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WELCOME TO TONG-ITS

*The Filipino card classic.
Learn it, play smart, win.*

BY

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WELCOME TO TONG-ITS

Learn the game, play smart, win more.

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The free companion book to the Niche Tong-its Tour on IsaiahSendy.com.

Twenty-eight lessons across seven units — the basics, card values and melds, turn play, winning the hand, smart strategy, scoring, and the Filipino roots of the game.

Read a lesson here, then play that exact spot in the Niche Tong-its Tour until the right move is automatic.

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If you ever play Tong-its for money, keep it light and within your means. The skills in this book matter far more than the stakes.

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

Read it, then prove it at the table

Each lesson is short on purpose, built around one idea you can carry straight to a real hand.

1. Read the lesson — the red lead line is the whole idea in a sentence; the rest explains why it's true.
2. Run the *Try It* steps, lock in the *Key Takeaway*, and test yourself with the *Quick Check*.
3. Open the Niche Tong-its Tour and play that exact spot against the AI a few times. Reading builds understanding; repetition builds reflex.

The book moves from the very basics through melds, turn play, winning, strategy, scoring, and finally the history and Filipino terms of the game. Read straight through, or jump to any part from the contents.

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PART 01

01 The Basics

*Three players, one deck, and the simple rhythm every
hand follows.*

Lessons 1-4

What Is Tong-its?

Tong-its is a fast 3-player Filipino card game where you race to clear your hand by forming melds.

Tong-its (also spelled Tongits) is one of the most popular card games in the Philippines. Three players use a single deck of cards, and the whole game is about one thing: getting rid of the cards in your hand by grouping them into melds.

A meld is just a valid group of cards — three or four of the same rank, or three or more in a row of the same suit. The moment your hand is empty you win instantly. If nobody empties their hand, the player holding the fewest leftover points wins instead.

Think of it as a quicker, more aggressive cousin of Rummy — it is closely related to the American game Tonk and shares a family resemblance with Mahjong. It became popular across the Philippines in the 1990s, and today it is played everywhere from street tables to phone apps. There is a fuller history in the final unit, Roots & Tradition.

Hands are short, the lead changes fast, and a single smart move can flip the table.

- ♠ **Three players, one deck** — Tong-its is built for exactly three players sharing a standard 52-card deck.
- ♠ **It's a race to empty your hand** — You win by melding and discarding until you have no cards left, or by holding the fewest points when the game ends.
- ♠ **Short and punchy** — Hands move quickly, so every draw and discard matters more than in slower card games.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Picture three friends around a table, each trying to be the first to run out of cards.*
- ♦ *Open the Niche Tong-its Tour app and just watch one hand play out before reading on.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Tong-its is a 3-player race to clear your hand by melding cards.

QUICK CHECK

How many players play a standard game of Tong-its?

Three players. *Right — Tong-its is played by exactly three players with one deck.*



02 LESSON 2 OF 28

THE BASICS

The Deck and the Deal

One 52-card deck: the dealer gets 15 cards, the other two players get 12 each.

Tong-its uses a single standard 52-card deck — no jokers. After a shuffle, the dealer hands out cards: the dealer keeps 13, and each of the other two players gets 12.

That adds up to 37 cards dealt, which leaves 15 cards. These remaining cards become the stock (the face-down pile you draw from). The discard pile starts empty and grows as players throw cards away.

Because the dealer starts with one extra card, the dealer opens the game — and skips drawing on that very first turn, since they already have enough cards to act.

- ♠ **Dealer gets 13, others get 12** — The dealer's extra card is why the dealer plays first and doesn't draw on the opening turn.
- ♠ **The stock is the draw pile** — After the deal, 15 cards remain face-down as the stock you draw from on your turn.
- ♠ **The discard pile starts empty** — It fills up as each player ends their turn by throwing one card away.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Deal a hand yourself with real cards: 13 to the dealer, 12 each to the others, 15 left over.*
- ♦ *In the app, count the stock at the start of a hand — it should read 15.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Dealer 13, others 12, with 15 cards left in the stock.

QUICK CHECK

How many cards does the dealer start with?

13 cards. *Correct — the dealer gets 13 and the other two players get 12 each.*



The Goal of the Game

Win by emptying your hand (Tongits), or by holding the fewest leftover points when the hand ends.

There are a few ways a hand of Tong-its can end, but they all reward the same thing: having the fewest cards and points stuck in your hand.

The cleanest win is a Tongits — you meld and lay off cards until your hand is completely empty, which wins the hand instantly. More often, a player who has melded will 'call' to end the hand and compare leftover points. And if the stock runs out, the player with the fewest points wins.

Those leftover, unmelded cards are called deadwood. Low deadwood is the heartbeat of the whole game.

