keep it beside your rack

American Mahjong at a Glance

Mahjong Tilework
Updated October 3, 2026

The tiles



Dots, Bams, Craks, 1 to 9, four of each	108
Winds, four of each	16
Dragons, four of each	12
Flowers	8
Jokers	8
In play	152

Setting up

- Four players, in seats named East, South, West and North, going to the right.
- Shuffle face down. Each player builds a wall 19 tiles long and two high, and the four walls make a square.
- East rolls two dice, counts that many stacks from the right end of their wall, and breaks it there.
- Nobody deals: from the break, each player takes four tiles at a time until everyone has 12. East then takes two more, everyone else one, so East has 14 and the others 13.

The Charleston

1. Three tiles to the right
2. Three tiles across
3. Three tiles to the left

- That round is required. A second round, left, across, right, happens only if everyone wants it, and any one player can stop it without giving a reason.
- **Blind pass:** on the last pass of each round you may pass on tiles you were just handed, without looking.
- **Courtesy pass:** last, players across from each other may swap up to three tiles, settling on the smaller number.
- Jokers are never passed.

A turn

- East discards first. Play goes to the right.
- Take the next tile from the wall, then discard one face up and name it out loud.
- You hold 13 tiles between turns and 14 during your turn.

Claiming a discard

- Only the tile just discarded, and only to complete a pung, kong, quint or sextet, or to win.
- Never for a pair or a single tile, unless it wins the hand. American play has no chows.
- Call it out, take the tile, lay the set face up, then discard. Play carries on from you.
- A claim to win beats a claim for a set. Otherwise the player next in turn gets it.
- The chance closes once the next player has drawn a tile and racked it, or discarded.

Jokers

- A joker stands in inside a pung, kong, quint or sextet. Never in a pair or as a single tile.
- On your turn, after you draw or claim, you may give the real tile a joker stands for and take the joker from any exposed set, your own included.
- You can't swap the other way, and a discarded joker is dead: nobody can claim it.

Dead hands

- A hand is dead with the wrong number of tiles, with exposures that fit no hand on the card, when it can no longer be finished, or when a concealed hand shows tiles.
- Any player still in the hand may say so, judging only by tiles everyone can see.
- That player stops drawing and discarding, cannot win, and still pays the winner.

Winning and paying

- Your 14 tiles must match a hand on this year's card, and the card shows what each hand pays.
- **Won on a discard:** that player pays double, the other two pay the value.
- **Won from the wall:** all three pay double.
- **No jokers in the hand:** those payments double again, except in the Singles and Pairs section.
- If the wall runs out first, nobody wins and nobody pays. East then moves one seat to the right, as it does after every hand.

Reading the card

1 to 9	That number, in any suit
F	A flower
D	A dragon
N E W S	The winds
0	Soap, the White Dragon, as a zero
Colors	How many suits, never which ones
X	You may expose sets
C	Concealed until you win
( )	A note that can override the pattern

Jokers go only in groups of three or more alike, so singles and pairs on a line never take one.

Words you will hear

Pung	Three alike
Kong	Four alike
Quint	Five alike, with a joker unless it is flowers
Sextet	Six alike, the same way
Exposure	A claimed set, face up on your rack
Soap	The White Dragon
Charleston	The passes before the first turn
Dead hand	A hand that can no longer win
Drawn hand	The wall runs out with no winner

Our summary of the rules, in our own words. It is not the National Mah Jongg League's card, and no hands are printed here. You need this year's card from the League to play.