

Nouns

Ref Hsk3 Grammar

Time / 动词 + 以前 — “before (a specific point)”

Place 以前 (yǐqián) *after* a time or an action to mean “before” it. The trap for English speakers is the **order**: the reference point comes **first**, then 以前 — the exact reverse of “before eating,” which Chinese says as “eating-before.”

Structure: Time / Verb Phrase + 以前,

{zh: 吃饭 |chī fàn|eating / 以前 |yǐ qián|before / , 你 |nǐ|you / 洗手 |xǐ shǒu|wash hands / 了 |le / 吗 |ma / ? }

Did you wash your hands before eating?

{zh: 星期五 |xīng qī wǔ|Friday / 以前 |yǐ qián|before / , 你 |nǐ|you / 要 |yào|need to / 做完 |zuò wán|finish / 这些 |zhè xiē|this / 工作 |gōng zuò|work / 。 }

You need to finish this work before Friday.

Remember: Chinese stamps the time-word **after** the event: 吃饭以前 = “eating-before.” Flip the English order and tack 以前 on the end.

Watch out

- “Verb + 以前 ” means “before [doing] the action” (做作业以前 = “before doing homework”).

以前, — “in the past, before” (general)

Drop 以前 at the **front** of a sentence and it means “in the past, back then” — a general earlier time, no specific event attached. It can also slip in right after the subject.

Structure: 以前 + Subject + Verb · Subject + 以前 + Verb

{zh: 以前 |yǐ qián|in the past / , 我 |wǒ|I / 不会 |bú huì|couldn't / 说 |shuō|speak / 中文 |Zhōng wén|Chinese / 。 }

I couldn't speak Chinese before.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 以前 |yǐ qián|used to / 是 |shì|be / 厨师 |chú shī|a chef / 。 }

He used to be a chef.

Remember: one 以前, two spots — **after an event** it's “before X” (吃饭以前); **at the front** it's “in the past, used to.” It usually contrasts the past with now (often

with a 了 marking the change).

Watch out

- Front position or after-the-subject — both are correct.

刚才 — “just now, a moment ago”

刚才 (gāngcái) is a **time word** for the very recent past — “just now, a moment ago.” Don’t confuse it with the adverb **刚**: 刚才 is a *noun* (a moment that just passed) and can stand alone, while **刚** (“just”) clings to the verb.

Structure: (Subject +) 刚才 + Verb

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 刚才 |gāng cái|just now / 说 |shuō|said / 什么 |shén me|what / 了 |le / ? }

What did you just say?

{zh: 刚才 |gāng cái|just now / 谁 |shéi|who / 来 |lái|came / 了 |le / ? }

Who came just now?

Remember: 刚才 = a **noun** (a moment in the past, can sit anywhere); **刚** = an **adverb** (glued to the verb). 我刚到 (“I just arrived”) vs 刚才谁来了? (“who came a moment ago?”).

Watch out

- 刚才 can take a 了 / 的 on the verb (刚才到的); 刚 + verb usually doesn’t.

Time / Event + 时 — “when, at the time of”

时 is a compact, **formal** stand-in for 的时候 — “when, at the time of” — placed after a time or event. The thing to remember: it drops the 的.

Structure: Time / Event + 时,

{zh: 考试 |kǎo shì|exam / 时 |shí|during / 不要 |bú yào|don’t / 说话 |shuō huà|talk / 。 }

Don’t talk during the exam.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 面试 |miàn shì|interviews / 时 |shí|during / 经常 |jīng cháng|often / 问 |wèn|ask / 这个 |zhè ge|this / 问题 |wèn tí|question / 。 }

I often ask this question during interviews.

Remember: 时 is 的时候 in its Sunday best — same meaning, formal register, and no 的: 考试时 ✓, never 考试的时. In speech you'd just say 考试的时候.

Watch out

- Reserve it for writing or set phrases; everyday speech uses 的时候.

以后, — “in the future, from now on”

At the start of a sentence, 以后 means “in the future, from now on, later.” It mirrors 以前 exactly: it can sit at the front (“from now on”), after the subject, or after an event (“after ...”).

Structure: 以后 + Subject + Verb · Event + 以后,

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 以后 |yǐ hòu|from now on / 不 |bù|won't / 喝酒 |hē jiǔ|drink / 了 |le / 。 }

I won't drink from now on.

{zh: 下课 |xià kè|class ends / 以后 |yǐ hòu|after / , 我们 |wǒ men|we / 去 |qù|go / 吃饭 |chī fàn|eat / 。 }

After class, let's go eat.

Remember: 以后 is the perfect mirror of 以前 — after an event = “after X” (下课以后 / 下课以前); at the front = “from now on” / “in the past.” But it points to an indefinite future, **not** “in a moment” (that's 一会儿).

Watch out

- Don't let “later” mislead you into using it for “shortly” — 以后 is the open-ended future.

..... , 后来 — “afterwards, later” (past only)

后来 (hòulái) sequences **past** events — “afterwards, later on.” The hard limit: both events must have **already happened**. 后 (after) + 来 (came) — it has, by definition, *already come*.

Structure: [Past Event 1] , 后来 [Past Event 2]

{zh: 开始 |kāi shǐ|at first / 我 |wǒ|my / 父母 |fù mǔ|parents / 不 |bù|didn't / 同意 |tóng yì|agree / , 后来 |hòu lái|later / 同意 |tóng yì|agreed / 了 |le / 。 }

At first my parents disapproved; later they came round.

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 以前 |yǐ qián|used to / 是 |shì|be / 厨师 |chú shī|a chef / , 后来 |hòu lái|later / 当 |dāng|became / 了 |le / 老板 |lǎo bǎn|the boss / 。 }

He used to be a chef; later he became the boss.

Remember: 后来 = a PAST “and then” (both events done and dusted). For a *future* “and then,” switch to 然后. The 来 (“came”) tells you it has already arrived.

Watch out

- Never use 后来 for a plan or future sequence — that’s 然后.