

The Exciting World of Bridge

Welcome to the exciting world of Bridge, the greatest game in the world! These lessons will assume that you are familiar with trick taking games like Euchre and Hearts. If you're not familiar with these games then you will need to do some extra work to understand some of the concepts that we're going to "skim over".

Bridge shares many similarities to the aforementioned games. In Euchre you have a partner – the person sitting across the table from you. Bridge is the same. In Euchre, there is always a trump suit. In Hearts, there is never a trump suit. In Bridge we have both options available to us; a contract can be played with a trump suit or in notrump. We're going to get into how that gets determined a little bit later. For now we're going to play our first hand of Bridge and explore the mechanics of the game to see where there are some differences to how a hand of Euchre or Hearts is played.

In Bridge we use all 52 cards in the deck (no jokers). Every player is dealt 13 cards. The first thing you should always do before looking at your cards is count them. If you don't have 13 now is the time to say something (before you look at them). Once you have verified that you have 13 cards sort them into suits and in order within the suits. In Bridge, just like Hearts, aces are high and then it's king, queen and so on right down to the little two. In Bridge we have an auction to determine what contract we are playing (that means what's trump and how many tricks are needed to make your contract) and during that process someone at the table becomes the "Declarer". Later on we're going to learn how that is determined. The important thing to know at this time is that someone at the table will become the Declarer on every hand. The person on the Declarer's left is the person who gets to make the opening lead on every hand. This person is a "Defender", as is their partner.

One important habit to get in to is to make your opening lead face down. The reason for doing this is that if you happen to be mistaken (ie it's not your lead) then it gives you a chance to take the card back. If you were to make the opening lead face up and you weren't the person on lead then there are a bunch of rules to go through to allow the actual Declarer to decide what they want to do. It's way too complicated so just make your opening leads face down!

Once the opening lead is made is when what's probably the biggest departure from most other card games happens. The partner of the Declarer is called the "Dummy" (this word comes from the French word for silent – it has nothing to do with the person's intelligence level). So once the opening lead is "faced", Dummy puts their entire hand down on the table for everyone to see. For the rest of the hand everyone can see what cards Dummy has. Dummy also doesn't get to decide what cards they play. It's the

Declarer who calls for a card from Dummy and Dummy must play that card. Dummy should basically sit there and not say a word for the entire hand. Specifically, it would definitely be wrong for Dummy to suggest in any way what card(s) Declarer should play.

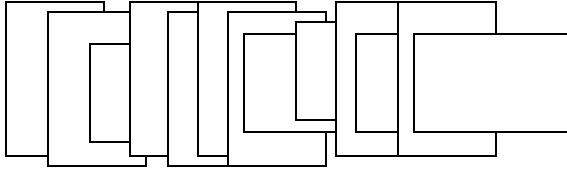
So now that Dummy has put their hand down on the table (four nice neat columns please!), Declarer can have a look and note their combined assets. It's at this point that Declarer starts to make a plan on how they intend to take the required number of tricks for their side.

Once Declarer has made some sort of plan (don't worry, much more about this later) they will call for a card from Dummy. Declarer should name the specific card that they want Dummy to play. If they want to take some shortcuts, they can for instance simply say "low heart" rather than naming the lowest heart Dummy has. In fact, they can simply just say "heart" or "a heart". If Declarer says any of these, Dummy must play the lowest heart that they have. Declarer – be careful! If you say it – it's played! If you say "a heart" and then Dummy looks at you like you've lost your mind and then you quickly say "Oops, I mean the king of hearts", it's too late. Dummy must play their smallest heart.

Like Euchre and Hearts, everyone must "follow suit" to the suit that is led each trick. If you do not have any cards in the suit led then you may play any other card you like. Often times this is where you will "trump" a trick just like you do in Euchre. We also often call this a "ruff" in Bridge. If you could have followed suit and fail to this is called a "revoke" and there are set penalties for doing it. These penalties can be harsh so it's best to avoid them. When you don't follow suit your partner is allowed to ask you "No spades (as an example) partner?". Even Dummy is allowed to do this for Declarer (it's one of the very few things they are allowed to say). Doing this is a very good habit to get into as it will prevent your "side" from revoking. There's a saying that if your partner revokes it's your fault. Guess what? That's true.

So each trick is played in turn, everyone following suit when they can and discarding (or ruffing) when they can't, until all thirteen tricks have been played. Whoever wins the trick gets to lead to the next trick. One small but important mechanical thing that we do in Bridge is what we do with our cards at the end of each trick. We don't throw them in the middle or take them all into little piles of four. We each play our card immediately in front of ourselves and at the end of the trick we "quit" them in front of us in a row going from left to right. We also position the card to indicate which side won the trick. Vertically in front of us means our side won the trick, horizontally means the other side won the trick.

