Card Games: Getting Started

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Walmart and Family Dollar Stores sell playing cards and prices range from $1 to $3. Pinochle decks contain 48 cards and regular decks contain 52 cards. The packages are clearly marked. This page includes basic instructions for playing the following card games:

- Go Fish (2 to 6 players)
- Crazy Eights (any number of players)
- Concentration (any number of players)
- Rummy (2, 3 or 4 players)
- Gin Rummy (2, 3 or 4 players)
- Egyptian Rat Screw (2 to 5 players)
- Kings in the Corner (2, 3 or 4 players)

Note: Pinochle and Bridge are two games that advanced players may want to explore. Unless you have enough people to play separate games, pick a game that includes everyone. Locate medium-sized tables and chairs.

Background: Playing Cards

Today's playing cards have an Islamic history. The oldest cards are believed to have originated in China and they are thought to have been paper currency with Chinese ideograms to mark their rank and suit (see: “Popular, 52-Card French Decks”). From China, playing cards spread to India and Persia. From Persia they are believed to have spread to Egypt during the era of Mamluk control (Mamluks ruled Egypt and Syria from 1250 until 1517, when their dynasty was extinguished by the Islamic Ottoman Turks).

In England, a complete set of cards is called a pack, in the U.S., the set is called a deck, and elsewhere the word set is used. A subset held by a player during a game is called a hand.

Playing cards entered Southern Europe in the 14th century, most likely from Mamluk Egypt, using the Mamluk suits of:

- Cups
- Swords
- Coins
- Polo-sticks or Batons

These suits are still used in traditional Latin decks. Wide use of playing cards in Europe can, with some certainty, be traced from 1377 onward.

In the late 14th century, Europeans changed the Mamluk court cards to represent European royalty and attendants. Packs of 56 cards (as in tarot) containing in each suit a King, Queen, Knight, and Knave (as in tarot) were once common in the 15th century. From the 17th century the Knave was called a Jack, a term borrowed from the English Renaissance card game All Fours where the Knave of trumps has this name. All Fours was considered a game of the lower classes, so the use of the term Jack at one time was considered vulgar.

Modern playing cards are grouped into three broad categories based on the suits they use: French, Latin, and German. Excluding Jokers, the French 52-card deck preserves the number of cards in the original Mamluk deck, while Latin and German decks average fewer.

Popular, 52-Card French Decks

French decks come in a variety of patterns and deck sizes. The 52-card deck is the most popular deck and includes 13 ranks of each suit with reversible “court” cards. Each suit includes an Ace, depicting a single symbol of its suit, a King, Queen, and Jack, each depicted with a symbol of their suit; and ranks (numbers) two through ten, with each card depicting that number of pips of its suit. As well as these 52 cards, commercial packs often include between one and four jokers, most often two. Note: Pips are symbols that denote suits and value of playing cards.

Go Fish

This game requires a standard 52-card deck. Remove the Jokers from the deck. If there are three or more players, each player is dealt five cards. If there are only two players, deal 7 cards to each. The remaining cards are placed in a pile between all the players.

Game Objective

Players try to form sets of four-of-a-kind. When they do, the four cards are immediately placed on the table face up. Play continues until all books have been made.

The player who makes the most books wins.

How to Play

One of the players deals the cards and each player gets five cards. If you are dealt a four of a kind, or get four of a kind during game play, those cards are removed from your hand, and you get a point. Moving clockwise, players take turns asking a specific player for a given rank of card.

Starting with the player to the left of the dealer, each person takes a turn asking the selected player if they have a certain rank of card (e.g. “John, do you have any nines?”). If asked for a rank he has in his hand, a player must hand over all of the cards of that rank.

If the asker successfully retrieves any cards, he/she gets to take another turn. If a player (who is asked for cards) has no cards of the requested rank, he responds, “Go fish.”

The asker then draws a card from the pile. If he happens to draw the card he was requesting, the asker shows the card to the group as proof and then takes another turn.

Crazy Eights

This game requires a standard 52-card deck. Remove the Jokers from the deck. 2 to 5 players can play with one deck (shuffle in a second deck for more players).