- ♠ **Empty hand = instant win** — Clearing every card from your hand is called Tongits and wins immediately.
- ♠ **Otherwise, fewest points win** — If nobody goes out, the player with the lowest deadwood total wins the hand.
- ♠ **Deadwood is the enemy** — Deadwood is the points value of the cards you never managed to meld.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Say the goal out loud: empty hand, or lowest leftover points.*
- ♦ *Watch a full hand and notice which player ends with the fewest cards.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Win by emptying your hand, or by holding the lowest deadwood.

QUICK CHECK

Besides emptying your hand, how do you win a hand of Tong-its?

By holding the fewest leftover points (deadwood). *Exactly — if no one empties their hand, the lowest deadwood wins.*



A Turn at a Glance

Every turn follows the same rhythm: draw a card, lay down melds if you can, then discard one card.

A Tong-its turn is simple once you see the pattern. First you take a card — either the top of the stock, or the top of the discard pile (with one important condition you'll learn soon). Then you may lay down any melds you've formed and lay off extra cards onto melds already on the table. Finally, you end your turn by discarding exactly one card.

The only exception is the dealer's first turn: they already hold the extra card, so they skip the draw and go straight to melding and discarding.

That loop — draw, meld, discard — repeats around the table until someone wins.

- ♠ **Draw first** — Take the top stock card, or the top discard if it immediately helps you meld.
- ♠ **Then meld and lay off** — Put down any valid groups and add stray cards onto melds on the table.
- ♠ **Discard to finish** — Every turn ends by throwing exactly one card onto the discard pile.

TRY IT

- ◆ *Memorize the rhythm: draw, meld, discard.*
- ◆ *Take one turn in the app and narrate each step to yourself as you do it.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Each turn is draw, then meld or lay off, then discard one card.

QUICK CHECK

What three actions make up a normal Tong-its turn, in order?

Draw, meld or lay off, then discard. *Right—you draw, then lay down melds, then discard one card to end the turn.*



PART 02

02

Card Values & Melds

What each card is worth — and the two ways to group them.

Lessons 5-8

Card Values & Deadwood

Aces are worth 1, number cards their face value, and J/Q/K each count 10 points.

Every card carries a point value that only matters for the cards you fail to meld — your deadwood. Counting is easy: an Ace is worth 1 point, the number cards (2 through 10) are worth their face value, and the face cards — Jack, Queen, King — are each worth 10.

When a hand ends without a Tongits, each player adds up the points of their unmelded cards. The lowest total wins. So a lonely King sitting in your hand is 10 points of risk, while a stray Ace is only 1.

This is why players rush to meld their high cards and are happy to hang onto low ones.

- ♠ **Ace = 1 point** — Aces are the cheapest card to be caught holding.
- ♠ **2 through 10 = face value** — A seven is worth 7 points, a four is worth 4, and so on.
- ♠ **J, Q, K = 10 each** — Face cards are the most dangerous deadwood — meld or dump them early.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Add up a sample hand's deadwood in your head: $K + 5 + A = 16$.*
- ♦ *In the app, glance at your hand's deadwood readout after you draw.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Ace is 1, numbers are face value, and J/Q/K are 10 each.

QUICK CHECK

How many points is a King worth as deadwood?

10 points. *Correct — every face card (J, Q, K) counts as 10 points.*



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CARD VALUES & MELDS

Melds: Sets

A set is three or four cards of the same rank — and every card must be a different suit.

The first kind of meld is a set: three or four cards that share the same rank. Three Sevens make a set. Four Queens make a set. The one rule to remember is that all the cards must be different suits — you can't use two cards of the same suit in one set.

Since there are only four suits, a set can be three or four cards, never more. Sets are a great way to dump dangerous face cards: three Kings melded means 30 points of risk left your hand at once.

- ♠ **Same rank, three or four cards** — Examples: 7-7-7, or Q-Q-Q-Q.
- ♠ **All different suits** — You cannot put two cards of the same suit into the same set.
- ♠ **Great for clearing high cards** — Melding a set of face cards removes a lot of deadwood in one move.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Lay out three Kings of different suits — that's a valid set.*
- ♦ *In the app, select three of a kind and tap Lay Meld to see it accepted.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

A set is 3 or 4 of the same rank, all in different suits.

QUICK CHECK

Which of these is a valid set?

The 9 of hearts, 9 of spades, and 9 of clubs. *Right — three different suits of the same rank is a valid set.*



07 LESSON 7 OF 28

CARD VALUES & MELDS

Melds: Runs

A run is three or more cards in sequence, all of the same suit — and the Ace is low only.

The second kind of meld is a run (also called a sequence): three or more cards in a row, all of the same suit. The 4-5-6 of hearts is a run. So is 8-9-10-Jack of clubs.

In this version, the Ace is low only. That means Ace-2-3 of the same suit is a valid run, but Queen-King-Ace is not — the Ace can't sit on top of the King. Runs have no upper size limit; you can keep extending them as long as the sequence and suit hold.

