

American Mah Jongg Basics (Edited by John Smigel, Original by Janet Sloey), 5 Feb 2026

Set Up

Place all tiles on the table, face down, and mix them.

Each player stacks a row of 19 tile pairs (two high) in front of their rack.

Players each roll two dice and player with highest total is "East." Alternately, host player starts as East. East rolls dice again, to determine where to "break" their wall. East separates the number rolled of tile pairs from the right.

Deal

East pushes out the remaining tiles from their wall and takes 4 tiles. In counterclockwise direction, players continue taking tiles, 4 at a time, until each player has 12 tiles. When East's wall has been distributed, the next wall to the left is pushed out. East then takes tiles 1 and 3 from the top layer of the wall, and each player in counterclockwise direction gets one tile. That leaves "East" with 14 tiles, and the other players with 13 tiles each. Players do not put their tiles on their racks until all players have the appropriate number of tiles.

Walls are pushed out as needed to the left (to remember this, WALL ends with L), until someone gets a Mah Jongg or until all tiles have been used. At game end, the player to East's right becomes East for the next game. When a new wall is pushed out, rotate the last tile in the wall 90 degrees to indicate that is the wall end, not the beginning.

Charleston

Acronym for the passing order: **ROLLOR (Right, Over (Across), Left, Left, Over (Across), Right)**

First Right: Each player passes 3 tiles to the player on the right.

First Across: Each player passes 3 tiles to the player sitting opposite them.

First Left (can be blind): Each player passes 3 tiles to the player on the left.

STOPPING: If after the First Left any player wants to stop Charleston, they can, but only before anyone has done their Second Left pass.

Second Left: Each player passes 3 tiles to the player on the left.

Second Across: Each player passes 3 tiles to the player sitting opposite them.

Last Right (can be blind): Each player passes 3 tiles to the player to the right.

Blind Passing

Blind passes may be done for **First Left and Last Right**. If a player does not have three tiles they wish to pass, they may take one, two, or all three tiles passed to them and pass them without looking at them (Blind Pass) along with any of their own tiles needed to pass three tiles.

Courtesy

Before play begins, players opposite each other **may** choose to do a Courtesy Pass. They exchange 1, 2, or 3 tiles, the minimum desired between the two players. Players can also pass NO tiles.

Play

“East” begins play by discarding 1 tile, face up, **saying aloud** the name of the tile as it is placed on the table. From that point, players continue drawing tiles in turn, counterclockwise. The drawn tile should be **placed on the slanted part of the rack**, and then discarded, if it is not wanted. If the tile drawn is one the player wishes to keep, that tile is placed on the slanted part of the rack. **Placing a drawn tile on the slanted part of the rack makes the previously discarded tile unavailable for anyone else to call.** At the end of the current player’s turn, unless calling Mah Jongg, a tile from that player’s rack must be discarded by placing it face up on the table and **saying its name aloud.** Once the tile hits the table or saying the tile’s name is completed, the tile can’t be taken back. Discards **MUST** always be correctly named when they are laid on the table. Play continues until someone has 14 tiles that match a hand from the NMJL card and declares, “Mah Jongg”, or until all the tiles have been drawn with no winner (called a “Wall” game). After a game is completed the “East” position rotates counterclockwise to the player on the previous East’s right.

Calling a Discarded Tile

If any other player can take a discarded tile, they may “call” the tile by saying, “call,” “I’ll take that,” or “I want that,” or something to that effect. When called, they must place the tile directly on their rack’s top flat part. Once it is placed on the rack it must be used in an exposure or the player’s hand is dead. **A correctly discarded Joker can NEVER be called, EVER.** Any other tile can be called if the player can:

- 1) make a SET of 3 or more (a SET is a multiple of the SAME identical tile) OR
- 2) make a single or pair SET, **but ONLY for Mah Jongg.**

Note: runs (123), 2025, and EAST are all singles. The player places tiles from their rack on the top exposed part of the rack along with the called matching tile. It is now the calling player’s turn. The exposed set of tiles is called an eXposure. The player may exchange Joker(s) or call Mah Jongg at this point. If not, the calling player must then discard a tile from their rack. Play continues with the player counterclockwise from the discarding player. If the calling player would not have drawn next, some player’s turns will be skipped.

