

American Mahjong Rules

A free printable guide for beginners & card parties — 2026 edition

Players	4 (standard; some groups adapt to 3)
Tiles per set	166 — 3 suits, winds, dragons, flowers, seasons, 8 jokers
Required card	Annual National Mah Jongg League (NMJL) card
Game length	■ 20–40 minutes per hand
Goal	Complete a hand listed on the current year's NMJL card

1. What you need

A complete American mahjong set: **166 tiles** (the three suits — dots, bamboo, and characters — plus winds, dragons, flowers, seasons, and 8 jokers), four **racks** and **pushers**, and a carrying case. Most groups also use a **quiet padded mat** to silence the clack and keep the wall tidy. Every legal hand comes from the **annual NMJL card**, so you need the current year's edition.

2. Setting up

- 1 Seat four players around the table, facing the cardinal directions (East, South, West, North).
- 2 Shuffle all 166 tiles face down and build a **wall** — each player stacks 17 tiles x 2 high in front of them (34 tiles per side, 136 total in the wall; the rest form the dead wall / flowers).
- 3 East rolls dice to decide who breaks the wall and deals **13 tiles** to each player (East gets 14 to start).

3. The Charleston (passing phase)

Before regular play, all four players improve their hands by passing tiles. The standard Charleston has three passes of **three tiles each**:

- 1 Pass 3 tiles to the **right**.
- 2 Pass 3 tiles to the **left**.
- 3 Pass 3 tiles **across** (to the opposite player).
- 4 Optional: a second Charleston (right, left, across) and a single courtesy pass of 1–3 tiles, if all players agree.

Jokers are never passed during the Charleston.

4. Your turn

- 1 **Draw** one tile from the wall.
- 2 **Assess** your hand against the NMJL card — is a listed hand now possible?
- 3 **Discard** one tile face up into the center. This is the only tile other players may claim.
- 4 After a discard, any player may **claim** it to complete a pung (3 of a kind), kong (4), or quint (5), or to win.

5. Jokers — the wild card

A set includes **8 joker tiles**. Jokers are wild: they stand in for any tile inside a group of three or more (pung, kong, quint, sextet). They **cannot** be used in a pair. You may exchange jokers from exposed sets during your turn when you draw the real tile they represent. Jokers change strategy dramatically — American mahjong has no jokers, so a Chinese set cannot play the American game.

6. Winning the hand

You win by completing one of the hands printed on the current **NMJL card** — for example a standard **2468**, a **Quint**, a **Run**, or a **Cleared** hand. Each hand has a point value (commonly 25¢, 50¢, or more for difficult hands). The winner reveals their hand, all players verify it against the card, and the winner collects from each player. Bonuses apply for a self-drawn win; penalties apply to the player who discarded the winning tile.

7. Quick reference

Phase	What happens
Setup	166 tiles, 4 racks, build wall, deal 13 each (East 14)
Charleston	Pass 3 right, 3 left, 3 across — jokers never passed
Turn	Draw → assess vs card → discard one
Claim	Take a discard to complete pung/kong/quint or to win
Win	Complete a hand on the current year's NMJL card

This guide is a beginner overview. Official hands, point values, and the annual card are published by the National Mah Jongg League. Free download from Mahjong Market — a manufacturer-direct source for 166-tile, NMJL-compatible American mahjong sets, mats, and pushers. Visit americanmahjongshop.com.