- ♠ **Same suit, in sequence** — Example: 4-5-6 of hearts, or 8-9-10-J of clubs.
- ♠ **At least three cards** — A run needs a minimum of three cards to be valid.
- ♠ **Ace is low only** — A-2-3 is allowed; Q-K-A is not, because the Ace can't be high here.

TRY IT

- ♦ Lay out the 4, 5, and 6 of one suit — that's a valid run.
- ♦ Try to form A-2-3 of a suit in the app, then try Q-K-A and watch it be rejected.

KEY TAKEAWAY

A run is 3+ same-suit cards in sequence, with the Ace low only.

QUICK CHECK

Which run is NOT allowed in this version of Tong-its?

Queen, King, Ace of spades. Correct — the Ace is low only, so Queen-King-Ace is not a valid run.



08 LESSON 8 OF 28

CARD VALUES & MELDS

Reading Your Hand

Before you act, scan your hand for finished melds and 'almost' melds that need just one card.

Good Tong-its players see their hand as groups, not loose cards. When you pick up your hand, sort it and look for two things: melds you can already lay down, and near-melds — pairs that want a third, or two-card sequences that want a neighbor.

Those near-melds tell you what to hope for from the stock and the discard pile, and which cards are safe to throw away. A card that connects to nothing is your best discard candidate; a card that's one away from a meld is worth keeping.

- ♠ **Sort by suit and rank** — Organizing your hand makes runs and sets jump out at you.

- ♠ **Spot near-melds** — A pair wants a third of its rank; two in sequence want a neighbor of the same suit.
- ♠ **Loose cards are discard fuel** — A high card connected to nothing is usually the first to go.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Sort a hand and circle every pair and two-card sequence — those are your targets.*
- ♦ *In the app, use Auto-Meld to see the best grouping the engine finds in your hand.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Read your hand as melds and near-melds, not loose cards.

QUICK CHECK

What is a 'near-meld' worth keeping?

A pair, or two same-suit cards in sequence. *Right — pairs and two-card sequences are one card away from becoming melds.*



PART 03

03

Playing Your Turn

*Draw, meld, sapaw, discard: your turn, move by
move.*

Lessons 9-12

Draw or Take the Discard

You may draw from the stock, or take the top discard — but only if it immediately makes or extends a meld.

At the start of your turn you choose how to take a card. The safe default is to draw the top card of the face-down stock — nobody knows what it is, and it costs you nothing.

The other option is to take the top card of the discard pile. But there's a strict condition: you can only take it if you can use it right away, either to complete a new meld in your hand or to lay it off onto a meld already on the table. You can't grab a discard just to hold it. In the app, the Take button only lights up when the top discard is actually usable.

- ♠ **Stock is the default** — Drawing face-down from the stock is always allowed and keeps your plan hidden.
- ♠ **Discard has a condition** — You may only take the top discard if it immediately forms or extends a meld.
- ♠ **It gets laid down at once** — When you take the discard, the meld it completes goes straight onto the table.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Ask before taking a discard: 'Can I use this card this very turn?' If not, draw instead.*
- ♦ *In the app, notice the discard pile glows gold only when the top card is takeable.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Draw from the stock, or take the discard only if it melds right now.

QUICK CHECK

When are you allowed to take the top card of the discard pile?

Only when it immediately forms or extends a meld. *Correct — the discard can be taken only if you can use it for a meld that same turn.*



10 LESSON 10 OF 28

PLAYING YOUR TURN

Laying Down Melds

After you draw, put any valid sets and runs face-up on the table to clear them from your hand.

Once you've drawn, you may lay down melds. Laying a meld means placing a valid set or run face-up in front of you, which removes those cards from your hand and lowers your deadwood.

There's a quiet but huge benefit here: laying even one meld means you are no longer 'burned' (you'll learn why that matters later). Many players rush to get a first meld down early just for that protection. You can lay as many melds as you have on a single turn.

- ♠ **Melds go face-up** — Laid melds sit on the table and no longer count against you.
- ♠ **It lowers your deadwood** — Every card you meld is points removed from your leftover total.
- ♠ **One meld lifts the 'burned' penalty** — As soon as you've laid a meld, you're eligible to win the showdown.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Lay your strongest meld as early as you can — protection plus points.*
- ♦ *In the app, select a valid group and tap Lay Meld, or use Auto-Meld for all at once.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Lay your valid melds face-up to cut deadwood and avoid being burned.

QUICK CHECK

What is one big benefit of laying down at least one meld?

You're no longer 'burned' and can win the showdown. Right — laying a meld removes the burned penalty and lowers your deadwood.



II LESSON 11 OF 28

PLAYING YOUR TURN

Sapaw: Laying Off

Sapaw means adding a single card onto a meld already on the table — yours or an opponent's.

