

ONEDOTDOT CHINESE · GRAMMAR WORKSHEET

The Usage of 了 le

Three kinds of 了, when to use them, and when not to

了₁

Verb-suffix
action complete

了₂

Sentence particle
new situation

了₃

Set structure
excessiveness

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On this worksheet

01 了₁ Verb-suffix: action complete

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HOW TO USE THIS WORKSHEET

Each example shows Traditional Chinese first, with Simplified Chinese below in grey when the characters differ.
Try every “**Your turn**” on your own before checking the Answers at the end.



PART 01

了₁ Verb-suffix 了: action complete

Here comes the tricky part. Does “action complete” mean past tense?

The answer is **NO!** Take “I didn’t do it.” It is in the past tense, but no action was completed, so Chinese uses 没. 了₁ is not used at all: 我沒做 wǒ méi zuò. And 了₁ can also be used for the future: it marks that one action will be done before the next one starts. So please do not think of 了₁ as the past tense.

明天下了課，我就去找你。

明天下了课，我就去找你。

Míngtiān xiàle kè, wǒ jiù qù zhǎo nǐ.

After class tomorrow, I'll come and find you.

This is the future, but 了₁ still works: “finishing class” is completed before “coming to find you”.

Basic structure

S + V + 了 + (O)

他吃了飯

他吃了饭

Tā chīle fàn.

He had a meal.

It emphasizes that the action “eat” has been finished.

我睡了覺

我睡了觉

Wǒ shuìle jiào.

I slept.

It also emphasizes that I am awake now. The sleeping is finished.

TIP

A short sentence with only V + 了 + object (like 他吃了飯 tā chīle fàn) can sound unfinished to native speakers, as if something else is coming. It sounds complete when you add a number (我睡了一覺 wǒ shuìle yí jiào), a time, or the next action (他吃了飯就走了 tā chīle fàn jiù zǒu le).

YOUR TURN · I took a shower.

1

Related structure 1

S + V + 了 + Number + Measure Word + O

他昨天吃了兩碗飯

他昨天吃了两碗饭

Tā zuótiān chīle liǎng wǎn fàn.

He ate two bowls of rice yesterday.

我喝了五杯水

Wǒ hēle wǔ bēi shuǐ.

I drank five glasses of water.

YOUR TURN · I read three books.

2

Related structure 2

S + V + 了 + Time spent + (的 de + O)

他昨天晚上看了兩個鐘頭的電視

他昨天晚上看了两个钟头的电视

Tā zuótiān wǎnshang kànle liǎng ge zhōngtóu de diànshì.

He watched two hours of TV last night.

他跟他男朋友交往了七年

Tā gēn tā nán péngyǒu jiāowǎngle qī nián.

He was in a relationship with his boyfriend for seven years.

YOUR TURN · I spent three hours reading a book this morning.

3



PART 02

了₂ Sentence particle 了: a new situation

了₂ sits at the **end of the sentence**. It tells you something has changed: it wasn't like this before, but **now** it is.

Basic structure

S + V / Adj + (O) + 了

他吃飯了

他吃饭了

Tā chī fàn le.

He has eaten.

The situation has changed: he hadn't eaten before, but now he has.

王先生五年前很胖，現在瘦了

王先生五年前很胖，现在瘦了

Wáng xiānsheng wǔ nián qián hěn pàng, xiànzài shòu le.

Mr. Wang was fat five years ago, but now he's thin.

"Thin" is the new state. He wasn't thin, but now he is.

學中文的人多了

学中文的人多了

Xué Zhōngwén de rén duō le.

More people are learning Mandarin now.

Not many people learned Mandarin before, but now that has changed.

東西都貴了

东西都贵了

Dōngxi dōu guì le.

Everything has become expensive.

Things weren't this expensive before.

YOUR TURN · I can speak Chinese now!

4

YOUR TURN · I get it now. (I didn't understand it before.)

5

Related structure 1 · The situation will change soon

快 kuài / 快要 kuàiyào / 就要 jiùyào / 要 yào + V / Adj ... 了

他的生日快到了

Tā de shēngrì kuài dào le.

