

BASIC MAHJONGG HOW TO

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INTRODUCTION

Basic Mah Jongg How To
The National Mahjongg League Way

Mah Jongg is a fascinating rummy-like game played with tiles. The object of the game is to be the first to match your tiles to one of the hands on the National Mahjongg League card. New cards are introduced every April, ensuring that the game never gets old.

Mah Jongg cards can be purchased from the National Mah Jongg League at https://nationalmahjonggleague.org/. Beware of knockoffs that are often incorrect at Amazon and other such places.

THE TILES

Mah Jongg is played with 152 unique tiles. As you begin to learn the game, the tiles are confusing, but it won't take long to recognize them immediately.

There are three suits, each containing four sets of tiles numbered 1 to 9. (108 tiles)

Dots



Craks



Bams



Note: Images on the 1 Bam may differ, but it is always a bird.



There are 3 DRAGONS – four tiles each. Each dragon matches one of the suits: White – dots, Green – Bams, and Red – Craks. Images on dragon tiles may differ, but they will always be red, green, and white. (12 tiles)

***White dragons are also used as Zeros in hands requiring them.**



There are 8 FLOWERS – each with a different pattern. Although some of the symbols are not images of flowers, they are considered flowers. Numbers on flower tiles should be ignored as they have no significance. (8 tiles)



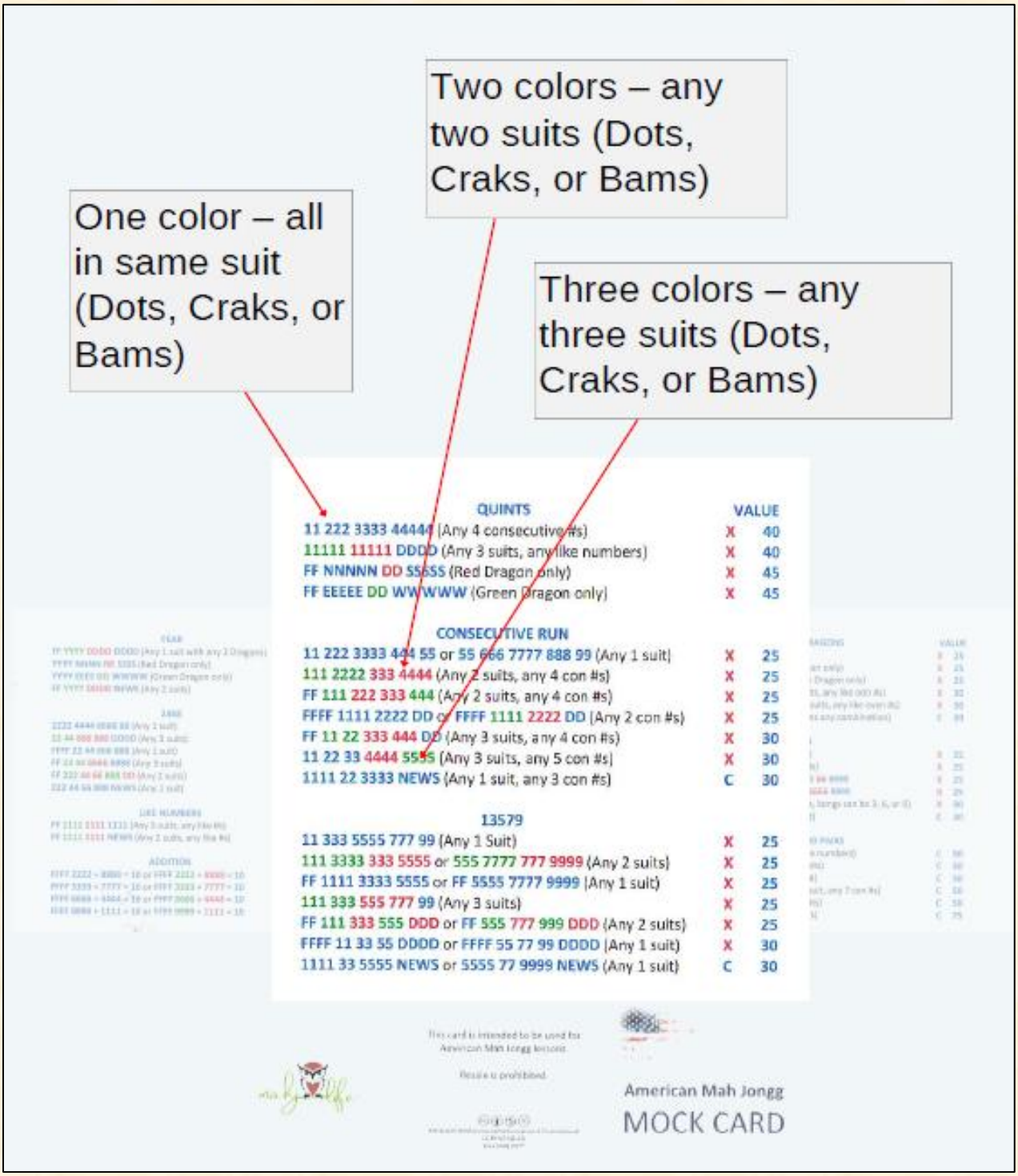
There are 8 JOKERS – all the same pattern. Some Mah Jongg sets have custom jokers. They work the same – just look different.







