



Bridge Fundamentals

The game from the beginning — tricks, the auction, and how scoring shapes both

No previous experience assumed



Four players, two partnerships

North and South play against East and West. Partners sit across the table from each other.

You win and lose together with your partner. That is not a detail of the scoring — it is the whole character of the game, and it is why so much of the skill lies in making yourself understood.



Every deal has two phases

First the auction, where the two sides compete to set the contract. Then the play, where one side tries to fulfill it.

The auction decides how many tricks you have promised to win and what the trump suit will be. The play is where you find out whether the promise was a good one.

A standard 52-card deck, no jokers. Everything that follows comes out of those two phases.



You may only talk through the game itself

Bids and cards are the only legal way to tell partner about your hand.

Not tone, not hesitation, not a glance. This is why bridge has such a developed language of bids — the whole system exists because ordinary conversation is forbidden.

Any agreement you have with partner must also be disclosed to the opponents.



Thirteen cards in each of four suits

Ace, King, Queen, Jack, Ten, then 9 down to 2. The Ace is always high in bridge.

All 52 cards are dealt out, so each player holds exactly thirteen. You look only at your own hand.

A, K, Q, J and 10 are the honors. Cards next to each other in rank — Q-J-10 — are "touching", and are effectively equal in power.



The suits have a rank order too

♣ lowest, then ♦, then ♥, then ♠ — and notrump above them all.

This order matters only during the auction, where each bid has to outrank the last. It has no effect whatever on which card wins a trick.

Spades and hearts are the MAJOR suits; diamonds and clubs the MINORS. That difference matters enormously for scoring, as you will see.



A trick is four cards, one from each player

Thirteen tricks make up the play of a deal.

One player leads — plays first, and may choose any card. The other three follow in clockwise order. Whoever wins the trick leads to the next one.



You must follow suit if you can

Holding a card in the suit led, you have to play one.

Only when you are out of that suit may you play something else — a card of another suit, which is a discard, or a trump, which is a ruff. Nearly every clever play in bridge depends on somebody being unable to follow.

This is the single most important rule of the play.



Who wins the trick

The highest trump played to it — or, if nobody trumped, the highest card of the suit that was LED.

The suit led is what everyone is competing in. A card of any other suit cannot win no matter how high it is: an ace of diamonds thrown on a spade trick is simply a wasted ace.

This is the rule beginners most often get wrong. The suit LED is what counts.

A trump beats everything outside its suit

The two of trumps beats the ace of any other suit.

That is the whole power of a trump suit — but you may only use it when you cannot follow suit. You can never simply choose to trump a suit you still hold cards in.

A contract played in notrump has no trump suit at all: every trick goes to the highest card of the suit led.



The auction decides three things

Which side plays the hand · how many tricks they must win · what the trump suit is.

Starting with the dealer and moving clockwise, each player makes a call: a bid, a pass, a double or a redouble. The last bid left standing becomes the contract.



A bid always means six tricks more than it says

Level + 6 = the number of tricks you have promised.

The first six tricks are called the book, and they do not count. So 1♥ is a promise to win SEVEN tricks with hearts as trumps, not one. This catches out every beginner exactly once.

What each level actually promises

Bid	Tricks promised	Out of thirteen
1♥	7	just over half
3NT	9	the cheapest game
4♠	10	a major-suit game
6♦	12	a small slam
7♠	13	every trick — a grand slam

Level plus six, every time.



Each bid must outrank the one before

Either a higher level, or a higher denomination at the same level.

Over 1♥ you may bid 1♠ or 1NT, because both outrank hearts. To bid clubs or diamonds you must climb to the two level, since they sit below hearts in the order.

This is why bidding room is precious — and why a bid that skips a level costs the partnership something real.



Pass, double, redouble

Pass declines to bid for now — it does not shut you out of the auction later.

A double is available when an opponent made the most recent bid. It roughly says "I do not think you can make that", and it raises the stakes both ways. A redouble, by the doubled side, raises them again.

