Chinese Vocabulary Mnemonics Cheatsheet

General Advice

Relax & take frequent breaks

Free association is difficult if you are in an anxious state of mind

Understand the meaning(s) of the Word

This seems obvious, but sometimes definitions aren't precise enough. For example, "box" could be a large box for moving house "箱子 xiāngzi" and sometimes it can be a small box for packing food or small items "盒子 hézi".

Also try:

· **Look it Up (Pleco/有道)**
· **Read an example sentence**
· **Image search in Chinese**. This doesn't always work, but it can often help to distinguish between similar concepts (e.g., "happiness" vs. "satisfaction.")

Follow your trains of thought

No matter how "out there" they are. As long as you can follow the train back to the Chinese word, it's fine.

Don't worry about it "not being perfect."

Many of the mnemonics you judge as not very memorable will end up being highly memorable. By definition, it's impossible to know whether or not something is memorable when you're only just coming up with it. You have to wait for it to leave your conscious mind to find out whether it can easily recall it.

Because you're putting your mnemonics into flashcards in the form of images and notes, you can rely on the Spaced-Repetition Software (SRS) algorithm to let you know in the future whether or not your mnemonic device was sufficiently memorable.

Character Meanings

Know the primary meaning of each character.

- **Allow the obvious!** Loads of chinese words are formed in the same way that "playground" (play + ground).
- **Knowing the secondary and tertiary meanings is also helpful**, but you'll find that the secondary and tertiary meanings of characters often have a relationship to the primary meaning. **For example, "看" means "to look" (literally), however, it can also mean "perspective."** These aren't exactly the same, but they are conceptually related.

What is the relationship between the characters?

Here are the 7 ways compound words are formed in Chinese:

Verb-What 述宾式

Verb-How 补充式

Biased 偏正式

Subject-Predicate 主谓式

Duplicated 重叠式

Affixed (Prefixes, Suffixes, Infixes) 附加式

Parallel 并列式

Say the two (or more) primary English definitions out loud

Does it make sense instantly? If not, does it make sense with the
secondary or tertiary definitions of either of the characters?

Personal Memories

Characters from your life.

You can often connect to a real person or fictional character that
connect to the word you're trying to learn. For example, if you're
learning the word 说话 shuōhuà "To Speak", you could find a picture of
a famous person/fictional character or write down a note of someone
in your life who talks a lot.

Media

Use media you've consumed over the years as inspiration for finding images that represent the words you want to learn. Here are some ideas:

· **TV Shows you've watched**
· **Movies you've seen**
· **Newspaper articles you've read**
· **Video games you've played**
· **Documentaries you've seen**
· **Books you've read**

Sounds

Say the word out loud

This can help you recognize connections to other sounds you know to make mnemonics. Ask the following questions:

· **Does it sound like anything else?**
· **Words from another language?**
· **Other Chinese Word/Characters**

Look at single syllables, or even the first part of a syllable:

Example: 随便 suí biàn

Single syllable

Suí - sounds like "sway" in English

First part of single syllable

Suí starts with "su-" which sounds like the English name "Sue," then ends with the "-ei" sound, sounds like "A." Someone named "Sue A." **Biàn starts with "bi-" which sounds like "Be" and ends with "-an", which sounds like the name "Ann."**

Sue A! You should "Be Ann" and be more CASUAL!

Draw the border between syllables wherever is appropriate for your train of thought:

Example: 比较 bǐjiào bi-ji-ao - "BeeGee's singing "Ow!"

Despite the border in the actual Chinese word being between "比 bǐ" and "较 jiào," it's still fine to draw the mnemonic border between "biji" and "-ao".

Chinese Homophones

As you learn more and more words, you'll inevitably run into words that have the same or very similar pronunciations. Once this starts to happen, you can connect the two words:

Example: 就算 jiùsuàn - "even if..." has the same pronunciation as 旧蒜 jiù suàn which means "old garlic." So "EVEN IF you paid me, I wouldn't eat that *old garlic*."

When making these connections, don't worry too much about tones being different. For example, 就算 jiùsuàn could also be connected to

酒 酸 jiǔ suān, which means "alcohol + sour." They don't have the same tones, but they have the same syllables, so there is still potential for a sound connection.

Half & Half

Perhaps you can't find a connection via character meanings or sound, but you can find a connection if you combine the two:

Example: 但是 dànshì - 'but.' Mix the sound of 但 dàn (a person's name) with the English translation of 是 shì "is" and then imagine two guys, one of them is really tall, BUT Dan is quite short. Imagine either a famous Dan (e.g., Dan Radcliffe, Dan Aykroyd, Dan Stevens) or a Dan from your life. You can use any form of contrast that's visually obvious.

Sound Mnemonic "Anchors"

Sometimes, a sound mnemonic is a bit of a stretch. For example, you might decide that Pinyin "yì" sounds like "he" in English. This is a stretch because "yì" does not contain an "h" sound. However, if you decide that and "yi" Pinyin can *always* be replaced with "he," then you'll have countless opportunities to solidify that connection. Not to mention, there are many English accents where the "h" sound is lost (e.g., British cockney accent).

Images

· **ANY image is better than NO image**
· **Google Images & YouTube** should be the primary two search engines since they are the largest in the world, but you can consider other search engines where appropriate.
· **Type in a search that connects to the LINKS you made** related to Characters, Personal Memories and Sounds.

Search for the English Definition of the Chinese Word

English Definition Search Tricks:

· **Type the English Definition and look at the predictive text**
· **Type the English Definition + "clipart.".** This creates a surprising number of great results.
  Type the English Definition + "funny". If you're laughing while studying, you remain orbiting the primary mnemonic rule: Relax!
· **Type the English definition of each Chinese character as opposed to the definition of the whole word.** This doesn't always work, but it's good to have in your toolkit.

  Example: 高兴 gāoxìng means "happy," but the two characters mean "high excitement." Searching "high excitement" gets better results than simply "happy."

  Example: 歌手 gēshǒu means "singer," but the two characters mean "song hand." Searching for a singer with big hands or just directly "song hand" gets great results.

MANDARIN BLUEPRINT

Search the Chinese Word directly

As you continue to learn words and become an intermediate Chinese learner, also check the predictive text on Google Images
Search the Chinese word on a Chinese search engine like www.baidu.com, www.bing.com/cn, or www.youku.com.

Concrete Words

Concrete words are easier to search for. For example, finding an image to represent "Train" is simple, however, to make it slightly stronger than any old train on Google Image search, search for a *specific* train or type of train that relates to your experience. For example:

· **The Hogwarts Express**
· **A Chinese 动车 Bullet Train** (or Japanese Shinkansen)
· **A train from your local city's transportation system** (e.g., Phil is from Philadelphia where he rode SEPTA (Southeast Pennsylvania Transportation Authority) trains all the time.

Abstract Words

Consider the word in the sentence. Does this naturally trigger a sequence that can lead to an image? For example:

· **"Cheap" - "Talk is cheap"**
· **"Normal" - "The New Normal"**

- **"Already" - "Enough Already!"**