

YOYO CHINESE

— *presents* —

TOP 10

MISTAKES

— *made by* —

CHINESE LEARNERS

by **Yangyang
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Hi there,

I'm Yangyang, the founder of YoyoChinese.com.

I have been teaching Chinese for many years both at college level and as a private tutor.

Throughout the course of my Chinese teaching, I've encountered many mistakes made by my English-speaking students. Some of these mistakes are very specific to the individual, but lots of them are repeated over and over again and share the same patterns.

Over the years, I've accumulated a collection of them. Now, I'd like to share with you these top 10 mistakes.

Please note that awareness of these mistakes should NOT scare you away or prevent you from speaking Chinese. Instead, it should give you more confidence because you will be more aware of how to say things correctly.

In this book, I will:

- Show you the top 10 Chinese mistakes made by English-speakers
- Explain why these mistakes are made
- Break down 10 related Chinese grammar concepts and explain them in detail
- Explore how you are affected by your mother tongue as an English-speaker
- Teach you quick and easy tips to avoid these mistakes in the future

I will use lots of practical examples, easy-to-understand tables and charts to help you reinforce important language concepts. Also, all the examples are written in Pinyin, Chinese characters (simplified, followed by traditional when there is a difference between the two versions), and English.

I sincerely hope you enjoy this ebook and learn a lot from it!

Thank you and happy studies!

Yangyang Cheng
YoyoChinese.com



Mistake #1 Assuming "to be" = "shì (是)"

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When people ask "how are you," how would you answer in Chinese "I am good"?

"wǒ shì hǎo (我是好) – I AM GOOD?"

Wrong.

One of the first things you learn in Chinese is that the verb "to be" is "shì (是)." So you automatically assume that whenever you need to say "is, am, are, were, was," you should use "shì (是)."

This assumption is wrong.

In Chinese, adjectives such as "beautiful," "smart" and "funny" function as verbs, so "beautiful" is already "to be beautiful," "smart" is already "to be smart" and "funny" is already "to be funny." Therefore, you don't need to say "She is beautiful." You only need to say "She, beautiful." "Is" is assumed.

Also, you need to add the word "hěn (很)" before adjectives to provide rhythmic balance.

"hěn (很)" means "very," but its meaning is weak here. It might sound like a weird concept to you, but do take the trouble to add "hěn (很)" each time you say "She is pretty," or "I am happy," or "He is smart."

So "I am good" in Chinese should be "wǒ hěn hǎo (我很好)."
Here are a few more examples.

In Chinese, adjectives function as verbs, so "is" is assumed and should be dropped.

Examples:

English	Pinyin	Chinese
She is pretty. (lit. She very pretty.)	tā hěn piào liang.	她 很 漂亮。
I am glad to meet you. (lit. I very glad know you.)	wǒ hěn gāo xìng rèn shi nǐ .	我 很 高兴认识你。 我 很 高興認識你。
I am tired. (lit. I very tired.)	wǒ hěn lèi .	我 很 累。

Mistake #1 Assuming "to be" = "shì (是)"

I just mentioned although "hěn (很)" means "very," its meaning is very weak. If you want to express the meaning that "I am VERY tired," use the word "fēi cháng (非常)" instead of "hěn (很)."

English	Pinyin	Chinese
I am very good. (lit. I very good.)	wǒ fēi cháng hǎo.	我 非常 好。
She is very pretty. (lit. She very pretty.)	tā fēi cháng piào liang.	她 非常 漂亮。
I am very tired. (lit. I very tired.)	wǒ fēi cháng lèi。	我 非常 累。
I am very very busy. (lit. I very very busy.)	wǒ fēi cháng fēi cháng máng。	我 非常非常 忙。

The usage of "shì (是)"

Remember, in Chinese, we use "shì (是)" a lot LESS OFTEN than we use the verb "to be" in English.

In Chinese, "shì (是)" is used when talking about someone's profession, identity or nationality. To simply put, you can think of "shì (是)" as the equal sign "=".

"shì" is used a lot LESS OFTEN in Chinese than "to be" is used in English.

English	Pinyin	Chinese
I am Mary.	wǒ shì Mary.	我是Mary。
She is a student.	tā shì xué shēng.	她是学生。 她是學生。
We are American.	wǒ men shì měi guó rén.	我们是美国人。 我們是美國人。

Mistake #2 Assuming "and" = "hé (和)"

English speakers often assume that the Chinese word "hé (和)" is equivalent to the English word "and."

This assumption is wrong.

The **English word** "and" can connect words (e.g. I like apple and oranges), phrases (e.g. I like playing soccer and watching movies), and sentences (I am John and I am American).

However, the **Chinese word** "hé (和)" can only connect words or phrases. It CANNOT connect sentences.

For example, it's wrong to say "I am John hé (和) I am American." "hé (和)" cannot be used to connect the two sentences "I am John" and "I am American."

