

# American Style Mahjong Rules

**Mahjong** is a Chinese game of skill, which involves four players. Although the **game play** in general is similar in all of the versions of **mahjong**, the game pieces and scoring, however, slightly differ depending on the regional variations.

Almost similar to gin rummy, the object of **mahjong** is to build sets, as well as get the highest point value. In order to do this, each player selects and discards tiles (the game pieces, bearing different designs) until an entire set of combinations has been made.

For this article, we will cover the **American Style of Mahjong**, which was standardized in 1937 by the National Mah Jongg League in New York.

So let's start the ball rolling (in this case, the dice), and begin playing **mahjong**.

## The Mahjong set

The basic **Mahjong** set has 136 pieces, which contains 36 distinct kinds of pieces (4 of each kind). There are three suits, which runs from one to nine.

### Group # 1: Suits

There are three suits, which run from one to nine.

#### 1) Bamboos



#### 2) Characters



#### 3) Dots



### Group # 2: Winds and Dragons

Furthermore, there are four directional tiles (Winds or Feng), labeled as East, South, West, and North (4 pieces each)



There are also three Cardinal tiles (Dragons or Special Honor Pieces), labeled as Red Dragon (matches with Character suit), Green Dragon (matches with Bamboos suit), and White Dragon (matches with Dots suit). There are 4 pieces of each Dragon.



Note that The White Dragon can also be used as a zero of any suit.

### Group # 3: Flowers

There are eight Flowers tiles, every series marked 1, 2, 3, and 4 - two of each kind.



### Group # 4: Jokers

There are eight **Joker** tiles, which can be used to replace any tiles in putting together a hand.



## Game Objective

The objective of the **game** is to put together a complete set (or "hand"), which contains combinations of "**pung**" (three of a kind), "**Kong**" (four of a kind), "**Quint**" (five of a kind), or "**pairs**" (two of a kind) for a total of 14 pieces.

Each player starts with 13 tiles. With each turn, a player picks up a 14th tile, and then discards one tile face up in the center of the table. At this point, other players can choose to pass, take the tile to complete a set (**pung, kong, or quint** - we'll describe this later) or to declare a win ("**mahjong**"). The first player who completes the set of 14 tiles wins the hand.

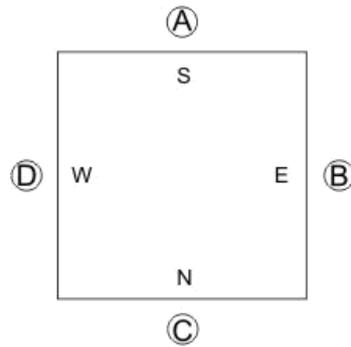
Let's look at each step of the game in more details.

## Determining the Seats (Dealing/seating part in game is performed for you automatically).

Each player throws a pair of dice. The player who rolls the highest total will be East. The player who rolls the 2nd highest total will be South, follows by West, and North.

### Here is an example:

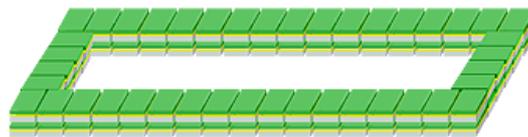
The player "B" rolls the highest total, so "B" will take East side of the table. The player "A" rolls the 2nd highest total, so "A" will take the South side of the table. The Player "D" rolls the 3rd highest total, so "D" will take the West side of the table. Lastly, The Player "C" rolls the lowest total, so "C" will take the North side of the table.



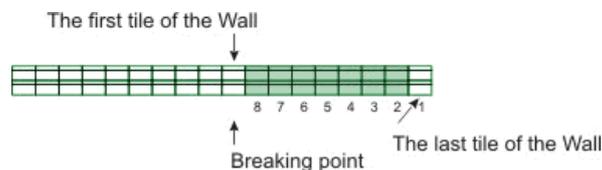
Note that the winds follow each other in counter-clockwise direction in order East, South, West and North (the order in which winds are customarily listed in Chinese) so they do not follow compass directions.

