

How to Run a Rules Lab

Rules Lab is a facilitated learning experience that helps players explore, understand, and evaluate rules, customs, variations, and strategic concepts through guided discussion and hands-on play. Rather than simply explaining a rule, instructors create an opportunity for participants to experience it firsthand, observe its impact on decision-making, and reflect on its influence on the game.

Rules Labs can be used to introduce unfamiliar rules, regional variations, house rules, betting customs, tournament procedures, scoring systems, Charleston modifications, and advanced strategic concepts. By focusing on one topic at a time, instructors create a low-pressure environment where curiosity, experimentation, and discussion take center stage.

Why Offer a Rules Lab?

Many aspects of mah jongg are difficult to fully understand through reading or lecture alone. Players often develop stronger judgment when they can see a rule in action, test its implications, and discuss their observations with others.

A Rules Lab helps instructors:

- Create engaging learning experiences beyond traditional lessons
- Encourage critical thinking and strategic awareness
- Introduce unfamiliar concepts in a safe, structured environment
- Foster meaningful discussion among players
- Build community through shared exploration and discovery
- Help players become more adaptable and confident at a variety of tables

The goal of a Rules Lab is not to persuade participants to adopt a particular rule or approach. The goal is to help players better understand how different rules shape the playing experience so they can make informed decisions and become more versatile players.

Experience the rule.

Observe the impact.

Decide for yourself.



Welcome & Context (10–15 minutes)

Begin by introducing the rule.

- What is the rule?
- Where is it commonly used?
- Why was it created?
- How does it change decision-making?

For example, with bettors: *"Today we're exploring the role of bettors. Some groups use bettors to create additional incentives, strategic considerations, or social interaction. Our goal is not to decide whether betting is good or bad. Our goal is to understand how it works and observe how it affects play."*

Prediction Exercise (5 minutes)

Before anyone plays, ask participants:

- How do you think this rule will affect your decisions?
- Will it make the game more aggressive or conservative?
- What concerns do you have?

This creates a baseline against which they can compare their actual experience.

Gameplay (30–45 minutes)

Play one game or a set number of hands using the featured rule.

Periodically pause briefly to point out observations, but keep these interruptions to a minimum so the game remains enjoyable.

Reflection Discussion (15–20 minutes)

After play, ask questions such as:

- What surprised you?
- What was easier than expected?
- What was harder than expected?
- How did the rule affect strategy?
- Would you choose to play with this rule again?
- In what environments would this rule make sense?



Recurring Categories

Rules Lab: Table Customs

- Bettors
- Courtesy rules
- House rules

Rules Lab: Competitive Play

- Timed games
- Scoring systems
- Penalties

Rules Lab: Charleston Variations

- Blind passes
- Optional passes
- Regional approaches

Rules Lab: Strategy in Action

- Push-Fold
- Defensive play
- Exposure timing