Now you're probably wondering which word you should use when you want to say "I am John and I am American."

There are two ways to do this:

First, it's okay if you ONLY say "I am John. Period. I am American." Don't use anything in between the two sentences. That's how I would say it in Chinese. We omit the word "and."

If you think about it, it's actually a bad habit to use "and" all the time because "and" is merely a filler word here that contributes almost nothing to the meaning of the sentence.

Second, if you feel compelled to use the word "and," use the Chinese word "hái yǒu (还有)." "hái yǒu" means "in addition, also."

Again, it's really unnecessary. If you have to find a word to say "some sentence + and + some sentence," use "hái yǒu" instead of "hé."

“
Unlike in English, in Chinese, "hé (和)" - and - cannot connect two sentences.
”

Mistake #3 Ignoring Chinese measure words

“Measure words” or “classifiers” might be one of the most foreign concepts for English speakers.

A student of mine once tried to joke with his Chinese friend by saying, “wǒ yǒu sì tài tài (我有四太太).” He’d meant to say “I have four wives,” but since he omitted the crucial measure word “ge (个)” in the sentence, nobody could understand what he was trying to say and the joke completely fell flat. The correct way of saying “four wives” is “sì ge tài tài (四个太太).”

The concept of “measure words” or “classifiers” shouldn’t be entirely foreign to you.

In English, you have something similar:

“a **sheet** of paper,” “a **bar** of soap,” “a **set** of furniture,” “a **school** of fish,” etc. Here, sheet, bar, set, and school can be considered measure words or classifiers.

What’s different between English and Chinese is not so much the existence of measure words or classifiers, but rather the extent to which measure words are used. In Chinese, we use measure words all the time.

Here’s a summary when measure words have to be used.

1. When a quantity is involved – you must insert a measure word in between the **NUMBER** of the object and the **NAME** of the object.

English	Pinyin	Chinese
One hamburger	yí ge hàn bǎo bāo	一个汉堡包 / 一個漢堡包
Two younger sisters	liǎng ge mèi mei	两个妹妹 / 兩個妹妹
Three people	sān ge rén	三个人 / 三個人
Four books	sì běn shū	四本书 / 四本書
Five tables	wǔ zhāng zhuō zi	五张桌子 / 五張桌子
Six chairs	liù bǎ yǐ zi	六把椅子 / 六把椅子

“ In Chinese, you must insert a measure word in between the number of the object and the name of the object. ”

Mistake #3 Ignoring Chinese measure words

2. When you want to specify a noun. In other words, if you use “zhè - 这 (這) - this,” “nà - 那 - that” and “měi - 每 - every.”

English	Pinyin	Chinese
This chair	zhè bǎ yǐ zi	这把椅子 / 這把椅子
That person	nà ge rén	那个人 / 那個人
Every book	měi běn shū	每本书 / 每本書

3. When the question words “nǎ - 哪 - which” and “jǐ - 几 (幾) - how many” are used.

English	Pinyin	Chinese
Which book	nǎ běn shū	哪本书 / 哪本書
How many people (number usually < 10)	jǐ ge rén	几个人 / 幾個人
How many people (number usually > 10)	duō shǎo rén (*“duō shǎo” is an exception. It doesn't need a measure word.*)	多少人 (*“多少” is an exception. It doesn't need a measure word.*)

Classifiers

Measure words are also referred to as “classifiers” because some measure words actually have the additional function of classifying nouns along some physical dimensions, such as size, shape and so on.

Different measure words are used for different kinds of objects.

- flat objects such as tables or paper are counted with the measure word “zhāng (张)”
- long, thin objects such as ropes use “tiáo (条)”
- objects with volume such as books or magazines use “běn (本)”

Don't be overwhelmed yet! For now, just remember this: in Chinese, you must insert a measure word in between the **number** of the object and the **name** of the object.

Number + Measure Word + Object

Mistake #3 Ignoring Chinese measure words

The Generic Measure Word - “ge (个/個)”

The most widely used and the most generic measure word is “ge (个/個).” You can generally get away with using “ge (个/個)” when you’re not sure what measure word to use for a particular noun, so until you learn new specific measure words or classifiers, you should use “ge (个/個)” to save yourself some trouble.

You can also think of it this way: maybe a good English word that can be used to describe measure words is “unit.” For example, “yí ge hàn bǎo bāo (一个汉堡包)” is like saying “one unit of hamburger.” “sān ge rén (三个人)” is like saying “three units of people.”

Measure words are so important. If you use the generic measure word “ge” for everything, it’s okay. It just shows that you’re not a native speaker, but Chinese people will still understand you. However, if you skip measure words, Chinese people will NOT understand you at all. So it’s better to use a less-than-perfect measure word than not to use one at all.