Here's an example of how it might look at the end of a hand:



I have offset these vertically a bit just to better show how this works. On this deal the pair sitting at the top and bottom of the page (we'll call them North/South) won eight tricks. They won the first two, lost the third one, won the next four, lost the next two, won one, lost one, won one and then finally lost the last trick.

So now we know everything we need to play a hand of Bridge. We know how to lead, how to put down Dummy, how to call for cards from Dummy and what to do with our cards at the end of the trick. We also know how to determine who leads to subsequent tricks and how to determine how many tricks each side won when the hand is over.

Scoring

So since we're playing a game, we probably want to keep score. Since each hand contains thirteen tricks, obviously trying to take less than half wouldn't seem like much of a goal. So in Bridge we call those first tricks "the book". We have an auction to determine what's going to be trump (or possibly play the hand in notrump) and also to determine the minimum number of tricks that Declarer needs to take to make their contract. So we start the auction at the one-level but what that actually means is that we're contracting to take 7 tricks. The auction can go all of the way up to the 7 level which means we would need to take all thirteen tricks in order to make our contract.

In Bridge we don't treat all of the suits equally. We call clubs and diamonds "the minor suits" and hearts and spades are called "the major suits". When you end up "buying" the contract, assuming we make at least as many tricks as we've contracted for, here's how we score:

20 points for each trick in a minor suit.

30 points for each trick in a major suit

40 points for the first trick in a notrump contract. 30 points for every trick after that.

Note that above, we aren't counting the first 6 tricks (our book). Here are some examples:

We bid 2 diamonds and we make 9 tricks – that's 60 points.

We bid 2 spades and we make 9 tricks – that's 90 points.

We bid 1NT and we just make it (7 tricks). That's 40 points. If we had made 8 tricks we'd have scored 70 points instead.

On top of the above points we also make bonus points. If you make what is called a "part score" you get a 50 point bonus. So basically, as long as you make your contract you will always get at least that many bonus points. However, there's a big incentive to bid a little higher! If you bid to a level that pays at least 100 points and you make your contract, you get what's called a game bonus. So in a minor suit (diamonds or clubs) you would need to bid to the 5 level (11 tricks) to get your game bonus. In a major suit you need to bid to the 4 level (10 tricks) to get your game bonus. And in notrump, you need to bid to the 3 level (9 tricks) to get your bonus. The size of the game bonus varies depending on what's called "vulnerability" but there's no need to worry about that right now. For now, just know that if you bid a game and make it you score a lot more points than if you don't bid the game – even if you score the exact same number of tricks. One example: if you bid 1NT but take 9 tricks you will score 150 points. That's 40+30+30 for the tricks you took and 50 more for the part-score bonus. However if you had bid 3NT you'd still score 40+30+30 for the tricks but you'd score either 300 or 500 points for your game bonus instead of the measly 50 point part-score bonus. So that's either 400 or 600 points total instead of 150!

There are also even larger bonuses for bidding a "slam" or "small slam". That's bidding to the 6 level (taking at least 12 tricks). Finally, there is a HUGE bonus for bidding a grand slam. That's bidding to the 7 level – saying you will take ALL of the tricks. Slams don't come up all that often and grand slams are very rare so we're not going to worry about that very much for now.

What if I don't make my contract?

If you take fewer tricks than you said you would, you get a negative score. This also is dependent on vulnerability just like our game bonuses were. If we are not vulnerable we get -50 points for every trick shy of our contract we are. If we're vulnerable it's -100 points for every trick we're down. Let's do some examples:

- 1) We bid 6 hearts. We almost make it but not quite – we only take 11 tricks. If we're vulnerable we get -100. If non-vulnerable we get -50.
- 2) We bid 3NT but it seems we got a little carried away as we only take 6 tricks. That's what we would call "down 3". We get either -150 or -300 depending on vulnerability.

What's this whole vulnerability thing about?

For now, there's no need to worry about it other than recognizing that it affects the scoring for game bonuses, slam bonuses and undertricks. For those with curious

minds, it's actually borrowed from the scoring in "rubber bridge" which is just another form of scoring in Bridge. We will get more into this topic in coming weeks.

What are the red X card and blue XX card all about?

These are called double and redouble. They can be used to increase the stakes in a hand. We're going to talk more about them later, for now we will just pretend they don't exist.