## Dealing the tiles / Breaking the wall

- a. The 152 pieces are mixed and then placed faced down on the table. Each player then selects 38 tiles and arranges them face down in a row of 19 pieces and 2 tiles high. Then, these rows are pushed forward to form a hollow square in the middle of the table. Below is an example of an unbroken wall:



- b. To determine the breaking point of the wall, East throws the two dices and counts from the right end of East side of the wall. Then East makes a break in the wall by pushing slightly the tiles to the left of the breaking point.



For example: if the total of the two throws is 8, then East counts off 8 stacks along the tiles of the top tier of the East wall, starting from the right end, and breaks the wall.

- c. East starts the deal by taking the first two stacks of the tiles (i.e., four tiles) from the left of the break, then each of the other three players pick two stacks of tiles in order South, West and North. This is repeated twice so that each player has 12 tiles. East then draws the next stack of two tiles (top tile of the 1st and 3rd stacks), and South, West and North in turn take one tile each. Thus East has 14 tiles and the other three players each 13 tiles. Here the illustration on how the last tiles are picked up:

					E	W	E
					N	S	

## The Charleston

One of the main differences between the **American Style Mahjong** and the other **Mahjong Styles** is "the **Charleston**" sequences before the game play. The **Charleston** is basically series of tile exchanges among the players. This creates opportunities to get rid of tiles that the players do not want by passing them to other players during the **Charleston**.

**Note:** that **Jokers** cannot be passed during the **Charleston**.

The **Charleston** is divided into three stages: **First Charleston** (required), **Second Charleston** (optional), **Courtesy Pass** (option). Let's look at each stages in more details:

### 1. First Charleston

**First Charleston** is a required step, even if a player has drawn a complete set of hand from the wall. This step consists of three passes:

- 1st pass** - each player passes three tiles to the player on the right.
- 2nd pass** - each player passes three tiles to the player across.
- 3rd pass** - each player passes three tiles to the player on the left. For this step, a player may choose to perform "**Blind Pass**" -- players may take one, two, or three tiles that being passed to them and pass them to the player on the left without looking at the tiles.

### 2. Second Charleston

The **Second Charleston** is optional and can be performed only when ALL players agree. This step consists of three passes:

- 1st Pass** - each player passes three tiles to the player on the left.
- 2nd pass** - each player passes three tiles to the player across.
- 3rd pass** - each player passes three tiles to the player on the right. For this step, a player may choose to perform "**Blind Pass**".

### 3. Courtesy Pass

After the **First Charleston** and/or **Second Charleston** have been completed, two players who sit across may want to perform one last pass. In this step, one, two or three tiles may be passed, based upon the lesser tile request. Thus, if a player does not want to exchange any tiles, then there will be no courtesy pass performed between this particular player and the player across.

Once all the **Charleston** steps are completed, the game is ready to start!

## Drawing tiles

The game is now ready and new tiles will be taken from the "Wall" where the **drawing** of initial hand ended. East starts the game by **discarding** a tile faces up in the center of the table. South then **draws & discards** a tile, followed by West and North. Thus, the draw goes counter-clockwise around the table, unless a tile is thrown which a player can claim. In that case, the turn jumps to the respective player's position. We'll go into more details in the Game Play section.

## Game Play

When a player **discards** a tile, any of the other players may pick up the **discarded** tile if he/she has a set, which may be completed by the **discarded tile**. However, a drawback of this action is that the player must now expose the completed set to the others, thus providing them a glimpse of what kind of hand he/she is creating. A player can pick up a discarded tile to complete one of the following sets:

- Pung** - a set of 3 identical tiles. A player must say "**Pung**" when he/she gets another player's discarded tile to form the combination. The player then must show the created set and then discard a tile. The next player (counterclockwise) will then have the next turn. Here is an example of a **Pung**:



