

Learning Mahjong 屁胡 — A Beginner's Guide

CASUAL CHINESE MAHJONG · BEGINNER'S GUIDE

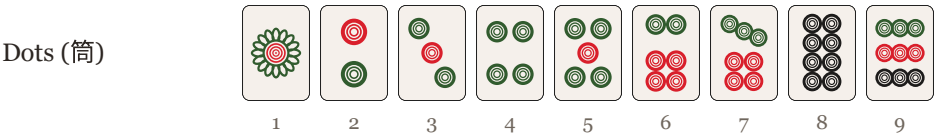
It's playing cards, with tiles

Mahjong plays a lot like a card game — you just hold tiles instead of cards. Where a deck has clubs, spades, hearts and diamonds, mahjong has its own suits: **Dots** (筒, *bing*), **Bamboo** (索, *tiao*) and **Characters** (萬, *wan* — also called “cracks”). On top of the three suits there are **Winds** and **Dragons**, which everyone calls **honor tiles**.

The Chinese characters can look intimidating at first, but treat them the way you'd treat a stop sign or a logo — they're symbols. A little time at the table is all it takes to read them on sight, and most physical sets print the number or name in a corner to help you along while you learn.

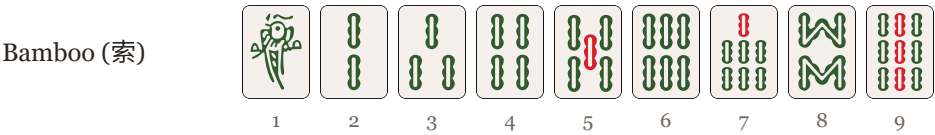
Dots 筒 (bing) — 1 through 9

Count the dots and you have the number — 1 Dot has one dot, 9 Dots has nine.



Bamboo 索 (tiao) — 1 through 9

Same idea — count the bamboo stalks. 2 Bamboo has two stalks, 3 Bamboo has three, and so on.



1 Bamboo is the odd one out — it's drawn as a bird sitting on a stalk rather than a single stalk. Once you know to look for it, it's easy to spot.

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Characters 萬 (wan) — 1 through 9

1, 2 and 3 are easy to read at a glance. The rest just take more time at the table before they're second nature.



Winds and Dragons — the honor tiles

Four Winds — East, South, West, North (*dong, nan, xi, bei*) — and three Dragons: Red (*zhong*), Green (*fa*) and White (*baiban*).



The White Dragon is drawn bordered in blue rather than blank, so it reads as intentional, not a misprint. Flower and season tiles aren't used at this table, so they're left out here.

That's every tile face in the set — 34 in all. Just like a deck of cards, there are four physical copies of each one, for 136 tiles total.

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What you're building toward

To win, you need to be the first to arrange your 14 tiles into **four groups of three**, plus **one pair**. Each group of three is either:



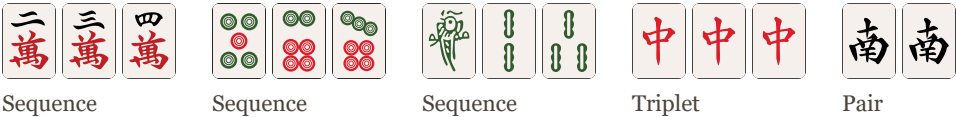
A sequence — three consecutive tiles, all in one suit.



A triplet — three copies of the same tile.

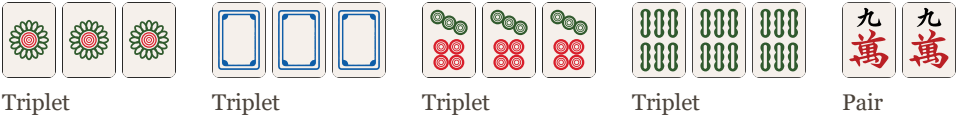
The pair is simply two matching tiles. Four groups of three plus one pair — that's the shape of every winning hand, no matter which tiles fill it.

A mixed hand



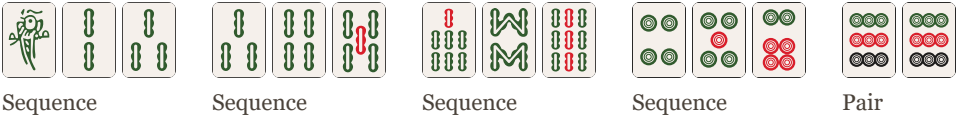
Three sequences, one triplet, and a pair — 4 groups plus 1 pair, 14 tiles.

An all-triplets hand



Every group can be a triplet — there's no rule that says you need a sequence at all.

An all-sequences hand



And the reverse works too — every group a sequence, no triplets required.

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Setting up the table

Tip the tiles out and, with the other three players, mix them around on the table. It's fine to do this face up — after the first hand they'll mostly be face up anyway, so there's little point flipping every tile down each time.

Each player then builds their own wall: **17 stacks of two tiles**, standing side by side. Line up 17 in a row, then stack the rest of your tiles two-high on top. Once all four walls are built, push them together into a square — it's meant to suggest the Great Wall of China — set at a slight diagonal at the corners so there's room for each player's hand and the melds they'll reveal as the game goes on.

Put the money out before you deal. Coins, chips, or anything else the table agrees on — everyone starts with **10**.

Choosing a dealer and breaking the wall

Decide a dealer any way the table likes — a high roll of the dice is the simplest. The dealer rolls two dice and counts seats counterclockwise starting from themselves as 1, which picks whose wall will break.

That player then rolls two dice, and the total tells you how many stacks to count off — starting from the right-hand end of their wall — before the wall breaks and dealing begins on the next stack. For example, a roll of 12 counts off 12 stacks; the wall opens on the 13th.

Dealing

Starting at the break, deal counterclockwise in **three rounds of four tiles per player** — think of them as breakfast, lunch, and dinner. Each player takes their 12 tiles across those three rounds before anyone touches a 13th.

The dealer then takes **two more tiles** instead of one — the dealer plays with 14 and everyone else holds 13, so the dealer always has something to discard to open the hand. Taking two instead of one is done a little unevenly — jumping a tile in the wall for the first one — purely to add a bit of randomness to an otherwise fixed count. The remaining three players each take one more tile the same way, and then every hand is flipped face up to see what there is to work with.

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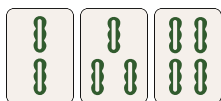
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Play, and calling a discard

Turns pass counterclockwise. On your turn you draw a tile and discard one, unless you call a discard out of turn:

- **Chow** — only the player immediately after the discarder can call this, using two tiles from hand to complete a run with the discard.
- **Pong** — any player may call this off a discard, using two matching tiles from hand to complete a triplet.
- **Kong** — any player holding the other three copies of a discard may call this to take all four. A kong draws one replacement tile from the far end of the wall (the “dead wall”) before play continues.

Calling a pong or a kong **skips** any players in between — play jumps straight to the caller, who reveals the meld, discards, and turn order then resumes counterclockwise from there. A chow never skips anyone, since only the very next player can call one.



Chow — the next player completes a run with the discard.



Pong — any player completes a triplet with the discard.



Kong — any player takes all four and draws a replacement tile.

If more than one player wants the same discard, a win outranks a pong or kong, which outranks a chow. On a self-draw — completing your hand with the tile you just drew, rather than a discard — none of this applies; you simply declare the win.

This guide covers the tiles, the setup, and the four calls — chow, pong, kong, and win. For payment, ting, and the exact wording of the ruleset run at the table, see the Basic Mahjong 屁胡 quick reference.