

Begin contract bridge with Ross

www.rossfcollins.com/bridge

Class Four

Bridge customs.

What if you change your mind?

Declarer plays a king. You are texting or otherwise woolgathering, and instead of playing low, you accidentally play your queen! Can you take that card back? The rule is this: if you're still touching the card, we consider that you haven't definitely played it. But once you let go, too late. You'll have to suffer the snotty snickers of your opponents and the baleful wails of your partner. Suitable punishment for not paying attention. But the rule also applies to declarer.

Who explains it?

You can't explain your bid to your partner, of course. Can you explain it to your opponents? Bridge etiquette requires partnerships to explain all their special or *conventional* bids (actually, this means *not* conventional, but artificial, as we'll consider below) to everyone before the play. Partnerships do not have the right to enjoy secret systems they refuse to explain. But *after* a bid has been made, an opponent who doesn't understand what it means may ask the *partner* of the bidder to explain it (but can't ask the person who made the bid to explain it). A partner is expected to know what the other partner's bid means. You'd think that's a given. But actually, partners frequently forget about the previous agreements they made at the bar after a disastrous defeat. Or they are clueless when a partner throws out an off-the-wall, bat-\$!@# crazy bid that, really, nobody can explain. In bridge columns, a weird bid is often followed by the designation (!).

Bidding: when you have better than minimum hands.

We've covered one-bids based on minimum opening hands (13-14 HCP) and minimum responding hands (6-9 HCP). You may have been less than inspired with these hands. Who wants average hands

time after time? You want to reach game! Slam! Bigger slam! Okay. Let's consider larger suit hands, and one no-trump bids.

Opening with more points.

Recall that the objective of a partnership is to find a fit and determine number of points. From that we can consider whether we can bid a little for a *part score* (fewer than 100 pts below the line), bid more for a game (100 or more below the line), or even bid for a *slam* (planning to take all the tricks, or all but one, and so get 500-1,500 bonus points. In French a slam is called *chelem*. Always cracks me up.).

Note you need minimum 13-14 pts to open. But bidding one of something doesn't promise your partner that you're limited to 14. You may have more! A lot more! You can open one with up to 21 pts (beyond that you open two). You usually show your extra points by opening at one, and then instead of passing, rebidding at a higher level. Here are the guidelines following an opening of one in a major suit (five or more cards), with a response from partner of two in that same suit.

- 15-16 HCP: usually pass, unless you can give yourself extra points for length or shortage (see Class Five).

- 17-18 HCP: Rebid your opening suit. Example:

1♠ - 2♠ - 3♠

This is called an *invitational* bid, as it invites responder to bid game (four spades) if he or she has better than bare minimum count.

Consider: you need 26 for game. You have 17. If your partner has six, that's 23. Not gonna go. But if your partner has nine, that's 26. You got game! And your partner needs to bid it, 4♠.

- 19-20 HCP: Rebid your opening suit at the four level:

1♠ - 2♠ - 4♠.

Even if responder has only six points, you have enough (or purd' near) for game. Don't be chicken. Bid it!

So what if you have a good hand, but don't have a five-card major suit? Open with your longer minor suit. Bid it twice if you have length (at least five). But bridge players try to avoid playing in the minor suits, quite cruel, actually, for those poor diamonds and clubs. In any case, we often opt instead for no-trump.

- With 16-18 pts and a balanced hand (some partnerships play 15-17 pts), bid one no-trump.

“No-trump” means, well, what do you think? You declare no trump suit, so can take tricks in only two ways: high cards and length. While that does tend to be limiting, the bridge scoring system sympathizes. The first trick over book counts 40; subsequent tricks count 30. This means you only need to take nine tricks total for a game, instead of 10 for a major contract, and 11 for a minor.

A partnership should have 25-26 pts for a game in no-trump, so players like to open one no-trump if they can. But they need points in the agreed-upon range, and a balanced hand. *Balanced* means no five-card major suit. If you have a five-card major, you must bid it to avoid confusing your partner. As well, a balanced hand can have no void or singleton, and no more than one doubleton. And it must have supported high cards in at least three of the suits (all four is best).

Why those guidelines? Well, consider the biggest danger of playing in no-trump: losing control of a suit. Let's say you have lots of great cards in spades, hearts and diamonds, but your club suit is fairly pathetic. You have a singleton club. Singletons are great in a trump contract! Ruffing power! Not so much in no-trump. If your partner also turns up with no high card in clubs, called a *stopper*, you're likely to see a gleeful, cackling pair of opponents lead club after club, wrecking your bee-yutiful hand as you're forced to sluff all your good cards. This is a painful bridge experience you want to avoid. (But you won't always be able to, I assure you). Keep control of the hand with a stopper (preferably several) in every suit.

Alternatively, keep control of the hand by having a long suit, even without high cards. That way your opponents can collect a trick or two at your expense, but soon will be out of that suit, leaving the rest for you to scoop up, bwah-hah.

Responding to a suit opening with better than minimum.

A partner opens one of a major suit, promising at least five in the bid suit, and at least 13—and up to 21—points. But now, as a responder, you have more than that pathetic six to nine points! You get a little excited. This could be something big. How do you show that to opener? If you have support (at least three cards) in partner's suit:

- With 11-12 pts invite game by bidding three:

1♥ - 3♥.

This is called a *limit raise*, as it shows more than minimum points, but no powerhouse. If opener has 13-14 he may pass, depending on the shape of his hand (shortages, long suits, sequences of high cards make a hand look healthier). But with better than minimum, responder has invited him to bid a game.

- With 13-16 pts and a fit, jump directly to game:

1♥ - 4♥.

