

There are so many yaku ... help!

Welcome to Mahjong! You've seen the yaku list, and are wondering how anyone is ever supposed to get started learning that!

Whilst there are 39 items on that list, in practice many of them are so rare that they can be safely ignored *entirely* whilst learning. Additionally, quite a few of them are related, as "greater" and "lesser" forms of a basic concept too, so can be learnt as one. In other words, don't worry, you *can* start to learn, play, and enjoy Mahjong without needing to study all that up front.

Let's start with just 5 yaku - but first, let's confirm some terminology:

- A **yaku** is something about your hand of tiles which makes it more special, and so worth more points.
- **Han** is the score bonus that yaku give you - there are yaku worth 1 han, and yaku worth more, up to 6 han. At this point, it's not really required to go beyond "more han => better".
- A **closed hand** is one where you have not called (said 'chii', 'pon', 'kan') to take any tiles from another player. Japanese mahjong prioritises going for a closed hand quite strongly, and some yaku are only valid if you keep your hand closed (except that you can call your final tile to win - 'ron' - and this is still considered to be winning on a closed hand).

So, on to the yaku! I'll be introducing each yaku with its Japanese name first - this may seem like a counterproductive approach for an introductory guide, but in many cases, the English-speaking world has done a fairly awkward, and sometimes inconsistent, job of coming up with translations for yaku names. Mentioning the Japanese name ends up being the easiest way of having a short consistent way of referring to them.

Section 1: Five yaku to start

Yakuhai (1 han) "Dragon Tile Triplet" / "Seat Wind Triplet" / "Round Wind Triplet"

A triplet of red/green/white dragons, or of east/south/west/north winds where the wind in question is the round wind or your seat wind. As a result, often just referred to just as "red", "white", "green", "east", "south", "west" or "north" during play.

Remember:

- The dragons are usable for this for all players, all the time.
- Only specific winds are usable for this:
 - The wind matching the current round is scoring for all players. (This is usually displayed on a small plastic placard or device placed at the right of the first dealer - if in doubt, ask!)
 - The wind matching a player's seat is scoring for that player only. (The dice should have been positioned near the east player, on their right, after being rolled, to indicate who is east - if in doubt, ask!)

Tan'yao (1 han) "All Simples" / "All Inside" / "No Ends"

A hand completely composed of number tiles between 2 and 8. It is a strange quirk of translation that these tiles are referred to as 'simples' in the most commonly used English name for this yaku.

Equivalently, a hand containing no winds, dragons, 1s or 9s (collectively termed 'ends').

Riichi (1 han, CLOSED ONLY) “Reach”

The yaku after which the entire Japanese variant of Mahjong is named - “Riichi Mahjong”.

When you are 1 tile away from winning (Japanese: tenpai), **if your hand is closed**, you **may** declare riichi just before you discard a tile. You are required to stake 1000 points which comes back to you if you win.

The downsides are:

- You warn the other players, who may now be more cautious about what they discard
- You are no longer allowed to change your hand - on your turn, you draw, and then win or discard. If the tile could have made your hand better, you’ve missed out on doing so. If the tile is one you recognize as potentially dangerous, too bad, you have to discard it anyway.

The upsides are:

- You have a yaku, if you didn’t already
- Your hand is now worth more

Menzen tsumo (1 han, CLOSED ONLY) “Fully Concealed Hand”

Draw your own winning tile from the wall, with a closed hand.

Impossible to plan for, of course, but I’m still including it in my selection of five basic yaku, because if your winning tile is still in the live wall, you have a 25% chance that it will be drawn by you assuming no-one else wins first.

If you were contemplating whether you should riichi or not, did not, and end up self-drawing your winning tile anyway, you at least get this.

Pinfu (1 han, CLOSED ONLY)

This one is complicated to explain, but relatively easy to aim for, so it makes my shortlist of five initial yaku.

A pinfu hand must:

- Be four sequences and a pair. No triplets.
- The pair must not be a dragon, or the round wind, or your seat wind.
- The final sequence you complete must be waiting to be completed on either end - i.e.
 - 1-2 waiting for 3: NO, can only be completed on one end
 - 4-6 waiting for 5: NO, can only be completed in the middle
 - 4-5 waiting for 3 or 6: YES

If you manage to get a suitable pair early on, and a few 2-tile sequences, it can be very practical to choose your discards to try to move towards this.

End of section 1

Even just with these five yaku, you have enough to play a perfectly reasonable game of real Mahjong. If you are feeling a little overwhelmed, take a break, and plan to play some real games, whilst focussing on just these five yaku.

As you might expect, only knowing a very restricted set of the scoring opportunities, you'd be at a slight competitive disadvantage - but rather less than you might think. A surprisingly large number of winning hands are composed just from these yaku.

