

Sample Lessons

Easy Chinese

Teach Yourself Chinese Step By Step

Mandarin

Level 1

易
学
中
文

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第一课

Lesson 1

Some Chinese characters are pictographic, which mean they were initially derived from pictures that represent the objects or ideas. A great majority of Chinese characters used today are determinative-phonetic, which consists of a "radical," that suggests the meaning, and a phonetic component that serves as a cue for the original sound.

You don't need to fully know the etymological origin of each character unless you want to become an etymologist someday. But it will make it easier for you to remember it if you have a general idea of how the character was initially formed. Taking advantage of its richness in association and connection will enable you to achieve maximum results with less effort.

For example, you can compare the similarity of the pictographs and the modern form as you read the following paragraphs about this character. You can also pay particular attention to those words in italics which reflect its basic meanings.



#1



rì

sun; day



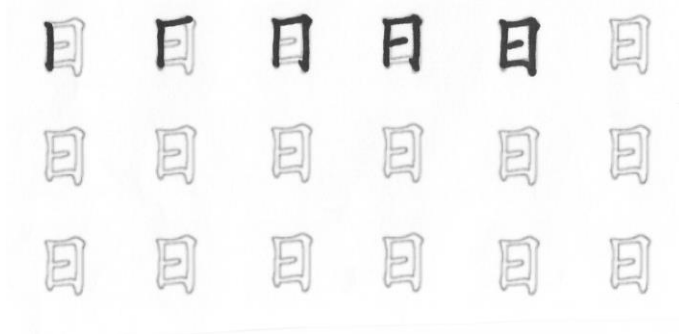


About this Character

If you want to send a message to someone with whom you have no written language, how would you create a symbol to represent the *sun*?

One way would be to draw a picture of the *sun* that the other can easily recognize. The ancient Chinese did just that when they created the original character for “*sun*.” Many Chinese characters were originally simple pictures of the thing they represented. In the course of time, some of these pictographic characters were modified in both form and style. As you see, the modern form for “*sun*” (日) has become stylized than the pictographic character shown here.

The character for “*sun*” is also the character for “*day*.” If you were the ancient people and you observed that the *sun* came out and came down at a predictable interval, *day* in and *day* out, wouldn't you use the same character for “*day*” too?



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A: Compound Words

An individual Chinese character can be a word in itself, but most Chinese words consist of two or more characters, which are referred to as compound words (复合词/ fù hé cí).

For each new character introduced, we will show you the compound words that can be formed: Combining the “new” character with the “old” characters.

Since 日 is the very first character shown in this course, we have no compound word to show except 日日. As you see, it is formed by duplicating the same character.

日日

Since we know that 日 can mean “sun” or “day,” we can infer that 日日 can mean “every day” or “daily.”

日日

rì rì

every day; daily

日日

Total number of characters, words, and sentences you have learned so far:

Characters

1

Compound words

1

Sentences

0



月

#2

月

yuè

moon; month



月

To create a character for “*moon*,” the ancient people chose the crescent *moon* as its shape, and for good reason: To distinguish it from the simple drawing of sun ☉. The modern forms for both “sun” (日) and “moon” (月) are similar except that the latter has long extensions of the two vertical strokes. “月” is also the character for “*month*” as “日” is for “*day*.”

Our script creators perhaps did not know that a palace in the moon was merely a fantasy, but they did know that the number of days between a new *moon* and the next followed a predictable interval. They knew exactly on what day of the *month* the crescent or full *moon* would be seen in the sky. It is therefore logical to assign to this character these two different meanings: “*moon*” and “*month*.”