Sapaw is one of the most satisfying moves in Tong-its. If there's a meld already on the table and you hold a card that fits it, you can lay that card off onto the meld. You can sapaw onto your own melds or onto your opponents' melds — it doesn't matter whose they are.

For a set, you add the missing fourth suit of that rank. For a run, you add the next card up or down in the same suit. Every card you sapaw is one less card in your hand and one less point of deadwood, for free.

- ♠ **Add one card to an existing meld** — You're extending a group that's already on the table.
- ♠ **Any meld is fair game** — You may lay off onto your own melds or your opponents'.
- ♠ **Free deadwood reduction** — Each sapaw sheds a card without you needing a whole new meld.

TRY IT

- ♦ Find a run on the table and the next card in that suit in your hand — that's a sapaw.
- ♦ In the app, tap Sapaw, pick one card, then tap any meld it fits.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Sapaw lays a single card onto any table meld to shed deadwood.

QUICK CHECK

Onto which melds can you sapaw a card?

Any meld on the table, yours or an opponent's. *Correct — sapaw works on any meld already on the table, no matter who laid it.*



12 LESSON 12 OF 28

PLAYING YOUR TURN

The Discard

Every turn ends by throwing exactly one card onto the discard pile — choose it carefully.

Unless you've just won, you finish your turn by discarding one card. This is a real decision, not an afterthought. You generally want to throw your highest card that isn't part of a meld or a promising near-meld, because high deadwood is what loses hands.

But also watch what you feed your opponents. The top discard is available to the next player if it completes a meld for them. Throwing a card you suspect

they need can hand them a free move, so sometimes a slightly higher 'safe' card is the smarter discard.

- ♠ **Discard one card to end your turn** — Exactly one card goes onto the pile every turn.
- ♠ **Dump high, useless cards** — Throw the highest card that isn't helping you toward a meld.
- ♠ **Don't feed the table** — Avoid discarding a card you think the next player can immediately use.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Before discarding, ask: 'Is this my most useless card, and is it safe?'*
- ♦ *In the app, select one card and tap Discard to end your turn.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

End your turn by discarding your highest safe, useless card.

QUICK CHECK

Which card is usually the best to discard?

Your highest card that isn't part of a meld or near-meld. *Right — shed high, unconnected cards, while avoiding ones that help opponents.*



PART 04

04

Winning the Hand

Tongits, the call, the stock-out, and the burned-player rule.

Lessons 13-16

Tongits: The Instant Win

Empty your hand completely — through melds and sapaw — and you win the hand instantly.

The most decisive way to win is a Tongits: getting rid of every single card in your hand. The moment your hand hits zero cards, the hand is over and you win immediately, no comparing of points needed.

You usually reach Tongits by laying melds and sapaw-ing your last stray cards onto the table. Emptying your hand on your final discard counts too. It's the cleanest, most celebrated win in the game — the equivalent of going out in one perfect motion.

- ♠ **Zero cards = instant win** — The hand ends the instant your hand is empty.
- ♠ **Get there by melding and sapaw** — Lay groups and lay off strays until nothing is left.
- ♠ **No point comparison needed** — A Tongits beats everyone outright, regardless of their deadwood.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Plan a path to zero: which melds plus which sapaws would clear your whole hand?*
- ♦ *In the app, try to set up a hand where one more sapaw empties your hand.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Tongits means emptying your hand for an instant win.

QUICK CHECK

What is a 'Tongits'?

Emptying your hand completely for an instant win. *Correct — clearing every card from your hand wins the hand instantly.*



 LESSON 14 OF 28

WINNING THE HAND

Call / Draw (Tumba)

If you've melded, you may 'call' instead of discarding; the lowest deadwood wins the showdown.

Most hands don't end in a Tongits. Instead, a player who has laid at least one meld can 'call' (often said as draw, or tumba) on their turn, instead of discarding. Calling triggers a showdown where everyone compares their leftover deadwood.

The lowest deadwood wins. If the caller is tied for lowest, the caller wins. But if another player has strictly fewer points than the caller, that player wins instead — the caller has been beaten, sometimes called being sapawan. So you only call when you're confident your hand is the lowest.

- ♠ **You must have melded to call** — A player who never laid a meld cannot call.
- ♠ **Lowest deadwood wins** — Calling compares everyone's leftover points; fewest wins.
- ♠ **Ties go to the caller** — But a strictly lower opponent beats the caller — so call only when confident.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Before calling, estimate: is my deadwood really lower than both opponents'?*
- ♦ *In the app, the Call Draw button only activates once you've laid a meld.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Call to compare points; lowest deadwood wins, ties go to the caller.

QUICK CHECK

What happens if you call but an opponent has strictly fewer points?

That opponent wins instead — you've been beaten. Right — a strictly lower opponent beats the caller; ties go to the caller.



