

Mistake #4 Using “ma” for “non-yes-or-no” questions

Some students have this wrong notation: “Whenever you put “ma” at the end of a statement, instantly, you change that statement into a question.” This is not an accurate statement. The accurate statement should be:

“Whenever you put “ma” at the end of a statement, instantly, you change that statement into a “yes-or-no” question.”

Basically, for any questions that require real answers other than “yes-or-no” , you CANNOT add ma at the end of the sentence. For example, when you ask “who are you” “What do you do” , “How do I say this in Chinese” , “why” , “where is the bathroom” , etc, you are looking for real answers such as “I am Mary” , “I am a lawyer” , “The bathroom is there” , etc. These are NOT “yes-or-no” questions, so you don’ t add “ma” at the end.

The only time you add ma at the end of the sentence is when you are asking a question that requires a “yes-or-no” answer. For example, to ask “Do you want coffee?” , you simply add ma at the end of the statement of “You want coffee” , because the answer the question requires is either “Yes, I do” , or “No, I don’ t” . In this case, you can add ma at the end.

Examples

English	Pinyin	Chinese
Questions that need real answers (No “ma” at the end)		
Who are you? (lit. You are who?)	nǐ shì shéi ?	你是谁? 你是誰?
What job do you do? (lit. You do what job?)	nǐ zuò shén me gōng zuò ?	你做什么工作? 你做什麼工作?
How old are you? (lit. You how old?)	nǐ duō dà ?	你多大?
Where’ s the bathroom? (lit. The bathroom is where?)	xǐ shǒu jiān zài nǎ lǐ ?	洗手间在哪里? 洗手間在哪裡?
Do you want coffee or tea? (lit. You want coffee or tea?)	nǐ yào kā fēi hái shì chá ?	你要咖啡还是茶? 你要咖啡還是茶?
Questions that need “yes-or-no” answers (“ma” at the end)		

Common Chinese Mistakes Made by English Speakers

Can you speak English? (lit. You can speak English ma?)	nǐ huì shuō yīng wén ma ?	你会说英文吗？ 你會說英文嗎？
Does she have a boyfriend? (lit. She has a boyfriend ma?)	tā yǒu nán péng yǒu ma ?	她有男朋友吗？ 她有男朋友嗎？
Did you eat yet? (lit. You ate ma?)	nǐ chī fàn le ma ?	你吃饭了吗？ 你吃飯了嗎？
Have you been to China before? (lit. You have been to China before ma?)	nǐ qù guò zhōng guó ma ?	你去过中国吗？ 你去過中國嗎？