

A Guide for Learning and Playing Japanese Mahjong

Chris Y



Copyright & Licensing

All original content in this guide, *A Guide for Learning and Playing Japanese Mahjong*, is © 2026 Christopher Yee and is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

You are welcome to share, adapt, and use the material for personal or educational purposes, provided that you credit the author, do not use it commercially, and share any derivative works under the same license.

For full attributions, third-party content details, and licensing information, please see the companion PDF: [Back Matter](http://bit.ly/415Ao) (<http://bit.ly/415Ao>). These materials are included solely for non-commercial educational purposes, and no endorsement or affiliation is implied.

This guide is intended to help beginners and enthusiasts learn Japanese Riichi Mahjong in a clear, step-by-step manner. It is designed to make the game approachable, enjoyable, and rewarding, while providing a foundation for players to explore and appreciate Riichi Mahjong for years to come.

Preface

This guide began as a small collection of reference sheets I printed for friends and family while teaching them Japanese Riichi Mahjong. Over time, those sheets grew into a more comprehensive set of materials, and several people encouraged me to share them more broadly.

I've been enjoying the game for many years now, and I know firsthand how rich and complex it can feel when first learning. New players can often feel overwhelmed by the number of tiles, the many rules, and the variety of scoring patterns, and it's easy to get lost without a structured approach.

My motivation for this guide was to create a clear, modern written resource that helps learners understand the game step by step. The guide includes a structured curriculum of readings and practice activities so you can play and learn simultaneously, with reference sheets designed to support both learning and teaching the game.

Much of my inspiration comes from my experiences in educational instruction and from how I originally learned to play from my grandmother — without scoring, additional rules, or special equipment — simply trying to make four sets and a pair with our tiles and discovering the patterns as we went. Breaking complex ideas into smaller, digestible pieces has always been central to my teaching philosophy, and it shapes how this guide is organized.

My goal in creating these packets is to streamline the learning process and provide a guide that is practical, approachable, and enjoyable to use — while still covering the full rules of the game once learners are comfortable with the basics.

Although these materials were originally intended for printed use, they can also be viewed digitally if you prefer. In the end, all you really need is a set of tiles — the rest comes with patience and practice.

Because these materials may continue to evolve over time, this guide should be considered a living document. If you notice errors, unclear explanations, or have suggestions for improvement, I would greatly appreciate your feedback. For questions or comments, you can reach me at riichimahjongguide@gmail.com.

My hope is that this guide makes Riichi Mahjong accessible, enjoyable, and rewarding — providing a clear path to learn, practice, and appreciate the game for years to come.

—Chris

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the **World Riichi Championship Rules (2025)** and the **European Mahjong Association Rules for Japanese Mahjong (2025)** for providing the foundation for the rules, scoring, and gameplay procedures used in this guide.

Over the years, the team at **Ooyamaneko** has made invaluable contributions by maintaining a comprehensive, up-to-date database of Riichi rulesets from around the world, which I consulted extensively while preparing this guide.

I also sincerely thank the team at **YoStar Games** for allowing me to use images and descriptions of various mahjong tiles and hands that appear throughout the *List of Yaku* packet; their support has made these materials far richer and more accessible.

Last but not least, I extend my deep gratitude to my grandmother, who originally taught me the game of mahjong.

Table of Contents

How to Use This Guide

- Stage 1 — Start with the Basics & Learn the Game Flow
 - Stage 2 — Introduce Basic Yaku
 - Stage 3 — Add Gameplay Procedures and Scoring
 - Stage 4 — Add Riichi
 - Stage 5 — Introduce Furiten and Swap Calling
 - Stage 6 — Add Honba, Exhaustive Draw, and Open Hands
 - Learning Yaku
 - Further Reading
-

1 — Mahjong Tiles & Winning Hands

- Mahjong Tiles Reference
 - The Tiles of a Japanese Mahjong Set
 - A Winning Hand
 - A Winning Hand—Revisited
 - Basic Wait Patterns
 - Complex Wait Patterns
-

