Mahjong Beginner Cheat Sheet

The tiles, the goal, a turn, the calls and the words you will hear at the table. Chinese, American and Riichi in one sheet.

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1 · THE TILES

Dots (Circles)
1–9, four of each · **36**

Bamboo (Bams, Sticks)
1–9, four of each · **36** · the 1 is usually a bird

Characters (Craks, Wan)
1–9, four of each · **36** · the number is written in Chinese

Winds
East, South, West, North, four of each · **16**

Dragons
Red, Green, White (often a blank or blue frame), four of each · **12**

Flowers & Seasons
one of each, eight in all · **8** · bonus tiles, not used in Riichi

Three suits + winds + dragons = **136**. Add the eight flowers = **144** (Chinese). Add eight jokers to that = **152** in play for American (boxed as 166 with spares and blanks). Riichi plays the 136 with three red fives swapped in.

2 · THE GOAL

Collect **14 tiles** that form **four sets and a pair**. The sets are:

- **Chow** — three in a row, one suit (4-5-6 of Dots). Not used in American.
- **Pung** — three identical tiles.
- **Kong** — four identical tiles. Declare it and draw a replacement tile.
- **Pair (eyes)** — two identical tiles.

American mahjong replaces “four sets and a pair” with the hands printed on this year’s National Mah Jongg League card. Riichi needs at least one *yaku* (scoring pattern) as well as the shape.

3 · SETTING UP

- Turn all tiles face down and **wash** (shuffle) them with both hands.
- Each player builds a **wall** two tiles high in front of them: 18 stacks for Chinese, 17 for Riichi, 19 for American.
- Push the four walls together into a square.
- The dealer is **East**. East rolls the dice to decide where the wall is broken and the deal begins.
- Deal **13 tiles** each; East takes a 14th and discards first.
- Flowers and seasons are set aside face up as soon as they are drawn and replaced from the back of the wall.

4 · A TURN

① **Draw**
Take the next tile from the wall, or claim the tile just discarded.

② **Look**
Can you win? Declare a kong? Otherwise choose a tile to let go.

③ **Discard**
Place one tile face up in the middle and say its name.

④ **Pause**
Anyone may claim it. If nobody does, play passes to the right.

Play moves **counter-clockwise**. A claimed set is placed face up in front of you and stays there; the rest of your hand stays hidden.

5 · CLAIMING A DISCARD

You want	Who you may take it from	Say
Chow	Only the player on your **left** (the one who just played). Chinese and Riichi only.	“Chow” / “Chii”
Pung	Anyone.	“Pung” / “Pon”
Kong	Anyone. Draw a replacement from the back of the wall.	“Kong” / “Kan”
The winning tile	Anyone. **A win beats every other claim**; pung and kong beat chow.	“Mahjong” / “Ron” / “Hu”

After claiming you must discard. In American mahjong you may call any tile for any exposure except a pair, and a joker in an exposed set can be swapped for the real tile on your turn.

Three games, one set of tiles

What changes between Chinese, American and Japanese Riichi mahjong, and the words you will hear.

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6 · WHICH GAME IS WHICH

	Chinese (Hong Kong)	American (NMJL)	Riichi (Japanese)
Tiles in play	144, with flowers	152: 144 + 8 jokers	136, no flowers, 3 red fives
Winning shape	4 sets + pair	A hand on this year's card	4 sets + pair + at least one yaku
Chow allowed	Yes, from the left	No	Yes, from the left
Jokers	No	8, stand for any tile in a set of 3+	No
Before play	Deal and go	The **Charleston**: pass 3 tiles right, across, left, then left, across, right	Deal and go
Scoring unit	Fan, usually a 3-fan minimum	Printed on the card, paid in chips or coins	Han and fu → points; riichi bets 1,000
Gear	Tiles, dice, wind indicator	Tiles, 4 racks with pushers, the card	Tiles, point sticks, dice
Tile size	Size 36 is standard (≈36 mm tall)	1.2 in, 1.3 in large print	26 mm, two-tone back

7 · WORDS AT THE TABLE

Wall — The stacked tiles you draw from.

Dead wall — The last 14 tiles, never drawn except for kong replacements.

East / dealer — Starts the hand; keeps the deal after a win or a draw in most rules.

Seat wind — Your wind this hand. A pung of it scores.

Prevailing wind — The round's wind, East first. A pung of it scores too.

Concealed — A set you drew yourself and have not shown. Worth more.

Exposed / melded — A set you claimed from a discard. Shown face up.

Ready / tenpai — One tile away from winning.

Self-draw / tsumo / zimo — Winning on a tile you drew. Everyone pays.

Furiten — Riichi: you cannot win on a discard if a tile you need is in your own discards.

Dora — Riichi bonus tile shown on the dead wall; each one in your hand adds a han.

Charleston — American pre-game tile pass, see table above.

Blind pass — Charleston: passing tiles you received without looking.

Wash — Shuffling the tiles face down.

8 · ETIQUETTE

- Say the tile when you discard it, and lay it in a neat row in front of you so others can read the pond.
- Never touch another player's tiles or wall. Point if you need to.
- Keep your hand behind the rack or on edge; do not show it when you win until the call is confirmed.
- Claim promptly. "Pung" after the next player has drawn is too late.
- Do not comment on discards or coach the player next to you during a hand.
- In American play, the Charleston is passed, not thrown. Hand tiles face down, three at a time.
- Set your phone face down. The pace of the table depends on four people paying attention.

9 · BEGINNER MISTAKES

- Discarding dragons and winds first out of habit. Watch what the table is collecting.
- Chasing a big hand while someone is one tile from a small one. A cheap win still ends the hand.
- Calling chow too early. Every exposure tells the table what you hold.
- Buying a Chinese set for American mahjong: no jokers, no racks, 8 tiles short.
- Buying a size 40 set for a card table. Measure first: size 36 fits a 34-inch table.

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