# Opening at the 1 level- 1NT and 1 of a suit

Before opening 1 of a suit, think….Can I bid 1NT?
If your hand qualifies for 1NT, it's usually better than bidding something else!

## What are the criteria for an opening 1NT?

*   12-14 HCP.  Some players play a strong NT, or variable, or a different HCP point range, but I recommend sticking to 12-14, as it fits best with the rest of our Modern Acol system.
    and
*   A balanced hand: no void, no singleton (a suit with 1 card) , and no more than one doubleton (a suit with 2 cards), ie the shape is 4 3 3 3 or 5 3 3 2 or 4 4 3 2
    or
*   A semi-balanced hand (5 4 2 2), ie with two doubletons, if the 5-card suit is a minor or a poor quality major.

If your hand qualifies for opening 1NT, it is OK to choose to open 1 of a major instead, if your major is a decent quality 5-card suit. But always make sure you have a reasonable rebid available whatever partner responds. If you don't have a rebid available for every response partner might make, open 1NT.

Why is the 1NT opener such a useful bid?

*   It describes your hand quite precisely in only 1 bid. Once you've opened 1NT, your partner will **not expect you to make another bid**, unless he/she forces you to, eg by bidding Stayman or a transfer. (Don't worry if you're not familiar with these – they'll be covered quite soon, in future lessons)
*   The opposition will need to come in at the 2 level if they want to overcall, which often makes life very difficult for them

    It's true that you might occasionally come unstuck opening 1NT, but the pre-emptive value of making it hard for your opponents to enter the bidding outweighs the risks. Don't be reluctant to open 1NT because you have a weak suit with only 2 little cards. It will be very rare for a 12-14 point hand to have good values in all suits.

## When to open 1 of a suit

Let's assume you are considering opening at the 1 level, and you don't have a hand suitable for 1NT.
What values do you need?
The standard teaching is that to open at the 1 level, you should have at least 12 HCP.

However, there are other considerations as well as HCP count:

**Intermediates** (10's and 9's), especially together in one suit, improve the strength of a hand without changing its HCP count.

**Sequences**: a run such as Q J 10 9 8 is usually a great asset; this example counts only 3 points, but is worth a lot more.

**Distribution** (how the high cards are distributed amongst the suits) are important too. Which of these 13HCP hands would you rather hold?

♠A K 9 8 7   ♥8 6 5      ♦K Q J 10   ♣5
♠A K          ♥9 8 7 6 5  ♦Q J 10     ♣K 6 5

and most important:

**Shape**

If your hand is unbalanced, with one or two long suits, your hand will play more strongly if one of your long suits is trumps, but poorly if the opposition win the contract, and their suit is trumps. This means it's usually a good idea to bid more aggressively when you have a good suit, to try to win the contract; the better your suit, the more this applies. If you have a long suit, and you end up defending the opposition's suit contract, they are likely to be short in your suit, and be trumping in early. Your hand, which looked quite strong if played in your suit as trumps, can be almost worthless defensively!

As we get more experience, we will be using our judgement about these factors to <mark>UPGRADE</mark> or <mark>DOWNGRADE</mark> the value of our hand from the basic point count.


# Opening light

As you probably already know, sometimes it's OK to open 1 of a suit with fewer than 12 points. To help us with this judgement, we have two shortcut methods to help us.

The first of these, the "**Rule of 20**", is based on combining shape and high card point count.

If we have fewer than 12 points, but a shapely hand, we add the number of High Card Points to the number of cards in our two longest suits. If this comes to at least 20, we should CONSIDER opening 1 of a suit – obviously, our longest suit.

Note I say "consider", NOT "must". Rule of 20 is a measure of **shape**, but think about the other factors we've already mentioned: **intermediates; sequences; distribution** of your high card points (eg quality of your longest suit). Also consider vulnerability, and which suit you are thinking of bidding: the higher ranking, the better.

But for now, **Rule of 20 is a good guide.**

The second evaluation tool I want to mention today is **LOSING TRICK COUNT.** It's a brilliant tool, and we'll spend a whole lesson on it later in the course. It's going to be a great help judging what level we can bid to, when our playing strength is based on shape rather than merely high card points.