In practice most low-level doubles ask partner to bid rather than predicting a failure.



Three passes in a row end it

The final bid becomes the contract.

If all four players pass at their very first turn, nobody has bid at all — the deal is thrown in and a new one is played.



Declarer, dummy, and the defenders

Declarer is whoever FIRST bid the final contract's denomination for their side — not necessarily whoever bid it last.

Declarer's partner becomes the dummy, and the other two are the defenders. That "first bid it" rule is what decides which of the two partners actually plays the hand.

The opening lead comes before dummy appears

The defender on declarer's left leads. Only then does dummy's hand go face up on the table.

That order matters. The opening leader has to choose knowing only the auction, never having seen a card. It is the hardest single card of the deal, and often the one that decides it.

From then on declarer plays both hands. Dummy takes no decisions at all.



Count your high card points

Ace 4 · King 3 · Queen 2 · Jack 1 — forty in the whole deck.

An average hand therefore holds ten. The count is a rough tool, but the entire bidding language is built on it, so it needs to become automatic.



The numbers worth memorizing

About 12 to open the bidding. About 25 between the two hands for a game.

Those two numbers drive most of the decisions you will face early on: whether to speak at all, and whether to stop in a partscore or push on to game.

Then 29 for a minor-suit game • 33 for a small slam • 37 for a grand slam.



Shape counts as well as honors

Long suits win tricks that no high-card count ever notices.

Once the opponents have run out of a suit, your remaining small cards in it are winners. So length is worth extra — commonly one point for each card past the fourth.

And once a trump fit is found, SHORT suits become valuable too, because shortness is what lets you ruff.



What "balanced" means

No void and no singleton — nothing shorter than a doubleton anywhere.

Balanced hands lean towards notrump, where there are no trumps to protect a weak suit. Unbalanced hands lean towards a suit contract, where shortness becomes an asset instead of a liability.

The usual balanced patterns: 4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2 and 5-3-3-2.

The same twelve points, two different hands

Shape is not a footnote to the point count — it changes where the hand wants to play.

BALANCED

♠ KQ4
♥ A72
♦ J1063
♣ Q82

12 HCP, shape 3-3-4-3 — nothing shorter than a doubleton

Thinking notrump

UNBALANCED

♠ KQ9752
♥ 4
♦ AK1063
♣ 8

12 HCP, but eleven cards in two suits and two singletons

Thinking a suit

The second hand will take far more tricks with spades as trumps than it ever would in notrump.



A fit means eight cards between you

Eight or more of one suit, counting both partners' hands, is enough to make it trumps.

Thirteen cards exist in each suit, so eight leaves only five for the opponents — few enough that your trumps will control the hand. Finding out whether a major-suit fit exists is the main job of most auctions.

With no fit anywhere, notrump is usually the right place to play.

Only tricks beyond six score at all

The first six are the book. The tricks your contract committed to are the odd tricks.

Anything beyond the contract is an overtrick and scores a little extra. Every trick you fall short is an undertrick, and those cost you — more when vulnerable, and much more when doubled.

What a trick is worth

These few numbers explain the entire shape of bidding.

Denomination	Per odd trick	To reach 100
♣ / ♦ minors	20	5♣ or 5♦ — eleven tricks
♥ / ♠ majors	30	4♥ or 4♠ — ten tricks
Notrump	40 first, then 30	3NT — only nine tricks

A contract worth 100 or more trick points is a GAME, and games earn a large bonus.

Why everyone wants 3NT or a major

3NT needs nine tricks. 4♥ or 4♠ needs ten. A minor-suit game needs eleven.

All three pay the same game bonus — so the minor game is simply two tricks harder for the same reward. This one fact is why so much of bidding is a hunt for a major fit, with 3NT as the fallback.

A slam at the six or seven level pays a very large bonus on top, which is why partnerships work so hard to recognize 33 points.

The tension that makes the game

Bidding higher earns more and risks more.