月



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A. Compound Words

日月 rì yuè sun and moon; life; livelihood 日月

Cumulative total

Characters
2

Compound words
2

Sentences
0



山

#3

山

shān

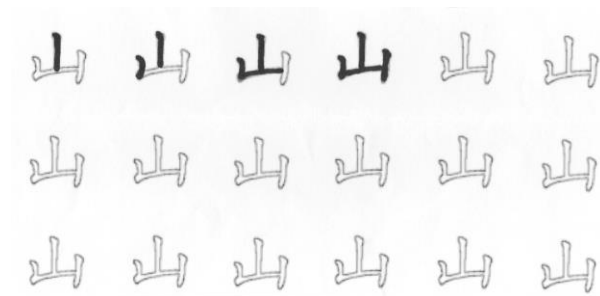
hill; mountain



山

The early drawings show the *mountain* rolling up and down. The modern form “山” retains the shape of the *mountains* but makes the slopes even deeper. In Chinese the distinction between a *hill* and a *mountain* lies not in the character itself but the adjective before it. While a large 山 denotes a *mountain*, a small 山 refers to a *hill*.

山



Cumulative total

Characters
3

Compound words
2

Sentences
0



川

#4

川

chuān

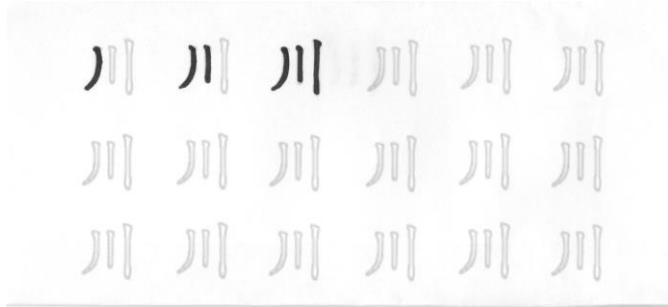
river; stream



川

The pictographs depict water flowing down in a *stream* (川). The banks are presented by two lines at both sides. “川” can refer to either a mountain *stream* or a *river*. In fact, “川” may suggest a current of running water or anything that *flows constantly*, including traffic and people. Many people are likely to associate “川” with Sichuan or Szechwan Province when they see this character by itself, because “川” is *Sichuan* (four streams) for short.

川



Linking Past Learning with New Information (溫故知新)

A. Compound Words

山川 shānchuān mountains and rivers; landscape 山川

Cumulative total

Characters
4

Compound words
3

Sentences
0



木

#5

木

mù

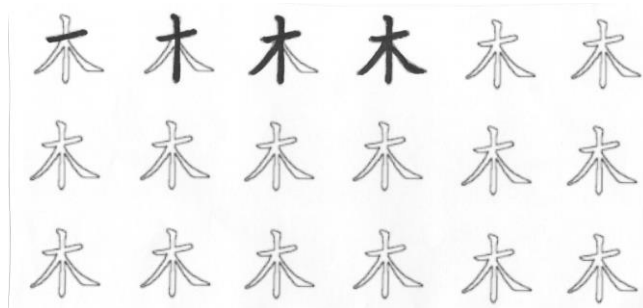
tree; wood



木

The two early pictographs depict a *tree* with its trunk, branches, and roots. “木” also denotes *wood*, *timber*, and *lumber*. Oh, yes, “木” can also be used to describe a person who is simple or honest like a “木头” (*wooden head*).

木



Characters	Cumulative total	Sentences
5	Compound words	0
	2	

土

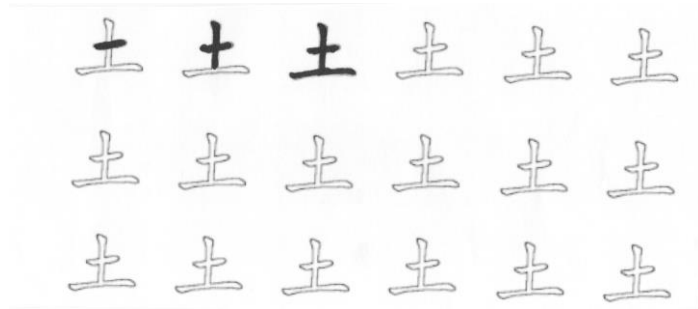
#6 土 tǔ soil; earth; unrefined



土

The pictographs suggest a growing plant sprouting from the *soil*. Although some plants can manage to grow without *soil*, most plants need *soil* to sustain a vigorous growth. Plants can grow even better if both *topsoil* and *subsoil* are available. The horizontal stroke added to the latter form 土 appears to recognize the importance of having both.

