

# The Rules for Modern American Mah-jongg

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It is important to remember that there are many different kinds of Mah-Jongg. The rules that follow are known as modern American rules. Mah-Jongg is played with four players, and a fifth person may be a bettor. The object of modern American (sometimes called "Jewish") Mah-Jongg is to make the tiles match up with a hand on a Mah-Jongg card.

There are currently two leagues which publish a Mah-Jongg card:



The National Mah Jongg League, 250 West 57th Street,  
New York, New York 10107 - (212)246-3052 - Card costs  
\$5. Large print card for \$7

The American Mah-Jongg Association, 1330 Reisterstown  
Road, lower Level, Ste. 7, Baltimore, Maryland 21208 -  
(800)663-4581 - Card costs \$5.

The cards change yearly.

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## 1. **THE TILES**

The modern American Mah-Jongg set has 152 tiles.  
The tiles consist of:

**CRAKS** - 1 through 9 - four each.

**BAMS** - 1 through 9 - four each.

**DOTS** 1 through 9 - four each.



Four red dragons

Four green dragons

Four white dragons ("soaps")



Four each of:

North Wind, East Wind,

South Wind and West Wind.



8 FLOWERS



8 JOKERS

The tiles are mixed, turned face down, and each player makes a wall in front of their rack - nineteen tiles long and two tiles deep.

## 2. DEALING

One person is selected to be East. You can choose East by throwing the dice, arbitrarily choosing the hostess or by actual seating arrangement.

To begin dealing, East throws the dice. The number on the dice indicates where East will break her wall. If, for example, East throws a 10 on the dice, she will take ten groups of two tiles from the right end of the wall and keep them separate. They are reserved until the end of the game.

East takes four tiles (two groups of two) from the remainder of her wall. Then the player to the **right** of East takes four tiles and then the next player to the right takes four, etc. When East's wall is exhausted of tiles, the player to the **left** of east pushes out her wall and the players continue to pick until each player has three groups of four (12 tiles).

When each player has 12 tiles, East then picks the first and third tile from the wall. The player to the right of East takes the bottom tile, the next player takes the tile on top, and then the last tile gets picked so that each player has 13 tiles and East has 14. The number of tiles remaining in the wall will be determined by the number East originally threw on the dice. For example, if East threw 11, only one tile will remain.

### 3. **PASSING** - also known as "Charleston"

Each player puts her tiles on her rack, facing her but concealed from the other players. The player then organizes her tiles in groups and pairs according to the categories on the card. Three unwanted tiles are picked for passing. The passing is organized into two "Charlestons," as follows:

#### **First Charleston (compulsory):**

Each player gives 3 tiles to the player on her **RIGHT**; then  
Each player gives 3 tiles to the player **ACROSS** from her;  
then  
Each player gives 3 tiles to the player on her **LEFT**.

At the end of the first Charleston, any player may decide to halt the passing and proceed to the final Optional pass. If no one halts the passing, then the second Charleston begins, in which:

Each player gives 3 tiles to the player to her **LEFT**; then  
Each player gives 3 tiles to the player **ACROSS** from her;  
then  
Each player gives 3 tiles to the player to her **RIGHT**.

A player is permitted to STEAL one, two or three tiles on the last pass of each Charleston. For example, if a player only has one tile she wishes to pass, she may take two tiles which are passed to her and add her one tile and pass them to the next player. A player may only "steal" a tile on the **FIRST LEFT** and **LAST RIGHT**.

At the end of the second Charleston, an **OPTIONAL** pass is permitted. The players exchange either 0, 1, 2 or 3 tiles with the player across from her.

During the passing, players are concentrating on the card and how the tiles they are receiving can fit together to make a hand.

One point to remember: **A Joker may never be passed.**

#### 4. **THE PLAY**

After the optional last across pass, East discards a tile from her rack, placing it face up on the table and naming it out loud. The player to East's **right** then picks a fresh tile from

the wall, looks at it, and decides whether or not she wants to keep it. If she keeps it, she places it in her rack and then discards a tile. If she does not want it, she places it face up on the table and names it. The play continues in turn, with each player picking and then discarding. When a wall is exhausted, the wall to the **left** gets pushed out. The last wall to be played is the wall which East reserved in the beginning. **Remember, all picking is to the right, the walls come out to the left.**

### **PLAYERS MUST HAVE 13 TILES IN THEIR HANDS AT ALL TIMES.**

The only time a player may have 14 tiles is at the beginning of a game if she is East, at the moment of picking a tile and before discarding, and at the time she makes a Mah-Jongg. If a player miscounts and has more or less than 13 tiles, she is declared DEAD and is excluded from play.

## **5. THE HANDS**

The Mah Jongg card is organized in categories. They are:

**YEAR** hands or other special hands. (Usually the current year.)

These hands utilize tiles which make up the year: i.e., 1's and 9's.

for 1999, 2's and 0's for 2000. The white dragon represents a zero, as there is no tile with an actual zero.

**2468** - Self-explanatory. Hands concentrate on even numbers.

**MULTIPLICATION** - These hands perform a type of multiplication, such as FFFF 5555 x 5555 = 25. You would need four flowers, four fives of one suit, four fives of a second suit, and a 2 and a 5 of a third suit.

**QUINTS** - Quints (five of a kind) require the use of jokers, since there are only four of each number tile. However, a quint of five flowers is possible.

**CONSECUTIVE RUNS** - These hands require groups of number tiles in consecutive order, sometimes interspersed with flowers or dragons.