More importantly, you'll be able to participate fully in a real game, gain experience at building winning hands, and can choose to concern yourself with adding extra yaku to your repertoire at your own pace.

If you're impatient to read ahead, pick just some of the section 2 yaku, and add those to what you consider as your own personal "core set" of yaku, that you'll be focussing on in your next game. But, if you're concerned about information overload, please do set this document aside for now, and come back another day to read another section.

Interlude - Dora

Dora are tiles that give you an extra han each just for having them in your winning hand. However, they don't count as yaku for the purposes of "need to have a yaku to win".

One tile will have been turned face up in the wall - that is the dora indicator - it shows that the tile **after** that tile in numeric sequence is the dora - e.g. 3 of circles would indicate the 4 of circles:

- If the indicator is a 9, it indicates the 1 of the same suit
- If the indicator is a dragon, it indicates a specific other dragon (ask, or consult the summary/reference sheet).
- If the indicator is a wind, it indicates a specific other wind (ask, or consult the summary/reference sheet).

In addition to the standard dora, riichi is sometimes played with "red 5s". Three of the "5" tiles will be coloured all red, one in each suit, and these also count as dora. In some sets, there are four - the extra one is in the pin (circles) suit.

In addition to **that**, there's another potential bonus to declaring riichi that couldn't be explained until dora had been: when you riichi and win, you have the potential to receive extra dora: the hidden tile underneath the dora indicator is revealed, and becomes another dora indicator, exclusive to players who have declared riichi. These additional dora are called "ura dora", using the Japanese name.

Section 2: The rest of the common yaku

By this time, hopefully you've already played (and won) a few hands using just the section 1 yaku. This section adds on another 6, and rounds out the set of most of the yaku you might actually plan for, in most common and not-so-common scenarios.

Chiitoitsu (2 han, CLOSED ONLY) "Seven pairs"

Seven pairs has the distinction of being a weird hand which throws out the usual requirement of four-sets-and-a-pair. Instead, you can win on 7 distinct pairs (i.e. 4 of the same tile is not 2 pairs).

This yaku is usually one that the tiles choose for you, rather than you choose yourself. It's not particularly high scoring, and since it must necessarily wait for the final pair to be completed, there are at most three copies of one tile type that you can win on.

However, if you find yourself with 5 pairs of tiles that are not going to be useful for forming sequences, it's definitely more practical to go for 7 pairs, than a standard hand. Even from 4 pairs, it's quite possibly the better option. The only alternative you really have would be to attempt to call 'pon' a lot and head towards the yaku explained next ... but that will rely a lot on your opponents discarding the exact few tiles you need!

Toitoi (2 han) "All triplets"

Quite simply, all triplets, no sequences. Nice if you can get it, but requires a lot of luck with your draws - of course, if you do happen to get a full triplet in the initial draw, and plenty of pairs (to call for more) it can be worth knowing about.

Iipeikō (1 han, CLOSED ONLY) "Pure Double Sequence"

Two sequences of exactly the same numbers and suit. Actually a bit more common than you might think, especially when you are collecting number tiles and trying to string them together into sequences.

Sanshoku dōjun (2 han, or 1 han in an open hand) "Mixed Triple Sequence"

Frequently referred to just as "sanshoku". For this you require the three sequences, one in each suit, having the exact same number values. Usually approached by noticing you have a suitable sequence already by luck, and some number tiles in other suits that might be useful. If you get to two sequences and are in tenpai, you'll often have multiple possible winning tiles, where one will complete the sanshoku, and one will not.

Hon'itsu (3 han, or 2 han in an open hand) "Half Flush"

An entire hand containing just one suit, but it may also contain the non-suit tiles (winds and dragons). You'll probably give your opponents quite a few hints if you pursue such a hand, as you'll usually need to call more than once, and your discards will show a complete lack of one suit, then some of that suit will usually need to be discarded as you approach tenpai. Still, if you get a starting hand suited to it, and can work in a yakuhai, and a dora or two, it can score very nicely.

Chin'itsu (6 han, or 5 han in an open hand) "Full Flush"

An entire hand containing just one suit only. Just as hard as it sounds. This is the yaku with the greatest single value - until we get to yakuman, which are **extremely** unlikely special patterns, which score an **extreme** amount of points.

End of Section 2

At the end of section 2, we have covered 12 of 39 yaku. However, from here on in, the probability of achieving these extra yaku drops off a lot. You now know the yaku relevant to planning the vast majority of hands.

Interlude: Kan

There exists the concept of a kan - this is a quadruplet of identical tiles which function in all respects like a higher scoring stand-in for a triplet of those tiles. This introduces an interesting quirk - how can you have an extra tile, yet still form the required four sets and a pair? The answer is that on declaring a kan, you draw an extra tile from the wall to compensate. This comes from the dead wall, unlike regular draws.

