

Numbers

Ref Hsk3 Grammar

+ — approximating with two numbers in a row

Say **two consecutive numbers** back to back and you get “about, a few” — exactly like English “three or four” or “a day or two.” It’s the quickest way to be vague about a quantity.

Structure: Number + (next Number) + Measure Word + Noun

{zh: |wǒ|I / |děng|waited / |le / |nǐ|for you / |sān sì ge|three or four / |xiǎo shí|hours / 。 }

I waited three or four hours for you.

{zh: |zhè ge|this / |cí|word / |wǒ men|we / |xué guo|have studied / |liǎng sān cì|two or three times / |le / 。 }

We’ve studied this word two or three times now.

Remember: for the productive “N or N+1” approximation the two numbers are **next-door neighbours** — , , . (A few skip-pairs survive only as fixed idioms — e.g. in / “a few” — so learn those as set phrases, not as a pattern to build.) For “ten-odd / a dozen-ish,” use .

Watch out

- (“one or two”) is the common small one: (“a day or two”).

/ — big numbers

Here’s where Chinese numbers feel alien: the language counts big in (ten thousand) and (hundred million), not in thousands and millions. So you have to **group digits in fours**, not threes — and that mental regrouping is the whole skill.

Structure: Number + · Number +

{zh: |yì bǎi wàn|one million}

1,000,000 — literally “a hundred (ten-thousands).”

{zh: |shí sì yì|1.4 billion}

1.4 billion — roughly China’s population.

Remember: mentally **shift the comma one digit left:** 12,000 → “1|2000” → . Lock in = 10⁴ and = 10⁸, then regroup in fours: 52,152 = .

Watch out

- English “million” = (a hundred); English “billion” = (ten). The mismatch is what trips people up.

x y / / — telling the time (precise)

Once you can say whole hours, add the detail: for minutes, for quarter-hours, and for the minutes *short of* the hour. One quirk: a single-digit minute needs a (“oh”) to fill the gap.

Structure: x () y · x y · y x

{zh: |liǎng diǎn|two o’clock / |líng|oh / |jiǔ fēn|nine minutes}

2:09 (fills the single-digit minute).

{zh: |chà|to / |wǔ fēn|five minutes / |sān diǎn|three o’clock}

Five to three.

Remember: = a **quarter** (= :15, = :45); = “**short of**,” so is “five *to* three”; and any minute under 10 takes a ().

Watch out

- comes **first**, before the minutes and hour: = “7:55.”

+ () — telling the time (basic)

The whole hour is a number + (“o’clock”), with for half past. A full time-stamp is built **big-to-small:** day → part of day → clock time — the opposite of casual English.

Structure: (/ +) Number + (+)

{zh: |xiàn zài|now / |xià wǔ|afternoon / |liǎng diǎn bàn|half past two / 。 }

It’s 2:30 pm now.

{zh: |xīng qī tiān|Sunday / |shàng wǔ|morning / |shí diǎn bàn|half past ten}

Sunday at 10:30 am.

Remember: there’s **no “am/pm” word** — put (morning) or (afternoon) *before* the time, and build everything big-to-small (date → part of day →). The in is optional and usually dropped.

Watch out

- “2 o’clock” is , not — use for the hour count.