From now on, I suggest you seriously consider getting into the habit of adding “ge” to your daily English conversations, e.g. saying four “ge” apples, three “ge” people, and 10 “ge” hamburgers.

The following table is a summary of common measure words. If you want to sound like a native speaker, memorize them. If not, it’s okay to simply use “ge” to replace all the following measure words and you will do just fine.

Measure words used in a similar way in English

Examples:

English	Used with	Examples
包 bāo	Pack	One pack of cigarettes yì bāo yān 一包烟
杯 bēi	Cup of, glass of	One cup of coffee yì bēi kā fēi 一杯咖啡
盒 hé	Box of	A box of chocolate yì hé qiǎo kè lì 一盒巧克力
块 / 塊 kuài	Piece of (cake, soap, land)	One piece of cake yí kuài dàn gāo 一块蛋糕 一块蛋糕
瓶 píng	Bottle of something	One bottle of beer yì píng pí jiǔ 一瓶啤酒

Mistake #3 Ignoring Chinese measure words

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English	Used with	Examples		
群 qún	Crowd, group, herd, flock, pack of (cows, bees, sheep)	One pack of sheep	yì qún yáng	一群羊
双 / 雙 shuāng	Pair of (shoes, chopsticks, gloves)	One pair of shoes	yì shuāng xié	一双鞋 一雙鞋
套 tào	Set of (furniture, stamps)	One set of furniture	yí tào jiā jù	一套家具
种 / 種 zhǒng	Type of, kind of	One type of fruit	yì zhǒng shuǐ guǒ	一种水果 一種水果

Measure words sometimes used or not required in English

For example:

English	Used with	Examples		
把 bǎ	Objects with a handle such as knife, umbrella, toothbrush, and chair	One knife	yì bǎ dāo	一把刀
本 běn	Things with volume, such as books, magazines	One book	yì běn shū	一本书 一本書
串 chuàn	Items joined together, e.g. by a string	One bunch of grapes	yí chuàn pú táo	一串葡萄
顶 / 頂 dǐng	Hat	One hat	yì dǐng mào zi	一顶帽子 一頂帽子
份 fèn	Used with items distributed in portions	One newspaper	yí fèn bào zhǐ	一份报纸 一份報紙
封 fēng	Letters, mail	One letter	yì fēng xìn	一封信
个 / 個 ge	Generic measure word that can be used with anything	One person	yí ge rén	一个人 一個人
间 / 間 jiān	Room (living room, bedroom, etc.)	One bedroom	yì jiān wò shì	一间卧室 一間臥室

Mistake #3 Ignoring Chinese measure words

English	Used with	Examples		
件 jiàn	Items of clothing (generally for the upper body), matters, affairs	One shirt One matter	yí jiàn chèn shān yí jiàn shì	一件衬衫 一件襯衫 一件事
棵 kē	Trees	One tree	yì kē shù	一棵树 一棵樹
辆 / 輛 liàng	Wheeled vehicles (such as cars, bicycles, trucks)	One car	yí liàng chē	一辆车 一輛車
篇 piān	Essay, article, report	One article	yì piān wén zhāng	一篇文章
首 shǒu	Passage of text (such as poems, songs)	One song	yì shǒu gē	一首歌
台 tái	Fairly large electrical items (such as computers, washing machines)	One computer	yì tái diàn nǎo	一台电脑 一台電腦
条 / 條 tiáo	Long and winding objects (such as towels, streets, pants, rope)	One towel One (pair) pants	yì tiáo máo jīn yì tiáo kù zi	一条毛巾 一條毛巾 一条裤子 一條褲子
位 wèi	People (a polite measure word to replace 个—ge)	One guest	yí wèi kè rén	一位客人
张 / 張 zhāng	Flat surfaces (tables, sheets of paper, beds, photos)	One table	yì zhāng zhuō zi	一张桌子 一張桌子
支 zhī	Fairly long, stick- like objects such as pens, pencils, cigarettes	One pen	yì zhī bǐ	一支笔 一支筆
只 / 隻 zhī	Animals, birds and insects One of a pair	One cat One hand One shoe	yì zhī māo yì zhī shǒu yì zhī xié zi	一只猫/一隻貓 一只手/一隻手 一只鞋子/一隻鞋子
座 zuò	Large, relatively permanent thing	One mountain	yí zuò shān	一座山

Mistake #4 Using “ma” for “non-yes-or-no” questions

Some students have this wrong notion:

“Whenever you put ‘ma’ at the end of a statement, you instantly change that statement into a question.”

This is not an accurate statement.

The accurate statement should be:

“Whenever you put ‘ma’ at the end of a statement, instantly, you change that statement into a ‘yes or no’ question.”

“ For questions that require specific answers other than “yes-or-no,” you CANNOT add “ma” at the end of the sentence. ”

Basically, for all questions that require specific answers other than “yes-or-no,” you CANNOT add “ma” at the end of the sentence.