His birthday is coming soon.

天快黑了

Tiān kuài hēi le.

It's almost dark.

他要睡覺了

他要睡觉了

Tā yào shuìjiào le.

He is going to sleep soon.

下個星期就要考試了

下个星期就要考试了

Xià ge xīngqī jiù yào kǎoshì le.

We have an exam next week.

WATCH OUT

When you name a specific time (明天 míngtiān, 下個星期 xià ge xīngqī, 三點 sān diǎn), use 就要 jiù yào, not 快 kuài or 快要 kuài yào.

× 明天快要考試了 → ✓ 明天就要考試了

YOUR TURN · I am going to take a bath soon.

6

YOUR TURN · It's going to rain soon.

7

Related structure 2 · Not anymore

(已經 yǐjīng) + 不 bù + V + 了 / (已經 yǐjīng) + 沒(有) méi(yǒu) + N + 了

他已經不愛你了

他已经不爱你了

Tā yǐjīng bú ài nǐ le.

He doesn't love you anymore.

我已經不學中文了

我已经不学中文了

Wǒ yǐjīng bù xué Zhōngwén le.

I don't study Chinese anymore.

我已經沒錢了

我已经没钱了

Wǒ yǐjīng méi qián le.

I don't have any money anymore.

YOUR TURN · My father doesn't eat meat anymore.

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YOUR TURN · I don't have time anymore.

9

Related structure 3 · Stop doing something

別 bié + V(O) + 了

別哭了！

别哭了！

Bié kū le!

Don't cry!

別喝了！

别喝了！

Bié hē le!

Stop drinking!

YOUR TURN · Stop using your cellphone.

10



PART 03

Let's compare these two 了

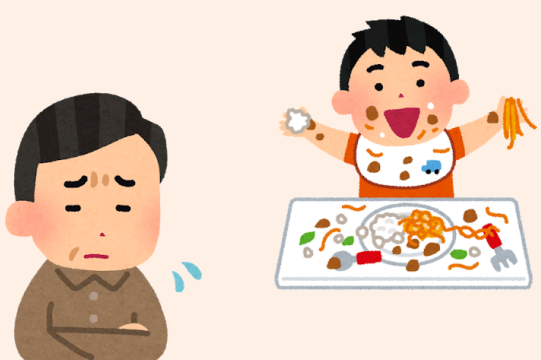
下雨了 Xià yǔ le vs 下了雨 Xià le yǔ



我不吃飯 Wǒ bù chī fàn vs 我不吃飯了 Wǒ bù chī fàn le



你吃了飯嗎 Nǐ chīle fàn ma vs 你吃飯了嗎 Nǐ chī fàn le ma

了₁ (action complete) <u>你吃了飯嗎? Nǐ chīle fàn ma?</u> Have you finished eating? (Have you complete the action of eating?) 	了₂ (New situation) <u>你吃飯了嗎? Nǐ chīfàn le ma?</u> Have you eaten? (You are checking the situation has been changed or not) 
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GOOD TO KNOW

As an everyday greeting, people say 你吃飯了嗎? / 你吃了嗎? (Nǐ chī fàn le ma? / Nǐ chīle ma?). 你吃了飯嗎 nǐ chīle fàn ma sounds less natural as a greeting. If you really want to ask whether someone has finished their meal, say 你吃完飯了嗎? / 你吃完饭了吗? Nǐ chīwán fàn le ma?

四

PART 04

了₃ Set structure 了: to express excessiveness

太 tài + Adj + 了

Adj + 死 sǐ + 了

Adj + 極 jí + 了

王先生太胖了!

Wáng xiānsheng tài pàng le!

Mr. Wang is too fat!

今天熱死了!

今天热死了!

Jīntiān rè sǐ le!

It's so hot today!

我真的累極了!

我真的累极了!

Wǒ zhēn de lèi jí le!

I am really exhausted.

太好了!

Tài hǎo le!

That's great!

太...了 is not always negative. It also expresses strong positive feelings.