Judging how high to go — partscore, game or slam — on the combined strength of two hands that cannot see each other is what the auction is really about. Everything else is technique in service of that judgment.



Count before you play a card

When dummy appears, stop. Count your certain winners, then count what the contract needs.

The gap between those two numbers is the problem you have to solve, and there are only a handful of ways to solve it. Playing quickly to trick one is the most expensive habit in bridge.



Promotion — making your own winners

Drive out the higher cards so your lower honors grow up.

Holding K-Q-J you have no immediate winner. Lead the king; the ace takes it — and now your queen and jack are the two highest cards left in the suit.

You gave up one trick to create two. That trade is the commonest source of extra tricks in the game.



Length — small cards that become winners

Keep playing a long suit until the opponents have none left.

With five cards in a suit opposite three, the opponents hold five between them. Play it often enough and they run out — after which your remaining small cards win tricks against nothing at all.



The finesse — a trick you only half-deserve

Win with a card while the missing higher honor sits in front of it, trapped.

Say dummy holds A-Q and the king is missing. Lead low towards dummy. If the opponent who plays before dummy holds the king, they either play it and lose it to your ace, or duck — and your queen wins.

It works whenever that particular opponent holds the king: a 50% chance where you would otherwise have none.

Ruffing — the point of a short suit

Trump your losers in the hand with FEWER trumps.

Ruffing in the long trump hand usually gains nothing, because those trumps were going to win tricks anyway. Ruffing in the short hand turns a card that had no value into a trick.



Defenders cannot see each other's hands

So they agree in advance what their cards mean.

Lead the top of touching honors — the king from K-Q-J — or a low card from a suit with an honor. Second hand low, third hand high. Return your partner's suit.

And they SIGNAL: the size of a card played when not trying to win can encourage, discourage, or show an odd or even number of cards.

Defense is the hardest part of bridge, and the part where a partnership gains most.

From the first bid to the opening lead

NORTH

♠ KQ4
♥ AJ7
♦ K1063
♣ A82

17 HCP, *balanced*

SOUTH

♠ A83
♥ Q52
♦ Q972
♣ K104

11 HCP, *flat, no four-card major*

1NT

North A balanced hand of 15–17 points, described in a single bid.

3NT

South 11 opposite 15–17 is at least 26 — enough for game, and no major fit to hunt for.

Pass

All The contract is 3NT, and North is declarer for having bid notrump first.

Lead

East East sits on declarer's left and leads. Only now does South's hand go down as dummy.

North needs nine tricks. Ten would be an overtrick; eight would be down one.



Duplicate bridge removes the luck

The same deal is played at many tables, and you are scored against everyone who held your cards.

It stops mattering whether you were dealt good cards, because everybody in your seat was dealt the same ones. All that is left is how well you used them — which is why bridge is considered a game of skill.

A club session is usually 24–27 deals, at roughly five to eight minutes each.



What to do next

Play tricks first Deal four hands face up and simply play them out. Follow suit, see who wins, get the mechanics into your fingers.

Then add a trump suit Play the same deals again with spades as trumps, and watch how differently they go.

Count every hand Before you bid, count your points. Before you play, count your winners. Both become automatic sooner than you expect.

Learn one system The Two Over One lesson takes the bidding from here — when to open, what to respond, and what the second bid means.

Nobody learns bridge by reading. Read a little, then deal the cards.

The fundamentals on one card

LEVEL PLUS SIX

1♥ promises seven tricks, not one — the first six are the book

FOLLOW SUIT

if you can. Only when you cannot may you discard or ruff

HIGHEST OF THE SUIT LED

wins — unless somebody ruffed. Another suit never wins

4-3-2-1

ace down to jack; about 12 to open, about 25 between you for game

EIGHT CARDS IS A FIT

and finding a major-suit fit is what most auctions are for

NINE, TEN, ELEVEN

3NT, a major game, a minor game — one bonus, rising difficulty

Practice: play a deal at bridge.jmariada.org.

Ask the Learn Bridge chat anything about this material.