土



Linking Past Learning with New Information (溫故知新)

A. Compound Words

土木 tǔmù Construction; civil engineering 土木

Cumulative total

Characters
6

Compound words
4

Sentences
0



水

#7

水

shuǐ

water; liquid



水

The two pictographs show the *water* flowing down from its source. While the middle line suggests the direction of the *water* current, the four smaller dots represent the waves on the *water* surface. Although the pictograph does not show the source of the flowing *water*, it is obvious that everything has its origin. As the saying goes, “every river” (川) has its source and every tree (木) has its roots.

水



Linking Past Learning with New Information (溫故知新)


A. Compound Words

水土	shuǐtǔ	water and soil; natural environment and climate	水土
山水	shānshuǐ	water from mountain; landscape	山水

Characters
7

Compound words
6

Sentences
0



火

#8

火

huǒ

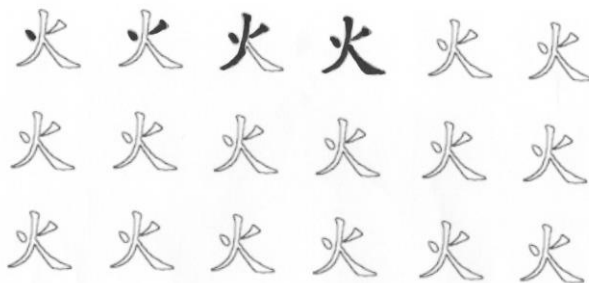
fire; anger; temper



火

The two drawings above are the early pictographs of *fire*. Ancient people learned that *fire* could be a source of comfort as well as calamity. They quickly learned that a single spark could start a prairie *fire*, just as a minor irritation could trigger uncontrollable *anger* in people with *quick temper*.

火



Linking Past Learning with New Information (溫故知新)

A. Compound Words

火山	huǒshān	volcano	火山
水火	shuǐhuǒ	water and fire; incompatible	水火

Cumulative total

Characters
8

Compound words
8

Sentences
0



上

#9

上

shàng

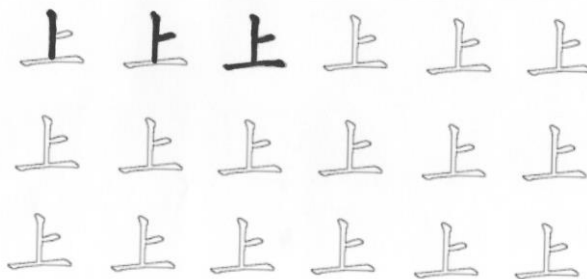
above; up; go up



上

Simple pictures can be used to represent concrete objects. No simple picture, however, can adequately represent an abstract idea. Many Chinese characters can be described as ideographic because they represent ideas, not the shape or appearance of an object. The character stands for *above* or *up* (上) is of the ideographic type. Shown above are two early forms of the ideographic characters that were used to represent the idea of “above.” The horizontal line represents the ground

上




Linking Past Learning with New Information (溫故知新)

A. Compound Words

上月	shàngyuè	last month	上月
上上	shàngshàng	the very best	上上
上山	shàngshān	go up the mountain	上山