2. **Kong** - a set of 4 identical tiles. A player must say "**Kong**" when he/she gets another player's discarded tile to form the combination. The player then must show the created set and then discard a tile. The next player (counterclockwise) will then have the next turn. Here is an example of a **Kong**:



3. **Quint** - a set of 5 identical tiles. A player must say "**Quint**" when he/she gets another player's discarded tile to form the combination. The player then must show the created set and then discard a tile. The next player (counterclockwise) will have the next turn. Here is an example of a **Quint**:



4. **Sextet** - a set of 6 identical tiles. A player must say "**Sextet**" when he/she gets another player's discarded tile to form the combination. The player then must show the created set and discard a tile. The next player (counterclockwise) will then have the next turn. Here is an example of a Sextet:



5. **Pair** -- An Eye, or a **Pair**, are two identical tiles. It cannot be created with discarded tiles unless to declare a win / **mahjong**. Here is an example of a Pair:



How about if two players are claiming a discarded tile at the same time? Then the Claim Priority is in effect.

1. **Win (Mahjong)** has priority over other claims.
2. A player next in turn has priority over other players.

## Waiting to Win

A player with one tile short of **winning** the game is considered to have a "ready hand". This is called "waiting" because that player is basically waiting for certain tiles to complete his hand.

## Winning

When a player creates a set of hand or "mahjong", he wins the game. A **winning hand** consists of combinations of **pung, kong, quint, pair** or **special hands** as described in the yearly standard hands & rules published by National Mah Jongg League.

After a game is completed (whether by a winning hand or no winner after the last tile in the wall has been picked), the player to the right becomes the new dealer (East) as the wind / seating position rotate counterclockwise.

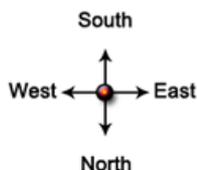
## Round

In **mahjong**, there are 4 rounds: East, South, West and North Round.

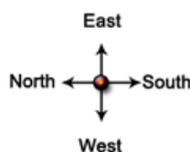
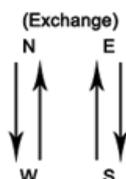
Within each round, the winds / seating position will rotate as follows: East, South, West, North (counterclockwise). This also happens in the event of a dead hand (where nobody wins).

Round	Position			
	East	South	West	North
1 (East Wind Round)	East(A)	South(B)	West(C)	North(D)
2 (South Wind Round)	South(B)	East(A)	North(D)	West(C)
3 (West Wind Round)	West(C)	North(D)	South(B)	East(A)
4 (North Wind Round)	North(D)	West(C)	East(A)	South(B)

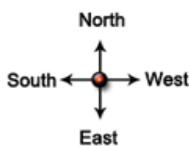
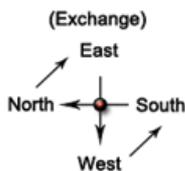
### 1st Round



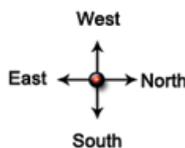
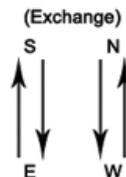
### 2nd Round



### 3rd Round



### 4th Round



Thus, there are total of 16 hands in one complete game of **mahjong**.

## More Details on Jokers

1. **Jokers** can be used as a wildcard to complete any **Pung, Kong, Quint or Sextet** only. A **Pung, Kong, Quint or Sextet** may be composed of all **Jokers**! Thus it can't be used to replace a single tile or to complete a pair.
2. **Jokers** cannot be passed during The **Charleston**.
3. A **Joker** can be discarded during the game and is called as the same tile of the previous discard.
4. If a player exposed a **Pung, Kong, Quint, or Sextet** with a **Joker** and you have the tile that the player needs, you may exchange the **Joker** with your tile during your turn (whether you just picked the tile from the wall or already in your hand, you can exchange it during your turn).