2 — Setup & Gameplay Reference

- Overview
 - Seat Wind
 - At Game Start
 - To Begin Each Hand
 - Phases of the Game
 - Playing a Hand
 - Handling Tiles
 - Dealer Rotation
 - Round Winds and the End of the Game
 - Notes
 - Point Sticks Reference
-

3 — Introduction to Tile Calls

- Introducing Chii, Pon, Kan, Ron, and Tsumo
 - Additional Rules on Chii, Pon, and Kan
 - Reference for Replacement Tiles
 - Additional Notes
-

4 — Essential Terms & Rules

- Chii, Pon, Kan, Ron, Tsumo
 - Set (Meld)
 - Open Hand, Closed Hand
 - Tenpai (Ready Hand)
 - Riichi, Note on Riichi Judgment, Rules on Riichi
 - Closed Kans During Riichi, Additional Notes on Riichi
 - Exhaustive Draw
 - Fu, Han
 - Dora Indicator, Dora
 - Kandora, Variations on Kandora Timing
 - Uradora
 - Honba
 - Furiten
 - Furiten Applies to All of a Player's Waiting Tiles
 - Swap Calling
-

5 — List of Yaku

- Additional Rules for Specific Yaku
 - Local Yaku
 - Abortive Draws
 - Additional Notes
-

6 — How to Calculate a Hand's Score

- Fu Calculation Chart
 - Scoring Tables
 - Scoring Examples
 - Additional Notes on Scoring
-

7 — Additional Rules & Supplementary Material

- Valid Hand
 - Tenpai—Readdressed
 - Furiten (continued)
 - Why Does Furiten Exist?
 - Discard Furiten—Readdressed
 - Temporary Furiten—Readdressed
 - Certain Hands Run the Risk of Furiten
 - Liability Payment
 - Closed Kans During Riichi—Revisited
 - Rule Variations
 - Competitive Play
 - Recommended Ruleset for Casual Play
 - Recommended Ruleset for Competitive Play
 - Blank Ruleset Template
-

7a — Three-Player Variants (Coming Soon)

- Details will be included in a future version of this guide.
-

7b — Two-Player Variants (Coming Soon)

- Details will be included in a future version of this guide.
-

8 — Back Matter

- References
 - Attributions & Third-Party Content
 - Author Contact
-

How to Use This Guide

Although the packets in this guide are arranged in a specific order, the way I teach the game in practice does not always follow that exact sequence.

If you are learning Riichi Mahjong for the first time—or teaching it to others—I recommend working through the material gradually using the order below. Each stage introduces a small number of new concepts so that players can practice them before moving on to the next step.

This guide is primarily written for **standard four-player Japanese Riichi Mahjong**, which is the most widely played format and serves as the foundation for the rules, scoring, and examples presented throughout these materials.

However, mahjong can also be played with fewer players. **Three-player and two-player variants** are commonly used in casual settings when a full group is not available. These variants modify certain rules and game procedures, but they are still built on the same core concepts introduced here.

To keep the learning process focused and consistent, this guide begins with the four-player format. **Supplementary materials for three-player and two-player variants will be included in a future update**, allowing for additional flexibility once you are comfortable with the fundamentals.

In the meantime, if you are learning with fewer than four players, you may still use these materials to understand the structure of the game and practice forming hands, as the core mechanics remain largely the same.

The fundamentals introduced in this guide—such as forming a complete hand, recognizing patterns, and understanding tile flow—also extend beyond Japanese mahjong. These concepts form the basis of many other mahjong variants, including Chinese styles (such as Hong Kong mahjong), Taiwanese mahjong, and American mahjong, making them valuable regardless of which version of the game you play.

At its core, mahjong is a flexible game—what matters most is having a way to play, learn, and enjoy the experience together.

