

The background of the entire page is a close-up, slightly blurred photograph of numerous American Mah Jongg tiles. The tiles are white with various symbols in red, green, and black, including circles, squares, and Chinese characters. They are scattered across the surface, creating a textured, layered effect.

# American Mah Jongg

## **EXPERIENCE LEVEL EVALUATION**

**AWARENESS IS THE FIRST STEP TO CONFIDENT PLAY**

# **GUIDEBOOK**

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# Introduction

American mah jongg is a game you learn in layers. You grow a little in one area, stretch in another, and suddenly something that once felt overwhelming becomes second nature. But the challenge is this: progress is often quiet. It happens in the background, one hand at a time.

The American mah jongg Experience Level Evaluation (ELE) gives you a snapshot of where you are today—your instincts, your timing, your table awareness, your rule understanding, and your comfort across the full rhythm of a round. This guide is designed to help you make sense of that snapshot and turn it into meaningful next steps.

Inside, you'll find simple, practical ways to strengthen the areas where you scored lower or felt unsure. Think of it as a personal roadmap: a clear, supportive set of suggestions you can revisit anytime you want to sharpen your skills, build confidence, or deepen your understanding of the game.

This isn't about ranking or perfection. It's about seeing yourself clearly so you can grow intentionally.

Whether you're building your foundation, refining your rhythm, or polishing advanced skills, this guide will help you move toward your next level—one thoughtful adjustment at a time.

Let's keep building your game, your confidence, and your joy in playing mah jongg.



## Before You Begin

Before you dive into this guide, please take a moment to reflect on its purpose. This isn't a workbook to finish or a list of tasks to conquer. It's a companion to walk alongside you as you continue learning the game and refining your player style.

Here are a few thoughts to hold as you begin:

### **Growth in is not linear.**

You'll strengthen one skill while another still feels uncertain. That's how everyone progresses, no matter how long they've played.

### **Your results are a snapshot, not a judgment.**

They capture where you are today—not your ceiling, not your potential, just your current rhythms and habits.

### **You don't need to fix everything at once.**

Pick one or two areas that feel important or interesting. Improvement often comes from small shifts practiced consistently.

### **Curiosity works better than pressure.**

Ask yourself what your answers reveal about how you think, make decisions, and respond to the flow of the game. Insight creates change long before drilling ever does.

### **Celebrate what's already working.**

Your strengths are part of your style of play. They matter just as much as whatever you're still developing.

### **Let this guide support you—not overwhelm you.**

Use it gently. Return to it when you're ready. Let it unfold at your own [pace](#).

You're building something: confidence, clarity, and your own personal rhythm with the game. This guide exists to help you see that growth more clearly and take the next step in a way that feels grounded, intentional, and enjoyable.

Whenever you're ready, turn the page and begin.



## How to Use This Guide

This guide is designed to help you turn your quiz results into meaningful action. You don't need to work through everything at once—mah jongg growth happens in layers, and each layer builds naturally on the last. Here's how to make the most of what's inside:

### **Start with your lowest-scoring areas.**

Look for the questions where you scored one or hesitated. These are the skills that will give you the biggest boost as you strengthen them.

### **Choose one or two skills to focus on first.**

Improvement is most effective when it's targeted. Pick a skill—hand development, exposure judgment, [pivoting](#), risk awareness, push-fold judgment, or rule clarity—and practice it intentionally for a few games.

### **Put the recommendations into play.**

Each next-step suggestion in this guide is practical and doable. They're meant to fit real gameplay: guided play nights, solitaire, skill builders, or online play.

### **Revisit the guide as your game evolves.**

Every improvement uncovers a new layer of possibility. Come back whenever the game feels different, challenging, or ready to evolve again.

### **Retake the evaluation periodically.**

Most players find it helpful to take the quiz once or twice a year—after you learn something new, transition to a new card, or feel a shift in confidence. Your answers will change over time, and that's a sign of real progress.

### **Use this guide in conversation with your instructor.**

If you're working with an instructor or coach, bring your results—and this guide—to your next session. It gives them a clear understanding of where you are now and where you're ready to grow, making your time together even more effectively and personalized.

This guide is here to support your learning, strengthen your confidence, and help you enjoy the game even more.

If you're not currently working with an instructor, we can help you find one. The Mahj Life Instructor Referral Program connects you with trained Mahj Life Instructor Guild members who can support your next steps with clarity and care.