**For example:** If East exposes a kong composed of three of one dot and a **joker** and you have a one dot in your hand or just picked a one dot from the wall, you may do the following:

- a. pick a tile during your turn (if the one dot is in your hand),
  - b. take the one dot and exchange it with the exposed **Joker**,
  - c. put the **Joker** in your hand,
  - d. discard a tile.
5. When a tile has already been discarded, you can't take it back and exchange it for a **Joker**.
  6. If a **Joker** has been exchanged for a tile and there is no other **Jokers** remaining in the hand, the hand is considered a **No Joker** hand.
  7. A symbol tile can be exchanged for a **Joker**, but a **Joker** can't be exchanged for a symbol tile.
  8. A symbol tile cannot be exchanged for a **Joker** for the purpose of claiming the last discard for an exposure or **Mahjong**.
  9. Only a properly exposed **Joker** can be exchanged. A **Joker** that is going back to the rack due to a dead hand cannot be exchanged.
  10. Any **Joker** that was properly exposed prior to a dead hand stays in the game and can be exchanged even after the hand is declared dead.

## More Details on Flowers & White Dragon

1. Flowers can be passed during Charleston
2. A Flower can be discarded and called as **Flower**.
3. When a White Dragon is used as a Zero, it has no matching suit and can be used with any suits.

## More Details on Rules & Penalties

1. The tile needs to be called/named correctly in order to be claimed. There is no penalty for incorrectly naming a tile that wanted for **Pung, Kong or Quint** in an exposed hand. However, if the miscalled tile is wanted **Mahjong**, the game ends and the player who miscalled the tile pays four times the value of the hand of the claimer. Other players do not need to pay. If the miscalled tile is not claimed for **Mahjong**, it then needs to be correctly named and then called for **Pung, Kong, Quint** for exposure, or the final tile needed for a Run, Pair, **Pung, Kong or Quint** for **Mahjong**.
2. A player may challenge another player's hand and call it **dead** for the reasons below:

- a. **Invalid Hand** – The current exposed tiles do not match with any of the possible hands.
- b. **Invalid Exposure** – The current exposed tiles points out that the hand must be concealed.
- c. **Impossible to Win** – The current exposed tile and dead tiles point out that it is impossible for the player to win. For example: a player needs to make a pair of two dots to win, however there are already three of two dots discarded on previous moves.
- d. **Breaking the Rules** – such as, picking up tiles when it is not your turn, etc.

Here is how the challenge works:

- A player states that another player's hand is dead

- A player with the questionable hand may respond as follows:

- i. Admit that the hand is dead – this player stops playing and does not pick up or discard, part of the hand that is in error is returned to the rack, and pays the winner the full value of the hand.
- ii. Deny that the hand is dead – The game continues. At the end of the game, the challenger's hand is inspected. If the challenger is correct (the hand is dead), then the challenged pays 25 points to the challenger. Otherwise (if the hand is ok), then the challenger pays 25 points to the challenged.

If no player catches the error, the play may continue. However, the player who has the incorrect exposure cannot declare **Mahjong**.

## More Details on Declaring a Wrong Mahjong

1. If a player declares a **wrong mahjong** but catches the error prior to exposing the hand and all other hands remain intact, the play continues with no penalty.
2. If a player declares a **wrong mahjong**, exposes the hand but all other players' hands are intact, the game still continues. However, the declarer's hand is **dead**, means the player stops playing, does not pick up or discard, and pays the winner the full value of the hand. The same applies for calling a wrong discard and making a wrong exposure.
3. If a player declares a **wrong mahjong**, exposes the hand and one other player exposes the hand, the two remaining players continue the game. If only one player manages to hold the hand intact, the game has to be stopped. The player who declares **wrong mahjong** pays double of the incorrect hand to the one remaining player.
4. If a player who declares a **wrong mahjong** has an exposed hand, the **Joker(s)** in the exposure may be redeemed by other players with a like tile during their turn. However, if the hand becomes dead, the part of the hand that was in error is returned to the rack, and no Jokers may be redeemed.