For example, if you ask “Who are you?” “What do you do?” “How do I say this in Chinese?” “Why?” “Where is the bathroom?” etc., you are looking for real answers such as “I am Mary,” “I am a lawyer,” “The bathroom is there,” etc.

These are NOT “yes-or-no” questions, so you don’t add “ma” at the end.

The only time you add “ma” at the end of the sentence is when you are asking a question that requires a “yes-or-no” answer.

For example, to ask “Do you want coffee?” you simply add “ma” at the end of the statement of “You want coffee?” because the answer the question requires is either “Yes, I do,” or “No, I don’t.” In this case, you can add “ma” at the end.

Questions that need specific answers (Omit “ma”)

English	Pinyin	Chinese
Who are you? (lit. You are who?)	nǐ shì shéi ?	你是谁 ? 你是誰 ?
What job do you do? (lit. You do what job?)	nǐ zuò shén me gōng zuò ?	你做什么工作 ? 你做什麼工作 ?
How old are you? (lit. You how old?)	nǐ duō dà?	你多大?
Where’s the bathroom? (The bathroom is where?)	xǐ shǒu jiān zài nǎ lǐ ?	洗手间在哪里 ? 洗手間在哪裡 ?
Do you want coffee or tea?	nǐ yào kā fēi hái shì chá ?	你要咖啡还是茶 ? 你要咖啡還是茶 ?

Mistake #4 Using "ma" for "non-yes-or-no" questions

Questions that need "yes-or-no" answers (add "ma" at the end)

English	Pinyin	Chinese
Can you speak English? (lit. You can speak English ma ?)	nǐ huì shuō yīng wén ma ?	你会说英文吗？ 你會說英文嗎？
Does she have a boyfriend? (She has a boyfriend ma ?)	tā yǒu nán péng yǒu ma ?	她有男朋友吗？ 她有男朋友嗎？
Did you eat yet? (You ate ma ?)	nǐ chī fàn le ma ?	你吃饭了吗？ 你吃飯了嗎？

Mistake #5 Using “bù (不)” to negate the verb “yǒu (有) – to have”

Before we continue, remember this: you should NEVER say “bù yǒu (不有)” in Chinese.

The verb “to have – yǒu (有)” is verb with a VIP status. It deserves its own very special negation word which is “méi (没).” To say “not have,” you should say “méi yǒu (没有).” You should never say “bù yǒu (不有).” There is no such a thing!

“Yǒu” is a VIP verb and deserves its own special negation word.

Examples

English	Pinyin	Chinese
I don't have siblings. (lit. I not have siblings.)	wǒ méi yǒu xiōng dì jiě mèi.	我 没有 兄弟姐妹。
She doesn't have a boyfriend. (lit. She not have boyfriend.)	tā méi yǒu nán péng yǒu.	她 没有 男朋友。

Mistake #6 Using "bù (不)" to negate past action

To indicate that an action DID NOT happen in the past, use the negation word "méi (没)" or "méi yǒu (没有)." "yǒu (有)" is optional.

Since "méi (没)" is used exclusively to negate "yǒu (有)," when you see "méi (没)" by itself, you know that "有 (yǒu)" is assumed.

If you think about it, it DOES make sense to use "méi (没)" or "méi yǒu (没有)" to negate past action, because "méi yǒu (没有)" literally means "not have" and it's the same in English, "not have done something."

“ For negating past action, use “méi” or “méi yǒu.” For negating present/future, use “bù.” ”

Examples

English	Pinyin	Chinese
I didn't eat breakfast.	wǒ méi (yǒu) chī zǎo fàn 。	我 没(有) 吃早饭。 我 没(有) 吃早飯。
I have never been to China.	wǒ méi (yǒu) qù guò zhōng guó 。	我 没(有) 去过中国。 我 没(有) 去過中國。

For Present and Future Action

To indicate that an action DOES NOT happen now or WILL NOT happen in the future, use the negation word "bù (不)."

Examples

English	Pinyin	Chinese
I don't like him.	wǒ bù xǐ huān tā 。	我 不 喜欢他。 我 不 喜歡他。
I don't want to go.	wǒ bù xiǎng qù 。	我 不 想去。
I won't go to China tomorrow.	wǒ míng tiān bú qù zhōng guó 。	我明天 不 去中国。 我明天 不 去中國。
It won't rain tomorrow.	míng tiān bú huì xià yǔ 。	明天 不 会下雨。 明天 不 會下雨。

Mistake #6 Using "bù (不)" to negate past action

Compare these two sentences.

English	Pinyin	Chinese
I don't eat breakfast.	wǒ bù chī zǎo fàn 。	我 不 吃早饭。 我 不 吃早飯。
I didn't eat breakfast.	wǒ méi chī zǎo fàn 。	我 没 吃早饭。 我 沒 吃早飯。

(1) wǒ bù chī zǎo fàn (我不吃早饭)

It means "I don't eat breakfast."