The player closest counterclockwise to the discarding player has priority over other players (unless they take too long to call so that another player has called and placed the tile on their rack – I don’t like this NMJL rule). Players who do not have priority must give the other player(s) reasonable time to call. Not doing so is called slamming. A player calling for Mah Jongg has priority over ordinary calling.

Holding

If a player might want to call a tile and needs more time, they can say “Hold” (or something to that effect) to stop play while they decide if they want to call the discard. Anyone can hold any time up to when the next drawn tile is racked by the next player (not just tapped on the rack).

Closed Hands

Each line on the card has either an **X** (eXposed hand) or a **C** (Closed hand) to the right of the hand description. Most hands are marked with an “X,” signifying they are “eXposed.” If someone is playing

an “exposed” hand, they can pick up discarded tiles to complete sets in their hand. **Closed hands** are usually the last hands listed for each category and marked with the letter C. If a player is trying for a Closed Hand, they may NOT call for a discarded tile, unless it is their 14th tile for Mah Jongg. The player can still exchange tiles for another player’s Joker and use Jokers in their Closed hand. Some Closed Hands are made up of Singles and Pairs only. Because **NO Jokers** can be used in **Singles and Pairs, EVER, IN ANY HAND**, NO Jokers are allowed in a hand that is only Singles and Pairs. These hands are more difficult and have a higher value. The Single and Pairs values on NMJL cards already consider that these hands are jokerless and do not double for being jokerless like values for other categories.

Using Jokers

Jokers can never be called, even for Mah Jongg. Jokers may be used in sets of **three, or more identical tiles**. Sets of three identical tiles are called “Pungs.” Sets of four identical tiles are called “Kongs.” All Quints hands require at least one Joker (unless Flowers). **Jokers may NEVER be used for single tiles, pairs, runs, in a winds set (such as NEWS), or in a date set (such as 2025). Not even for Mah Jongg.** However, if 3 or more, a set may be all Jokers and there is no minimum number of “natural” tiles needed in a set.

Exchanging for a Joker

If any player has exposed tiles (on the top flat part of their rack) using a Joker or Jokers, any player may, when it is their turn and if they have the tile(s) that Joker(s) represents, exchange the matching tile for its exposed Joker. You can exchange as many Jokers as you can on the same turn. You can exchange for your own jokers. The order of play for exchanging a joker or jokers is:

Draw from the wall (or **call** for a discard and **expose**), **exchange** for the Joker(s), **discard**. If exchanging for a Joker gives you Mah Jongg, that is called a Finesse and scores double from all players, even if the turn started by calling a tile. Otherwise, after a player has made a Joker exchange and discarded, play continues from that player counterclockwise. Players should NEVER touch the tiles on another player’s rack. When exchanging a joker player 1 must ask player 2 to exchange their matching tile for player 2’s exposed joker. The tiles should be exchanged without laying them on the table. You can exchange for your own Jokers (player 1 = player 2). You can ask yourself if you want.

American Mah Jongg Cards

There are many American Mah Jongg card alternatives. Players can use any card they agree on. The most-used cards are the yearly National Mah Jongg League (NMJL) Cards.

National Mah Jongg League Cards. NMJL Cards may be ordered online at www.nationalmahjonggleague.org or on Amazon (but be careful not to order fake NMJL cards on Amazon or elsewhere)). NMJL has both regular-sized and larger print cards for slightly more. You can usually start ordering new cards near the beginning of the year. However, the new NMJL cards don’t start being distributed until late March to April.

The hardest thing to learn is how to read a new Mah Jongg card. Here’s an explanation of how to read a card. Each card defines all the different 14-tile hands achieving Mah Jongg (winning).

American Mah Jongg cards have several hand **categories, typically 9 or 10 (also called groups or sections)**. Common categories are: 2025, 2468, ANY LIKE NUMBERS, QUINTS, CONSECUTIVE RUN, 13579, WINDS-DRAGONS, 369, and SINGLES AND PAIRS. The categories can change from year to year. Usually, most of the specific hand patterns in each category DO change from year to year.