15 LESSON 15 OF 28

WINNING THE HAND

When the Stock Runs Out

If the draw pile empties before anyone wins, the player with the fewest points wins the hand.

Sometimes nobody empties their hand and nobody calls. If the stock pile runs out of cards, the hand simply ends right there.

At that point everyone reveals and compares deadwood, exactly like a call. The player holding the fewest points wins. This is why even when you can't see a path to Tongits, you should keep trimming your hand all game — you might win quietly on points when the deck dries up.

- ♠ **Empty stock ends the hand** — When there are no more cards to draw, play stops.
- ♠ **Lowest deadwood wins** — It's settled by points, just like a call.

- ♠ **Always keep trimming** — Low deadwood can win you the hand even with no dramatic finish.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Keep your running deadwood low so a stock-out works in your favor.*
- ♦ *In the app, watch the stock counter; plan for the hand possibly ending at zero.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

If the stock empties, the lowest deadwood wins the hand.

QUICK CHECK

If the stock pile runs out before anyone wins, who wins the hand?

The player with the fewest deadwood points. *Correct — a stock-out is settled by lowest deadwood, like a call.*



16 LESSON 16 OF 28

WINNING THE HAND

Burned: No Meld, No Win

A player who never lays a single meld is 'burned' and cannot win the showdown.

There's a penalty that keeps everyone honest: if you reach the end of a hand without having laid a single meld, you are burned. A burned player cannot win the showdown, no matter how low their deadwood is.

This is the real reason to get a meld down early. Even one small meld lifts the burned penalty and keeps you in the running. Sitting on a tidy hand with zero melds feels safe, but it can leave you unable to win at all.

- ♠ **No meld means burned** — Failing to lay any meld by the end disqualifies you from winning.
- ♠ **Low points won't save a burned player** — Burned players can't win the showdown even with the fewest points.
- ♠ **Lay one meld early** — A single meld removes the penalty and keeps you eligible.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Make a habit of laying your first meld as soon as you have one.*
- ♦ *In the app, watch the scoreboard tag change from 'no meld' to 'melded'.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Never melding leaves you burned and unable to win.

QUICK CHECK

Why can't a 'burned' player win the showdown?

Because they never laid a single meld. *Right — a player with no melds is burned and can't win, regardless of points.*



PART 05

05 Smart Play

*The habits that quietly win hands — low deadwood
and sharp reads.*

Lessons 17–20

Keep Your Deadwood Low

The single best habit in Tong-its is shedding high cards early so your leftover points stay tiny.

If you remember one strategy, make it this: keep your deadwood low at all times. Because so many hands are decided by points — calls and stock-outs both — the player who steadily trims high cards is always near the front.

Meld when you can, sapaw whenever a card fits, and discard your biggest unconnected cards first. A hand full of low cards and melds is both safer and more flexible than a hand clinging to face cards hoping for a perfect set.

- ♠ **High cards are liabilities** — A held King or Queen is 10 points waiting to lose you the hand.
- ♠ **Trim every turn** — Meld, sapaw, and discard to keep your leftover total shrinking.
- ♠ **Low hands stay flexible** — Small cards give you more safe discards and more ways to win on points.

TRY IT

- ◆ *Set a personal rule: don't hold a face card past a turn or two unless it's near a meld.*
- ◆ *In the app, watch your deadwood number and try to make it drop every single turn.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Shed high cards early and keep your deadwood as low as possible.

QUICK CHECK

Why is keeping deadwood low so important?

Many hands are decided by who holds the fewest points. *Correct — calls and stock-outs are both decided by lowest deadwood.*



18 LESSON 18 OF 28

SMART PLAY

When to Take the Discard

Take the discard when it instantly melds — but weigh whether it reveals your plan to opponents.

Taking the discard is powerful because it guarantees you a useful card, but it's also public — everyone sees what you took and what meld you laid. That tells observant opponents what you're collecting.

A good rule: take the discard when it makes a real difference, like completing a meld that sheds serious deadwood or setting up a Tongits. For a tiny gain, the hidden draw from the stock is often better because it keeps your hand a mystery.

- ♠ **It's a guaranteed useful card** — Unlike the stock, you know exactly what you're getting.
- ♣ **But it's visible** — Opponents learn what you needed and what you're building.
- ♥ **Take it for big gains** — Grab it to shed real points or set up a win; otherwise draw blind.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Ask: does this discard win me real points, or just a little? Big gain, take it.*
- ♦ *In the app, compare taking an obvious discard versus drawing blind across a few turns.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Take the discard for big melds; draw blind to stay hidden.

QUICK CHECK

What's a downside of taking the top discard?

It shows opponents what you needed and are building. *Right — the discard is public, so taking it reveals information about your hand.*



19 LESSON 19 OF 28

SMART PLAY

Reading Your Opponents

Watch what opponents draw, meld, and discard to guess what they need — then starve them of it.