The Bidding Ladder

Have you ever played Euchre and been sitting with a lone hand (say for example in spades) but before you have a chance to make it "spades" some joker at the table makes trump some red suit? Frustrating isn't it? Well in Bridge – be frustrated no more!!! You may have already guesses, based on some of what we already talked about, that you can bid to a higher level than your opponents to "buy" the contract. On top of that, we actually designate a rank to the suits. Clubs is the lowest, then diamonds, hearts, spades and finally notrump. So if someone has bid "1♣" you can still bid one of anything else (diamonds, hearts, spades or even notrump). If someone has bid "1♠" you can no longer bid 1♣, 1♦ or 1♥. You would have to bid at least two the two level to bid one of these suits. Some examples:

- 1) Your partner has bid 1NT and the person on your right has passed. What's the smallest bid you can make? Two clubs.
- 2) The person on your right just bid 3♥. Your minimum bid is 3♠.
- 3) The person on your left bid 7NT and then your partner passed and so did the person on your right. What's your lowest bid? Trick question – you're not allowed to bid higher than the 7 level.

So now we've learned both the basic mechanics of how to play an hand and how an auction takes place. We've also learned basic scoring and been shown why we'd possibly want to bid to a higher level than our opponents force us to as we want to pick up game and slam bonuses. So now it's time for today's last two topics.

Evaluating your Hand

In a game like Euchre, you've only got 5 cards. You can generally get a pretty good idea of how many tricks you might take on your own and often we assume that our partner can help us out a little bit. In Bridge, with 13 cards to deal with and a choice of levels between taking 7 tricks and 13, it becomes much more complicated. So many, many years ago a Canadian invented a way to help us out. The very first thing to do on EVERY hand after you've counted your cards face down, and sorted them into suits and rank is to count your HIGH CARD POINTS. In order to save some space you will offer

see this shortened to HCP. We know that big cards tend to take tricks, so as our starting point to deciding how good our hand is we assign point values to the biggest cards in the deck. Here's how we do it:

- 1) Aces are worth 4 points each.
- 2) Kings are worth 3.
- 3) Queens are two.
- 4) Finally, jacks are 1 point each.

So every suit has a total of ten HCPs in it, the whole deck has 40.

You'll usually find that long suits tend to take extra tricks. Once the big cards are gone, our little cards will start to take tricks. So on top of our "high card points" we are going to add "length points". If you have a five card suit, you get to add a point for that. For any card more than 5 you add an additional point. So a 7 card suit gets a 3 point bonus. If you had a hand with both a 6 card suit AND a 5 card suit you would add on 2 points for the 6 card suit and 1 point for the 5 card suit – a total of 3 length points.

Once we have added our high cards points to our length points, we now have how many "points" we feel our hand is worth. As we learn this game we will start to deepen our skills of evaluating a hand. In fact, there are probably almost as many ways to evaluate a Bridge hand as there are Bridge players. For now, take this as your starting point. It's easy and it will serve you well.

Opening the Bidding – First Item on the Checklist

As the auction is about to begin, you count your high cards points, add on your length points and determine how many points your hand is worth. Whoever the "Dealer" is on the hand gets the first chance to make a "call". They can pass or they can bid anything they'd like. Once they make their call, we go clockwise around the table taking turns bidding or passing (or even doubling or redoubling but that's coming later). This auction is going to continue until one of two things happen:

- 1) All four players "Pass" at the very beginning of the auction. This is called a "passed out" deal.
- 2) After a bid, there are three passes in a row.

Once one of these two things happen, the auction is over (Sold to the highest bidder!). The person who makes the first bid is called the Opener. In order to decide if you are going to "open" the bidding there is a short checklist that you need to go through. It's important to always go through this checklist in the specific order that I am going to teach you because certain bids take precedence over the others. Today we are going

to go through the first option only. It's a very important opening bid because it defines your hand to a very narrow range.

If you have between 15 and 17 points AND your hand is balanced, you open 1NT. What does balanced mean? A hand that is balanced contains no voids and no singletons (a void means no cards in a suit, a singleton means 1 card in a suit). In order to be balanced your hand also must contain no more than 1 doubleton. Also if your hand is balanced, you will open 2NT if you have 20 or 21 points. That's it for item number 1 on our "Should I open" checklist. I'll write it out here for you, as we go on we are going to add to the list.

Week One "Should I Open/What Should I Open" Checklist

- 1) Is my hand balanced? If it is; open 1NT with 15-17 points, open 2NT with 20 or 21 points.

Next week we will begin to add to our checklist and start to explore some basic techniques on declaring and defending as we play some practice deals.