When you use "bù (不)" to negate a verb, it means the action doesn't happen or will not happen. This sentence implies that I don't have the habit of eating breakfast. I just don't do that.

(2) wǒ méi chī zǎo fàn (我没吃早饭)

It means "I haven't eaten breakfast or I didn't eat breakfast."

Maybe I forgot to eat breakfast or maybe I didn't have time to eat breakfast, the result is that I didn't have breakfast.

Mistake #7 Confusion about “verb + default object” verbs

In Chinese, there’s such a concept called “verb + default object” verb.

For example, the English word “to read” can be either “kàn (看)” or “kàn shū (看书)” depending how you use it. “kàn shū (看书)” is a “verb + default object” verb.

In English, you can say “I like to read,” but in Chinese, you have to say “I like to read (something).” “To read” has to carry an object.

If you don’t have anything specific to refer to, you have to assign a default object to the verb “to read,” which is “book – shū (书).”

So, simply put, if YOU don’t specify, we’re going to specify FOR YOU by assigning an obligatory object to your verb. So “to read” in the sentence “I like to read” is “看书 (kàn shū).” We call verbs such as “看书 (kàn shū)” “verb + default object” verbs.

So in Chinese, when you say “I like to read,” you are literally saying “I like to read books.” However, if you have something specific to refer to, for example, if you want to say “I like to read newspapers,” you should use that specific thing —“newspapers” to replace the default object—“book - shū (书).”

“ Certain verbs must have an object following it, or else a “default object” will automatically be assigned. ”

Verb (English)	Verb (Chinese)	English	Pinyin	Chinese
To read	kàn shū 看书 看書 (read + book)	I like to read .	wǒ xǐ huān kàn shū 。	我喜欢看书。 我喜歡看書。
	kàn 看	I like to read books.	wǒ xǐ huān kàn shū 。	我喜欢看书。 我喜歡看書。
		I like to read newspapers.	wǒ xǐ huān kàn bào zhǐ 。	我喜欢看报纸。 我喜歡看報紙。
		I like to read novels.	wǒ xǐ huān kàn xiǎo shuō 。	我喜欢看小说。 我喜歡看小說。

Mistake #7 Confusion about "verb + default object" verbs

The following table covers some of the most common "verb + default object" verbs.

Verb English	Verbs Chinese	English	Pinyin	Chinese
To sing	chàng gē 唱歌 (sing + song)	I like to sing .	wǒ xǐ huān chàng gē 。	我喜欢 唱歌 。 我喜歡 唱歌 。
	chàng 唱	I like to sing Chinese songs.	wǒ xǐ huān chàng zhōng wén gē 。	我喜欢 唱 中文 歌。 我喜歡 唱 中文 歌 。
To eat	chī fàn 吃饭 吃飯 (eat + meal)	I like to eat .	wǒ xǐ huān chī fàn 。	我喜欢 吃饭 。 我喜歡 吃飯 。
	chī 吃	What do you want to eat ?	nǐ xiǎng chī shén me ?	你想 吃 什么？ 你想 吃 什麼？
To drive	kāi chē 开车 開車 (drive + car)	I drive to work everyday.	wǒ měi tiān kāi chē shàng bān 。	我每天 开车 上班。 我每天 開車 上班。
	kāi 开(開)	What car do you drive ? (lit. You drive what car?)	nǐ kāi shén me chē ?	你 开 什么车？ 你 開 什麼車？

Mistake #7 Confusion about "verb + default object" verbs

Verb English	Verbs Chinese	English	Pinyin	Chinese
To run	pǎo bù 跑步 (run + step)	I like to run (jog) in the morning.	wǒ xǐ huān zǎo shàng pǎo bù 。	我喜欢早上 跑步 。 我喜歡早上 跑步 。
	pǎo 跑	I like to run marathon.	wǒ xǐ huān pǎo marathon 。	我喜欢 跑 marathon。 我喜歡 跑 marathon。
To treat	qǐng kè 请客 請客 (treat + guest)	My treat today. (lit. Today I treat .)	jīn tiān wǒ qǐng kè 。	今天我 请客 。 今天我 請客 。
	qǐng 请(請)	I like to treat friends to meals.	wǒ xǐ huān qǐng péng you chí fàn 。	我喜欢 请 朋友吃飯。 我喜歡 請 朋友吃飯。
To dance	tiào wǔ 跳舞 (dance + dance)	Can I invite you to dance ? (lit. I can invite you to dance ma?)	wǒ kě yǐ qǐng nǐ tiào wǔ ma ?	我可以请你 跳舞 吗？ 我可以請你 跳舞 嗎？
	tiào 跳	Can you dance Cha Cha?	nǐ huì tiào Cha Cha ma ?	你会 跳 Cha Cha 吗？ 你會 跳 Cha Cha 嗎？