Find your instructor here: <https://mahjlife.com/lesson-referral>



# SECTION 1 — Foundations & Setup

## Game Setup & Breaking the Wall

If you scored low here, practice the setup sequence slowly and consistently. Rebuild and break the wall several times in a row, narrating each step. Familiarity creates calm.

## Reading the Card

If you find yourself hesitating or second-guessing as you move through the card, spend time modeling the categories. Take a hand and explore every variation made possible by the flexibility in the parentheses. This helps you see how a single structure can live in multiple places.

Next, do random tile pulls (<https://mahjlife.com/wiki/skill-builders-article-171/>) and practice identifying the hand's natural strength—pairs, repeats, suit clusters, and patterns that point toward one category over another. Choose the category that uses the most tiles and practice committing to it quickly.

Both of these skill builders shift card-reading from passive recognition to active muscle memory, making it easier to find direction with confidence during real play.

## Core Mechanics

If you hesitate with the basics (drawing, discarding, claiming), rehearse a simple turn: draw, sort, decide, discard, reset. Repetition builds confidence and frees up mental space for strategy.

## Evaluating Your Dealt Hand

If you scored low here, focus on [finding the natural strength of your hand](#) right from the deal. Begin by identifying your multiples—pairs, pungs, or kongs—because these are the strongest signals of where your hand wants to go. If you don't have multiples, look for the dominant pattern in your tiles: a suit cluster, a number cluster, or a clear lean toward one category on the card.

The goal is to choose the direction that uses the most of your tiles. Practice evaluating your dealt hand out loud: name two or three possible categories, then select the one that gives you the most momentum. With repetition, this early decision-making becomes quick, intuitive, and reliable.



## SECTION 2 — Charleston & Pre-Game Decisions

### Charleston Comfort

If the Charleston feels confusing, spend time doing [Charleston skill builders](#). Resist the urge to choose a hand early; instead, focus entirely on how your tiles develop. Notice how each pass shifts the shape of your hand and reveals new possibilities. The goal is to build comfort with the flow and understand the evolution—not to force a destination before the tiles give you direction.

### Discard Planning During the Charleston

If choosing tiles to pass feels difficult, begin with a simple approach: pass clear discards first. Once those are gone, release the tiles tied to weaker or low-probability options. This helps you stay flexible while still moving your hand toward its strongest direction.

### Exercising Charleston Options

If you forget when you can [pass blind or stop the passing](#), rehearse the Charleston verbally (“right, across, left with blind option, pause to consider stopping, left, across, right with blind option, optional across”) before playing.

### Using the Charleston to Set Tempo

If you haven’t yet learned to read hands during the Charleston, begin by paying attention to simple trends. Notice which suits or numbers seem to appear again and again in the tiles you receive, and just as importantly, which ones never show up at all. These patterns reveal what your opponents may be targeting or gathering. This early information helps you set your own [tempo](#).



## SECTION 3 — Early Game Development

### **Straddling**

If you're balancing two or three categories with equal potential and it stalls you, begin by eliminating the weakest option—the one with the least structural support or the fewest meaningful tiles. Once you narrow it down to two, choose the direction targeting the strength of the hand or the one that uses the most of your tiles.

This [keeps your momentum steady](#) and prevents analysis paralysis that often comes from keeping too many possibilities open at once.

### **Exposure Judgment**

If you tend to expose too early, anchor yourself in [your position and the level of risk](#) you're facing. When your hand has gaps, weaknesses, or uncertainty, you're in an underdog position. Underdogs should avoid claiming discards too early; exposing them too early only gives opponents information without guaranteeing meaningful progress.

If you know exactly what hand you're building and your structure is solid, you're playing as a contender. Contenders can afford to take calculated risks, including claiming discards to accelerate hand development, especially when the exposure creates momentum rather than vulnerability.

Using position as your guide helps you expose with intention instead of impulse—balancing speed, safety, and the information you reveal to the table.



## SECTION 4 — Midgame Strategy & Risk

### Reading Hands

If you're new to [hand reading](#), start tight. Choose just one opponent to observe—the strongest player at the table is usually the best teacher. Watch their discards, their speed, and any hesitation in their tile choices. Try to identify the category they are focused on, not the exact hand they're playing.

Once you feel comfortable tracking a single opponent, add another. With practice, you'll begin noticing patterns without effort—who is collecting a suit, who is targeting a particular category, who is pushing to win, and who has folded and is blocking everyone from progressing.

Gradually expand your awareness to all three opponents, but don't rush the process. Hand reading becomes easier as you train your eye to filter the critical signals from the noise.

Start with one, build confidence, then widen your view as your instincts sharpen.