Created in collaboration with Microsoft Copilot AIArt (2026)


Two colors – any two suits (Dots, Craks, or Bams)
One color – all in same suit (Dots, Craks, or Bams)
Three colors – any three suits (Dots, Craks, or Bams)
QUINTS
VALUE
11 222 3333 44444 (Any 4 consecutive #s) X 40
11111 11111 DDDD (Any 3 suits, any like numbers) X 40
FF NNNNN DD 55555 (Red Dragon only) X 45
FF EEEEE DD WWWWW (Green Dragon only) X 45
CONSECUTIVE RUN
11 222 3333 444 55 or 55 666 7777 888 99 (Any 1 suit) X 25
111 2222 333 4444 (Any 2 suits, any 4 con #s) X 25
FF 111 222 333 444 (Any 2 suits, any 4 con #s) X 25
FFFF 1111 2222 DD or FFFF 1111 2222 DD (Any 2 con #s) X 25
FF 11 22 333 444 DD (Any 3 suits, any 4 con #s) X 30
11 22 33 4444 5555 (Any 3 suits, any 5 con #s) X 30
1111 22 3333 NEWS (Any 1 suit, any 3 con #s) C 30
13579
11 333 5555 777 99 (Any 1 Suit) X 25
111 3333 333 5555 or 555 7777 777 9999 (Any 2 suits) X 25
FF 1111 3333 5555 or FF 5555 7777 9999 (Any 1 suit) X 25
111 333 555 777 99 (Any 3 suits) X 25
FF 111 333 555 DDD or FF 555 777 999 DDD (Any 2 suits) X 25
FFFF 11 33 55 DDDD or FFFF 55 77 99 DDDD (Any 1 suit) X 30
1111 33 5555 NEWS or 5555 77 9999 NEWS (Any 1 suit) C 30
American Mah Jongg
MOCK CARD

UNDERSTANDING THE MAH JONGG CARD

- ***The card includes over 50 variations of winning hands, with illustrations of tile combinations.***

- ***Each color on the card signifies a suit:***
  - ***One color = a one-suited hand.***
  - ***Two colors = any two suits.***
  - ***Three colors = any three suits.***

- ***Specific colors do not represent specific suits (e.g., green does not necessarily mean Bams, red Craks, or black Dots).***

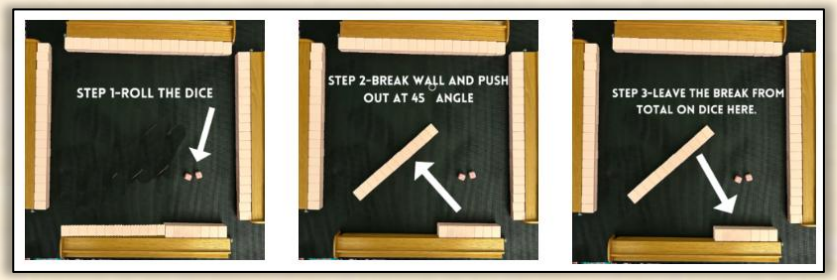
- ***Suits can be arranged in any order unless noted otherwise (exceptions are in parentheses beside the hand).***

