

American Mahjong Joker Exchange Checklist



Joker Basics

- A joker is in every American mahjong set
- Jokers substitute for any tile in a group of **2 or more** (pung, kong, quint, secret)
- Jokers **cannot** be used in pairs or singles
- Jokers **cannot** be discarded (NMJL rule)
- You may exchange a natural tile for a joker in any player's exposed group — but only **on your turn**, and only with the exact tile the joker is replacing
- An exchange takes the place of your draw from the wall

Before You Exchange: The Five Question Check

#	Question	If YES	If NO
1	Does this joker help me complete a specific group I need for mahjong?	Continue	Don't exchange.
2	Can I give up the natural tile without breaking a pair I need?	Continue	Don't exchange.
3	Am I playing an exposed hand (not concealing)?	Continue	Ex: In Concealed Hand Check below.
4	Is the information I reveal by exchanging okay at this stage of the game?	Continue	Hold off.
5	Does this exchange keep me closer to mahjong — not just "feel good"?	Exchange!	Don't exchange.

Concealed Hand Check

If you're playing a concealed hand, ask these extra filters:

- ☒ Will this exchange reveal which hand I'm pursuing?
- ☒ Could opponents narrow down my hand from the tile I swap in?
- ☒ Is there a less "visible" way to get what I need (drawing from the wall)?

Rule of thumb: If the exchange could blow your cover, **hold the joker you have and stay quiet.**

Pair Protection Rule

Never break a pair you need to chase a joker — unless:

- ☒ The joker lets you pivot to a clearly better hand on the card
- ☒ You have a realistic path to re-forming the pair (multiple tiles still unaccounted for)
- ☒ You're early in the game and flexibility outweighs commitment

Remember: Jokers can't fill pairs. Pairs are irreplaceable. Protect them.

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Endgame Exchange Timing

When the wall is getting short (roughly 15–20 tiles or fewer remaining):

- ⚠ Every exchange broadcasts information — assume the table is watching.
- ⚠ A late exchange often signals “I’m one tile from mahjong” — both when you do it and when you see others do it.
- ✅ Exchange late only if it directly completes your hand or the natural tile you’re giving up is already visibly visible in discards/exposures.
- ❌ If the exchange gets you close but not finished — and alerts the table — draw from the wall instead.

Reading Other Players’ Joker Moves

Use this quick-read guide to interpret what opponents’ exposures and exchanges are telling you:

What you see	What it likely means
Exchanging a joker into a pung.	They’re saving jokers for a harder set (kong/quint).
Exchanging a joker into a quint.	Joker-rich hand (or poor in match tiles closer to completion/mahjong).
Player exchanges late, immediately discards.	They likely just completed a group — they’re getting closer.
Player doesn’t exchange when they clearly could.	Possibly on a concealed hand, or they don’t hold the natural tile.
Player exchanges any tile in the game.	High alert — they are very likely one (or two) away from mahjong.

Joker Bait: Red Flags

Before you grab that “easy” joker off the table, watch for these warning signs:

- 🚩 The joker has been sitting exposed for several turns, and nobody has taken it.
- 🚩 The exposed tile bank is disconnected from the obvious hand on the current card.
- 🚩 The player who exposed it has been unusually quiet — no calls, no urgency.
- 🚩 Swapping in your natural tile would give that player the last copy they need.

When in doubt, don’t swap. A joker in someone else’s exposure is still a joker out of their hand.

Quick Golden Rules

- 1 Jokers are tools, not trophies. Only exchange when it serves your hand.
- 2 Protect your pairs — jokers can’t help there.
- 3 Information is currency. Every exchange spends some.
- 4 Count the jokers. Always try to track where all 8 are.
- 5 Stay calm near the wall end. Patience wins more games than impulse.