**13579** - Again self-explanatory. Hands focus on odd numbers.

**WINDS/DRAGONS** - Hands made up primarily of wind and dragon tiles, sometimes interspersed with numbers or flowers. Winds and dragons may also be referred to as "honor" tiles.

**369** - Guess which tiles you need for these hands!

**SINGLES & PAIRS** - Singles and pairs are the most difficult hands to attain, since you are not allowed to use jokers. The singles and pairs hands contain a representative sample of all the hands above; i.e., one wind hand, a consecutive run hand, a 2468 hand, etc.

## 6. **READING THE CARD**

Mah-Jongg cards are printed in three colors; red, blue and green. If a hand is printed entirely in one color, it means that all tiles in that hand are to be from ONE SUIT.

Similarly, if a hand is printed in two colors, the tiles are to be selected from TWO DIFFERENT SUITS; and three colors, THREE DIFFERENT SUITS.

For example, in consecutive runs, a hand may read: 11 222 3333 444 55, in all one color. In order to make mah-jongg, you must have all the above tiles, in the above order in one suit only. In other words, if you are using dots, you must have two one dots, three two dots, four three dots, etc.

Another hand may read: 444 555 6666 777, written in two colors with a parenthetical following it, (Any 2 suits, 4 consecutive Nos.) This means that you must use two suits, but you may use any four consecutive numbers, you are not bound to play four through seven. You may play the hand 666 777 8888 9999, wherein the sixes and sevens must be one suit and the eights and nines must be another suit.

The instructions may refer to "pung" and "kong."

A "pung" is three of a kind, a "kong" is four of a kind.

A "quint" is five of a kind, of which one must be a joker (except for flowers).

When the instructions refer to matching dragons, they are as follows:

Craks match with RED DRAGONS;

Bams match with GREEN DRAGONS and

Dots match with **WHITE DRAGONS**.

White dragons are sometimes called "Soap."

Be careful, as some hands require **matching dragons** and others require **opposite dragons**. When a hand calls for opposite dragons, if you are using **Dots**, the dragons must be either **green** or **red**; for **bams**, **white** or **red**, etc.

A **white** dragon (soap) is used for the zero.

Flowers do not belong to any suit and are used wherever there is an F.

## 7. **PICKING A HAND**

The most difficult aspect of modern American of Mah-Jongg is to determine which hand to aim for. While you may have many tiles that belong in one category, a player may be missing a whole family, or a pair of tiles that may prove difficult to obtain.

Next to each hand is a number, which tells how much the hand is worth. The harder the hand, the more it is worth. A hand with a value of 25 is usually easier to work out than a hand with a value of 50.

## 8. **CALLING TILES**

If the hand you are playing has an X next to the value of the hand, the hand is designated as a calling, or open hand. A hand with a C is a closed hand and if a tile you need is discarded, you may not call it from the table.

If a tile you need is discarded, and you are playing an open hand, you may call the tile to complete a pung, a kong, a quint or to make mah-jongg. A tile may not be called to make a pair, unless it is your mah-jongg tile. Once you call a tile, you must expose the pung or kong and you may not make any further changes to the exposed tiles.

If two players call for the same tile, the one whose turn is next gets the tile. If one of the players is calling the tile for mahjong, she has priority over a player who needs it for a pung or kong.

Once the next player has picked a tile and put it in her rack, it is too late to call a tile that was discarded and is on the table.

## 9. **JOKERS**

A joker may be used as a wildcard to fill in any pung or kong. A pung or kong may be entirely composed of jokers. **A JOKER MAY NEVER BE USED TO COMPLETE A PAIR.** The singles and pairs hands are worth more because you may not use any jokers in these hands.

If someone has called a tile and exposed a pung or kong and they are showing jokers, if you have the tile they need, you may exchange it and keep the joker for yourself. In other words, if East has called a six dot and she exposes three six dots and one joker, if you have the last six dot in your hand you should do the following:

**PICK A TILE WHEN IT IS YOUR TURN.  
TAKE THE 6 DOT AND EXCHANGE IT FOR THE**

JOKER

PUT THE JOKER IN YOUR RACK

DISCARD A TILE.

In this way, you will be assured of maintaining the necessary number of tiles in your hand.

Sometimes, you may find that you have too many jokers in your hand. This occurs when you need to complete a pair and are unable to use the jokers. In this event, you may discard a joker, but no one can call it.

## 10. MAKING MAH-JONGG

When all thirteen tiles match a hand on the card, and you either pick the 14th tile needed to complete the hand, or someone discards it, you may declare "Mah-jongg" and you are the winner.

Scoring is as follows:

If you make mah-jongg on a discard, you are paid the value of the hand

If you pick your mah-jongg tile, you are paid double the value of the hand.

If you make mah-jongg on a discard and you were bet on, you get double, and you share your winnings evenly with the bettor.

If you pick mah-jongg and are bet on, you get four times the value of the hand, and share your winnings evenly with the bettor.

Jokerless hands pay double. If a player picked her own

mah-jongg tile and her hand is jokerless, she gets paid four times the value of the hand.

Table rules can be added, depending on the preferences of the players. Some people like to "mush" all their unwanted tiles together at the end of the first Charleston. If you put in three tiles, you get to pick three tiles out. Other table rules may include using a "hot wall" where when the picking and discarding gets down to the last wall, no one can call a tile unless it's for mah-jongg.

If you are playing with a bettor, East leaves the table and the bettor sits in.

## 11. GOING DEAD

A player "goes dead," (is out of the game) when:

She has too many or too few tiles in her hand.

She has declared Mah Jongg in error

Another player is able to figure out her hand and knows she cannot possibly make it, based on what is on the table.

A player has exposed too many or too few tiles to make any hand.