Game Objective

The first player who runs out of cards wins the game.

How to Play

One of the players deals the cards giving each player 5 cards. If there are only 2 players, deal 7 cards to each. Place the remaining cards face down in the center of the table. Turn the top card face-up next to the stack. The player to the dealer’s left will then play a card that matches either the rank or suit of the face-up card (place the appropriate card on top of the cards that are face up). For example, if the face-up card is 4 of Hearts, then the player can add any 4 or any heart. If a player does not have an appropriate card, then he draws face down cards from the stock pile until he finds a playable card. Whenever the stockpile runs out, the cards are reshuffled.

All 8s are wild and players can use them when they don’t have another card to play or at other strategic times. The person who plays the 8 calls out what suit they want it to represent and the next player must play a card of that suit.

Concentration

This game requires at least 2 players and a standard 52-card deck. Remove the Jokers from the deck. 2 or more players can play. Shuffle in a second deck for more players.

Game Objective

Turn over more pairs of matching cards than your opponent(s).

How to Play

Shuffle one or two decks and lay out the cards, face-down, in rows of 13 cards. Each player takes turns flipping two cards face-up to see if they are of the same number and color (e.g. 9♠ and 9♣, or Q♥ and Q♦), then that player wins the pair, picks them up and gets another turn. If the cards are not of the same number and color, they are turned back facedown and it becomes the next player’s turn to pick two cards. The game continues until players have picked up all the pairs; the winner is the player with the most pairs.

Number Pairings

Match any number pairing regardless of color.

Rummy

Rummy is the longer form of the famous “Gin Rummy” game. This game is designed for 2 to 4 players, requires a standard 52-card deck and a pad to record scores.

Game Objective

The first player to get rid of all his cards by melding or laying off wins the round. No one else may play after a player goes out. The winner receives all the points left in the opponents’ hands, even if a player has valid melds he has not yet laid down. Points are determined by the type of cards held, with numbered cards worth 5 points, face cards worth 10, and Aces worth 15. Before...
How to Play
If there are 2 players, each is dealt 10 cards. If there are 3 or 4 players, each receives 7 cards. The dealer then places the remaining cards face down, creating the stockpile, and turns the top card face up next to it, creating the discard pile.

Play goes around the table to the left. Each player has a turn, either taking a face-up card from the discard pile or a facedown card from the stockpile. The player adds this card to his hand and discards another. He may not discard the one he has drawn until the next hand.

A player is trying to meld runs and sets in his hand. A run is a sequence of at least 3 consecutive cards in the same suit. Example: 10 of Clubs, J of Clubs, Q of Clubs, K of Clubs. A set is a group of at least 3 cards of the same number (5♣, 5♥, 5♦). Once assembled, individual melds can be placed face-up on the table.

When a player ends a round by going Gin, the same number of points are scored. A secondary way to get rid of cards is laying off. A player can lay off a card (or cards) by adding to a run or set already on the table.

Game Objective
A player can end the round, or “knock,” by placing his discard face-down when he has completed enough melds that his “deadwood” (the cards in his hand, not counting melds) totals fewer than 10 points. Points are determined by the face value of each card held, with Aces worth 1 and face cards worth 10 each. If a player can complete his hand without any deadwood, he/she can declare “Gin” and earn a 25-point bonus, in addition to his opponent’s deadwood points.

When a player ends a round by knocking, his opponents lay down all their valid runs and sets. Opponents may also lay off their other cards on the player’s melds if the addition makes a valid meld. Whatever cards remain are scored.

When a player ends a round by going Gin, the same rules apply, except the opponent cannot lay off his cards on the player’s melds. This makes for a higher deadwood point count — and significant incentive to hold on to your cards.

Each player is trying to meld runs and sets in their hand. A run is a sequence of at least 3 consecutive cards in the same suit (10♦, J♦, Q♦, K♦). A set is a group of at least 3 cards of the same number (5♣, 5♥, 5♦). Once assembled, individual melds can be placed face-up on the table.