YOUR TURN · This is too expensive!

11

五

PART 05

了₁ + 了₂: progress up to the present

Use both 了 together to say how much has been done **so far**, up to now.

S + (已經 yǐjīng) + V + 了₁ + Number + Measure Word + O + 了₂

他已經喝了兩杯酒了

他已经喝了两杯酒了

Tā yǐjīng hēle liǎng bēi jiǔ le.

He has already drunk two glasses of wine.

我已經寫了500個中文字了

我已经写了500个中文字了

Wǒ yǐjīng xiěle wǔbǎi ge Zhōngwénzì le.

I have written 500 Chinese characters.

YOUR TURN • I have already baked three cakes.

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YOUR TURN • She has already run 2 km.

13

S + (已經 yǐjīng) + V + 了₁ + Time spent + (的 de + O) + 了₂

The object can go either at the end of the sentence or at the beginning, as a topic.

他已經看了兩個鐘頭的電視了

他已经看了两个钟头的电视了

Tā yǐjīng kànle liǎng ge zhōngtóu de diànshì le.

He has been watching TV for two hours already.

這隻狗，他養了五年了

这只狗，他养了五年了

Zhè zhī gǒu, tā yǎngle wǔ nián le.

He has had this dog for five years.

YOUR TURN • She has worked for 12 hours.

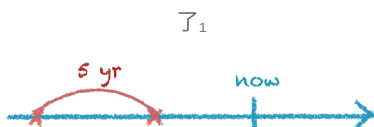
14

YOUR TURN • My cat has slept for 8 hours.

15

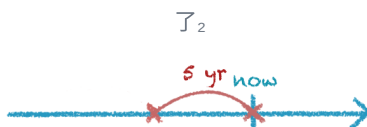
What's the difference?

我在日本住了五年
Wǒ zài Rìběn zhùle wǔ nián.



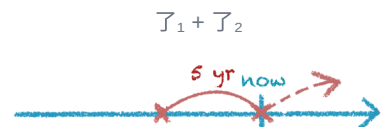
I lived in Japan for 5 years.
Finished, not ongoing.

我在日本住五年了
Wǒ zài Rìběn zhù wǔ nián le.



I have lived in Japan for 5 years.
Up to now; no idea about the future.

我在日本住了五年了
Wǒ zài Rìběn zhùle wǔ nián le.



I have been living in Japan for 5 years.
Most likely still ongoing.



PART 06

Where verb-suffix 了 is not used

The following verbs **cannot be “completed”**, so there is no 了₁. But their situation can change, so 了₂ is still possible.

Habitual activity · If it's a habit, how could you complete it?

Watch for words like usually, rarely, every Christmas, every Sunday, each day: 常常 chángcháng, 每天 měitiān, 每個星期天 měi ge xīngqītiān.

我以前每天喝三杯咖啡，現在只喝一杯了
我以前每天喝三杯咖啡，现在只喝一杯了
Wǒ yǐqián měitiān hē sān bēi kāfēi, xiànzài zhǐ hē yì bēi le.
I used to drink three cups of coffee a day, but now I only drink one.

我去年每個星期六學中文，今年不學了
我去年每个星期六学中文，今年不学了
Wǒ qùnián měi ge xīngqīliù xué Zhōngwén, jīnnián bù xué le.
I studied Chinese every Saturday last year, but not this year.

YOUR TURN · I used to eat a whole cake every birthday, but I don't anymore.

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Dispositional verbs · You cannot complete a feeling

Words like feel, think, believe, love, like, hate, guess: 覺得 juéde, 想 xiǎng, 相信 xiāngxìn, 愛 ài, 喜歡 xǐhuan, 討厭 tǎoyàn, 猜 cāi.

我早上覺得很累，現在不累了
我早上觉得很累，现在不累了
Wǒ zǎoshang juéde hěn lèi, xiànzài bú lèi le.
I was tired this morning, but I'm OK now.

他以前相信神，現在不信了
他以前相信神，现在不信了
Tā yǐqián xiāngxìn shén, xiànzài bú xìn le.
He used to believe in God, but now he doesn't.

