

Comparing similar time words

Ref Hsk3 Grammar

以后 vs 然后 vs 后来 — three kinds of “after / then”

All three brush against “after / then,” but each owns a different slot — so the trick is to match the situation to the word:

- **以后** — “after / from now on,” and it can point to the **future**: 以后想开公司 (“I want to start a company *someday*”).
- **然后** — “and then,” joining the **next step** in a sequence (any time frame): 先吃饭，然后看电影.
- **后来** — “later, afterwards,” narrating the **next thing that happened — in the past only**.

{zh: 我 |wǒ|I / 以后 |yǐ hòu|in future / 想 |xiǎng|want to / 开 |kāi|start / 公司 |gōng sī|a company / 。 }

I want to start a company someday.

{zh: 先 |xiān|first / 吃饭 |chī fàn|eat / , 然后 |rán hòu|and then / 看 |kàn|watch / 电影 |diàn yǐng|a film / 。 }

Eat first, and then watch a film.

{zh: 后来 |hòu lái|later / 他 |tā|he / 去 |qù|went / 了 |le / 美国 |Měi guó|the US / 。 }

Later he went to the US.

Remember: the quick test — **future** → **以后**, **next step** → **然后**, **past story** → **后来**. Only 后来 is locked to the past; 以后 can reach into the future, and 然后 chains steps in any time frame.

Watch out

- 以后 and 后来 can both translate as “later,” but 后来 only narrates what has **already** happened — never a future “then.”