- ***Labels on the right indicate how the hand should be played:***
  - ***"C" for Concealed (must be completed without exposures. Discarded tiles can only be claimed for Mah Jongg.).***
  - ***"X" for Exposed (can have exposures and discarded tiles can be claimed to complete sets of more than 2. Tiles completing a pair can only be called for Mah Jongg).***
  - ***Each hand displays its point value for scoring.***

PREPARING TO PLAY THE GAME

Building and Breaking the Wall: To begin, all tiles are placed face down in the center of the table and shuffled. Players then **build four walls**, comprised of 19 double-tiered stacks in front of each player's rack. Dice are rolled with the highest total determining who will be East.

Breaking the Wall: East throws the dice to determine how many tiles to count on the double-tiered wall, moving from the far right to the left. For instance, if the dice total is 7, East counts 7 tiles (1-2-3-4-5-6-7) on the double-tiered wall from **right to left.** The counted tiles are pushed back flush against East's rack and moved to the right of the rack. The remainder of the wall is pushed out into the center of the table.



Dealing the Tiles: East takes the first four tiles from the wall in the center of the table. The player to East's right takes the next four tiles, followed by the third and fourth players. This process continues until each player has 12 tiles.

Note: Tiles should be placed behind the players' racks until the deal is complete. Tiles should not be placed on the rack until all players have all their tiles.



When a wall is exhausted, the player to the left pushes out their wall and the deal continues until each player has their 12 tiles. For the final tile distribution, **East takes the 1st and 3rd tiles from the top tier of the wall.** The remaining players each take one tile in their turn. East should have 14 tiles; the other players should have 13.

East passes the dice to the player on their right, who will be the next East.

*It is recommended that each player take their own tiles rather than East dealing.

Selecting a hand: Players arrange their tiles on the sloped part of their racks, and organize them into Suits (Dots, Bams, Craks), Numerals, Winds, Dragons, and Jokers if they are lucky enough to have them. Players select the hand that will most likely result in Mah Jongg. Changes to this goal may be made based on tiles received as the game progresses. Selecting a hand is the most difficult part of the game. Making a choice and moving on is better than pondering and getting more and more confused.

Look for

- Lots of 2's, 6's and zeroes – for the 2026 category
- Lots of evens for the 2 4 6 8 hands
- Matching numbers for the Any Like Numbers hand
- Numbers that line up in a row for Consecutive Run
- Lots of 1, 3, 5, 7, 9 for the 1 3 5 7 9 category.
- Several Winds or Dragons for the Winds – Dragons hands
- Several 3, 6, 9 tiles for the 3 6 9 hands

- Three or more jokers? Look at the Quints category
- Lots of flowers, browse the card to see which hands need flowers that work with the categories you are considering.
- There are Single and Pairs hands for each category. If a player has no jokers, they might consider one of these if they have that category of tiles.



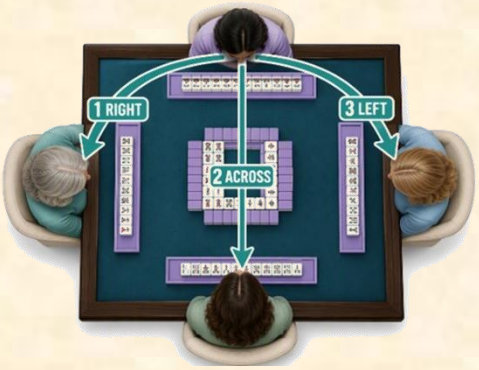
Players should not be afraid to adjust their hand if they receive tiles pointing in another direction. In fact, they might actually expect to do so – maybe more than once.

THE CHARLESTON

Players can exchange unwanted tiles during the "Charleston." The first Charleston is mandatory, even with a strong hand. If East starts with a complete Mah Jongg hand, known as a "Heavenly Hand," they win immediately and receive double payment from all players.

