American Mahjong Cheat Sheet

The tiles, the setup, the Charleston, a turn, jokers, and payment, on two pages. Keep it next to your card at the table.

playmahjongg.com



The Tiles at a Glance

An American set has 152 tiles in seven groups. Each suit tile, wind, and dragon appears four times. Flowers and jokers appear eight times each.

GROUP	TILES	TOTAL
Bams	1 to 9, bamboo sticks (1 Bam is a bird)	36
Craks	1 to 9, red character 萬	36
Dots	1 to 9, circles	36
Winds	North, East, West, and South	16
Dragons	Red, Green, and White (Soap)	12
Flowers	All count as the same tile	8
Jokers	Wild, in groups of 3 or more	8

Dragons and Their Suits

Each dragon belongs to one suit, which matters when a hand combines a dragon with numbers from the same suit. Soap, the white dragon, also stands for zero in year hands, such as 2026.

DRAGON	MATCHING SUIT
Red	Craks
Green	Bams
White (Soap)	Dots

Setup in Five Steps

1. Roll the dice to choose East, the dealer.
2. Shuffle all the tiles, face down.
3. Each player builds a wall, 19 tiles long and 2 high.
4. East rolls, then breaks their wall at the number rolled.
5. Take 4 tiles at a time, until everyone has 12. Then, East takes 2 more, and everyone else takes 1. East starts with 14 tiles, and the others start with 13.

The Charleston

Pass three tiles at a time, face down. Jokers may never be passed.

STAGE	ORDER	NOTES
First Charleston	Right, across, left	Required. A blind pass is allowed on the left pass.
Second Charleston	Left, across, right	Optional, and any player may stop it. A blind pass is allowed on the right pass.
Courtesy pass	Across only	0 to 3 tiles. Partners pass the lower of the two numbers asked for.

Your Turn

After the Charleston, East discards first, and play moves to the right.

1. Draw a tile from the wall, or call the last discard, if it completes a group.
2. If you can, swap natural tiles for jokers in any exposure.
3. Discard one tile, face up, and say its name.
4. After discarding, keep 13 tiles on your rack.

Calling Discards

Call a discard before the next player draws. You may call it to complete a group of three or more, which you then expose, or to finish your whole hand.

You may not call a tile for a single or a pair, unless it gives you Mahjong. A call for Mahjong beats a call for an exposure. If two players call for exposures, the one whose turn comes first gets the tile.

Group Names

NAME	MEANING	JOKERS?
Single	1 tile	No
Pair	2 identical tiles	No
Pung	3 identical tiles	Yes
Kong	4 identical tiles	Yes
Quint	5 identical tiles	Yes
Sextet	6 identical tiles	Yes

Joker Rules

- Jokers fill any group of three or more, and never a single or a pair.
- On your turn, you may swap a natural tile for a matching joker in any exposure, yours or another player's.
- A discarded joker is dead, and it cannot be called.
- A hand with no jokers pays double, except singles-and-pairs hands.

Reading the Card

Each line on the card is one winning hand, written as groups of numbers and letters. Colors show how many suits the hand uses: one color means one suit, two colors mean two suits, and three colors mean all three. The actual suits are your choice. Numbers in a row, such as 1, 2, and 3, are part of the pattern only. American mahjong has no runs, or chows, to call.

Green, **red**, and **blue** mean different suits, in any order. **X** The hand may be exposed. **C** The hand must stay concealed.

The number at the end of the line is its value.

Winning and Payment

Call Mahjong when your 14 tiles match one hand on the card, then lay your hand face up for checking.

HOW YOU WON	WHO PAYS
On a discard	The discarder pays double. The other two pay the value once.
Drawn yourself	All three players pay double.
No jokers	All payments double again, except on singles-and-pairs hands.

If nobody wins before the wall runs out, it is a wall game, and nobody pays.

Dead Hands

A hand is dead when it can no longer win. Usually, that happens after an exposure that fits no hand on the card, or when a player has the wrong number of tiles. A dead hand stops playing, but it still pays the winner.

Quick Strategy

- After the deal, pick two or three possible hands, and narrow them down during the Charleston.
- Hold on to pairs, since jokers cannot replace them.
- Count how many of the tiles you need are already discarded.
- Before you discard, check every exposure for joker swaps.
- Late in the hand, discard tiles that are already safe.

Table etiquette. Name every discard clearly, and wait for the previous player to finish before you draw. Keep your rack tidy, so your tiles never show, and do not touch the wall out of turn. If you think someone has made a mistake, raise it politely, before the next player draws, while it is still easy to fix.

The card. Every player needs the current card from the National Mah Jongg League, which publishes a new one each spring. This sheet covers the rules, not the hands themselves.

Free printable from playmahjongg.com. Not affiliated with the National Mah Jongg League.