

Beginner's Guide to American Mahjongg

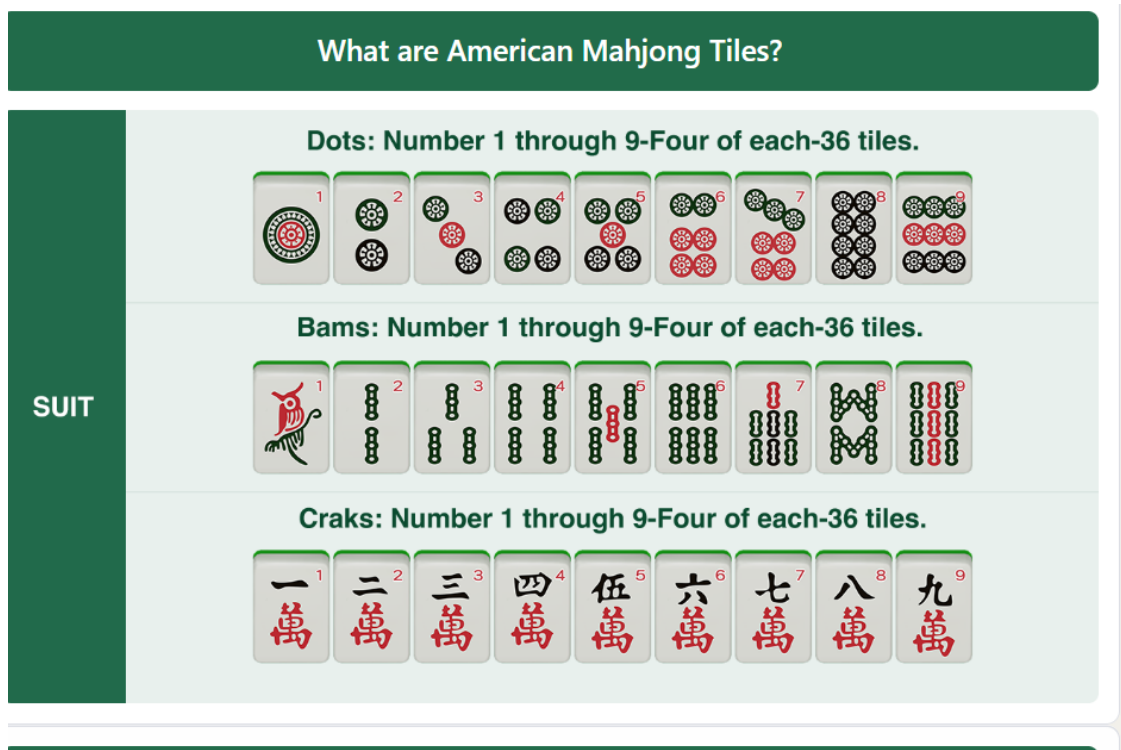
Understanding the Tiles

American Mah Jongg is played with 152 tiles. These tiles are divided into

- Three suits: bams, cracks, and dots (108 tiles)
- Winds (16 tiles)
- Dragons (12 tiles)
- Flowers (8 tiles)
- Jokers (8 tiles)

SUIT TILES:

Note that the 1 bam is typically represented as a bird.



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Non-Suit Tiles

Winds

E, W, N, S; four of each; suit neutral.



Dragons (white, red, green—four of each)

- RED dragons match cracks
- GREEN dragons match bams
- WHITE dragons match dots (also called soap)
- SOAP can also be used as “0”



Flowers (eight total; suit neutral)

There may be numbers or seasons of the year on the follower — they are irrelevant to American MJ.



Joker (eight total; suit neutral)



JOKERS ARE WILD CARDS

They can be used in any meld to replace a tile within a sequence of identical tiles larger than a single or a pair.

- Do not use Jokers in a meld if the tiles are not identical (i.e. NEWS or 2026 or 11223)
- They CANNOT EVER be used in a pair or as a single

Once exposed on a player's rack, a joker can be exchanged for its "native" tile by either an opposing player or by the "owner" of the joker. If claiming an opponent's joker, wait until it is your turn. The order of the joker exchange is: pick a tile, exchange the joker, and discard a tile.

Mah Jongg Card

A Mahjong card is a reference card issued by the National Mah Jongg League (NMJL) that details the valid combinations (hands) that can be claimed as a winning hand. The card changes annually on April 1 and is used only for American Mahjong.

The card is organized into sections, each representing different types of hands. It includes colors, letters, and numbers that indicate how many suits need to be in a player's hand. For example, a hand may require a specific combination of numbered tiles from different suits.

