



Improve Your Bridge

Bidding

As you develop a bridge partnership, don't start with a very complicated system. It will be too much. Rather, wait until you have the basics under control before adding new conventions.

Understand what's **forcing** and what's not. Generally, a **new** suit by an unpassed hand is forcing, but once an "old" suit (one that has been heard before in the auction) is mentioned, it's no longer forcing.

1♣ p 1♥ p 1♠ (this bidding is forcing – 3 new suits - still looking for a fit), but

1♣ p 1♥ p 2♥ (this bidding is not forcing, as an "old" suit has been mentioned).

Still, if either player has more than a minimum, they should continue. Most notrump bids define the points within a narrow range.

1♣ p 1♥ p 2NT (18 – 20, balanced, no heart fit).

Deciding whether to bid to **game** is the bread and butter of bidding. Having information about how hands fit rather than simply assessing high card points will produce more successful contracts. This means noticing **where** values are rather than just **what** they are. Shortages opposite partner's small cards, eg a singleton opposite Axxx, are attractive in a suit contract, because you can trump losers that way.

Judgement will develop as you recognise positive and negative features of hands.

Having honour cards in your long suits is a plus, and 10's and 9's are good "fillers". Aces represent first round controls of suits. Negative features include 4333 shapes, aceless hands, too many Q's and J's, not enough 10's and 9's, poor long suits, honours squashed in short suits.

Don't bid thin slams, as the field is not usually in them. Most people play safely in game. Going minus in a slam that they field is not bidding will give you a bad result. You don't need it. But, be prepared to bid **more** with a fit, and **less** without a fit, especially in competitive situations. Holding almost no cards in the opponents' suits is the green light to bidding more in your suit.

Play

The **plan** is everything, and needs to be worked out on **every** hand, right after the lead is made. In no trumps, count winners, in suits, count both winners and losers.

Check how many tricks you need to develop, and then decide which techniques you will use. Sometimes working out which technique to use first is the problem, but having a basic knowledge of the **odds** will save you here. An even number of cards against you will divide oddly more than evenly, and vice versa, eg

- You and partner hold 7 cards in a suit, (missing 6 cards). Expect them to divide 4-2 more than 3-3.
- You and partner hold 8 cards (missing 5 cards). Expect them to divide 3-2 much more often than 4-1.

As declarer, we are sometimes taught to draw trumps too early. Roughly 40% of the time, you need to do something else with the trump suit (usually dummy's) **before** you draw them. The trump suit is a good way to cross to and fro between hands.

Don't panic as declarer - you need to remember the lead and try to build up a picture of the opponents' hands. Also practise keeping **count** in important suits. This means mentally recording the distribution of some suits.



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Defence

Making the **opening lead** requires that you decide first which **suit** to lead, and having done that, which **card** of the suit. In general, don't lead suits that the other side has bid. Follow recommended leads ie top of a sequence of 3 touching, or near touching in no trumps, or top of two touching in a suit contract, low card from an honour, top of a doubleton etc.

The defenders use the same techniques for developing tricks as declarer does, ie **promotion. length, finesse, cross-trumping, and discarding losers on winners**. The difference is they can't see each other's cards, so it's harder to work out what is going on.

The crucial cards are the first one, and the first discard, so work out your favourite signalling method (high to encourage, or low to encourage), and stick to it. Your role is to make the cards you play mean something to partner. **Don't give up** until the last card is played.

Winning at Pairs (Matchpoints)

You receive a "top" (score) if your result is better than that of any other pairs sitting in the same direction. It's not the actual score that counts, but the number of pairs you beat. The size of the top depends on the number of tables in the field, eg with nine tables, you and your partner could have beaten eight other pairs, so a "top" will be 8, and a corresponding "bottom" 0. You receive one point for each pair you beat and half for pairs with whom you tie. So, in pairs, you need to go for any extra trick that comes your way.

If your opponent makes more tricks than anyone else, they will receive a **top** and you, a corresponding **bottom**. At the end of the session, each pairs' scores are totalled, and expressed as a **percentage** of the total matchpoints available. It would be impossible to score 100%, because on some hands every pair plays in game and scores the same result (so no-one has a "top" or "bottom"). Any percentage above 55% is considered good, with scores in the 60's excellent, and 70's rare!

Winning at Teams (IMP's)

This is a different story altogether to pairs. Here you are usually trying to beat just one team at a time, rather than a large number of other bridge players. Make your contracts safely, bid thin vulnerable games. Playing a steady game and making fewer mistakes than the opponents should see you winning at teams.

The Rules (Bridge Etiquette)

There is a formal **code of conduct** in a serious game or tournament, and this may at first surprise newer players. A common problem is to do with the tone and speed of your bidding. It's supposed to be consistent, so that you give partner information based only on the bids you make, **not** the way you make them.

Bidding in tempo all the time is hard, since some hands are more difficult than others, but the longer you take to decide, the clearer it becomes to everyone, especially partner, that you must have something of interest in your hand. Suppose you think, and then pass. Unfortunately your hesitation (innocent or otherwise) has conveyed information to partner. Your opponents have been put at a disadvantage. If the director is called, your partner won't be allowed to bid. They may well have been planning to bid anyhow, but now they probably won't be able to.



In general: Bridge should be played competitively, with a sense of fair play and friendly rivalry, and with an awareness of the rules. These simple guidelines should be kept in mind (from Paul Marston at Grand Slam):

- Count your cards before you look at them
- Agree on the number of tricks before packing up your cards at the end of a hand
- Don't make any comments about the bidding or play until the end of the hand, and generally the less said at the bridge table the better
- Don't take too much time. There is a certain amount per hand, and it's not fair to constantly be slow.
- Don't discuss a hand played earlier. Your opponents may not have played the hand, and you may be giving them an insight into what they should do.
- It's best not to comment on your successes, which are also the opponents' failures. Saying things like: "Oh that's a top partner" is very bad manners.
- Don't convey information to your partner by gestures, hesitations or mannerisms. It's unethical to do this
- You may draw inferences from the opponents' hesitations (at your own risk), but it is not accepted to draw inference from your partner's hesitation or manner
- Don't recriminate over a bad result. Don't harass partner by asking questions that start with "Why?"
- North or South should do the scoring, and East and West must check their score.
- Call the director whenever something goes wrong. It's proper procedure, and they will advise you of relevant rulings. The director is there to keep things equitable.
- You should warn the opponents, by saying "alert" when your partner has made a bid that isn't what it seems in your system. An opponent may, in his turn, ask the meaning of the alerted call. You are bound to give a full explanation

Your Partner

To be successful at the bridge table, you have to work with your partner. There's no way to reach the best contracts by yourself, or to defend a hand without help from partner. Bridge is a combination of luck, skill, and your relationship with your partner. No matter how much you have of the first two, you won't get far without the third ingredient. Audrey Grant suggests that you "Look at the person sitting opposite you, and think of something you love about the way they play".

You

Don't criticise yourself at the table, because even a little self-condemnation can get out of hand. First we think that we simply made an unlucky lead, next we consider that it helped declarer make the contract. Then we reflect that we never seem to make a good lead. In fact, we don't really understand the game at all...perhaps we just don't have the ability to play a good hand of bridge....

Timothy Gallwey, who wrote "The Inner Game of Tennis", puts it like this:

"First the mind judges the event, then groups events, then identifies with the combined event, and finally, judges itself. As a result, what happens is that these self-judgements become self-fulfilling prophecies" We should take a non-judgemental approach at the bridge table, both of our partner and ourselves!