Tong-its is a game of information. Every time an opponent takes a discard, lays a meld, or throws a card, they're telling you something. A player who grabs a 7 from the discard probably wants more sevens or a run around it. A player who suddenly stops discarding hearts may be building a heart run.

Use this. Avoid discarding cards that obviously help the player to your left, and feel safer throwing ranks and suits they've shown no interest in. Late in a

hand, denying an opponent one card can be worth more than improving your own hand.

- ♠ **Every action is a clue** — Draws, melds, and discards all reveal what an opponent is after.
- ♠ **Starve the leader** — Don't feed discards to the player who looks closest to winning.
- ♠ **Safe cards are ranks they ignore** — Throw into suits and ranks nobody has shown interest in.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Pick one opponent and try to name the meld they're chasing from their discards.*
- ♦ *In the app, read the table log to track what each opponent took and laid.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Read opponents' moves and avoid handing them the card they need.

QUICK CHECK

How can watching an opponent's discards help you?

It hints at what they need, so you can avoid feeding them. *Correct — their actions reveal their plan, so you can deny them key cards.*



When to Call vs Keep Going

Call when you're confident you hold the lowest deadwood; keep going if you can still safely trim more.

Deciding when to call is the art of Tong-its. Call too early and a quieter opponent may beat your points. Wait too long and someone may hit a Tongits or the stock may run out in another player's favor.

A reliable instinct: call when your deadwood is low (often single digits), you've melded, and nothing on the table suggests an opponent is lower. If you can shed more safely without giving an opponent a winning card, keep going. If you're stuck and your hand can't improve, calling locks in your advantage.

- ♠ **Call when you're likely lowest** — Confidence that no opponent has fewer points is the green light.
- ♠ **Keep going if you can still trim** — More safe sheds means a stronger position before you commit.
- ♠ **A stuck hand should call** — If you can't improve, calling locks in whatever lead you have.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Use a rough threshold: melded, deadwood in single digits, no scary opponents — then call.*
- ♦ *In the app, practice calling at different points and see how often it wins.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Call when you're confident you're lowest; otherwise keep trimming.

QUICK CHECK

When is the right time to call?

When you've melded and are confident you hold the lowest deadwood. Right — call when you've melded and believe no opponent has fewer points.



PART 06

06

Scoring & Next Steps

Matches, house rules, and a plan to get good fast.

Lessons 21-24

Scoring & Matches

In the Niche Tong-its Tour app, the first player to win three hands wins the whole match.

A single hand of Tong-its is quick, so the game is usually played as a series. In the Niche Tong-its Tour app, a match is simple: the first player to win three hands takes the tour. The scoreboard tracks each player's hand wins as you go.

In casual and money games, scoring varies a lot — players may track points based on opponents' leftover deadwood, with bonuses for a Tongits or for catching a burned player. The app keeps it friendly with a clean first-to-three format so you can focus on learning the play.

- ♠ **Hands are short, matches are a series** — You play several hands and track who wins each.
- ♠ **App rule: first to three hand wins** — The Niche Tong-its Tour match ends when a player reaches three wins.
- ♠ **Real-money scoring varies** — Stakes games often score by opponents' deadwood with Tongits bonuses.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Play a full match in the app and watch the scoreboard climb to three.*
- ♦ *Decide with friends what a 'match' means for you before you start.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

A match in the app is first to three hand wins.

QUICK CHECK

In the Niche Tong-its Tour app, how do you win the match?

Be the first player to win three hands. *Correct — the app's match goes to the first player with three hand wins.*



22 LESSON 22 OF 28

SCORING & NEXT STEPS

House Rules & Variations

Tong-its has many regional variations — agree on the rules with your table before you deal.

Like most folk card games, Tong-its is played a little differently depending on who taught you. The biggest difference is how ties are settled on a call: this book and the app give a tied call to the caller, but many traditional tables instead give the tie to the challenger, and a three-way tie to the last player to challenge. Tables also vary on whether the Ace can play high, and many rule that you cannot call at all if an opponent has already sapaw'd onto your meld that round.

Other common variations add bonus payouts for special hands like a concealed four-of-a-kind, or use a 'Joker mode' that shuffles in the two jokers. The rules in this book match the Niche Tong-its Tour app: Ace low only, sapaw onto any meld, call only after melding, and a strictly lower opponent beats the caller. When you play elsewhere, just agree on the house rules first — that's normal and expected.

- ♠ **Ties can go either way** — This app gives a tied call to the caller; many tables give the tie to the challenger, and a three-way tie to the last challenger.
- ♠ **A sapaw'd meld may block your call** — In many house rules you cannot call a draw if an opponent has already laid off onto your meld that same round.

