是 or 在?

Say who someone is and where people or things are in Mandarin Chinese.

YOUR GOAL Use 是 before an identity noun and 在 before a location.

是 shì

A person or thing + 是 + an identity noun. 是 does not change with the subject.

我是米娜。
Wǒ shì Mǐnà.
I'm Mina.

我是学生。
Wǒ shì xuésheng.
I'm a student.

她是老师。
Tā shì lǎoshī.
She's a teacher.

在 zài

A person or thing + 在 + a place. Here 在 is the location verb.

我在家。
Wǒ zài jiā.
I'm at home.

他在学校。
Tā zài xuéxiào.
He's at school.

书在这里。
Shū zài zhèlǐ.
The book is here.

Three useful patterns

Identity	我是学生。	I'm a student.
Person's location	我在家。	I'm at home.
Thing's location	书在这里。	The book is here.

Mandarin uses no am/is/are forms. Read the pinyin with its tone marks. This guide uses simplified Chinese characters.

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Make it a conversation.

Read the meaning, choose a form, then check why it fits.

Identity is not location

我是学生。
I'm a student.

我在家。
I'm at home.

A role such as student uses 是. A place such as home uses 在, not 是.

Not every description needs 是

她是老师。
She's a teacher.

她很忙。
She's busy.

老师 is a noun, so use 是. 忙 is an adjective: 她很忙 needs no 是. 很 here need not emphasize very.

Your turn

Fill each gap with 是 or 在. Use the meaning as your clue.

01 我_____米娜。
I'm Mina.

02 我_____家。
I'm at home.

03 她_____老师。
She's a teacher.

04 书_____这里。
The book is here.

05 我_____学生。
I'm a student.

06 他_____学校。
He's at school.

07 这_____书。
It's a book.

08 米娜_____家。
Mina is at home.

Check your answers

1. 是 Noun identity: 是 + 米娜.
2. 在 Location: 在 + 家.
3. 是 Noun identity: 是 + 老师.
4. 在 Location: 在 + 这里.
5. 是 Noun identity: 是 + 学生.
6. 在 Location: 在 + 学校.
7. 是 Noun identity: 是 + 书.
8. 在 Location: 在 + 家.

MAKE IT YOURS Say your name, then where you are. Add a sentence saying where a book is.

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