

The verb to be

English A1

What this topic teaches

You already know this grammar. In Chinese you say . English has the same idea: *I am a student*. There is only one difference, and it is the whole topic: the Chinese word for *be* never changes, but the English verb **to be** changes its shape.

- *to be* has three shapes in the present: **am**, **is**, **are**.
- You will learn the shapes, the short forms, the negative , and the question form.
- Memory hook: *be* is a shape-shifter . Same verb, three costumes.
- Good news: after this topic you can say who you are, who your friends are, and that your homework is, sadly, real.

The three shapes: am, is, are

The shape depends on the person. Learn this table as a chant: *I am, he is, the rest are*.

Person	Form	Example
I	am	I am happy.
he / she / it	is	She is a doctor.
you / we / they	are	They are classmates.

- **I am** is a pair that never breaks up. *am* goes with *I* and with nothing else. They are best friends; do not separate them.
- **is** goes with one person or one thing: *he, she, it, Tom, my cat*.
- **are** goes with *you*, and with every plural : *we, they, my cats*.
- *it* is for things and animals: *It is a big dog*. Your phone, your lunch and your neighbour's car are all *it*.

■ A first try

Say these aloud. Then change the name to your own name.

- I **am** Lin.
- Lin **is** a student.
- You **are** my classmate.
- We **are** in Class 2.

Short forms in everyday speech

English speakers are lazy in a hurry, so *to be* has short forms, called **contractions** .

Full form	Short form	Example
I am	I'm	I'm tired.
he is / she is / it is	he's / she's / it's	She's from Beijing.
you are / we are / they are	you're / we're / they're	We're ready.

- Register : short forms are neutral to **informal** . Use them when you speak, and in emails to friends.
- In **formal** writing – an exam essay, a letter to a university – use the full forms: *I am, she is*.
- $\triangle$ *it's* means *it is*. The spelling *its* without the apostrophe means “belonging to it”: *The cat eats its food*. English learners mix these two up so often that teachers have a special tired face for it.

Saying no with not

To make a negative sentence, put **not** after *am / is / are*.

Statement	Negative
I am late.	I am not late.
She is busy.	She is not busy. / She isn't busy.
They are here.	They are not here. / They aren't here.

- The short negative forms are **isn't** and **aren't**: *He isn't angry. We aren't lost*.
- *I am not* has no “amn't” in standard English. *I amn't* does not exist, so please do not invent it at 2 a.m. before a test.
- Memory hook: *not* is a wall. It stands right after *be*, and nothing jumps over it.

Asking questions: the flip

Chinese makes a yes/no question by adding a small word at the end: asks *Are you a student?* English does something different: it **flips** the verb and the person.

Statement	Question
You are a student.	Are you a student?
She is Chinese.	Is she Chinese?
They are ready.	Are they ready?

- The verb jumps to the front: *You are* → *Are you?* Nothing else moves.
- $\triangle$ “*You are a student?*” with rising voice is only spoken surprise, like “”. For a real question, flip it.
- Short answers keep the verb: **Yes, I am.** / **No, she isn't.**

- △ Never say “*Yes, I’m.*” A short answer never ends in a short form. *Yes, I am* – say the full form. The short form is shy; it refuses to stand at the end of a sentence.

Watch out: traps for Chinese speakers

These three traps catch almost every Chinese learner. They are normal. Catch them once, laugh at them, and move on.

- △ **Chinese adjectives work alone; English adjectives need *be*.** Chinese says – no verb at all. English must say *He **is** very tall.* Without *is*, the sentence has no verb, and English sentences without verbs fall over. *She is beautiful. The food is hot. I am fine.*
- △ **Every English sentence needs a verb.** “*He a teacher*” feels fine because of , but English needs *He **is** a teacher.*
- △ **Do not mix the shapes.** “*I is*” and “*they is*” are the classic errors. Chant again: *I am, he is, the rest are.*

Say it aloud

Grammar you only read is grammar you forget. Say these aloud, and make them true for you.

- I am ____ (your name). I am from ____ (your city).
- My best friend is _____. We are classmates.
- I am not a morning person. (True for most of us.)
- Am I ready? Yes, I am.

Record yourself once on your phone. Listen. If you hear *am, is, are* in the right places, you have already won this topic.

Check yourself

Answer first, then read the explanation.

1. *She ____ a doctor.* – **is.** *She* is one person, so *is*. Chant: *I am, he is, the rest are.*
2. Make it negative: *They are late.* – **They aren’t late. / They are not late.** *not* stands right after *are*.
3. Make a question: *You are free tonight.* – **Are you free tonight?** Flip the verb to the front; nothing else moves.
4. – **He is very happy.** English adjectives cannot stand alone; they need *is*.
5. Short answer: *Are you a student?* – **Yes, I am.** Never *Yes, I’m* – the short form cannot end a sentence.