

Ways To Ask “What Are You Doing?” Beyond Basic Chinese

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The basic structure

When you want to talk about what someone is doing right now, you need to use the present progressive tense, but how do you do that when verbs in Chinese don't change at all? In Chinese, we have three words that we add to a sentence to indicate that an action is in progress.

1. **Subject + 正在 + state/action + (呢)**
2. **Subject + 在 + state/action + (呢)**
3. **Subject + 正 + state/action + 呢**
4. **Subject + state/action + 呢**

Note that in the first two structures, including 呢 at the end is optional.

Common expressions

What are you doing?

你正在干/做什么（呢）？

(Nǐ zhèngzài gàn/zuò shénme (ne)?)

你在干/做什么(呢)?

(Nǐ zài gàn/zuò shénme (ne)?)

你正干/做什么呢?

(Nǐ zhèng gàn/zuò shénme ne?)

你干/做什么呢?

(Nǐ gàn/zuò shénme ne?)

e.g.

A: 你正在做什么? (Nǐ zhèngzài zuò shénme?)

What are you doing?

B: 我正在开会。(Wǒ zhèngzài kāihuì.)

I'm in a meeting.

A: 你在干什么呢? (Nǐ zài gànshénme ne?)

What are you doing?

B: 我在洗衣服呢。(Wǒ zài xǐ yīfú ne.)

I'm doing the laundry.

A: 你正做什么呢? (Nǐ zhèng zuò shénme ne?)

What are you doing?

B: 我正包饺子呢。(Wǒ zhèng bāo jiǎozi ne.)

I'm making dumplings.

A: 你干什么呢? (Nǐ gànshénme ne?)

What are you doing?

B: 我工作呢。(Wǒ gōngzuò ne.)

I'm working.

You can also ask someone more specifically “Are you doing something” by using a specific verb and adding 吗 at the end instead of 呢, like so: **Are you …… ?**

你在……吗?

e.g.

A: 你在吃东西吗? (Nǐ zài chī dōngxi ma?)

Are you eating?

B: 是的, 我在吃饺子。(Shì de, wǒ zài chī jiǎozi.)

Yes, I'm eating dumplings.

A: 你在做运动吗? (Nǐ zài zuò yùndòng ma?)

Are you exercising?

B: 没有, 我正在休息呢。(Méiyǒu, wǒ zhèngzài xiūxi ne.)

No, I'm taking a break.

Casual expressions

There are many common Chinese expressions used in everyday life which actually originate from different dialects. You'll often hear questions like this:

你在干嘛呢? / 你干嘛呢? / 干嘛呢?

(Nǐ zài gànma ne?)

你在干啥呢? / 你干啥呢? / 干啥呢?

(Nǐ zài gànshá ne?)

啥 and 嘛 are both words that mean "what" in some dialects. They're almost exclusively used in verbal conversations.

e.g.

A: 你在干嘛呢? (Nǐ zài gànma ne?)

What are you doing?

B: 我在洗碗呢。(Wǒ zài xǐ wǎn ne.)

I'm washing the dishes.

A: 干啥呢? (Gànshá ne?)

What are you up to?

B: 学习呢。(Xuéxí ne.)

Studying.

You can also ask "What are you busy with?"

你在忙什么?

(Nǐ zài máng shénme?)

忙啥呢?

(Máng shá ne?)

e.g.

A: 你在忙什么? (Nǐ zài máng shénme?)

What are you busy with?

B: 我在准备搬家呢。(Wǒ zài zhǔnbèi bānjiā ne.)

I'm getting ready to move.

And just like the other way we looked at earlier, there is also a more casual way to ask with a yes-no question.

……呢?

Are you……?

e.g.

A: 散步呢? (Sànbù ne?)

Are you taking a walk?

B: 是啊, 散步呢。(Shì a, sànbù ne.)

Yes, I'm walking.

A: 看电影呢? (Kàn diànyǐng ne?)

Are you watching a movie?

B: 不是, 我在玩游戏。(Bùshì, wǒ zài wán yóuxì.)

No, I'm playing a game.

Some Daily Activities		
Chinese	Pinyin	Translation
吃东西	chī dōngxi	eat something
做饭	zuò fàn	cook
学习	xuéxí	learn
做作业	zuò zuo yè	do homework
工作	gōngzuò	work
开会	kāihuì	have a meeting
听音乐	tīng yīnyuè	listen to music
画画	huà huà	draw
唱歌	chànggē	sing

跳舞	tiàowǔ	dancing
做运动	zuò yùndòng	do exercise
上网	shàngwǎng	go online
玩游戏	wán yóuxì	play games
打扫卫生	dǎsǎo wèishēng	clean up
散步	sànbù	take a walk
看书	kànshū	read book
看电影	kàn diànyǐng	watch movie
看电视	kàn diànshì	watch TV
买东西	mǎi dōngxi	shopping
洗衣服	xǐ yīfu	wash clothes
睡觉	shuìjiào	go to bed
冥想	míngxiǎng	meditation
思考	sīkǎo	thinking
聊天	liáotiān	chat

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