Should you do this? It depends ...

- It slightly increases your score
- It gives you an immediate extra draw
- But, it creates extra dora, which statistically are more likely to end up in one of your opponents hands than yours!

When a kan occurs, an extra dora indicator is flipped on the wall. Whatever tile is indicated by the new indicator is now an additional dora, functioning just like the original dora.

Recall that after a win with riichi, the reverse dora is consulted - if additional dora indicators have been flipped by kans, these also add additional reverse dora!

There are three types of kan:

- Concealed kan - if you have all four of a tile in your hand, you can declare a concealed kan. Whilst you do have to show the other players that you actually have the tiles, to justify you obtaining your extra draw and creating a new dora, a concealed kan does not actually count as opening your hand, for scoring purposes. You can only do this after drawing a tile - not on the same turn as calling a tile from another player.
- Big melded kan - if you have a concealed triplet in your hand, and an opponent discards the fourth of that tile, you can call it for a kan. This is rarely worth doing.
- Small melded kan - if you have previously called 'pon' and later draw the fourth tile yourself, you may upgrade to a kan. There is little downside to doing so ... unless the tile is an opponent's winning tile, in which case they may steal it from you to win!

There is also one very special case in which a concealed kan may be stolen from for a win - this is only possible if an opponent is waiting for that tile to win with the Kokushi Musō "Thirteen Orphans" Yakuman hand (we'll get to that later).

Section 3: Pure-luck yaku

There are a selection of yaku which you acquire solely through luck (short of having mystical precognition). Unlike the previous two sections, don't feel you need to learn these right now. In fact, the reason for bringing them up now is:

- If you've been playing quite a few games you may have witnessed one of these happen, and wonder what that was about.
- If you've been looking at a yaku summary list, you may have been concerned how much still remained to learn. All the ones in this section are safely ignorable when it comes to thinking about how you build your hand.

Ippatsu (1 han) “Unbroken” / “One-shot”

If, after declaring riichi, a player wins on the very next go-around of normal turns (the next discard of the other three players, or their own next draw), they score ippatsu added to their riichi. For this reason, you may want to be specially cautious about a riichi for your first discard against it. Any 'pon'/'chi'/'kan' call breaks the normal sequence of turns, including removing the opportunity for ippatsu.

Daburu Riichi (1 han) “Double Reach”

If you should be so lucky as to be able to riichi on your very first discard within the initial uninterrupted set of turns, you stand to receive an additional han if you win.

Chankan (1 han) “Robbing a kan”

When a pon is upgraded to a kan, the tile can be stolen to win, and if so, grants an additional yaku to the win.

Rinshan Kaihō (1 han) “After a kan”

Scored when you win from the replacement tile you draw after making a kan.

Haitei (1 han) “Last draw”

Scored when winning with the very last tile drawn from the wall.

Hōtei (1 han) “Last discard”

Scored when winning with the very last discard of the game.

Tenhō/Chihō (YAKUMAN) “Blessing of Heaven” / “Blessing of Earth”

East's initial hand of 14 tiles forms a valid hand (Tenhō), or one of the other three players' first draw forms a valid hand (Chihō).

Renhō (5 han, special) “Blessing of Man”

Your starting hand is already tenpai, and an opponent deals a winning tile before you take your first turn, and no 'pon'/'chii'/'kan' calls were made.

The scoring of this yaku is atypical: it does not combine with other yaku or dora. If the hand contained 6+ han of other yaku and dora, you would score those, and disregard the renhō.

End of section 3

As you can imagine, these happen rarely. The most important thing to take away from this section is that it's relevant to discard more cautiously immediately after a riichi (because of ippatsu) and for the last discard of the game (because of hōtei).

And now the end is in sight, as there are only 9 yaku and 9 yakuman remaining.

Section 4: Remaining Yaku

Nine more yaku remain to complete the list.

Ittsū (2 han, or 1 han in an open hand) “Pure Straight” / “Straight Through”

Three sequences, 1-2-3, 4-5-6, 7-8-9, all in the same suit.

Chanta (2 han, or 1 han in an open hand) “Half Outside Hand”

This hand is based around winds, dragons, 1s and 9s. Each set must contain one of those tiles, and so must the pair. That means the sets are either triplets of them, or 1-2-3 or 7-8-9 sequences.

Junchan (3 han, or 2 han in an open hand) “Full Outside Hand”

This is a stricter version of Chanta - it's the same but without winds or dragons. I.e. each set and the pair must contain a 1 or 9 tile.

San ankō (2 han) “Three Concealed Triplets”

Really quite rare, this yaku introduces a new restriction: you must have three triplets entirely self drawn - you don't have to have a closed hand, so you could have called the remaining triplet, but you can't call for any of the three triplets you are using for this yaku - **not even to win ('ron')**.

