

Comparing similar conjunctions

Ref Hsk3 Grammar

还是 vs 或者 — “or” in questions vs statements

This is the single most-tested “or” distinction in Chinese, so make it automatic. Both words mean “or” and present a choice, but they split by **sentence type**: **还是** offers the choice in a **question** (you’re asking someone to pick); **或者** lists alternatives in a **statement** (you’re just telling).

{zh: 你 |nǐ|you / 喝 |hē|drink / 茶 |chá|tea / 还是 |hái shì|or / 咖啡 |kā fēi|coffee / ?
}

Do you want tea or coffee?

{zh: 茶 |chá|tea / 或者 |huò zhě|or / 咖啡 |kā fēi|coffee / 都 |dōu|either / 行 |xíng|is fine / 。 }
}

Tea or coffee — either’s fine.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 不 |bù|don’t / 知道 |zhī dào|know / 他 |tā|he / 支持 |zhī chí|supports / 还是 |hái shì|or / 反对 |fǎn duì|opposes / 。 }
}

I don’t know whether he’s for or against.

Remember: ? → **还是**, . → **或者**. Asking someone to choose takes **还是**; stating open options takes **或者**. And a *hidden* question — “I don’t know whether A or B” — still counts as a question inside, so it keeps **还是**.

Watch out

- That embedded-question case (不知道 ... 还是 ...) trips people up — there’s no question mark, but the choice is still being *asked*, so **还是** stays.