Cumulative total

Characters	Compound words	Sentences
9	11	0



下

#10

下

xià

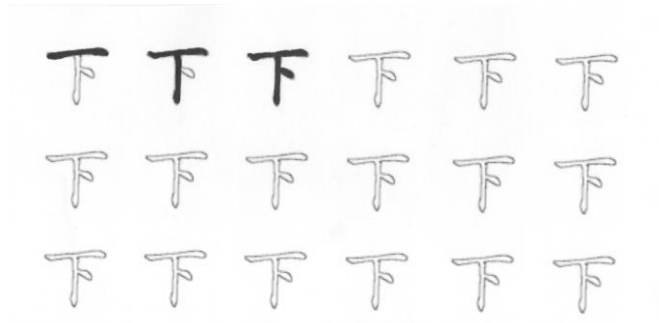
below; under; next;
descend



下

The character for “*under*” or “*below*” (下) is a reverse version of the character for “*above*” or “*over*” (上). If a line or stroke above the horizontal line can be used to indicate “*above*,” the same thing can also be used to represent “*below*” or “*under*” by placing it *below* the baseline.

下




Linking Past Learning with New Information (溫故知新)

A. Compound Words

下月	xiàyuè	next month	下月
下山	xiàshān	go down a mountain	下山
山下	shānxià	below the mountain	山下
上上下下	shàngshàng- xiàxià	above and below; all; the whole	上上下下

Cumulative total

Characters	Compound words	Sentences
10	19	0



大

#11

大

dà

big; large; great



大

The original character for “big” (大) is a pictograph of a man stretching out his arms. By extending both arms to the limit, it conveys the idea of “big” or “large.”

大




Linking Past Learning with New Information (溫故知新)

A. Compound Words

大火	dàhuǒ	a big fire	大火
大水	dàshuǐ	flood	大水
大大	dàdà	greatly; enormously	大大
大月	dàyuè	a lunar month of 30 days	大月
大川	dàychuān	great river	大川
大山	dàshān	great mountain	大山

Cumulative total

Characters	Compound words	Sentences
11	21	0



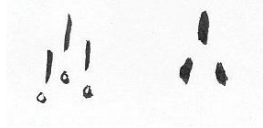
小

#12

小

xiǎo

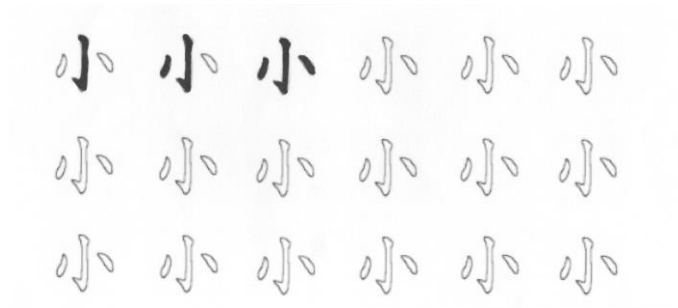
little; small; minor; young



小

The three dots in the early drawings represent things that are very *small*. The modern form retains the *small* dots but transforming the middle dot into a large stroke. By comparing with the middle stroke, the two dots at both sides appear to be relatively *small*.

小



Linking Past Learning with New Information (溫故知新)

A. Compound Words

小小	xiǎoxiǎo	very small; a little bit	小小
小月	xiǎoyuè	a lunar month of 29 days	小月
小山	xiǎoshān	hill	小山
小川	xiǎochuān	small river	小川
大小	dàxiǎo	big or small; adults and children	大小
月小	yuèxiǎo	a lunar month of 29 days	月小
大大小小	dàdàxiǎoxiǎo	the big and the small; the whole family	大大小小

Cumulative total

Characters
12

Compound words
28

Sentences
0



Exercises Lesson 1

A. Identify the character that is related to each English concept.

- | | | | | |
|----------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. big | (a) 天 | (b) 大 | (c) 人 | (d) 父 |
| 2. moon, month | (a) 白 | (b) 目 | (c) 月 | (d) 本 |
| 3. tree; wood | (a) 木 | (b) 母 | (c) 才 | (d) 本 |
| 4. water | (a) 小 | (b) 木 | (c) 來 | (d) 水 |
| 5. mountain | (a) 出 | (b) 尖 | (c) 山 | (d) 八 |
| 6. river | (a) 川 | (b) 三 | (c) 山 | (d) 了 |
| 7. fire | (a) 夫 | (b) 火 | (c) 人 | (d) 炎 |
| 8. above | (a) 下 | (b) 今 | (c) 公 | (d) 上 |
| 9. soil | (a) 二 | (b) 它 | (c) 土 | (d) 六 |
| 10. small | (a) 小 | (b) 下 | (c) 四 | (d) 日 |