Why be coy, and chance the possibility that opener will pass? Bridge maxim: opening count facing opening count should be in game somewhere.

What if you don't have a fit? Yeah, happens more than you might think.

- Bid your own longest suit at the one level. Recall this says you have a minimum six points, but doesn't say anything about a maximum. With two five-card suits, respond with the highest-ranking first. With two four-card suits, respond with the lowest-ranking first. Note that

you are no longer constrained to bidding at the one level. If opener bids one spade, and you have long hearts (at least four), bid two hearts. Opener knows immediately that you have more than nine points.

- Raise partner's minor opening suit if you have five or more. If you have the maximum of 16 pts, you're looking at possible game in a minor (need 28-29 pts total). With that maximum, jump to two NT, and then support the minor suit during the second rebid.
- Failing the above, show your extra points (13-16) by jumping to two NT:

1♥ - 2NT.

This is called a *jump* because it's a higher bid than necessary. A jump is likely to wake up a dozing table still playing late at night after a big meal and heavy dessert. Keep in mind, however, that while it's probably going to produce game somewhere, it may not be in slam territory (we'll cover that in Class Six).

Responding to a one no-trump opening bid.

An opening bid of one no-trump is pretty specific. You know clearly what the opener does and does not have. Responses to one no-trump also are pretty specific.

With a **balanced** hand (as defined above):

Fewer than seven pts (note seven, not six, when responding to no-trump): pass.

- 8-9 pts: bid two no-trump.
- 10 or more pts: bid three no-trump.

With an **unbalanced** hand (you have a long suit):

- 0-7 pts: bid two of your long (five or more) suit. Two of a suit after a one no-trump opening gives opener this message: “I have crappy points, but a long suit, so you’ll probably do better in a trump contract than no-trump. Don’t bid again!” (This is casually, if not politely, known as the “drop-dead bid.”)

- 10 or more pts. No you’re talkin’! If you have six or more in a major suit, bid game (four spades or hearts) in that suit. If you have a long minor suit bid three no-trump. If you have a five-card major, bid it at three. You are asking opener to bid either game in your major if he has three or four in that suit, or if not, to bid three no-trump. Either way you want to be in game.

The Stayman convention.

Sam Stayman invented this maneuver in, um, probably the 1930s. Well, Wikipedia says his bridge partner actually invented it, but Sam published an article about it in a 1945 *Bridge World* magazine, and so apparently undeservedly became the most famous name in bridge.

A *convention* is an artificial bid that does not mean what it suggests.

- Stayman is a response uniquely to an opening bid of one (or two) no-trump. The response is two (or three) clubs:

1 NT - 2♣

It does not mean the responder has clubs. It tells opener this: “I have at least eight points and four spades or hearts. If you also have four spades or four hearts, bid it, because I think we are more likely to make a contract in a major suit than in no-trump.”

An opener who does have four cards in a major must bid that major (If four spades and four hearts, he bids hearts first). If responder is pleased to see a fit, he or she will bid an invitational three if minimum points, or four if 10 or more.

If the opener does not have a four-card major, he or she bids two diamonds:

1NT - 2♣ - 2♦

On second opportunity to respond, responder then reverts to no-trump, either at two with minimum points, or three with better points.

Opener rebids: the conundrum.

Often your partner will not support your opening major bid the first time around. Consider that if you have five of a major, eight are out. Your partner may well hold only two of those, even one. But you really, really like your major suit! In fact, it's all you have to offer, baby. Can you bid it again? In the example below, responder has changed the suit (at the two level, showing more than minimum points). This is *forcing* (requiring opener to bid again) for one round. Can opener rebid hearts? Example:

1♥ - 2♦ - 2♥

The rule is this: every rebid of a suit promises partner that you have one extra card in that suit above minimum. So **to rebid hearts** you must have **six hearts**. Otherwise, sadly you must find another rebid. This is reasonable, when you think about it. Responder may not have three cards in your major suit, but might have two. If you rebid hearts, you promise six. Six plus two equals eight. Tah-dah! A fit.

Basic strategy: the defenders.

We have been talking a lot about declarer and his or her partner. What about the poor, dispirited defenders who didn't get the contract? Well, they do their best to make declarer's life miserable. In a pleasant sort of way, of course.

The defenders always have the opportunity to play the first card, the opening lead. What to play? Guidelines:

If you have a sequence, lead the top card, even if it's not the ace. You hope to promote your sequence:

♣ K Q J 10. Lead the king. It will likely lose, but will promote the rest of your sequence.

♣ J 10 9 7. Lead the jack. A long shot, but may eventually promote your 10.

If you have a singleton in any side suit, lead it. You hope your partner (or an oblivious declarer) will lead the suit before trumps are gone, and you will score a trump trick.

If you have a doubleton in any side suit, lead the TOP card in that suit. Again you hope to develop ability to trump in that suit:

♥ J 3. Lead the jack, hoping eventually to play or sluff the three, and so having an opportunity to trump in hearts.

Question: Why don't you first lead the lower card of a doubleton? Because you are trying to communicate with partner! If partner notices you lead a higher card in a suit, and then a lower card, you have told him or her that you only have two in that suit. If your partner gets the lead, he will play that suit, and you'll be able to trump.

Trying to establish good defender communication strategies make bridge more interesting, even when you're not the ones who play the contract. You can make things as annoying as possible for declarer, a cardinal rule in any bridge game in which concealed weapons are not likely to be readily available.

What **not** to lead: Don't lead an ace unless you have a sequence behind it. Why? Because declarer may hope to establish that suit by forcing out the ace. To do that, he will probably have to sacrifice one of his high cards—unless you so conveniently help him out, allowing him to keep all his high cards for subsequent trick-taking.