YOUR TURN · I loved you, but I don't love you anymore.

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Special verbs · 在 zài, 姓 xìng, 是 shì, 有 yǒu

我在日本了
Wǒ zài Rìběn le.
I am in Japan now.
I wasn't in Japan before. To talk about the past, say 我以前在日本 wǒ yǐqián zài Rìběn.

我是老師了
我是老师了
Wǒ shì lǎoshī le.
I am a teacher now.
I wasn't a teacher before. To talk about the past, say 我以前是老師 wǒ yǐqián shì lǎoshī.

A NOTE ON 有

有了 yǒule does exist, but it means “to come to have, to get”, usually followed by more information: 她有了男朋友以後就變了 (Tā yǒule nán péngyǒu yǐhòu jiù biàn le. After she got a boyfriend, she changed.). On its own, a short sentence like 我有了狗 sounds unnatural.

YOUR TURN • I married Mr. Zhang, so now my last name is Zhang.

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What's the difference?

Sentence	Meaning
1. 我有狗 Wǒ yǒu gǒu	I have a dog. (A fact, present.)
2. 我有了狗 Wǒ yǒule gǒu	Unnatural on its own. (See the note on 有 above.)
3. 我以前有狗 Wǒ yǐqián yǒu gǒu	I had a dog. (The time word shows it was in the past.)
4. 我有狗了 Wǒ yǒu gǒu le	I have a dog now. (I didn't have one before.)

Direct and indirect speech • 說 shuō, 問 wèn, 回答 huídá

English uses “said”, “asked” and “answered”. In Mandarin we don't need to mark these verbs as completed: if you are quoting someone, the words have obviously already been said.

我問他：「你吃飯沒有？」他說：「吃了。」
我问他：“你吃饭没有？”他说：“吃了。”
Wǒ wèn tā: “Nǐ chī fàn méiyǒu?” Tā shuō: “Chīle.”
I asked him, “Have you eaten?” He said, “Yes!”

我問他吃飯沒有，他說吃了
我问他吃饭没有，他说吃了
Wǒ wèn tā chī fàn méiyǒu, tā shuō chīle.
I asked him if he had eaten. He said yes.

YOUR TURN • I asked him, “Have you asked your friend?”

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YOUR TURN • He answered, “I haven't asked yet.”

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Verbal expressions in series

What if a whole string of actions happened in the past? You have two choices: put a time word in to show it was in the past, or add one 了 after the **last** verb.

昨天我去台北看我的朋友

Zuótiān wǒ qù Táiběi kàn wǒ de péngyǒu.

I went to Taipei to see my friend yesterday.

我去台北看了我的朋友

Wǒ qù Táiběi kànle wǒ de péngyǒu.

I went to Taipei to see my friend.

YOUR TURN · We went to China and had a meeting there last week.

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Direction verbs · 來 lái, 去 qù, 到 dào, 回 huí, 離開 líkāi ...

These verbs are very tricky.

1. Arriving somewhere → sentence particle 了₂. It's a new situation. We don't use verb-suffix 了 here because, as long as you are still at the place you just arrived at, the action doesn't count as "completed". It's like installing new software: even when the progress bar reaches 100%, the installation isn't finished until you click "Finish" and close the window.

2. Arriving, then doing something there → 了₁ after the direction verb. When you stress that you arrived at a place and then did something there, put 了 right after the direction verb.

我回家了

Wǒ huí jiā le.

I'm home now.

我到學校了

我到学校了

Wǒ dào xuéxiào le.

I've arrived at school. (I'm at school now.)

我到了學校，就開始上課了

我到了学校，就开始上课了

Wǒ dào le xuéxiào, jiù kāishǐ shàngkè le.

As soon as I got to school, class started.

我到了公司以後，才發現大家都不在

我到了公司以后，才发现大家都不在

Wǒ dào le gōngsī yǐhòu, cái fāxiàn dàjiā dōu bú zài.

After I got to the office, I realized no one was there.

