

How to Play Bridge

The Basics

Bridge is played with a deck of 52 cards (take out the jokers) and four people sitting at a square table with the players who are sitting across from each other forming a partnership.

About the Cards

There are four suits: clubs, diamonds, hearts and spades. Each suit has 13 cards. In bridge, the deuce is the lowest card in the suit and the ace is the highest.

Getting Started

Draw cards to select the person to deal the cards (the dealer). This person distributes the cards face down, in clockwise rotation one at a time, until each player at the table has a hand consisting of 13 cards. After the play of each deal is completed, the opportunity to deal moves around the table clockwise so that each person has a turn to deal out the cards.

Aim of the Game

Each partnership tries to win (or take) as many tricks as possible.

Taking Tricks in Notrump

A trick contains four cards, one contributed by each player. One player starts by leading a card, placing it face up on the table. In clockwise rotation, each player has to follow suit, by playing a card of the same suit as the one led. If a heart is led, for example, each player must play a heart if possible. Only if a player doesn't have a heart can that person discard (i.e., play a card of another suit). The highest card in the suit led wins the trick for the player who played it. This is called playing in notrump.

Taking Tricks with a Trump Suit

Having a trump suit is something like having one suit wild. The rules of the game still require that if a player can follow suit, the player must. When a player can no longer follow suit, however, a trump can be played, and the trump is higher and more powerful than any card in the suit led.

Bidding

Bidding is the language of bridge. The players, through bidding, decide whether the deal is to be played in notrump or in a particular trump suit. The dealer has the first chance to bid. If the dealer has some high cards in the hand and a preference for one suit over another (usually decided by the length of the suit), dealer makes a bid to let his partner know which suit he prefers. If the dealer doesn't have many high cards and doesn't want to make a bid, he says "pass."

Bids must be made according to the hierarchy of suits: clubs, diamonds, hearts, spades and finally notrump. Thus, if 1♣ is the opening bid, the next hand to bid must bid at least 1♦, the next hand at least 1♥ and so on. If declarer were to open 1♣, the next bid would have to be 1NT or 2♣, 2♦ or 2♥.

After the dealer makes a decision, each player in turn has an opportunity to either bid or pass. At the end of the bidding, each partnership will have decided on the suit it wants to name as trumps and if it has enough strength (high cards) to bid for the privilege of naming trumps. Or one partnership will have passed, letting the opponents pick the trump suit in return for committing to winning a certain number of tricks. The bidding ends when three players in succession say "pass."

Declarer, Opening Leader and Dummy

The declarer is the player who first mentions the suit that ends up being trumps or who first mentions notrump.

The opening leader is the player to the left of the declarer who starts the play by making the opening lead, playing a card face-up on the table.

The dummy is declarer's partner. After the opening lead, the dummy places his hand face-up on the table, and declarer calls the cards during the play for both hands.

Guidelines for Making the Opening Lead

Against notrump contracts, it is a good idea to lead your longest suit because that could be your best source of extra tricks. With a sequence, three or more cards in a row, lead the top card of the sequence. If you don't have a sequence, lead low.

Against trump contracts, you can still lead the top of a sequence, but you no longer need to lead your longest suit. Your opponents have a trump suit and can usually prevent you from taking tricks in your long suit. They can trump in and win the trick. Sometimes it is a good idea to lead a short suit if it isn't the trump suit. Your partnership wants to take tricks as quickly as possible.

The Bidding

Think of the bidding as a pleasant conversation between friends. A bid is a number combined with a word. The word refers to the suit or notrump in which the player hopes the contract will be played. The number refers to the number of tricks the partnership is willing to commit to over the book of six. $1\spadesuit$ is a commitment to take $6 + 1 = 7$ tricks, and a suggestion of spades as the trump suit. If $1\spadesuit$ is the final bid, it would be the contract.

Hand Valuation

The ace = 4; the king = 3; the queen = 2; the jack = 1. In addition to giving points for high cards, points are given for the shape of the hand. A five-card suit = 1; a six-card suit = 2; a seven-card suit = 3; and an eight-card suit = 4. Once you have valued your hand, the next step is to bid according to its strength and shape.

Guidelines for Opening the Bidding

With 0 to 12 points, pass.

With 13 or more points, open the bidding with one of your longest suits.

With 15 to 17 high-card points and a balanced hand (one where all suits are represented with at least two or more cards), open 1NT (notrump).

Contracts

The bidding will lead to a variety of final contracts (a number and a suit or notrump). They are not equal in value since you score more for bidding and making certain contracts. They can be slams, game contracts, or part-game or partscore contracts. They can be major suit (spades or hearts) contracts or minor suit (diamonds or clubs) contracts.

Bonus Levels

Slams: You score highest for bidding and making a grand slam of $7\spadesuit$, $7\heartsuit$, $7\clubsuit$, $7\diamondsuit$ or

7NT (notrump) where you can lose no tricks to the opponents. To bid a grand slam, the partnership should

have a total of 37 points. The next best score comes from bidding and making a small slam of 6♣, 6♥, 6♦, 6♠ or 6NT where you can lose only one trick to the opponents. To bid a small slam, the partnership needs a total of 33 to 36 points.

Games: There are five game bonuses which are more attainable than a slam contract. 3NT requires that you bid for and make 9 tricks. 4♥ and 4♠ require that you bid and make 10 tricks. All three of these games can be bid when the partnership has a total of 26 points. 5♣ and 5♦ require that you bid and commit to making 11 tricks, and 29 points are suggested for a contract at this level. Experience has shown that if you and your partner have at least eight trump cards in your combined hands, you can usually take one more trick in a suit contract than you could in a notrump contract. That means that games in 3NT or 4♥ or 4♠ (if you have at least eight trumps) require about the same strength in high cards.

Partscores: In a partscore, the partnership receives points for every trick made. The partnership is not eligible, however, for the bonus it would get for bidding a game or a slam.

The Role of the Responder

The partners on a bridge team have certain roles to play. The opening bidder describes his hand to his partner. The partner becomes the captain and assumes the role of deciding on the best denomination and the best level for the final contract. The partner of the opening bidder knows more about the combined strength of the two hands after hearing the opening bid and looking at his own hand.