Stage 1 — Start with the Basics & Learn the Game Flow

Begin by exploring **Mahjong Tiles & Winning Hands** to get familiar with the tiles and understand what a winning hand looks like. Focus on the following sections for now:

- Mahjong Tiles Reference (pg. 1)
- The Tiles of a Japanese Mahjong Set (pg. 2-3)
- A Winning Hand (pg. 4-6)

Next, dive into **Setup & Gameplay Reference** to see how a game and individual hands proceed. Perform any setup instructions described in the sections below:

- Overview, Seat Wind, Determine Starting Seat Wind (pg. 1)
- To Begin Each Hand (pg. 2-3)
- Playing a Hand, Handling Tiles (pg. 4)

Then, review the core calling rules in **Introduction to Tile Calls**:

- Introducing Chii, Pon, Kan, Ron, and Tsumo (pg. 1-4)
- Special Case: Forming a Quadruplet from Your Hand (pg. 4)

★ *Fill in the remaining bullet of "A player begins their turn by doing one of the following:" in the Playing a Hand section on pg. 4 of the Setup & Gameplay Reference with "Calling a tile to complete a set".*

★ *Fill in the second bullet of "During their turn, a player may:" in the Playing a Hand section with "Form a quadruplet".*

Practice Activity:

Play a few hands purely for practice. For now, focus only on the basics: forming **four sets and a pair**.

The East player takes the first turn, and play proceeds counterclockwise. The first player to complete a valid hand wins. If the tiles in the live wall run out and no player wins after the final discard, the hand ends in a draw. You may track wins casually or leave scoring out entirely.

Don't worry about rotating the seat winds yet — focus on **getting comfortable with the flow of turns, drawing, discarding, and making tile calls**. The goal is to build confidence and familiarity with the fundamental mechanics of play.

Extended Learning and Practice:

Once you are comfortable with the flow of the game, review the additional rules in **Introduction to Tile Calls:**

- Additional Rules for Chii, Pon, and Kan (pg. 5-6)
- Reference for Replacement Tiles (pg. 6)

Then reinforce the concepts by reviewing the first page of **Essential Terms & Rules:**

- Chii, Pon, Kan, Ron, Tsumo (pg. 1)

Feel free to continue practicing more hands at your own pace, or to move on to the next section when you're ready.

Stage 2 — Introduce Basic Yaku

Once you're comfortable forming hands, it's time to understand that **a winning hand must include at least one yaku.**

Start by reading in **Mahjong Tiles & Winning Hands:**

- A Winning Hand—Revisited (pg. 7-8)

Then explore some of the basic yaku in **List of Yaku.** Note that the Prevalent Wind yaku mentions the round wind. When the game begins, **the round wind is East.** For early practice, we will keep the round wind as East until we learn how it changes later.

- Prevalent Wind, Seat Wind, Dragons (pg. 2)
- All Simples (pg. 3)
- Seven Pairs (pg. 6)

Practice Activity: Play a few hands with only:

- Yakuhai (Prevalent Wind, Seat Wind, Dragons)
- All Simples
- Seven Pairs

Your goal is to form a hand that contains **at least one yaku.**

You can use notecards with East 東, South 南, West 西, and North 北 written on them to help players track their seat wind.

Some mahjong sets include a rectangular placard called a wind indicator used to track the round wind. If your set doesn't include one, an additional notecard with East 東 written on it can be placed at the center of the table to help players remember the round wind.

Seat winds normally rotate according to a procedure explained in the next section. For early practice, simply rotate the seat winds counterclockwise at the end of each hand.

Strategy Tips: If you have a pair of the round wind, seat wind, or any of the dragons, keep them so you can call Pon if an opponent discards a third copy. Otherwise, you may choose to aim for All Simples by discarding honor tiles and terminal tiles.

If you happen to have many pairs at the start of the hand, you can try for Seven Pairs, although this yaku is generally more difficult to complete than the other basic yaku.

Stage 3 — Add Gameplay Procedures and Scoring

Once you have some practice forming hands with at least one yaku, we can begin looking at how a complete game plays out and introduce scoring mechanics.

