Pronunciation

These are basic guidelines; base your pronunciation on that of Chinese native speakers.

Pinyin - Romanised Chinese

Pinyin is the most common way of writing Mandarin in the Roman alphabet these days. The following is useful information for the use of hyphens, capitalisation and separate words in Pinyin:

Pinyin

From Wikipedia.

In this resource, the rules in the above document are followed closely, with the following exceptions:

1. y is always y in Pinyin, but in this resource you will see it changes to yi before syllables in Tones 1, 2 and 3 and to y in before Tone 2. This is usually what happens in actual pronunciation. During the creation of this wiki, two exceptions have been observed: y lou 'first floor' (NOT yi lou) and di-yi ci 'first time' (NOT di-yi ci).
2. In Pinyin le is sometimes written as one word when it follows a verb or adjective. Here it should always be written separately (work in progress!).
3. In Pinyin there are complicated rules for how directional, result and potential complements are written. Here they are always written together as one word.
4. In Pinyin there are complicated rules about which words have neutral tone. Here, for the sake of simplicity doubtful cases are written with a tone.
5. In Pinyin chéngy (four-character phrases) are either written with a hyphen between the second and third character, or as one word. Here, the normal Pinyin rules are applied, even to four-character phrases.

Syllables

Chinese syllables consist of initials and finals:

Initials

"Initial" is the name given to a consonant starting a Chinese syllable.

Consonants like English ones:

f, l, m, n, s
As in English.
Examples: fú qián 'pay money', lù shang 'on the road', mshàng 'immediately', nàme 'then', sì ge 'four'
MP3 sound recording (link)

p, k, t
The important thing is that these are aspirated (there is a puff of breath after them, as there is after p, t and k and before a vowel in English).
Examples pútao 'grape', ky, tuyùn 'check in'
MP3 sound recording (link)

w
As in English; it is only used at the start of a syllable. It is not pronounced in the combination wu. If it comes after an initial consonant, it is spelled u.
Examples wài guó 'abroad', wshù 'martial art', gungchng 'square (in a town)'
MP3 sound recording (link)

y
As in English; it is only used at the start of a syllable. If it comes after an initial consonant, it is spelled i. It is not pronounced before i.
Examples Yàzhu 'Asia', yībn 'generally'
MP3 sound recording (link)

Sounds like English ones, but written differently:
c, x, z
These sound like English ts, sh and dz respectively.
Examples: cèsu 'toilet', xyào 'need', zuóliao 'ingredient'
MP3 sound recording (link)

q
This is like English ch, including the puff of breath before a vowel.
Example: qù 'go'
MP3 sound recording (link)

Consonants different from English

b, d, g, j
These do sound like their English counterparts, but in fact they are the unaspirated equivalents of p, t, k and q, the sounds mentioned above, so that puff of breath mentioned above must not be there when pronouncing them.
Examples: bàba 'father', dàxué 'university', gge 'elder brother', ji l 'at home'
MP3 sound recording (link)

h
There is more of a rasp in Chinese h.
Example: hn ho 'very good' MP3 sound recording (link)

Retroflex consonants

Retroflex means that you need to tuck your tongue back slightly as you pronounce these consonants.

Ch is like the English ch, but with your tongue tucked slightly back.
Sh is like the English sh, but with your tongue tucked slightly back.
Zh is like the English j, but with your tongue tucked slightly back.
R is like the short tapped English r (not the rolled one!), but with your tongue tucked slightly back.
Examples: chfàn 'eat (rice)', shífn 'quite', zhnbèi 'prepare', rìjì 'diary'
MP3 sound recording (link)

Finals

"Finals" is the term given to the vowel(s) in a Chinese syllable and the consonant (if any) at the end of the syllable.

