character. Think of strokes like the building blocks of letters in English.

- There are **basic stroke types** (like horizontal, vertical, diagonal, etc.).
- When writing each stroke, you have to follow a specific direction
- Each character has a **specific stroke order** that must be followed
- **Why stroke order matters:**
 - It helps with **writing neatly and quickly**.
 - It makes it easier to **learn and remember characters**.
 - It's important for **using dictionaries and apps** that recognize handwriting.



 Example: The character for “person” (人) has **2 strokes**.

How Are Chinese Characters Formed?

Chinese characters are made up of **radicals** and **components**:

- A **radical** is a part of the character that often gives a clue about its meaning or pronunciation.
- Characters can be **simple** (one part) or **compound** (made of multiple parts).

 Example:

- The character 好 (hǎo – good) is made of:

- 女 (nǚ – woman)
- 子 (zǐ – child)

Together, they form the idea of “good” — a woman and child.

What Is Pinyin?

Pinyin is the Romanized spelling system used to show how Mandarin words sound. It uses the English alphabet to help learners pronounce Chinese words.

- Example: The word for “mom” is **mā** in pinyin.
 - Pinyin helps with:
 - **Pronunciation**
 - **Typing Chinese on a keyboard**
 - **Learning tones**
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What Are Tones in Mandarin?

Mandarin is a **tonal language**, which means the **pitch** or **intonation** of a word can change its meaning.

There are **4 main tones** (plus a neutral tone):

1. **First tone: Steady** (e.g., mā 妈 – mom)
2. **Second tone: Rising** (like you're asking a question) (má 麻 – numb)
3. **Third tone: Falling then rising** (mǎ 马 – horse)
4. **Fourth tone: Sharp and falling** (mà 骂 – scold)
5. **Fifth tone: Neutral tone** (ma 吗 – question)

 So, **mā**, **má**, **mǎ**, and **mà** are all different words!