

“Y’all gonna learn Chinese,” Chinese-American MC Jin promises the bullies in his breakout hit, aptly titled “Learn Chinese.” It’s a tune with no subtle undertones, and even if he were dropping rhymes in modern Chinese rather than English, the written lyrics would carry the same meaning.

Had MC Jin been making threats a few thousand years ago, however, there would have been far more subtleties to work out. The ancient Chinese considered learning and teaching to be two halves of the same coin, and thus the characters 学 (xué, to study) and 教 (jiào, to teach) were used interchangeably to mean the same thing. “The Discourse of States” (《国语》 Guóyǔ), an ancient collection of records compiled over 3,000 years ago, makes a fine example of this with the lesson: “顺德以学子，择言以教子” (shùn dé yǐ xué zǐ, zé yán yǐ jiào zǐ. Teach your son with ethical principles and selected useful words). In this scenario, both 学 and 教 mean “teach.”

In modern Chinese, the two characters have taken on distinct meanings, with 学 keeping a grip on the meaning “to learn.” Thus, when Confucius said, “学而不思则罔，思而不学则殆” (xué ér bù sī zé wǎng, sī ér bù xué zé dài) over two centuries ago, he stuck to 学 to convey the meaning, “Learning without reasoning leads to confusion, thinking without learning is a waste of effort.”

Today, we still use the word 学 in this way, albeit with simpler catchphrases like “活到老，学到老” (huó dào lǎo, xué dào lǎo), or, “You’re never too old to learn.”

It says something about Chinese



Revealing the makeup, stroke by stroke, of one of the first characters you’ll ever learn

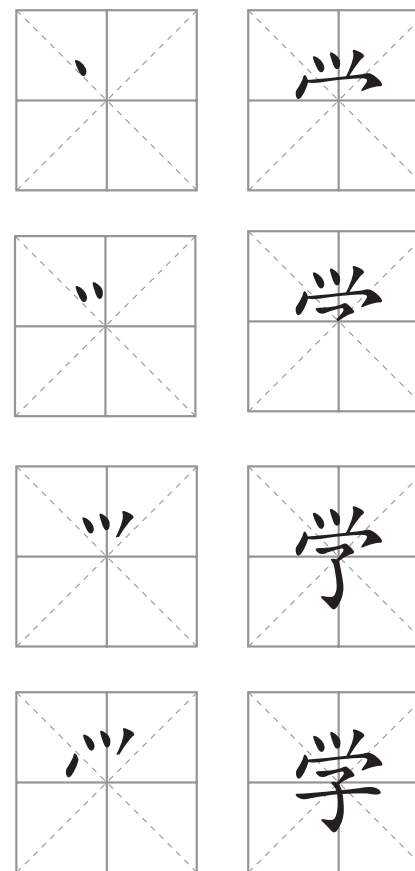
你能做到“活到老，学到老”吗？

learning methods that 学 has another particular meaning when written alone: it can also be interpreted as “to mimic.” For instance, “她学鸟叫，学得很像” (tā xué niǎo jiào, xué de hěn xiàng. She can mimic birds really closely), or “她的语调太奇怪了，我学不来” (tā de yǔdiào tài qíguài le, wǒ xué bù lái. Her

tone is too strange for me to mimic).

In order to avoid confusion, “to learn” is often differentiated from other meanings by writing it as 学习 (xuéxí) instead of just 学, a practice that also fits with modern Chinese’s tendency to favor two-character words for reasons of rhythm.

In other words and expressions,



Pronunciation: xué
Strokes: 8
Radical: 学

Used in the words:

xuéxí
学习
to learn

xuéwén
学问
knowledge

学 can form part of a noun, usually one that relates to learning activities, as in 学问 (xuéwén, knowledge), 学科 (xuékē, discipline), 学术 (xuéshù, academics), 学说 (xuéshuō, doctrine) and 学派 (xuépài, school as in school of thought).

Because of the multiple meanings of 学, it is essential to consider the character’s specific meaning in a word

or expression. In “勤学好问” (qín xué hào wèn, to study diligently and ask frequent questions), it refers to 学习, but in a phrase used to show modesty, “才疏学浅” (cái shū xué qiǎn, to have little talent and limited knowledge), it means 学问.

For those readers seeking a Chinese knowledge challenge, see if you can’t



ORACLE BONE

Inscriptions on animal bones and tortoise shells from over 3,000 years ago show the earliest form of the character: two hands holding an arithmetic tool, 爻. The bottom of the character portrays an adult’s knee, on which a child is learning to do math. An alternative explanation is that the character represents a person with his hands full of wood learning to build a house.



BRONZE SCRIPT

The evolved form of 学 can be found on bronze vessels from the Zhou Dynasty (1046 B.C.-256 B.C.), in which 子 was added below, emphasizing that the learner is a child. On the right lower corner, 攴 was sometimes also added to represent a stick pointer held by a teacher.



SEAL SCRIPT

Though fundamentally the same, the character developed a more squared-off shape 800 years later. The strokes were also polished and their proportions readjusted to make an aesthetically pleasing seal mark. To simplify things further, the 攴 was later omitted.

tell us the specific meaning of 学 in each of these expressions: 孔孟之学 (Kǒng Mèng zhī xué), 说学逗唱 (shuō xué dòu chàng) and 学富五车 (xué fù wǔ chē). Tell us on our website or send an email if you have the answer!

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