B. Identify the character that is associated with each pinyin transcription.

- | | | | | |
|----------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| 1. shàng | (a) 山 | (b) 三 | (c) 上 | (d) 川 |
| 2. huǒ | (a) 大 | (b) 火 | (c) 下 | (d) 日 |
| 3. shuǐ | (a) 木 | (b) 月 | (c) 水 | (d) 尖 |
| 4. yuè | (a) 月 | (b) 日 | (c) 木 | (d) 田 |

5. chuān (a) 二 (b) 天 (c) 川 (d) 山

C. Identify the pinyin transcription that is associated with each character.

1. 木 (a) dà (b) mǎ (c) mù (d) mā
2. 日 (a) yì (b) dù (c) tǔ (d) rì
3. 山 (a) sǎn (b) shān (c) sān (d) shàn
4. 土 (a) dù (b) tǔ (c) tǔ (d) mó
5. 下 (a) xià (b) xiá (c) mā (d) dà

D. Identify the compound word or phrase that is associated with each English word or phrase.

livelihood

1. (a) 日月 (b) 大月 (c) 月小 (d) 上月

landscape

2. (a) 水月 (b) 山川 (c) 水土 (d) 大火

volcano

3. (a) 大水 (b) 水火 (c) 火山 (d) 上火

the very best

4. (a) 大小 (b) 上下 (c) 大大 (d) 上上

descend the mountain

5. (a) 下山 (b) 上山 (c) 上下 (d) 山上

every day

6. (a) 日日 (b) 月日 (c) 日上 (d) 小小

E. Identify the compound word or phrase that is associated with each pinyin transcription.

1. yuèdà (a) 大月 (b) 月小 (c) 月大 (d) 下山
2. dàchuān (a) 山川 (b) 大水 (c) 大火 (d) 大川
3. shānxià (a) 上山 (b) 山下 (c) 上下 (d) 下山
4. xiàshuǐ (a) 下水 (b) 水火 (c) 大小 (d) 大水
5. dàshuǐ (a) 大水 (b) 山上 (c) 水火 (d) 大火
6. xiàshān (a) 山川 (b) 下山 (c) 上山 (d) 日上

F. Select the best choice:

1. Which of the following characters differs in tone from the others?
(a) 水 (b) 火 (c) 土 (d) 山
2. Which of the following characters is pronounced in the fourth tone (à, è, ì)?
(a) 大 (b) 土 (c) 川 (d) 小
3. Which of the following characters is pronounced in the first ton (ā, ē, ō)?

(a) 小 (b) 上 (c) 月 (d) 川

4. Which of the following characters is pronounced in the third tone (ǎ, ě, ǐ)?

(a) 水 (b) 日 (c) 月 (d) 大

5. Which of the following compound words consists of both characters in the same tone?

(a) 水月 (b) 月小 (c) 大月 (d) 大火

6. Which of the following compound words consists of characters that differ in tone?

(a) 水火 (b) 山川 (c) 大水 (d) 日月

Answers

A.

1. b
2. c
3. a
4. d
5. c
6. a
7. b
8. d
9. c
10. a

B.

1. c
2. b
3. c
4. a
5. c

C.

1. c
2. d
3. b
4. c
5. a

D.

1. a
2. b
3. c
4. d
5. a
6. a

E.

1. c
2. d
3. a
4. d
5. a
6. b

F.

1. d
2. a
3. d
4. a
5. c
6. c