Where the final consists of more than one vowel, presume they are pronounced as diphthongs (a combination) of the vowels forming them, unless there is a note below to the contrary.

a
Open your mouth wide to pronounce Chinese a.
Example: tmen 'they' MP3 sound recording (link)

In yan and the final -ian it is pronounced like the e in English get.
Examples: yán'gé 'strict', tintin 'every day' MP3 sound recording (link)

ai is similar to English 'eye'.
Example: àishang 'fall in love' MP3 sound recording (link)

an
Example: bnji 'move house' MP3 sound recording (link)

ang
Example: bngmáng 'help' MP3 sound recording (link)

ao  goy 'high pressure''
The o is really a sort of u. MP3 sound recording (link)

e This is a central vowel. The closest English vowels are the e in the and the u in up.
Example: hé 'and' MP3 sound recording (link)

ei The e is close as in the first part of English "say", not central.
Example: Bijing MP3 sound recording (link)

en
Example: blái 'originally' MP3 sound recording (link)

eng
Example: pénghou 'friend' MP3 sound recording (link)
The quality of this vowel is like English "eat", NOT English "it". After retroflex consonants (ch, r, sh, zh) and c, r, s and z, it actually indicates that the consonant is extended so that it becomes a whole syllable. It's easier to say than to explain!
Examples: dìtì 'metro', chfàn 'eat', rìjì 'diary', shítáng 'canteen', zh yu 'there is only'
MP3 sound recording (link)

ie The e is open, as in English "get".
Bié kéqi. 'You're welcome.' MP3 sound recording (link)
This is spelled ye at the beginning of a word e.g. Y ho. 'It's also good.' MP3 sound recording (link)
in
Example: Yíndú 'India' MP3 sound recording (link)
Spelled yin at the beginning of a word.
ing
Example: Yngguó 'Britain' MP3 sound recording (link)
Note that y is silent before i.
iu This stands for iou.
Example: liūli 'fluent' MP3 sound recording (link)
o This vowel is close to the aw in English awful, but there is more tension in the lips. There may be a suggestion of a w before it.
Example: fójiaoj 'Buddhism' MP3 sound recording (link)
ong The o is really a sort of u, like English -ung in sung.
Example: Dngjng 'Tokyo', tóngyì 'agree' MP3 sound recording (link)
xíóngmo 'panda' MP3 sound recording (link)
ou
Example: Ozhu 'Europe' MP3 sound recording (link)
u This is similar to the oo in English boot.
Example: trán 'suddenly' MP3 sound recording (link)
un This is short for uen with a short centralised e as in English "the" in the middle. It is pronounced üen after j, q, x and y.
Example: lùnwén 'dissertation' MP3 sound recording (link)
u This is similar to German ü or French u (the vowel in English eat, pronounced with tight lips). After j, q, x and y, u is pronounced ü.
yyán 'language' [MP3 sound recording (link)]
ui This stands for uei.
Example: Duìbuduì? 'Is that right?' MP3 sound recording (link)
uo
Example: du 'many' MP3 sound recording (link)
R can also come at the end of a Mandarin syllable. This tends to happen more in the Beijing dialect.
shì or shir 'matter, thing'
Note the change in quality of the vowel when r is added.
MP3 sound recording (link)
If r is added to a syllable ending in -n or -i, the -n or -i is dropped in pronunciation.
wán or wánr (pronounced wár) 'play'
MP3 sound recording (link)
yidin or yidinr (pronounced yidir) 'a little'
MP3 sound recording (link)
For further information, see
Erhua
in Wikipedia.

Summary of initials and finals

Initials

b, p, m, f
d, t, n, l
g, k, h
j, q, x
zh, ch, sh
r, z, c, s, y, w

**Finals**

a, o, e, i, u, ü
ai, ei, ui
ao, ou, iu
ie, üi, er
an, en, in, un, (pronounced ün after j, q, x and y)
ang, eng, ing, ong.

**Tones (link)**

**Useful resources**

Pinyin table
From Wikipedia. A list of all possible Chinese syllables.

Standard Chinese phonology
From Wikipedia.