Honrōtō (2 han) “All terminals and honours”

This is also a stricter version of Chanta, but in a different way - sequences are not allowed. I.e. the whole hand consists of nothing but winds, dragons, 1s and 9s. If you manage to construct a Honroutou hand, it will by logical necessity also score Toitōi (all triplets) or Chiitoitsu (seven pairs), for a total of 4 han overall.

Sanshoku dokō (2 han) “Triple Triplet”

A triplet of the same number, in each of the three suits.

Shōsangen (2 han) “Little Three Dragons”

Bonus for the easier way of including all three dragons into a hand - two must form triplets, with the remaining dragon as the pair. You also score a Yakuhai yaku for each of the dragon triplets, for a total of 4 han overall.

San kantsu (2 han) “Three Quads”

Three kans. Ludicrously rare.

Ryanpeikō (3 han, CLOSED ONLY) “Twice Pure Double Sequence”

This hand is technically interesting, but rare. The interesting part is that a Ryanpeikō hand is both a normal 4-sets-and-a-pair hand, and seven pairs, at the same time. It is formed by having two separate iipeikō constructs, each of which can be thought of as both two sequences, or three pairs, plus a final pair. 3 han is a bit of a disappointing reward for such an elaborate construction!

Section 5: Yakuman Hands

Yakuman have been mentioned in passing a few times, but have not been explained yet. Since this guide is meant for someone who is only slightly acquainted with the scoring system, I'll define them thus:

A yakuman is a highly special and rare hand construction that is worth 32 times more points than the cheapest hand that can be won!

As you might imagine, when a yakuman is scored (which is very rare indeed), it dominates the outcome of the game. Whilst it's not necessarily an instant win, it usually puts the winner into such a favourable position that they are close to unassailable.

Sū ankō (YAKUMAN, CLOSED ONLY) “Four Concealed Triplets”

This is the easiest yakuman. “Simply” collect four sets of three identical tiles, none of which may be called for from other players, not even to win - you have to draw them all yourself. (It is possible to call a tile to win this yakuman if you already have four triplets and are waiting for another tile to complete a pair.)

Kokushi musō (YAKUMAN, CLOSED ONLY) “Thirteen Orphans”

One of each wind. One of each dragon. One of each 1 tile. One of each 9 tile. And one more tile matching one of the previous thirteen.

Chūren pōtō (YAKUMAN, CLOSED ONLY) “Nine Gates”

A hand composed of 1112345678999 all in one suit, plus one more tile of that suit. It is special, because if you were to actually get the 1112345678999 in hand, you can then complete 4-sets-and-a-pair with any additional number tile, leading to a 9-way wait. (You may still score it if you complete the pattern in a different order that gives you a less flexible final wait, though.)

Sū kantsu (YAKUMAN) “Four Quads”

Four kans.

Ryūiisō (YAKUMAN) “All Green”

If you look at the tiles, you will find that the green dragon, plus the 2, 3, 4, 6, 8 of sō (bamboo) are all green (or they are the sō tiles without any red on them, at least - set designs vary a little). Forming any regular hand consisting only of these tiles qualifies for this yakuman.

Chinrōtō (YAKUMAN) “All Terminals”

Recall the two upgraded forms of Chanta from the previous section? This is the ultimate form, overlapping the restrictions of both: a hand entirely consisting of 1 and 9 tiles.

Tsuuiisō (YAKUMAN) “All Honours”

A hand consisting entirely of winds and dragons - no number tile at all.

Daisangen (YAKUMAN) “Big Three Dragons”

Three triplets, one of each of the dragons.

Shōsūshi (YAKUMAN) “Little Four Winds”

Three triplets of winds, and a pair of the remaining one.

Daisūshi (YAKUMAN) “Big Four Winds”

Triplets of all four winds.

The End

You have now met all 39 yaku used in modern Riichi Mahjong.

Some others are somewhat well known, but are only used as “house rules” where players agree before the start of the game to play a rules variation.

This document has presented a staged learning approach to the yaku - now that you’ve reached the end, you may prefer a one-pager for reference - there are several versions to be found on the Internet:

- World Riichi have a yaku list available from <https://www.worldriichi.org/player-materials> with clean presentation - though the yaku are grouped by their scoring value here, which may be less optimal for new players.
- Reddit user “Aranlyde” produced a colourful reference with yaku grouped by themes, with the option to print it double sided with accompanying scoring reference: <https://www.reddit.com/r/Mahjong/comments/l5b221/>, then click through the drive.google.com link, and open “Cheat Sheet (Landscape).pdf”.
- Reddit user “Karew” has a version that prominently grades the how common or rare each yaku is: <https://www.reddit.com/r/Mahjong/comments/1gydpik/>, and find the links in the top comment.