

Strategic Mahjong Principles

The best path to Mahjong is to recognize patterns early, narrow possibilities intentionally, and remain flexible as your hand develops.

Charleston Strategy: Pass with Intention

The Charleston is your first opportunity to shape your hand while gathering information about what others may—or may not—be pursuing. In general, avoid passing:

- Flowers, which appear in a large percentage of hands
- Multiples of the same tile
- Three tiles from the same suit
- Sequential numbers that could form runs
- Useful Dragon combinations
- Paired Winds, especially North/South or East/West

Make note of who passes you specific tiles. If they do not support your hand, in the next round consider passing them back to the player who exchanged them to you. Players often reveal what they are *not* building before they reveal what they are.

Organize Before You Decide

Create order before choosing a direction by organizing your hand to see what patterns emerge. Below is one common approach:

- Group Flowers, Winds, and Dragons together.
- Keep Jokers separate.
- Arrange suits in numerical order.
- Look at tiles sequentially by number in addition suit to identify potential runs or flexible combinations
- Place Dragons near their associated suits.

Once organized, begin scanning for the following:

- Evens or odds
- Consecutive runs
- Year hand possibilities
- 3-6-9 patterns
- Pairs, pungs, kongs, quints, or sextets

Narrow Your Options

Begin crossing sections off the card that don't fit the hand you are building. Remember, Jokers cannot be used for singles, pairs, in runs or in single tile combinations such as, NEWS or year hands, i.e., 2026.

For incomplete sets in your hand, keep in mind it is often easier to complete a pung than a kong or quint, so look for lines that support that. It can be difficult to get to a kong or a quint set if you are starting play with none of those tiles in your hand.

Consider whether the tiles you'd need to complete a line are tiles that are less likely to be discarded, i.e., flowers, soap, 6's.

Pick a Direction, but Stay Flexible

Most hands begin with several possible directions. Resist chasing too many options for too long. As your hand develops, narrow your focus to two or three likely lines while remaining alert to pivots that open up from new draws or discards.

A common saying at many Mahjong tables is: "Eight or nine and you've found your line." Once you have eight or nine tiles working toward a hand, the direction is usually strong enough to commit more intentionally. Consider the points associated with each line. The higher the points, the more difficult the lines to complete.

Watch the Discards and Exposed Sets

Discards are information. They reveal the following:

- What players may not be collecting,
- Which suit ranges and honor tiles appear active,
- Which hands are becoming less likely.

Sets can provide insight into which section or hand that your opponents are building toward. Players repeatedly discarding lower numbers may be building toward higher-number combinations, and vice versa. An exposed set of Winds or Dragons can signal your opponent is collecting and seeking more of those honor tiles.

Draw and Rack Efficiently

Game pace matters. Rack your tile promptly after drawing. Once a player racks a drawn tile, the most recent discard becomes dead. Efficient play limits the amount of time opponents have to reconsider discarded tiles. Remember that once you touch the next tile and move it from the wall, it is yours even if you have not looked at it yet.

Know When to Pivot

Not every hand develops as planned. Strong players recognize important signs such as these:

- Critical tiles are not appearing,
- Needed tiles are repeatedly discarded and you can't call for them,
- Opponents' exposures make a line increasingly difficult to complete.

Pivoting early often preserves a stronger chance of success than stubbornly forcing a failing hand.