Introduction

Where to start when learning Chinese characters? Frankly speaking, a "literate" Chinese person can probably recognize upwards of 4000 characters. A Chinese child who has finished elementary school can probably recognize at least 2000. That's just characters, and does not take into account vocabulary (characters combined into multisyllable words). As a learner of Chinese, getting acquainted with 2000 Chinese characters is a daunting, but not impossible task.

But if you have decided to study Chinese characters – even if you only want to "check things out – you have to start somewhere.

The .pdf files here are intended to give you a start. There are 21 units that introduce about 260 Chinese characters by giving you mnemonic sentences and stroke orders. There is no magic involved on your end, just a lot of memorization, discipline, and hard work.

The characters here are not selected randomly, they are taken from about 260 extremely common Chinese characters, and in quite a few cases parts of characters that are used to build other Chinese characters. If you practice writing the mnemonic sentences, you can probably memorize all of the characters in about a month. Once you have done that, most of what you have learned can be considered as the basis for building other characters, and yes, the system continues to take you up to about 1000 characters. Still interested?

What makes these materials unique?
Most beginning language Chinese textbooks do not introduce Chinese characters as a *system*. For example, a lesson on buying fruit presents vocabulary and dialogues or useful phrases about that topic, and then gives you the characters needed to write the dialogues and phrases. This approach implies that new characters are presented randomly. Essentially, what you are learning to say is what you are expected to read and write.

However, speaking, reading, and writing are actually separate tasks which can be studied separately. As you go through these lessons, you will find that characters with similar shapes and components are presented together. For example the characters 人、入、月、and 用. (person, enter, month, and use). You should be able to tell that 人 and 入 are written similarly, as are 月 and 用. Likewise 手 and 毛 (hand and fur) are presented together, as are 口 、 日、 白、 and 百 (characters that are square).

As you study the lessons, these similarities should be self-evident, so no more will be said here.

What to look for in the lessons
Each lesson has several main parts; new characters, vocabulary, writing practices, and stroke orders. There are 21 lessons total. As you progress through the lessons, you should also review by finding the cumulative key. The cumulative key includes all of the writing practices in pinyin/English, and characters. Once you can write all of the mnemonic sentences, that covers about 260 Chinese characters.


Writing Practices

The best way to stick these characters into your brain is to write. If you are not concerned with writing but recognition only, then learn to read the writing practices instead of writing. If memorizing to write, you don't always have to actually write; an efficient method is to "visualize" the sentences without actually putting them on paper. As you go through the lessons, from time to time return to the cumulative key.

Appendices – In addition to the lessons, there are some appendices that summarize the characters you have learned by similarly composed characters, common components of characters, and radicals. Each summary includes short lists that give prompts in English for the Chinese equivalents. You should learn to write the Chinese for each of these sections in addition to the writing practices.

Simplified/Traditional Characaters – In a perfect world, beginning students of Chinese would not be presented with the chaos of two similar but distinct writing systems. This book is focused on simplified characters, but presents both systems. Quite honestly, most beginners should stick with simplified, and feel free to ignore the traditional. Nevertheless, if you are studying Chinese outside of China, the most obvious place you will encounter Chinese is the restaurant, and most restaurants use traditional characters. Therefore in part one, traditional characters are provided for those intrepid and unfortunate scholars who feel compelled to be afflicted by both.

Stroke Order Diagrams
Many simplified/traditional characters share the same form. If so they are listed as one form in the stroke order diagrams. Characters with traditional forms, are given separately following the main diagrams. The position or notation on the diagrams is significant.

cháng/zhǎng = long/grow

xī = west

sāndiǎnshuǐ 三点水
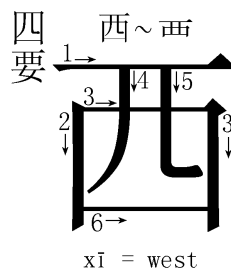
Top right corner, single character: A traditional or simplified equivalent if any. I.e., if the large character is simplified and has it traditional equivalent, the equivalent is shown in the top right corner. Likewise, if the large character is traditional and has a simplified equivalent, the equivalent is shown in the top right corner. So above we have 長 (traditional) and 长 (simplified).

Top left: lists characters sharing the main entry as a component, or characters that somewhat resemble the main character. So 四 resembles 西, and 要 has the component 覀 in it.

Top with "~" or "=": Characters similar in shape are marked with "~"; radicals with equivalent shapes are marked with "=".

So 西~覀 indicates the two elements are similar although the proportions are different.

氵 = 水 indicates that 水 is 氵 written as a radical.

- For many characters the stroke order is given by a "sum" of other components you have learned, i.e. 星 = 日 + 生.

Bottom Center: Pinyin and the English equivalent of the character or component. If the main entry is a radical with a common name, pronunciation of the common name is given. So "sǎndiǎnshuǐ" is the common name for the radical 氵 (three dots water). For explanation of radicals please see part two.

Symbols found in the informational charts.

a —Indicates a character outside the range of characters given in most beginning textbooks. Such characters are introduced in this part one when they are common components of other characters.

t –- traditional character

r – Radical. For further explanation of radicals see note eight in part one unit three, and also part two, "Radicals."

z -- Indicates that the introduced character is a common component, but otherwise has limited usage as an independent character. Get familiar with it's shape, but don't worry too much about it's pronunciation or meaning.

~ indicates elements similar in meaning or shape

= equivalent in meaning

/ Has more than one pronunciation or tone, for example cháng/zhǎng = long/grow.

[Pronounced "cháng" and "zhǎng", and means "long" and "grow"].