× SOUNDS UNFINISHED

~~我去子學校。~~

Wǒ qù le xuéxiào.

✓ BETTER

我去學校了。 / 我去了學校，可是沒看到他。

Wǒ qù xuéxiào le. / Wǒ qù le xuéxiào, kěshì méi kàndào tā.

On its own, verb-suffix 了 here makes listeners wait for the rest of the sentence. Use 了₂, or add what happened next.

YOUR TURN · I'm here! In the café. Where are you?

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YOUR TURN · I got there, but I couldn't find you, so I left.

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PART 07

Negatives and questions with 了

If an action **didn't** happen, nothing was completed, so 了 disappears. Use 沒(有) méi(yǒu) + V instead.

S + 沒(有) + V + (O)

還沒 hái méi + V + (呢 ne)

我昨天沒吃早餐

我昨天没吃早餐

Wǒ zuótiān méi chī zǎocān.

I didn't eat breakfast yesterday.

他還沒來呢

他还没来呢

Tā hái méi lái ne.

He hasn't come yet.

Asking whether something has happened

V + (O) + 了嗎？

V + (O) + 了沒有？

V + 沒 V？

你買票了嗎？

你买票了吗？

Nǐ mǎi piào le ma?

Have you bought the tickets?

你買票了沒有？／你買沒買票？

你买票了没有？／你买没买票？

Nǐ mǎi piào le méiyǒu? / Nǐ mǎi méi mǎi piào?

Have you bought the tickets (or not)?

買了。

买了。

Mǎi le.

Yes, I have. (Answer: verb + 了)

還沒買呢。

还没买呢。

Hái méi mǎi ne.

Not yet. (Answer: 還沒 + verb, no 了)

YOUR TURN · I didn't go to class yesterday.

24

YOUR TURN · "Have you finished your homework?" "Not yet."

25



PART 08

Common mistakes

× WRONG

~~我昨天沒吃了早餐。~~

✓ RIGHT

我昨天沒吃早餐。

Wǒ zuótiān méi chī zǎocān.

沒 méi already tells us the action didn't happen. Nothing was completed, so there is no 了.

× **WRONG**

~~我以前每天喝了三杯咖啡。~~

✓ **RIGHT**

我以前每天喝三杯咖啡。
Wǒ yǐqián měitiān hē sān bēi kāfēi.

A habit can't be completed. 每天 měitiān shows it's a habit, so no 了₁.

× **WRONG**

~~我早上覺得很累。~~

✓ **RIGHT**

我早上覺得很累。
Wǒ zǎoshang juéde hěn lèi.

Feelings (覺得 juéde, 喜歡 xǐhuan, 愛 ài ...) can't be completed, so no 了₁.

× **WRONG**

~~我是了老師。~~

✓ **RIGHT**

我以前是老師。／我是老師了。
Wǒ yǐqián shì lǎoshī. / Wǒ shì lǎoshī le.

是 shì, 在 zài and 姓 xìng never take 了₁. Use a time word for the past, or 了₂ for a new situation.

× **WRONG**

~~我在日本5年。~~

✓ **RIGHT**

我在日本住了5年。
Wǒ zài Rìběn zhùle wǔ nián.

在 zài can't take 了₁. To say how long you stayed somewhere, use 在 + place + 住 zhù + 了 + time.

× **WRONG**

~~明天快要考試了。~~

✓ **RIGHT**

明天就要考試了。
Míngtiān jiù yào kǎoshì le.

With a specific time word, use 就要 jiùyào, not 快要 kuàiyào.



PART 09

Summary chart

	Position	Meaning	Example
了 ₁	Right after the verb	The action is completed (past or future)	我喝了五杯水。 Wǒ hēle wǔ bēi shuǐ.
了 ₂	End of the sentence	A new situation / a change	東西都貴了。 Dōngxi dōu guì le.
了 ₃	太 / 死 / 極 ... 了	Too much, extremely	今天熱死了！ Jīntiān rè sǐ le!
了 ₁ + 了 ₂	After the verb and at the end	Progress so far, up to now	他已經喝了兩杯酒了。 Tā yǐjīng hēle liǎng bēi jiǔ le.
No 了 ₁	Habits, feelings, 是 / 在 / 姓, 沒 + V, quoting verbs	Nothing that can be "completed"	我沒去。 Wǒ méi qù.