Focus on the following sections in **Setup & Gameplay Reference**:

- Distribute Point Sticks, Position the Wind Indicator, Decide on a Ruleset (pg. 1)
- Phases of the Game (pg. 4)
- Dealer Rotation, Round Winds and the End of the Game (pg. 5)
- Note 1 (pg. 6)

Then review these key concepts in **Essential Terms & Rules**:

- Fu, Han (pg. 8)
- Dora Indicator, Dora (pg. 8)

★ *Fill in the two blanks in Step 3 of To Begin Each Hand on pg. 2 in the Setup & Gameplay Reference with “Reveal dora indicator” and “to serve as a dora indicator.”*

Practice Activity: Play a few hands with:

- Yakuhai (Prevalent Wind, Seat Wind, Dragons)
- All Simple
- Seven Pairs
- Dora

Remember to **rotate the seat winds** according to Dealer Rotation on pg. 5 in the Setup & Gameplay Reference.

Recall that **each hand needs at least one yaku to win** and that **dora do not count as yaku**.

You may feel free to leave scoring out of the equation altogether while practicing. However, if you are interested in scoring, a simple approach is described in the section below.

Simplified Scoring While Learning

If a player wins a hand, first determine the hand's total han value:

- Add together the **han from yaku** and the **han from dora**.
- Seat Wind is worth 1 han, Seven Pairs is worth 2 han, etc.
- Each satisfied yaku adds its associated han value to the hand's total han.
- Note that combining Prevalent Wind and Seat Wind is worth 2 total han.
- Each dora tile adds 1 han.

Each red five counts as one automatic dora.

- If a red five is indicated by a dora indicator, it counts as two han.

Once you know the total han, use the following chart to determine the point payment depending on whether the winner was the dealer (East) or a non-dealer, and whether the win occurred by discard (ron) or self-draw (tsumo).

Han	Dealer Ron (only discarder pays)	Dealer Tsumo (each player pays)	Non-Dealer Ron (only discarder pays)	Non-Dealer Tsumo (non-dealers each pay / dealer pays)
1	1500	500	1000	300 / 500
2	2900	1000	2000	500 / 1000
3	5800	2000	3900	1000 / 2000
4-5	12000	4000	8000	2000 / 4000
6-7	18000	6000	12000	3000 / 6000
8-10	24000	8000	16000	4000 / 8000
11+	36000	12000	24000	6000 / 12000

Note that the player who discards a winning tile is fully responsible for the payment of the winning hand. In contrast, when a player wins by self-draw, payments are split between all opponents.

Also note that the dealer's winning hands are worth about 1.5× the value of a non-dealer's hands, but the dealer must also pay more when a non-dealer wins by self-draw. See Note 2 on pg. 8 of the How to Calculate a Hand's Score packet for additional context.

If a hand ends in an **exhaustive draw**, players who are **one tile away from winning (*tenpai*) receive points**:

- If 1 player is tenpai: Each player pays 1,000 points to the tenpai player.
- If 2 players are tenpai: One non-tenpai player pays 1,500 points to one tenpai player, and the other non-tenpai player pays 1,500 points to the other tenpai player.
- If 3 players are tenpai: The remaining player pays 1,000 points to each of the three tenpai players.
- If 0 or 4 players are tenpai: No points are exchanged.

This simplified method is sufficient for practice until you are ready to incorporate the full scoring procedures used in standard riichi mahjong.

Extended Learning and Practice:

Once you have played a few hands, read the following in **Essential Terms & Rules**:

- Kandora (pg. 9)

★ *Add the following notes to the Simplified Scoring While Learning section:*

- *If a tile is indicated by multiple dora indicators, count it multiple times.*
- *If a red five is indicated by two dora indicators, it counts as three han, etc.*

Feel free to continue practicing more hands at your own pace, or to move on to the next section when you're ready.

