

# Verb phrases

Ref Hsk3 Grammar

## 难 + 动词 — “hard to ...”

Stick **难** (“difficult”) in front of a verb and you get “**hard to ...**” — 难学 (“hard to learn”), 难找 (“hard to find”). Its mirror image is **好** (“easy to”: 好学 “easy to learn”). With sense verbs, 难 fuses into fixed adjectives: 难吃 (“bad-tasting”), 难听 (“unpleasant to hear”).

**Structure:** Subject + (很) 难 + Verb

{zh: 汉语 |Hàn yǔ|Chinese / 很 |hěn|very / 难 |nán|hard to / 学 |xué|learn / 。 }

*Chinese is hard to learn.*

{zh: 这里 |zhè lǐ|here / 的 |de / 咖啡 |kā fēi|coffee / 很 |hěn|very / 难喝 |nán hē|bad-tasting / 。 }

*The coffee here tastes bad.*

**Remember:** 难 = “hard to,” 好 = “easy to.” Bolt either onto a verb: 难懂 / 好懂 (“hard / easy to understand”), 难看 (“ugly,” lit. “hard to look at”), 好看 (“good-looking”).

**Watch out**

- With sense verbs it forms set adjectives: 难吃, 难听, 难闻 (“smells bad”), 难看 (“ugly”).

## 动词 + 了 + 时长 — “did ... for (a length of time)”

To say **how long** a finished action lasted, drop the **duration after the verb** — Chinese has no “for” preposition, so the word order does the carrying. If there’s an object too, slip 的 in front of it.

**Structure:** Subject + Verb + 了 + Duration (+ 的 + Object)

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 学 |xué|studied / 了 |le / 一年 |yì nián|a year / 中文 |Zhōng wén|Chinese / 。 }

*He studied Chinese for a year.*

{zh: 我们 |wǒ men|we / 坐 |zuò|took / 了 |le / 十五个 |shí wǔ ge|fifteen / 小时 |xiǎo shí|hours / 的 |de / 飞机 |fēi jī|flight / 。 }

*We took a fifteen-hour flight.*

**Remember: no “for” word — the slot does it.** Duration goes *after* the verb (学了一年, “studied *for* a year”), and an object hangs off a 的 (看了一天的电视, “watched TV all day”).

### Watch out

- Contrast 一年没学了 (“haven’t studied *in* a year”), where the same duration flips to *before* the verb.

## 动词 + 了 + 时长 + 了 — “has been ...ing (and still is)”

Tag a **second 了** onto the very end and the action stretches **up to now and keeps going** — “have been ...ing for X (and still am).” When the verb has an object, you **repeat the verb**.

**Structure:** Subject + Verb + 了 + Duration + 了 · (with object) Subj + Verb + Obj + Verb + 了 + Duration + 了

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 在 |zài|in / 北京 |Běi jīng|Beijing / 住 |zhù|has lived / 了 |le / 两年 |liǎng nián|two years / 了 |le / 。 }

*He’s been living in Beijing for two years (and still is).*

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 学 |xué|learning / 中文 |Zhōng wén|Chinese / 学 |xué|have learned / 了 |le / 一年 |yì nián|a year / 了 |le / 。 }

*I’ve been learning Chinese for a year now.*

**Remember: one 了 = a finished stretch; two 了 = still going.** That trailing 了 means “...and counting.” With an object, double the verb: 学中文**学**了一年了。

### Watch out

- Without the final 了, 住了两年 reads as “lived there two years (then left)” — the second 了 is the whole “still ongoing” difference.

## 没办法 + 动词 — “no way to, can’t”

**没办法** is “there’s **no way**.” Standing alone it’s a shrug — “it can’t be helped, what can you do.” In front of a verb it means “have no way to ..., can’t possibly ....”

**Structure:** Subject + 没办法 + Verb

{zh: 今天 |jīn tiān|today / 太忙 |tài máng|too busy / 了 |le / , 中午 |zhōng wǔ|at noon / 没办法 |méi bàn fǎ|no way to / 出去 |chū qù|go out / 吃饭 |chī fàn|for lunch / 。 }

*It's too busy today — no way to go out for lunch.*

{zh: 没有 |méi yǒu|without / 密码 |mì mǎ|the password / , 我们 |wǒ men|we / 没办法 |méi bàn fǎ|have no way to / 打开 |dǎ kāi|open / 这个 |zhè ge|this / 文件 |wén jiàn|file / 。 }

*Without the password, we have no way to open this file.*

**Remember:** 办法 = “a way / method,” so 没办法 = “no way (to)” and 有办法 = “have a way.” Alone, 没办法 is the all-purpose “what can you do.”

### Watch out

- It's stronger and more resigned than 不能 — it says the door is simply shut.

## 动词 + 动词 — softening by reduplication

Double a verb and the action turns **brief, light, “give-it-a-go”** — “have a quick look,” “talk it over.” It warms the tone, perfect for soft suggestions and polite requests.

**Structure:** Verb + Verb (one-syllable, AA) · ABAB (two-syllable)

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 想 |xiǎng|want to / 出去 |chū qù|go out / 走走 |zǒu zou|for a little walk / 。 }

*I'd like to go out for a bit of a walk.*

{zh: 这件 |zhè jiàn|this / 事 |shì|matter / 我们 |wǒ men|we / 商量 |shāng liang|discuss / 商量 |shāng liang / 。 }

*Let's talk this over.*

**Remember:** doubling a verb adds a “**just a little / give it a try**” softness. One-syllable doubles **AA** (看看), two-syllable doubles **ABAB** (商量商量) — *not* the adjective's AABB. 看一看 and past 看了看 are common variants.

### Watch out

- It only fits actions you can do “a bit of” — you wouldn't reduplicate a one-off like 死 or 完成.

## 很 + 动词 — feelings take 很

A small club of **feeling / mental verbs** (喜欢, 想, 爱, 希望, 了解, 讨厌 ...) act like adjectives and take **很** — which is exactly why beginners end up saying “very like!”

**Structure:** Subject + 很 + [feeling verb]

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 很 |hěn|really / 喜欢 |xǐ huan|like / 这部 |zhè bù|this / 电影 |diàn yǐng|film / 。 }

*I really like this film.*

{zh: 他 |tā|he / 很 |hěn|well / 了解 |liǎo jiě|understands / 中国 |Zhōng guó|Chinese / 文化 |wén huà|culture / 。 }

*He understands Chinese culture well.*

**Remember: feelings behave like adjectives**, so they take 很 (很喜欢, 很想). Action verbs don't — there's no 很吃 or 很走. If it's an emotion or a state of mind, 很 is welcome.

### Watch out

- As with adjectives, this 很 is often just the plain positive form, not a strong “very.”