Under each category name are lines (also called hands) that define the specific Mah Jongg hands for that category. Each line contains 4 things from left to right:

- 1) 1 or 2 **EXAMPLES** of 14-tile patterns indicating 14-tile hands achieving Mah Jongg
- 2) In parentheses, instructions on how the above example pattern(s) can be expanded with alternate sets of 14 tiles that also represent Mah Jongg
- 3) An X (eXposed) or C (Closed) indication for hands from that line
- 4) The base value for hands defined by the line. Harder hands typically have higher values.

Example Hand Pattern(s)

The example pattern(s), along with the instructions define what specific 14-tile hands qualify for Mah Jongg. A pattern can represent anywhere from one to hundreds of specific hands. Each pattern is made up of sets that are usually separated by spaces. Sets **ALWAYS** have multiples of the same exact tile. **If the values are different, it's different sets**. Often a run, year group, or wind group are not separated by spaces, but are still all singles (or pairs). For example, 123 is a run of three singles, 1, 2, and 3. More examples of all singles: NEWS, 2025, 2468, 369, EW. This example is 3 pairs: 336699.

Depending on the specific category, line, and instructions, each set may also take on different values from the example(s) shown (possibly different values, suits, winds, or dragons). Each set has a color. NMJL cards use 3 colors: Dark Blue (or Black), Green, and Red. The colors indicate if the sets need to be the same or different suits. Unless indicated otherwise in the instructions, sets with the same color must be the same suit and sets with different colors must be different suits. Note that the color does NOT indicate the specific suit (green is not necessarily bams). If all the tiles are the same suit on NMJL cards, the sets are all dark blue. If there must be 3 different suits, one set will be dark blue, one set will be red, and one set will be green. Sets in the same color must generally be the same suit. Note that Flowers and Winds do not have a suit, so they are always dark blue. Sometimes the instructions say a particular run or dragon (usually in dark blue) can be any suit. Dragon suits are usually indicated by color. One exception is the white dragon (usually called "soap") when used as a zero. The number zero does not have a suit (if grouped with other numbers, the other numbers don't need to be dots, the white dragon suit). Another exception is if it says the dragon(s) or other group can be any suit (then color doesn't matter).

Instructions

To the right of the example pattern(s) are instructions in parentheses that hopefully clarify what is meant by the preceding pattern(s). Sometimes you need to ask for clarification from the creator of the card. Most NMJL instructions start with "Any Y suits" where Y is 1, 2 or 3. I don't think I have ever seen a case where the number of suits part of the instruction is needed and is not redundant with the number of colors (correct me if I'm wrong). The rest of the instruction is usually needed to understand how the example pattern(s) can (or can't) be expanded.

Sometimes the instructions start in the category name and apply to all category hands unless the instructions say otherwise (“These Nos. Only,” for example). This is true for “ANY LIKE NUMBERS” and “CONSECUTIVE RUN.” In these two categories you can think of the instructions as starting with the category name. In “ANY LIKE NUMBERS” the “1”s can ALL be replaced by any other single (alike) number (All 2’s, all 3’s, ... all 9’s). In “CONSECUTIVE RUN” a set sequence with increasing values starting at 1 can be replaced by sets starting at other numbers. For example, the three sets, 111 222 333, can be replaced by any three sets starting with any other number from 2 to 7. You can’t start at 8 or 9 in this case because you would run out of numbers. You also can’t go down instead of up or start with zero (You just can’t).

Values of Hands

Each hand listed on the card has an assigned base value, most often 25. The value determines how many points or money a winner gets with that hand. The values are doubled for all players if the winning tile is picked from the wall rather than called. If a tile is called for Mah Jongg, only the person discarding the winning tile pays double. Except singles and pairs hands on NMJL cards, values are also doubled for winning hands that are jokerless. The value is four times the base value from all players if both jokerless and picked on your own tile for Mah Jongg.