

5 Common American Mahjong Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

PLAY SMARTER • BUILD STRONGER HANDS • ENJOY THE GAME

1

PICKING A HAND TOO EARLY

It's tempting to commit to one hand right after the deal, but this can limit your options and make it harder to adjust when better tiles appear.

HOW TO AVOID IT

- ✓ Stay flexible through the Charleston.
- ✓ Look for 2–3 realistic directions before committing.
- ✓ Keep an open mind based on the tiles you actually receive.

EXAMPLE: KEEP YOUR OPTIONS OPEN



This hand could still go in several directions (e.g. Bams, Dots, or a 3–4–5 in Characters). Don't lock yourself into one hand too soon.

2

BREAKING NATURAL PAIRS

Natural pairs are valuable in American Mahjong because Jokers cannot be used as pairs. Breaking a pair too early can leave you with a harder hand to complete.

HOW TO AVOID IT

- ✓ Protect your natural pairs whenever possible.
- ✓ Only break a pair if it clearly strengthens your hand.
- ✓ Remember: pairs can be the key to many hands.

EXAMPLE: KEEP THE PAIR



A natural pair gives you options. Keep it intact unless breaking it clearly improves your hand.

3

IGNORING THE CHARLESTON

The Charleston isn't just a formality — it gives you valuable information about what other players might be collecting. Ignoring it can lead you to hold tiles that won't be useful.

HOW TO AVOID IT

- ✓ Pay attention to which suits and tiles are passed to you.
- ✓ Notice which tiles seem to be flowing and which are being held back.
- ✓ Use this information to refine your hand and avoid dead ends.

LOOK FOR PATTERNS



These tiles were passed to you — they may not be needed by the other players.

These tiles were kept — other players might be collecting these.

4

FORGETTING TO CHECK THE NMJL CARD

Each year the NMJL card features different hands, tile counts, suit requirements, and Joker rules. Assuming a hand from a previous year can lead to costly mistakes.

HOW TO AVOID IT

- ✓ Always check the current NMJL card before you start playing.
- ✓ Verify the exact hand, tile counts, suit requirements, and Joker rules.
- ✓ Don't rely on memory — the hands change every year!

CHECK THESE DETAILS



- ✓ Exact hand name
- ✓ Tile counts (e.g. 3, 4, 5...)
- ✓ Suit requirements
- ✓ Joker rules for that hand
- ✓ Any special rules or notes

5

HOLDING TOO MANY UNRELATED TILES

A rack full of unrelated tiles ("strays") can make it difficult to build a cohesive hand. It's easy to get distracted by attractive tiles, but too many strays slow your progress.

HOW TO AVOID IT

- ✓ Focus on a few key anchors (e.g. a pair, a sequence, or a pung).
- ✓ Keep flexible helper tiles that fit in multiple places.
- ✓ Pass tiles that don't support your main options.

TOO MANY STRAYS (HARDER TO WIN)



A MORE FOCUSED RACK (EASIER TO BUILD)



QUICK TIP

Pause before every pass:

What supports my best options, and what is truly expendable?