### Understanding Position

If you're unsure whether you're the underdog, a contender, or the frontrunner, ground your evaluation in three quick checks that reveal your position almost instantly.

Start with the strength of your hand. Look for multiples or a dominant pattern that clearly leans toward a category. Keep useful tiles, release obvious discards, and—after the Charleston—confirm your category or specific hand direction. Then [estimate your position](#) by counting your discards:

- **Underdog:** more than four discards
- **Contender:** four discards
- **Frontrunner:** fewer than four discards

Next, observe your opponents' [pace](#) and confidence—a player who discards smoothly and consistently is usually further along in their decision-making. If you're hesitating, reshuffling often, or still refining direction, those are signals that you're playing from the underdog position—even if your hand has potential.

Finally, consider the number of tiles left in the wall. Position becomes clearer as the game enters the middle and end phases. Reassess your position as the wall depletes and adjust accordingly.



Taken together, these three signals—hand potential, [tempo](#), and the wall in play—reveal your actual position and help you decide when to push, [when to pivot](#), and when to fold to block your opponents.

### **Begin-, Middle-, and End-Game Awareness**

If you find yourself losing [track of the game's pacing](#), start with a simple visual cue: the big wall signals the begin game, the medium wall marks the middle game, and the small wall indicates the end game. This rough awareness alone can help you adjust your mindset as the wall shrinks.

Once that feels natural, layer in more precision:

- **Begin Game:** roughly 90–81 tiles remaining
- **Middle Game:** roughly 80–51 tiles remaining
- **End Game:** roughly 40–1 tiles remaining

These ranges help you understand when to gather, build, assess, tighten, or let go. With practice, this awareness becomes part of your natural rhythm, guiding your decisions as the game progresses.

### **Identifying & Managing Risk**

If [risk assessment](#) still feels fuzzy, start with the most straightforward and reliable principle: discard what's already visible. Tiles that have been discarded or exposed are the safest choices because they're unlikely to improve anyone else's hand.

As you move into the deeper stages of the middle game, shift your attention to tile scarcity—the tiles you *haven't* seen. Missing numbers, suits, winds, dragons, flowers, or patterns (like evens, odds, or 369) often point to active hands being built around those tiles. That's when a tile that once felt harmless can suddenly become risky.

When you combine what's visible with what's missing, risk starts to reveal itself naturally. This awareness helps you choose safer discards, protect your position, and navigate the middle and end game with calm, clarity, and confidence.

### **Recovery & Resilience**

If [pivoting](#) rattles you, establish a steady reset routine to help you regain clarity quickly. When hand development stalls or you get blocked by big exposures, pause for a moment and reorganize your tiles as if you were assessing a newly dealt hand.

Once sorted, reassess the strength of your hand. Identify two options that work with most of your tiles, then choose the one with the greatest potential—multiples, clusters, or the



direction with the most straightforward path forward. Committing restores momentum, and momentum often restores confidence.

Don't worry about finding the perfect choice; focus on the strongest option and move with it. The faster you can pivot with purpose, the easier it becomes to stay composed, recover from setbacks, and maintain a steady, confident [pace](#) throughout the game.



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## SECTION 5 — Endgame Awareness & Tempo

### End Game Risk Assessment

If you struggle to recognize when it's time to tighten your play, use the wall itself as your cue. Once the game reaches roughly 40 tiles remaining, the end game is officially in motion. At this point, [confirm your position](#)—underdog, contender, or frontrunner—and reassess whether your current strategy still fits the moment.

From this point forward, treat every pick from the wall as a [position checkpoint](#). Notice the depleting wall, the [pace](#) of exposures, and your hand development progress.

Let the final 30 tiles operate as a countdown. With each pick, [refine your judgment](#). The wall tells you when to tighten.

### Push–Fold Judgment

If push versus fold feels unclear, let your position simplify the decision. [Your position reveals the risks](#) you can reasonably take and those you need to avoid.

#### **Underdog → fold.**

When your hand has gaps, weaknesses, or too many options, fold. Discard safely, avoid feeding exposures, and let the stronger hands clash without you.

#### **Contender → evaluate.**

When you have a strong hand but some uncertainty, pause and assess your potential. If your hand develops, check the likelihood of getting those final tiles. If the potential fades or you estimate your opponents are frontrunners, reconsider your position.

#### **Frontrunner → push.**

If you are ready to win or nearly ready, lean in. Claim tiles, keep your momentum, and play assertively—this is your moment to keep the lead before others catch up.

Using position as your guide turns push–fold into a natural rhythm. Simple frameworks build instinct, and instinct builds confidence in the moments that matter most.