Mistake #7 Confusion about "verb + default object" verbs

Verb English	Verbs Chinese	English	Pinyin	Chinese
To speak (To talk)	shuō huà 说话 說話 (speak + remarks)	She likes to talk (speak) .	tā xǐ huān shuō huà 。	她喜欢 说话 。 她喜歡 說話 。
	shuō 说(說)	I can speak Chinese.	wǒ huì shuō zhōng wén 。	我会 说 中文。 我會 說 中文。
To cook	zuò fàn 做饭 做飯 (cook + rice)	Do you cook often? (You often cook ma?)	nǐ cháng cháng zuò fàn ma ?	你常常 做饭 吗？ 你常常 做飯 嗎？
	zuò 做	Can you cook Italian food?	nǐ huì zuò yì dà lì cài ma ?	你会 做 意大利菜吗？ 你會 做 意大利菜嗎？

Mistake #8 Forgetting to insert “de (的)” in between adjectives and nouns

In English, you can use the same word “pretty” for both “She’s pretty” and “She’s a pretty girl” and nothing needs to change for the word “pretty.”

But in Chinese, to use an adjective that contains more than one syllable to describe a noun, you have to insert “de (的)” in between the adjective and the noun. Why? I don’t know. Just memorize this rule! :)

“de (的)” needs to go between an adjective with more than one syllable and the noun.

English	Pinyin	Chinese characters
She’s pretty.	tā hěn piào liàng 。	她很漂亮 。
Pretty girl	piào liàng de nǚ hái	漂亮 的 女孩
This movie is interesting.	zhè ge diàn yǐng hěn yǒu yì si 。	这个电影很有意思 。
Interesting movie	yǒu yì si de diàn yǐng	有意思 的 电影 有意思 的 電影
This cat is cute.	zhè zhī māo hěn kě ài.	这只猫很可爱。 這隻貓很可愛。
Cute cat	kě ài de māo	可爱的猫 可愛的貓

However, for adjectives that only contain one character (syllable), you don’t need to insert “de (的).”

English	Pinyin	Chinese
Male student	nán xué shēng	男学生 / 男學生
Hot soup	rè tāng	热汤 / 熱湯
Small house	xiǎo fáng zi	小房子
Good person	hǎo rén	好人

Mistake #9 Using “le (了)” to indicate past tense for all verbs

Chinese is very loosely structured around tense. The easiest way to indicate tense is to use a time marker.

For example, to say, “I will go to China tomorrow,” you can simply say “I tomorrow go to China.” Adding “tomorrow” makes the sentence future tense.

If you want to say “I watched a movie yesterday,” you can simply say “I yesterday watch a movie.” “Yesterday” makes the sentence past tense.

There’s another way of expressing completion of an action, and that is to use the particle “le (了).”

There are two things you need to remember regarding the usage of “le (了)”

1. “le (了)” is NOT equivalent to past tense.

In other words, don’t treat “le (了)” as the suffix “-ed” as in “danced,” “used,” etc. “le (了)” emphasizes that the action has been completed and can be used in any tense.

2. Since only action verbs can be marked as complete, “le (了)” can ONLY be used with action verbs to indicate past tense.

Remember, you CANNOT use “le (了)” to indicate past tense for adjectival verbs and stative verbs. For adjectival verbs or stative verbs, you need to use a past time marker, such as “before or previously – yǐ qián (以前)” to indicate the past.

“le (了)” can only be used with action verbs to indicate past tense.

Mistake #9

Using “le (了)” to indicate past tense for all verbs

The following is a table of common adjectival verbs, stative verbs, and action verbs.

Adjectival Verbs (functioning as verbs in Chinese)		Stative Verbs (showing a state, not an action, the way things ARE)		Action Verbs (relating to a process instead of a state)	
English	Pinyin	English	Pinyin	English	Pinyin
Good	hǎo	To be	shì	To read	kàn (shū)
Pretty	piào liang	To have	yǒu	To watch	kàn
Handsome	shuài	To like	xǐ huān	To cook	zuò (fàn)
Adorable	kě ài	To think / to feel (expressing an opinion)	jué de	To dance	tiào (wǔ)
Smart	cōng míng	To know	zhī dào	To sing	chàng (gē)
Early	zǎo	To understand	míng bái	To go	qù
Late	wǎn	To feel (physical or emotional)	gǎn jué	To sleep	shuì (jiào)
Tall/high	gāo	To love	ài	To return to	huí
Big	dà	To want	yào	To buy	mǎi
Small	xiǎo	To want to (do something)	xiǎng	To say	shuō

The following table summarizes how to indicate past tense for adjectival verbs, stative verbs, and action verbs.