Initially, the card can seem overwhelming due to its layout. However, once you understand the sections and symbols, it becomes easier to identify potential hands based on the tiles you have. Each line on the card represents a winning hand made up of 14 tiles, and additional notes often provide further details on how to play that hand.

Understanding how to read and analyze the card is crucial for success in the game.

Dealing and Direction of Play:

- Each player sets up a rack with two stacks of 19 tiles laid face down against the back of the rack
- One player rolls a pair of dice. The rolls continue around the table to the right. Highest number becomes "East."
- East rolls dice again; holds back same number of tiles as number rolled. These held-back tiles will be used later as the last wall of the game

- East pushes out the remainder of the wall to the middle of the table
- East takes first four tiles (two stacks of two) from the right end of the center wall
- Player to the right of East will then take the next 4 tiles
- Deal continues to the right until each player has 12 tiles
- Each player will pick four times (3 sets of four and a singleton)
- East takes the next first and third tiles from the wall for a total of 14
- Others take a single tile for a total of 13
- Game begins with East throwing and naming a tile on the table
- All tile play goes to right of east; walls are pushed out to the left of east

The Charleston (when playing with 4 players)

The Charleston is a three- or six-round tile exchange at the start of every American mahjong game. It allows players to improve their hands by passing and receiving tiles. The goal is to move closer to a winning hand while staying flexible and strategic.

The order of passing:

1. **Pass 3 tiles to the right**
2. **Pass 3 tiles across the table**
3. **Pass 3 tiles to the left**

After these first three rounds, players vote on whether to do a second **Charleston**, which follows the same pattern in reverse:

1. **Pass 3 tiles to the left**
2. **Pass 3 tiles across**
3. **Pass 3 tiles to the right**

Finally, there is an **optional pass** where players can trade 0, 1, 2, or 3 tiles with the player across from them.

GLOSSARY OF TERMS

Mahjongg Card: Reference card issued by the National Mah Jongg League that provides a choice of valid tile combinations required to win a hand

Rack: Stand used to both arrange and expose tiles

Charleston: Mandatory tile-passing phase before play begins. (R,A,L,L,A,R)

Courtesy Pass: Optional final exchange of up to 3 tiles between opposite players just after the Charleston

East: The “dealer”; determined by highest dice roll.

Walls: Face-down tiles used for gameplay. Initially set up as two double stacks of 19 tiles laid against each player's rack

Breaking The Wall: Dealer rolls dice; pushes out number of dice roll and holds back the rest

Calling Mahjong: Declaring a win with a complete hand of 14 tiles

Calling a tile: Claiming a discarded tile to expose a meld

Dead hand: A hand that cannot be completed according to the current rules. A player cannot call their own hand dead.

Blind pass: Passing along tiles in the Charleston without looking at them. Can only be done on first left and last right

Racking: Taking a tile from the wall or the table and placing it on the sloping side of your rack.

Concealed (or closed) hand: in hands designated on the Mah Jongg card by a "C", you cannot pick up a discard for an exposure. Must be self-picked from the wall (except to call mah jongg). You can do a joker exchange

Wall game: No winner.

Tile matches

- Pair: Two identical tiles
- Pung: Three identical tiles
- Kong: Four identical tiles
- Quint: Five identical tiles

Cheat Sheet

- You can't call a tile from the table unless it can be used immediately for an exposure. No "saving" until later.
- **NEVER** use a joker in a pair, even to call mah-jongg.
- **NEVER** use a joker in a meld in which the tiles are not identical
- Don't call for a discarded tile unless it completes a pung, kong, or a quint (except to call mah jongg)
- Always pick up from the table before you do a joker exchange with another player
- You cannot call tiles from the discards if you are playing a closed (concealed) hand. You can only pick them from the wall yourself
- You cannot call for a discarded Joker
- Always rack your tile as you pick it up. This "kills" the prior tile so it can no longer be called
- You cannot call a tile to complete a pair. Unless it's for mah jongg.

Mah Jongg Etiquette:

- Recognize that house rules exist. Be flexible
- Turn off cell phones if practical to do so
- Keep chatter to a minimum during a game
- Don't comment on discarded tiles
- Don't touch anyone's tiles during gameplay. Even when dealing
- Don't eat gooey food and then touch the tiles
- Respect the tiles. They can be easily broken, cracked or chipped
- Win and lose graciously
- Help mix and build walls
- Help pack up and clean the space at the end
- Avoid wearing strong scents
- Keep pets out of the playing space