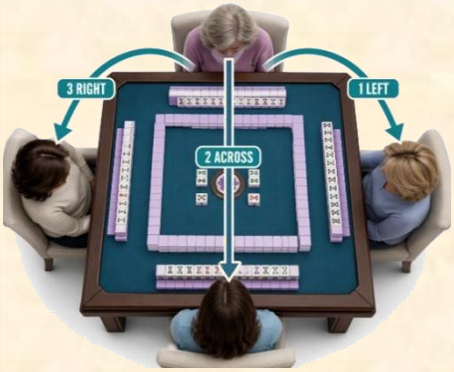
First Charleston (compulsory)

- First Pass – Players pass three tiles to the RIGHT.
- Second Pass – Players pass three tiles ACROSS.
- Third Pass – Players pass three tiles to the LEFT unless they do not have three tiles they want to pass. In that case, they can Blind Pass by "stealing" the number of tiles needed from the tiles they are receiving. The tiles cannot be looked at before passing.



Second Charleston (not compulsory)

- The Second Charleston can be stopped if any player does not want to continue AND no player has looked at the tiles being passed to them.
- First Pass – Players pass three tiles to the LEFT.
- Second Pass – Players pass three tiles ACROSS.
- Third Pass – Players pass three tiles to the RIGHT unless they do not have three tiles they want to pass. In that case, they can Blind Pass by "stealing" the number of tiles needed from the tiles they are receiving. The tiles cannot be looked at before passing.



OPTIONAL PASS

After the Charleston is complete, players have the option to make one more pass to the person across from them.

- This option is available:
  - Following the second Charleston.
  - Following the first Charleston if it was stopped.
- Players can pass:
  - Three tiles.
  - Two tiles.
  - One tile.
  - No tiles.
- The number of tiles swapped is determined by the player requesting the fewest tiles.

Rules & Tips for the Charleston

- Avoid passing two of a kind, dragons, and flowers.
- A joker may never be passed.
- Your tiles must be passed before taking those passed to you.
- EAST may call Mah Jongg if dealt a winning hand (Heavenly Hand) or has Mah Jongg after the Charleston (Earthly Hand).
- Players should confirm they have the correct number of tiles after the Charleston.
- If any player has the incorrect number of tiles, tiles are thrown in.
- The game does not officially begin until EAST discards.
- If a player other than EAST discards, they may take it back as long as EAST has not discarded.

PLAYING THE GAME

The game starts with EAST discarding a tile, placed face up with its name announced.
If the tile is not claimed, the player to the right draws and discards.
Play moves to the right until a tile is claimed.
Walls are pushed out to the left as each wall finishes.
The game ends when a player declares Mah Jongg or the wall is exhausted.

Claiming a discarded tile:

- Players may claim the tile to complete a Pung (3), Kong (4), Quint (5), or Sextet (6).
- A tile CANNOT be claimed for a **single or pair** unless it is for Mah Jongg.
- Jokers can complete a Pung, Kong, Quint, or Sextet, including exposures with all Jokers plus the called tile.
- To claim, players verbalize ("Call," "Take," "I want that," etc).
- Players may also say "Wait" or "Hold" before deciding.
- If multiple players call for a tile, preference is given to the next player in line, unless another player has already called and exposed.
- A claim is final once the tile is placed on the rack or tiles are exposed.
- Exposures do not need to be in card order but should be separated by exposure if another player requests it.
- Completed exposures must be displayed on the rack's top.
- The claimant discards to end their turn, and play continues to the right. Skipped players lose their turn.



USING JOKERS

In American Mahjongg, jokers are extremely valuable. They are used as substitutes for required tiles in exposures. Their use, however, is governed by specific rules:

- Jokers cannot be passed in the Charleston; if passed, they must be returned.
- Jokers can substitute tiles in Pungs, Kongs, Quints, and Sextets with no usage limit and may form a group of all Jokers.
- Jokers cannot replace tiles in blocks, singles, or pairs.
- Jokers can be claimed from exposures on any player's rack.
- Multiple Jokers may be exchanged in one turn.
- Joker exchanges can only occur after picking, racking, or calling for an exposure; early exchanges make the hand "dead."
- Replacing all Jokers in exposures before Mah Jongg is called results in a "Jokerless" hand.
- Discarded Jokers cannot be picked up; they are "dead."
- Players must announce a Joker exchange, hand the Joker to the player whose rack contains the Joker who in turn hands over the replaced tile. If the exchange is **not announced** and the symbol **tile touches the table**, it is considered a discard.
- Jokers from "dead" hands can only be redeemed if exposed before the hand was deemed dead.