- ♠ **Agree before you deal** — Ace-high, Joker mode, bonuses, and call rules all vary, so settle them with your group first.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Ask whoever you play with which variations they use before the first deal.*
- ♦ *Re-read the app's in-game rules panel and compare it to how your friends play.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Tong-its varies by region — agree on house rules before dealing.

QUICK CHECK

What's the smart thing to do before playing with a new group?

Agree on the house rules and variations up front. *Right — variations are common, so settle the house rules before you deal.*



25 LESSON 23 OF 28

SCORING & NEXT STEPS

Your Practice Plan

Learn fastest by playing: use the app to drill turns, melds, sapaw, and calling against the AI.

Reading gets you started, but Tong-its lives in your hands. The quickest way to get good is to play short hands against the app's two AI opponents — Mahjong Lola and Tito Boy — and let the Tutor point out smart plays as you go.

Focus on one skill at a time. Spend a few hands just practicing clean melds, then a few on timing your sapaw, then a few on deciding when to call. Small, focused reps beat one long marathon session.

- ♠ **Play, don't just read** — Hands against the AI build the instincts a book can't.
- ♠ **Drill one skill at a time** — Melds one session, sapaw the next, calling after that.
- ♠ **Let the Tutor coach you** — The in-app Tutor calls out the smart move in real time.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Play five quick hands focusing only on keeping your deadwood low.*
- ♦ *Turn on the Tutor's voice in the app and follow its tips for a full match.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Practice short, focused hands in the app to build real skill.

QUICK CHECK

What's the fastest way to improve at Tong-its?

Play focused hands against the app and learn from each one. *Correct — focused practice hands build the instincts reading alone can't.*



Quick Reference Recap

The whole game in a nutshell: deal, draw, meld, sapaw, discard — keep deadwood low and go out.

Here's everything in one breath. Three players, one deck; dealer 13, others 12, 15 in the stock. On your turn: draw the stock or take a usable discard, lay melds, sapaw stray cards, then discard one.

Melds are sets (3-4 same rank, different suits) or runs (3+ same suit in sequence, Ace low). Win by Tongits (empty hand), by calling with the lowest deadwood, or by holding the fewest points when the stock runs out. Lay a meld early so you're never burned, and keep your deadwood low. That's Tong-its.

- ♠ **The loop** — Draw, meld, sapaw, discard — every single turn.
- ♠ **The melds** — Sets (same rank, different suits) and runs (same suit in sequence, Ace low).
- ♠ **The wins** — Tongits, lowest-deadwood call, or lowest deadwood when the stock empties.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Recite the loop from memory: draw, meld, sapaw, discard.*
- ♦ *Play one last full match in the app and notice how every rule here shows up.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Deal, draw, meld, sapaw, discard — keep deadwood low and go out.

QUICK CHECK

Which sentence best sums up how to win Tong-its?

Empty your hand, or hold the fewest points when the hand ends. Right — Tongits or lowest deadwood wins; everything else serves that goal.



PART 07

07

Roots & Tradition

*Where Tong-its came from, the words you'll hear, and
its special hands.*

Lessons 25-28

The Story of Tong-its

Tong-its rose to popularity in 1990s Philippines and is widely believed to have grown out of the American game Tonk.

Tong-its — also spelled Tongits, and sometimes called Thong — is a three-player rummy game that became a fixture of Filipino card tables. Its exact origin is not documented, but the most common account traces it to the American military presence around the 1940s, with the game likely adapted from Tonk, a United States card game from the 1930s.

It took on a life of its own in the Philippines, growing popular through the 1990s on Luzon, especially among the Ilocano, alongside another Filipino favorite, Pusoy Dos. As it spread to other regions it picked up local names; in Pangasinan, for example, it has been called Tung-it.

You can feel that mixed heritage at the table: the melding and going-out feel like Rummy and Tonk, while the fast, social, set-collecting rhythm has a Mahjong-like spirit.

- ♠ **Roots in Tonk** — It is widely believed to descend from the 1930s American game Tonk, brought over around the 1940s.
- ♠ **A 1990s Filipino classic** — It rose to popularity on Luzon in the 1990s, especially among the Ilocano, alongside Pusoy Dos.
- ♠ **Many names, one game** — As it spread it gained local names — for example Tung-it in Pangasinan.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Next time you play, notice the Rummy-and-Tonk DNA in the melding and going-out.*
- ♦ *Ask an older relative or friend how they first learned Tong-its — the stories vary by region.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Tong-its is a Filipino classic, likely born from the American game Tonk and popularized in the 1990s.

QUICK CHECK

Tong-its is most commonly believed to have grown out of which game?

Tonk, an American card game. *Right — it is widely thought to be adapted from the 1950s United States game Tonk.*



26 LESSON 26 OF 28

ROOTS & TRADITION

The Words You'll Hear

Filipino tables use their own words: bahay for a meld, sapaw for laying off, and sunog for a burned player.