A secondary way to get rid of cards is laying off. A player can lay off a card (or cards) by adding to a run or set already on the table.

Egyptian Ratscrew
This game, also known as Egyptian War, requires concentration and lightning-fast reflexes. The game also requires 2 to 5 players and a standard 52-card deck. Remove the Jokers from the deck.

Game Objective
The player who accumulates all the cards in his hand wins the game. A secondary objective is to keep from breaking fingers and hands. Be careful when slapping!

How to Play
Deal the cards evenly. Stack any remaining cards face-up in the middle of the table as bonus cards. Players stack their cards facedown in front of them. A player may never look at his cards before they hit the middle pile.

Starting to the left of the dealer, each player pulls one card from the top of his stack — without looking at it — and quickly lays it face-up on the pile. When a player lays a face card on the pile, the next player must lay a face card on top of it. The number of tries he gets to play a face card depends on the face card played. For Jacks he gets only one try, for Queens two, for Kings three, for Aces four. If a player is able to play another face card, the problem of playing a face card moves to the next player. If he cannot, the player who put down the face card wins the stack. For instance, if a 9 of Hearts is on the foundation pile, then the next card played must be 8 of Clubs or 8 of Spades. A sequence of cards may also be played, but all the cards in the sequence must obey the lower rank and opposite color rules. Aces are always the lowest cards.

Kings in the Corner
This game requires 2 to 4 players and a standard 52-card deck. Remove the Jokers from the deck. The action of this game is competitive and challenges your brain to keep track of all the cards.

Game Objective
The first player to lay off (or play) all his cards wins.

How to Play
Deal seven cards to each player. Place the remaining cards in the middle of the table as a stockpile. Then turn the four top cards over, placing one on each of the four sides of the deck — to the north, south, east, and west. These will be the foundation piles. The cards on the table should make the shape of a cross.

The player to the left of the dealer begins. Kings can be placed in the corners, or played (placed) in an alternating color sequence with lower rank cards on top (see description below). If a player has no cards to play, he/she draws a card from the center stockpile. He may make as many valid plays as are possible during his turn to get rid of as many cards as possible from his hand playing either the foundation piles or face cards on the Kings in the corners. The following sample moves (that are valid) will help you learn:

- Play a card (or sequence of cards) on a foundation pile. To play cards on a foundation pile, the card played must be immediately below the foundation card in rank and of the opposite color (red or black). For example, if a 9 of Hearts is on the foundation pile, then the next card played must be 8 of Clubs or 8 of Spades. A sequence of cards may also be played, but all the cards in the sequence must obey the lower rank and opposite color rules. Aces are always the lowest cards.

- Play a “King in the corner,” literally. Kings are the only cards that can be played in the corner spaces created by the cross. Once a King is played, players may then lay off cards on that pile like any other foundation pile.

- Move an entire foundation pile onto another pile, if the move creates a valid sequence. This is often possible when the cards are first dealt.

- Play any card or sequence of cards on a vacant foundation pile. Each player begins his turn by drawing from the center stockpile and makes as many valid moves as he can.

Gin Rummy
“Gin Rummy” is sometimes called “Gin.” The game is a quicker, simpler version of Rummy. Similar to Rummy, the game requires a standard deck, 2 to 4 players and a pad to record scores.

Similarities and Differences (to Rummy)
The rules of Gin Rummy are similar to those of Rummy. The main difference is that the players do not lay down their sets and runs until they are prepared to end the round. If the opposing player has valid runs or sets in his hand, they will not count as points.

Full rules:
Each player is dealt 10 cards. The dealer then places the remaining cards facedown, creating the stockpile, and turns the top card face up next to it, creating the discard pile.

Play goes around the table to the left. Each player takes a turn, either taking a face-up card from the discard pile or a facedown card from the stockpile. The player adds this card to his hand and discards another. He is a sequence of at least 3 consecutive cards in the same suit (10♣, J♣, Q♣, K♣). A set is a group of at least 3 cards of the same number (5♣, 5♥, 5♦). Once assembled, individual melds can be placed face-up on the table.