English	Pinyin	Chinese
Adjectival verbs – Adding a past time marker “previously or before”		
She was beautiful. (lit. She before beautiful.)	tā yǐ qián hěn piào liang 。	她 以前 很漂亮。

Mistake #9 Using “le (了)” to indicate past tense for all verbs

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10 Most Common Mistakes Made by English Speakers

Stative verbs – Adding a past time marker “previously or before”

Mary **was** John's girlfriend. (lit. Mary **before** is John's girlfriend.) Mary **yǐ qián** shì John de nǚ péng you 。 Mary**以前**是John的女朋友。

I **was** a teacher before. (lit. I **before** am teacher.) wǒ **yǐ qián** shì lǎo shī 。 我**以前**是老师。
我**以前**是老師。

I **had** lots of money. (lit. I **before** have lots of money.) wǒ **yǐ qián** yǒu hěnn duō qián 。 我**以前**有很多钱。
我**以前**有很多錢。

Action verbs – Adding “le”

I **ate** three hamburgers. wǒ **chī le** sān ge hàn bǎo bāo 。 我**吃了**三个汉堡包。
我**吃了**三個漢堡包。

He **went** home. tā **huí jiā le** 。 他**回家**了。

I **bought** lots of stuff. wǒ **mǎi le** hěnn duō dōng xi 。 我**买了**很多东西。
我**买了**很多東西。

If a stative verb or adjectival verb is followed by “le (了),” the meaning is “change of status” or “new situation” rather than “completeness of an action.”

English	Pinyin	Chinese
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Adjectival verbs

She is no longer beautiful. tā bú piào liang le 。 她不漂亮**了**。

I am tired now. (lit. I tired le) wǒ lèi le 。 我累**了**。

Stative verbs

I don't love you anymore. wǒ bú ài nǐ le 。 我不爱**你**了。
我不愛**你**了。

She is a mother now. (lit. She is mother le.) tā shì mā ma le 。 她是妈妈**了**。
她是媽媽**了**。

Now I understand. (lit. I understand le.) wǒ míng bái le 。 我明**白**了。

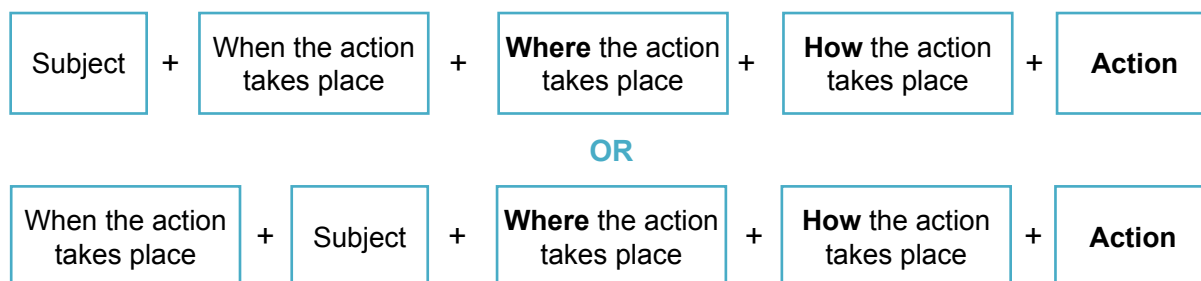
Mistake #10 Putting time and location at the wrong place

When it comes to simple Chinese sentences, such as “I love you” and “You love me,” the word order of a simple Chinese sentence is the same as English.

You can simply translate the sentence word by word from English to Chinese and you’ll then get the right Chinese sentence.

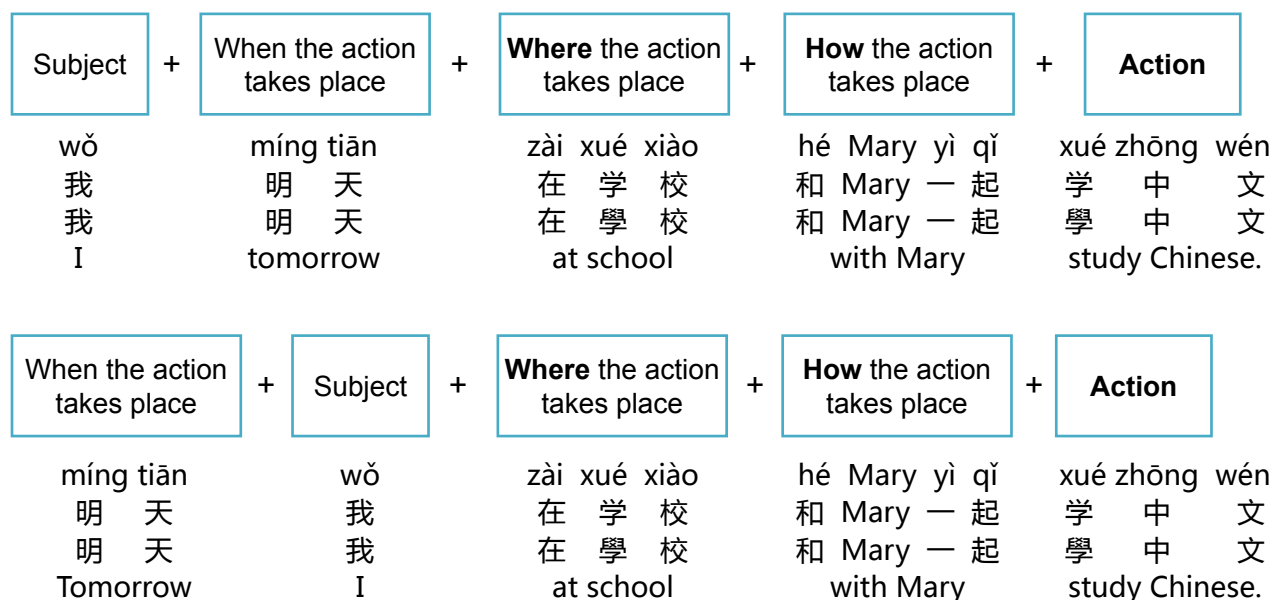
However, if a sentence has different elements such as when, where and how the action happens, you need to apply the Golden Rule of Chinese Word Order as follows:

“When a sentence addresses “when”, “where”, or “how” an action happens, the Golden Rule of Chinese Word Order applies.”



Examples:

The following two sentences show the right sequence of a complicated Chinese sentence. Both of them are correct. Now memorize them!



Mistake #10 Putting time and location at the wrong place

*Note: Among time phrases or location phrases themselves, remember this:
Think of Chinese as moving the focus from BIG TO SMALL.*

Time: Year, month, week, day, part of the day (morning, afternoon, evening), o'clock.
Location: country, province (state), city, street, building, apartment

Examples:

English	Chinglish
I get up at <u>7:00am everyday</u> .	I <u>everyday morning 7:00</u> get up. (“7am everyday” is “WHEN the action takes place”, so it should go before the action “get up”. Among timing phrases, the sequence is that “big time” comes first, followed by “smaller time.”)
See you at <u>9:00 pm next Thursday</u> .	<u>Next Thursday evening 9:00</u> see you. (“Big time” first, followed by “smaller time.”)
I studied Chinese in China for two years.	I in China studied Chinese for two years. (Two years here is the duration of the action, not when the action TAKES PLACE.)
I am going go to China tomorrow.	I tomorrow am going to China/ Tomorrow I am going to China (“China” here is the destination of the action, not where the action TAKES PLACE, so “go to China” should be considered as the action.)
Q: Where do you come from?	You from where come? (Questions and answers should follow the same word order and they mirror each other. See the answer above for mirroring.)
A: I come from China.	I from China come. (“From China” is “HOW the action takes place.”)
Q: How do you go to work?	You how go to work? (Questions and answers should follow the same word order and they mirror each other. See the answer above for mirroring.)
A: I go to work by subway.	I by subway go to work. (“by subway” is “HOW the action takes place”. It should go before “go to work.”)
Q: Where do you work?	You where work? (Questions and answers should follow the same word order and they mirror each other. See the answer above for mirroring.)
A: I work at IBM.	I at IBM work. (“at IBM” is “WHERE the action takes place”. It should go before “work”).

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Yangyang Cheng is the founder and on-camera host of Yoyo Chinese, an online Chinese language education company that uses videos to teach Chinese to learners from all over the world.

Before starting Yoyo Chinese, Yangyang was an adjunct professor at Pepperdine University, teaching Chinese language and culture to MBA students. Her independently developed, innovative curriculum earned her a word-of-mouth reputation as the #1 go-to Chinese teacher for *Fortune 500* executives and Hollywood celebrities.

Yangyang's intimate understanding of the problems English-speakers face when learning Chinese makes her one of the most uniquely qualified Chinese teachers out there. She has turned years of world-class teaching experience into fun, accessible lessons available at YoyoChinese.com.

Yangyang also worked as a bilingual host and reporter for the popular Chinese entertainment TV show *Hello! Hollywood*, reaching an audience of tens of millions in China and the U.S. Her on-camera experience enables her to bring life to language concepts, making Chinese fun and easy to learn.

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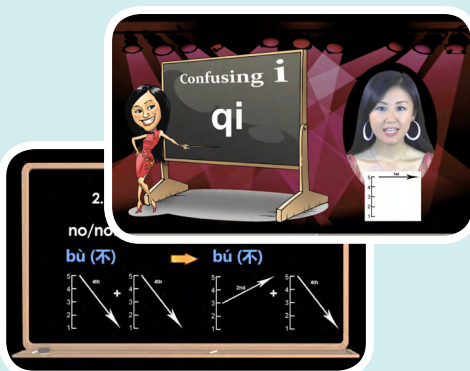
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