Stage 4 — Add Riichi

Next, introduce **riichi** and the concepts that support it. Follow this reading order carefully, even though the material moves between sections:

Essential Terms & Rules:

- Closed Hand (pg. 3)

List of Yaku:

- Fully Concealed Hand (pg. 1)

Return to **Essential Terms & Rules:**

- Tenpai, Riichi (pg. 4)
- Rules on Riichi (pg. 6)
- Uradora (pg. 10)

List of Yaku:

- Riichi, Ippatsu (pg. 1)

★ *Fill in the remaining bullet of “During their turn, a player may:” in the Playing a Hand section on pg. 4 of Setup & Gameplay Reference with “Declare riichi”.*

Practice Activity: Play a game incorporating:

- Yakuhai, All Simple, Seven Pairs
- Riichi
- Ippatsu
- Fully Concealed Hand
- Dora, Kandora, Uradora

Strategy Tip: Riichi requires a closed hand, which means you must reach tenpai by drawing and discarding tiles yourself, without calling Chii, Pon, or Kan to claim discards. This can be challenging, but when Yakuhai, All Simple, or Seven Pairs are not easily available, Riichi often becomes the most reliable yaku to pursue.

If you can keep your hand closed while also forming other basic yaku in addition to Riichi, your scoring potential can increase significantly.

See pg. 5 of Essential Terms & Rules for an additional strategy note about Riichi.

Stage 5 — Introduce Furiten and Swap Calling

Once players are comfortable declaring riichi and recognizing yaku, introduce **two important restrictions**.

Read in **Essential Terms & Rules**:

- Furiten (pg. 11)
- Furiten Applies to All of a Player's Waiting Tiles (pg. 11)
- Swap Calling (pg. 12)

Continue practicing while **incorporating these rules**, and adding the beginner-friendly yaku in the *Learning Yaku* section below if desired. Note that some of these yaku require a closed hand.

Stage 6 — Add Honba, Exhaustive Draw, and Open Hands

Finally, introduce additional **gameplay procedures and concepts**.

Read in **Essential Terms & Rules**:

- Honba (pg. 10)
- Exhaustive Draw (pg. 7)
- Set (Meld) (pg. 2)
- Open Hand (pg. 3)

Play additional games while practicing:

- Using honba counters
 - Exhaustive draw procedures
 - Additional yaku of interest
 - How a hand's **open/closed status** affects yaku eligibility and scoring
-

Further Study

Once players are comfortable with the core rules, the remaining packets and sections of the guide explore additional topics such as:

- Full scoring calculation
- Additional rules and edge cases
- Additional yaku
- Explanatory notes and clarifications
- Additional strategy tips
- Ruleset variations

These sections can be explored gradually as your familiarity with the game grows.

Learning Yaku

When learning yaku, I recommend starting gradually—adding a few new ones at a time. Some yaku are simpler and more practical to practice, while others are less common and require more experience to recognize consistently during play. Here is a suggested learning order for additional yaku not covered above:

Beginner-Friendly:

- Pinfu (pg. 3)
- Pure Double Sequence (pg. 3)

Luck-based:

- After a Kan (pg. 4)
- Under the Sea (pg. 4)
- Under the River (pg. 4)
- Double Riichi (pg. 5)

Intermediate:

- Half Flush (pg. 8)
- Full Flush (pg. 9)
- All Triplets (pg. 5)
- Mixed Triple Sequence (pg. 7)
- Pure Straight (pg. 7)
- Little Three Dragons (pg. 6)

Advanced:

- Half Outside Hand (pg. 7)
- Fully Outside Hand (pg. 8)
- Three Concealed Triplets (pg. 6)
- Triple Triplets (pg. 5)
- Three Quads (pg. 5)
- All Terminals and Honors (pg. 6)
- Twice Pure Double Sequence (pg. 8)

Rare:

- Robbing a Kan (pg. 4)
- Mangan at Draw (pg. 10)
- All Yakuman (pg. 11-14)

Take it step by step, and don't feel rushed while learning them. Practice and repetition are the best ways to become comfortable with the patterns.

Further Reading

Once you are comfortable with the core rules and most of the yaku, I highly recommend the following book on Riichi mahjong strategy:

Riichi Book 1 by *Daina Chiba* — A practical introduction to riichi mahjong strategy covering tile efficiency, five-block theory, improving hand speed, basic defense concepts, and decision-making fundamentals. The book focuses on how to build winning hands efficiently and recognize strong shapes, making it an ideal first strategy guide after learning the rules. **Available as a free PDF from the author's official page:**

<https://dainachiba.github.io/RiichiBooks/index.html>
