

# American Mahjong Starter Guide

Crack, Bam, Dot — and the card that ties it all together

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American Mahjong uses a National Mah Jongg League card that changes annually. It looks impossible at first. This guide breaks it down into the six things you actually need to know to play your first game.

## The tiles

- Three suits: Crack (characters, red), Bam (bamboo, green), Dot (circles, blue). 1-9 in each.
- Honors: four Winds (East/South/West/North) and three Dragons (Green/Red/White/Soap).
- Flowers and Jokers: Jokers are wild and can substitute for any suit tile — but not flowers.

## The card and hands

- The NMJL card lists every valid winning hand for the year. You must win with a hand on the card.
- Hands are categorized (2468, Like Numbers, Quints, etc.) — pick 2-3 categories to focus on first.
- Jokers can replace any suit tile in a set of 3+ but cannot be in pairs.

## The flow of a game

- East player deals 13 tiles each and takes 14; East goes first, drawing or taking the discard.
- Call 'Mahjong' when your tiles complete a hand on the card — show all tiles to prove it.
- Charleston: the opening 3-round tile pass (right, across, left) is unique to American Mahjong.

## Insider glossary

**Crack** — The character suit — red symbols. Players often call them 'craks'.

**Bam** — The bamboo suit — the 1-bam looks like a bird on a perch.

**Dot** — The circle suit — easiest to count quickly.

**Kong** — A set of four matching tiles. A Quint is five (using a joker).

**Mahjong** — The winning call — your complete hand matching a card hand exactly.

## Starter checklist

- Current NMJL card (new card releases in March each year)
- A full set of American Mahjong tiles
- A rack per player
- 4 players (or 3 with a Charleston adjustment)

**Mahjong Is My Love Language — tee at [15d0.com/shop/mahjong/](https://www.15d0.com/shop/mahjong/)**