

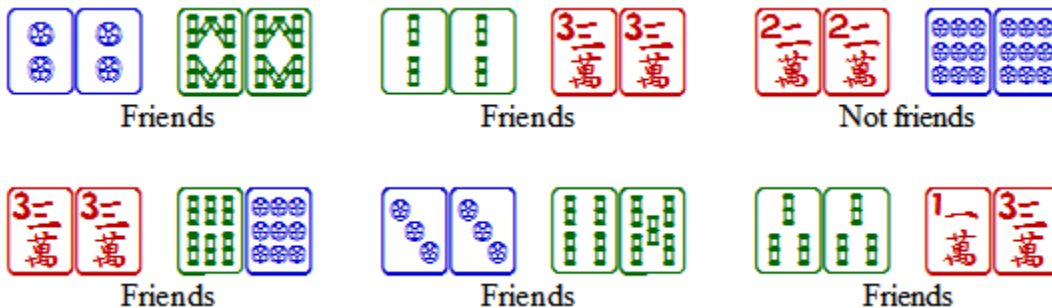


How to pick a hand: Tom Sloper's Four-Step Charleston strategy

Beginners mistakenly think that the purpose of the Charleston is to identify "the one correct hand to go for." That's wrong. The purpose is to choose at least a vague direction, and then to eliminate tiles that don't fit. It's fruitless to spin your wheels trying to find "the one and only hand." The Charleston is about elimination. Before you can eliminate tiles, you need to determine what you have the most of. And that's what the Four Steps are for.

1. Pairs. Look to see what pairs you have gotten in the deal. Sometimes you get no pairs; most of the time you get just one; sometimes you get two pairs, or even three, or even a pung. In this step, all you do is identify pairs or pungs in your hand. Done. Move on.

2. Friends. In step one, you identified pairs -- or maybe you don't have any. If you have one pair, look at the rest of your tiles to see what other tiles in your hand can go together with your pair to make a hand. Tiles that can work with your pair are "friends" of the pair. If you have two pairs, determine if they are friends with one another. For example, twos can be friends with other even numbers, or other low numbers, or flowers, or dragons, or E-W.

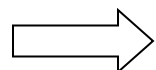


Twos and jokers are also friends, but jokers do not give you useful information at this point; the only hint you can get from jokers is "consider Quints" and "forget Singles & Pairs" (if you have multiple jokers).

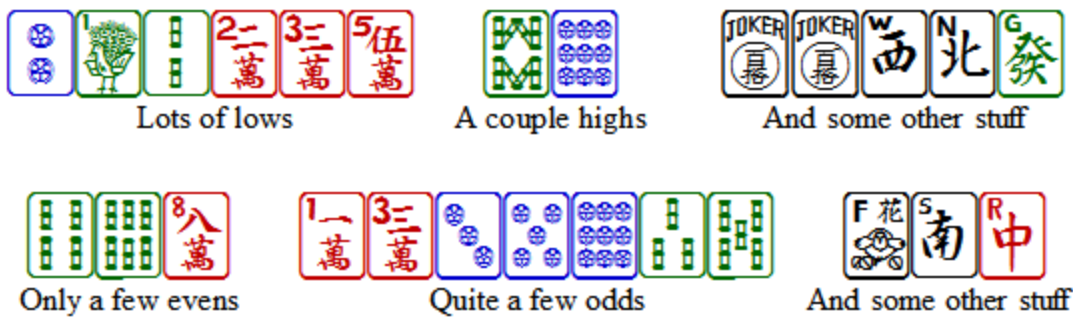
Pairs not friendly? If you have pairs that are not friends, see which pair has the most friends, and eliminate the other one (break it up).

No pairs? If you have no pairs, you can scan through the random tiles to see if there is any friendly pattern there. Don't overlook 369 and S&P.

If you have identified a hand by now, you don't need to do the remaining steps.



3. High vs. Low. The most powerful section of the card is Consecutive Runs, which is precisely why it's in the center of the card. Consecutive hands are usually just three or four consecutive numbers. Count the high numbers (5-9), count the low numbers (1-5). You can also count the middle numbers (4-6) if you want to be thorough. If you see a large preponderance of highs (for instance), then you can just go for Consecutives, and you know what to pass. Remember: simple elimination.



4. Odd vs. Even. The second most powerful section is Odds (13579, just beneath Consec. on the card). Chances are, you have more odds than evens (there are 5 odd numbers between 1 and 9, and there are only 4 even numbers). But maybe you have more evens. If so, go for Evens; if not, go for Odds.

That's it? After you've gone through the Four Steps, you may have identified a direction. If you have, you can choose three tiles to pass. Or maybe you have identified many possible hands. If so, you can choose three tiles to pass, based on several factors:

a. Tile count. Have you identified too many possibilities? Eliminate the weakest ones, based on simple tile count. It's a bad idea to have more than three possibilities, and it's a better idea to have two or fewer. Eliminate distractors.

b. Likelihood -- does the target hand require a pair that you don't have? If so, it's not likely you'll be able to make it. Along these lines, consider concealment; if one of your possibilities is a concealed hand, that'll be harder to make. So if you have an equal number of tiles towards a concealed hand and towards an exposed hand, lean to the exposed hand. What about jokers? If you have none, look at Singles & Pairs. If you have several jokers, pretend S&P doesn't even exist, and check out Quints.

c. "Red herrings" - sometimes you may discover that the pair you thought was your key is actually pretty friendless. It's interfering with your ability to think clearly. Eliminate it; break it up.

After you've been playing for a while, you'll get better at the Charleston. The American game is the hardest form of mah-jongg to learn, and the Charleston is the hardest part of that, so don't beat yourself up. You've got a steep learning curve ahead of you. You have to "pay tuition" for a while, but you'll get there. And remember: the point of the Charleston is elimination.

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