RULES AND PENALTIES

- A player must have thirteen tiles – including exposures and tiles on the rack. (Fourteen during players turn.)
- The position of EAST moves to the right after each game.
- Drawing a tile from the wall commits the player once the tile is moved.
- A player cannot claim a discarded tile after the tile has been placed on the sloped part of the rack. Tapping the rack is not considered racking. The tile can be claimed by other players until it is “racked.”
- Claiming a discarded tile commits the player when the tile is placed on top of the rack or tiles are exposed.
- Claimed tiles should not be placed in the rack.
- A tile is considered discarded when it is named or touches the table.
- A tile incorrectly named cannot be claimed until correctly named. If an exposure is made, the hand is "dead" unless a player declares Mah Jongg with the incorrect tile, then the game ceases. When playing for money, the player who miscalled pays for the table.
- If a player assumes the EAST position out of turn, the game continues. The next game reverts to the rightful East. The player who played out of turn is then skipped.
- If two players' hands are "dead," the others continue to play. If three players' hands are "dead," the game is replayed.
- If two players call for a tile, and one is for Mah Jongg, the Mah Jongg gets the tile.
- If Mah Jongg is called in error, the hand is "dead," and the others continue to play.



DEAD HANDS

For certain errors, a player's hand can be called "dead," and that player cannot finish the game. A player cannot announce that their own hand is "dead," only other players can do that based on the discarded tiles
and tiles on players' racks.

Reasons for calling a hand "dead":

- The wrong number of tiles on the rack
- Invalid Joker exchange (made before the player racks their drawn tile or calls for an exposure)
- Incorrect exposure
- Hand is not on the card
- Exposing a concealed hand
- Discarding before picking a tile or calling for an exposure
- Picking out of turn
- Picking from the wrong wall
- Picking from the wrong end of the wall
- Based on the visible tiles, the tiles needed to complete the hand are unavailable. (If the challenged player disagrees, play continues, and the issue is resolved after the game.)



HELPFUL HINTS

- Never “throw in” your hand until the winner’s Mah Jongg has been verified.
- Any player may stop the passing after the first Charleston without giving any reason.
- Exchanging a Joker could result in that player having a “Jokerless” hand.
- Jokers cannot be used in blocks, singles, or pairs.
- A White Dragon (Soap) cannot be used in a consecutive run as a zero.
- Exposures cannot be changed after discarding.
- A discarded tile cannot be called and then used to claim a Joker.
- A tile must be taken if placed on the top of the rack **or** tiles from the hand have been exposed. If the player cannot use the tile, their hand will be called “dead.”
- A player can use all Jokers to complete a Pong, Kong, Quint, or Sextet.
- If a miscalled tile results in a Mah Jongg, the player pays four times the value.
- A player cannot call their own hand “dead.”
- If a tile from the wall is accidentally turned over, it must remain in the same position in the wall. The tile cannot be “buried.”



RESOURCES

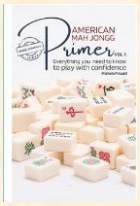
There are many books and videos on how to play Mah Jongg. American Mah Jongg is just one of several styles of play that can be found. Rules are very different in the different styles of play. Some resources are reliable; others not so much. Be careful if you decide to purchase or watch a video. Below are some suggestions for some resources you can trust.

Books:

Mahjongg Made Easy - National Mah Jongg League
https://nationalmahjonggleague.org



American Mah Jongg Primer
– Michele Frizzell (on Amazon)



Online:

Short Video Lessons: Michelle Frizzell on YouTube
https://www.youtube.com/@MAHJLIFE

American Mah Jongg Lesson - Fundamentals



Mah Jongg at Everleigh Lakeline – https://mj.djmcabee.com
Contains links to resources and online games.

The listed resources are included based on their reliability, not because they are superior to others. There may be better options available, but they have not been reviewed.

Created as a teaching aid for Mah Jongg instruction at Everleigh Lakeline, this booklet is exclusively for use within this initiative and is not authorized for use by others.