

Writing

Chinese writing is not based on an alphabet. Instead it is based on characters, which represent part or all of a word. On the whole there is more than one character to a word and when written down the 'words' all fill the same amount of space regardless of the number of characters contained in it. Each character is made up of a number of strokes which must be written in the correct order. To be able to say the word a person has to know the character as it is not possible to sound a word out like in English.

Some characters are pictographs, which mean they are based on an object they represent. Only a small number of characters use pictographs such as those for moon, sun, tree, and person.

Most characters are ideographs, which are more complex than pictographs as they represent ideas. Some are fairly easy ideas to understand, e.g. the characters for sun and moon together means bright. Others are more complex ideas to understand, e.g. the characters for female and horse together means mother.

Despite there being different dialects the written language is mostly the same throughout China. There are some local characters specific to certain dialects. One key exception though is written colloquial Cantonese. It is so different from the main written language that is practically unreadable to a person used to the main form.

There are two different ways of writing characters. The traditional form is based on classical Chinese. This is used in Hong Kong, Taiwan and by some overseas Chinese. The simplified form was introduced in 1954 to improve literacy by decreasing the amount of strokes in some of the more complex characters. This is used in China and Singapore.

To be able to use a Chinese dictionary a person needs to know the first character in a 'word'. Then to find a 'word' the total number of strokes and which order they are written in is needed. To be able to read a Chinese newspaper a person needs to know approximately 3,000 characters. Knowledge of 4,000 to 5,000 characters is thought to demonstrate a person has had a good education.

Pinyin is the official system of writing Chinese using a Roman alphabet. When children first learn to write at school they use *pinyin* before learning the character. *Pinyin* is not widely understood outside of a school environment, although it appears on street names and shop fronts.

In China, calligraphy is regarded as one of the highest forms of art. There are different types of calligraphy but the most commonly seen is running script. The character should look elegant, as though all the strokes are flowing together. The strokes have to demonstrate the four characteristics of 'bone', 'flesh', 'muscle' and 'blood'. All four must balance for a perfect piece of writing.