### Pace of Play

If your [pace](#) feels slow or you find yourself vacillating over decisions, practice with a single timed round set to 15 minutes. The goal isn't to rush; it's to reduce the extra thinking that creeps in once the basic decision has already been made.



Set a timer and play through the round with your natural rhythm, trimming hesitation where it isn't helping you. Notice when you're pausing out of habit rather than necessity. Over time, you'll learn to trust your instincts more often, especially in familiar situations.

Improvement doesn't come from moving faster; it comes from repetition, clarity, and a growing sense of flow. As you practice, you'll feel your internal [tempo](#) even out, allowing you to play confidently, consistently, and comfortably within the rhythm of the game.



## SECTION 6 — Rules Deep Dive

### Concurrent Interests

If you struggle to determine [who gets a tile](#) when more than one player claims it at the same time, revisit common examples of exposure claims versus mah jongg claims. The priority always depends on the *type of claim* and *turn order*, not status or speed. With repetition, you'll develop an instinct for knowing exactly who prevails and why, even in fast, complicated moments.

### Joker Protocols

If the timing of [joker exchanges](#) feels unclear, rehearse the sequence using a practice rack until it becomes automatic. Remember, a joker can be exchanged after you start your turn, and your turn officially begins the moment you perform one of these actions:

- Claiming a discard and completing an exposure
- Picking a tile from the wall and requesting a joker exchange
- Picking a tile from the wall and racking it
- Picking a tile from the wall and discarding it

Practicing clean, hand-to-hand exchanges reinforces timing, boundaries, and exposure integrity so you can execute exchanges confidently and correctly every time.

### Misnamed Discards & Verbal Intent

If misnaming a tile throws you off, slow down and focus on two things: listening and confirming visually. Always ask the same question: “What tile left their hand?”

Whether the player [misnames the tile](#) or verbalizes something confusing, the tile that lands on the table counts; treat verbal statements as intent, not action. With practice, this clarity keeps you calm, decisive, and consistent—even when the table gets loud.

### Pick Commitment

If you're unsure about the [commitment point](#) when drawing from the wall, rely on the one unchanging rule: movement equals commitment. A player may touch the tile without being committed, but the moment the tile moves in any way, they must take it. Watching for this tiny movement helps you understand exactly when a player becomes bound to their pick, making rulings around simultaneous claims or hesitation much more straightforward.

### Discard Commitment



If you catch yourself second-guessing or [interrupting your discard](#) mid-motion, pause before you pick a tile from your rack. Take a moment to survey discards and scan exposures before you pick up a tile. Then, name the tile clearly and put it on the table with confidence. Once a tile is fully named or it touches the table, the discard is final. Practicing this clean decision–name–discard rhythm reinforces [tempo](#) and eliminates mid-motion uncertainty.

### **Mah Jongg in Error**

Declaring [mah jongg in error](#) can feel jarring, but the correction process becomes simple once you understand what the rules require. A winning hand is only valid if it is complete according to the card; if a player declares mahjong and reveals an invalid hand, the declaration is retracted, and the issue must be resolved before play continues.

If the declaring player is the only one who exposed their tiles, they are automatically disqualified. Invalid exposures and newly exposed tiles are returned to their rack, and they stop playing with the game, continuing with the remaining players. If another player threw in their tiles before the error was caught, the situation becomes more complex.

To stay composed in these moments, separate emotion from process. Confirm whether the hand is valid, determine who exposed tiles prematurely, and apply the appropriate correction without debate.

Practicing this sequence reduces hesitation, keeps the table calm, and ensures everyone understands what to do when an error occurs.

### **Scoring and Payout Understanding**

If [scoring](#) still feels confusing, start by reviewing the most common payout scenarios—such as self-picks, wins by discard, and jokerless hands. Practice scoring several sample hands on paper: one that uses jokers, one that doesn't, one that's won by discard, and one that's self-picked. Seeing how values shift in different situations helps build an intuitive understanding. Then stack the bonuses: one that uses jokers that is self-picked, one that doesn't use jokers that is self-picked.

It's also essential to learn how penalties influence payout, including discarding the winning tile, a [misnamed discard](#) that results in mah jongg, or incorrectly disqualifying another player. These moments can feel stressful during live play, but when you're familiar with the parameters and next steps, they become more transparent and more manageable.

The more you rehearse these scenarios, the quicker and more confidently you'll be able to settle scoring questions at the table, helping the game stay fair, smooth, and enjoyable for everyone.





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