PART 10

Answers

1 我洗了澡

Wǒ xǐle zǎo.

2 我看了三本書

我看了三本书

Wǒ kànle sān běn shū.

3 我今天早上看了三個小時的書

我今天早上看了三个小时的书

Wǒ jīntiān zǎoshang kànle sān ge xiǎoshí de shū.

4 我會說中文了

我会说中文了

Wǒ huì shuō Zhōngwén le.

5 我懂了

Wǒ dǒng le.

6 我快／快要／要／就要洗澡了

Wǒ kuài / kuàiyào / yào / jiùyào xǐzǎo le.

7 快／快要／要／就要下雨了

Kuài / kuàiyào / yào / jiùyào xià yǔ le.

8 我爸爸已經不吃肉了

我爸爸已经不吃肉了

Wǒ bàba yǐjīng bù chī ròu le.

9 我已經沒有時間了

我已经没有时间了

Wǒ yǐjīng méiyǒu shíjiān le.

10 別用手機了！

别用手机了！

Bié yòng shǒujī le!

11 這個太貴了！

这个太贵了！

Zhège tài guì le!

12 我已經烤了三個蛋糕了

我已经烤了三个蛋糕了

Wǒ yǐjīng kǎole sān ge dàngāo le.

13 她已經跑了兩公里了

她已经跑了两公里了

Tā yǐjīng pǎole liǎng gōnglǐ le.

14 她已經工作了十二個小時了

她已经工作了十二个小时了

Tā yǐjīng gōngzuòle shí'èr ge xiǎoshí le.

15 我的貓已經睡了八個小時(的覺)了

我的猫已经睡了八个小时(的觉)了

Wǒ de māo yǐjīng shuìle bā ge xiǎoshí (de jiào) le.

16 我以前每年生日都會吃一個蛋糕，現在不吃了

我以前每年生日都会吃一个蛋糕，现在不吃了

Wǒ yǐqián měi nián shēngrì dōu huì chī yí ge dàngāo, xiànzài bù chī le.

17 我以前愛你，可是現在不愛了

我以前爱你，可是现在不爱了

Wǒ yǐqián ài nǐ, kěshì xiànzài bù ài le.

18 我跟張先生結婚了，所以現在我姓張了

我跟张先生结婚了，所以现在我姓张了

Wǒ gēn Zhāng xiānsheng jiéhūn le, suǒyǐ xiànzài wǒ xìng Zhāng le.

19 我問他：「你問你朋友了嗎？」

我问他：“你问你朋友了吗？”

Wǒ wèn tā: “Nǐ wèn nǐ péngyǒu le ma?”

20 他回答：「還沒問。」

他回答：“还没问。”

Tā huídá: “Hái méi wèn.”

21 我們上個星期去中國開會

我们上个星期去中国开会

Wǒmen shàng ge xīngqī qù Zhōngguó kāihuì.

Also OK: 我們上個星期去中國開了一個會。

22 我到咖啡店了，你在哪裡？

我到咖啡店了，你在哪里？

Wǒ dào kāfēidiàn le, nǐ zài nǎlǐ?

23 我到了咖啡店，可是沒看到你，所以就離開了

我到了咖啡店，可是没看到你，所以就离开了

Wǒ dào le kāfēidiàn, kěshì méi kàndào nǐ, suǒyǐ jiù líkāi le.

24 我昨天沒去上課

我昨天没去上课

Wǒ zuótiān méi qù shàngkè.

25 「你寫完功課了嗎？」「還沒(寫完)呢。」

“你写完作业了吗？”“还没(写完)呢。”

“Nǐ xiěwán gōngkè le ma?” “Hái méi (xiěwán) ne.”

WANT MORE PRACTICE WITH 了?

You're welcome to visit the Practice section on my website for more exercises:

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