Sit at a Filipino Tong-its table and you will hear its own vocabulary. A meld — your set or run — is often called a bahay, meaning 'house' (also buo or balay in other languages). Laying a card off onto a meld already down is sapaw, the same word you met earlier in this book.

A player who never manages to lay a meld is sunog, Tagalog for 'burned' (paksiw in Visayan); they cannot win. Calling to end the hand and compare points is the draw, sometimes said as tumba.

A few special hands have names too: a straight flush of four or more cards is an escalera, and a hidden four-of-a-kind is a secret or special. Knowing these words makes the table much easier to follow.

♠ **Bahay = a meld** — Your set or run; also called buo or balay depending on the language.

♠ **Sapaw = laying off** — Adding a card onto a meld already on the table.

- ♠ **Sunog / paksiw = burned** — A player who laid no meld and therefore cannot win.

TRY IT

- ◆ Match each term to its meaning: *bahay*, *sapaw*, *sunog*, *escalera*.
- ◆ Try saying one Filipino term out loud the next time you play to get comfortable with it.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Bahay is a meld, sapaw is laying off, sunog is burned, escalera is a long straight flush.

QUICK CHECK

What does the Tong-its term 'bahay' refer to?

A meld (a set or run). Correct — *bahay* (house) is the Filipino term for a meld.



Special Melds & Lucky Wins

Traditional Tong-its rewards a concealed four-of-a-kind (secret), an escalera, and even a perfect dealt hand.

Traditional Tong-its has a few prized hands that many casual and stakes tables reward. A four-of-a-kind kept hidden in your hand rather than laid down is a secret (or special). It is so strong that, in many rules, a player holding one may challenge a called draw even without an exposed meld. Building a four-of-a-kind by first laying three and then adding the fourth yourself is a sagasa.

A straight flush of four or more cards is an escalera — a long, satisfying run. And the luckiest result of all: if the cards you are dealt can be arranged into melds using your entire hand right away, you win the round instantly, sometimes called a Two Hits or jackpot win.

The Niche Tong-its Tour app keeps things streamlined and does not score these special hands, but they are a big part of the traditional game's flavor.

- ♠ **Secret / special** — A concealed four-of-a-kind; in many rules it lets you challenge a draw even without an exposed meld.
- ♠ **Sagasa and escalera** — Sagasa is completing a four-of-a-kind yourself; an escalera is a straight flush of four or more cards.
- ♠ **Instant win on the deal** — A hand that melds completely right away can win the round on the spot.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Imagine being dealt four Kings, hidden — that is a secret. How might you use it?*
- ♦ *Spot an escalera in a sample hand: four or more in a row of a single suit.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Secrets, sagasa, escaleras, and a perfect dealt hand are the traditional game's special rewards.

QUICK CHECK

What is a concealed four-of-a-kind called in traditional Tong-its?

A secret (or special). *Right — a hidden four-of-a-kind is a secret or special, a very strong hand.*



Betting, Pots & Tong-its Online

Money games use a pot won by consecutive wins, and Tong-its now thrives online and even in esports.

In many homes and barkada games, Tong-its is played for small stakes. Players ante into a pot, and the winner takes it — often by winning two games in a row, with some tables requiring three or paying a bonus on the second win. A 'Joker mode' variant adds the two jokers and opens up extra scoring options.

In the 2010s the game went digital, partly driven by Overseas Filipino Workers wanting a piece of home; early titles such as Tongits Wars became a social bridge for communities abroad. In the 2020s it grew into an esports, with platforms like Tongits Go and Tongits Plus running tournaments and large prize pools, and browser versions making it easy to pick up anywhere.

Whether you play for fun, for centavos, or just against the app, the heart of the game is the same. If you ever play for money, keep it light and within your means — the skills in this book matter far more than the stakes.

- ♠ **The pot and consecutive wins** — Players ante into a pot; the winner often must take two games in a row to collect.
- ♠ **From street game to app** — It moved online in the 2010s and grew into tournaments and esports in the 2020s.
- ♠ **Play responsibly** — Stakes are optional and culture-specific — keep any betting light and within your means.

TRY IT

- ♦ *Decide your group's stakes — even just bragging rights — before you start a session.*
- ♦ *Play a full match in Niche Tong-its Tour: no money, all skill.*

KEY TAKEAWAY

Tong-its is played for pots and now thrives online; play for skill and keep any stakes light.

QUICK CHECK

In a typical money game, how does a player usually collect the pot?

By winning games consecutively, often two in a row. *Right — pots commonly go to the player who wins two games in a row.*





Empty your hand. Master the table.

*Now go run it in the Niche Tong-its Tour — repetition
turns knowledge into reflex.*

Tong-its is a game of skill and good company. If you ever play
for stakes, keep it light, set your limit before you sit, and play
within your means.

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