We count the "losers" in our hand, by adding up the number in each suit, to a maximum of 3 losers per suit.

A "loser" is a card other than the A, K, or Q.

All these suits have two "losers":

♠A 7 6
♥K 10 9 5 3
♦6 4
♣ K 10 4

The fewer the "losers", the stronger the hand.

A hand opening 1 of a suit should have no more than 7 "losers".

This will become VERY important as we develop our bidding methods in suit contracts, and our lesson on Losing Trick Count will explore that in detail. Don't worry if it isn't clear right now – we'll have plenty of time to get to grips with it later on.

Let's consider those 4 suits as one hand:　♠A 7 6　♥K 10 9 5 3　♦6 4　♣ K 10 4

We have 10 HCP.　Should we open?

Rule of 20?　　　　　　　　NO! (total = 18)

Losing trick count?　　　　NO! (total = 8LT's)

Now look at this hand

      ♠ A K 10 9 6 2     ♥ 4      ♦ K J 10 7    ♣ 3 2         11 HCP

Rule of 20? – yes (it comes to 21 – one better than minimum)

Losing tricks? – yes (it's a 6-loser hand - one better than minimum)

So you would open 1♠. No question about it. You have an excellent long suit, and all the better that it's the boss suit, spades.


How about this one:

      ♠ 5 4        ♥ A Q J 9 5    ♦ A 10 9 8 2   ♣ 7         11 HCP

Rule of 20? – yes (it comes to 21 – one better than minimum)

Losing tricks? – yes (it's a 6-loser hand- one better than minimum)

So you would open 1 of a suit. But which suit? You have a choice of two 5-card suits.

The answer is to open the higher ranking of two 5-card suits ("high fives").

 You open 1♥, planning to rebid 2♦ over 1♠, 1NT, or 2♣ by partner. If you're unlucky and partner dislikes both your suits, they will show a simple preference for one of your two suits, either by passing 2♦ or bidding 2♥.


And now this one:

      ♠A J 4   ♥ J 9 8 5   ♦J 8 3 5 2   ♣A        11 HCP

Here, you satisfy Rule of 20. But would you really want to open 1♦? What would you rebid, if partner responded 2♣?

Rebid those moth-eaten diamonds? Bid 2♥ (a "reverse")?

In a coming lesson we'll talk about the barrier, "reversing", and what that all means.

But here's another check – counting our losers...there are 8.

You shouldn't open 1 of a suit on a hand with more than 7 losers.


## Think about your rebid

So far, we've talked about how to assess whether you hand is good enough to open 1 of a suit, even if we hold fewer than 12 points.

Now, I want to emphasise something you should ALWAYS think about before opening 1 of a suit – whether you are light, or hold 12+ high card points: your REBID.


Remember, if you open 1 of a suit, you are GUARANTEEING a rebid.

Of course, you won't always rebid….say partner passes, or makes a limit bid response

eg 1♥ – pass -2♥    or    1♥ – pass- 1NT. Then of course you have the option to pass.

But you must be PREPARED to rebid, in case partner makes a change of suit response to your opening bid.


It's the GOLDEN RULE of opening 1 of a suit:

If you're going to open 1 of a suit, have your rebid in mind, for WHATEVER partner responds. If partner could respond with something that gives you no reasonable rebid, DO NOT OPEN 1-of-a-SUIT.


Let's look again at that hand we had before, which satisfied RULE OF 20

      ♠A J 4   ♥ J 9 8 5   ♦J 8 3 5 2   ♣A        11 HCP

Say we open 1♦

     If partner replies 1NT, we can pass

     If partner replies 2♦, we can pass

     If partner replies 1♥, we can rebid 2♥

     If partner replies 1♠, we can rebid 2♠

BUT if partner replies 2♣, (quite likely as we hold only 1 club) we are stuck for a rebid.

     So our opening bid is PASS

Now look at the following hands, and decide (a) what you would open, and (b) what your planned rebid is for any response by partner (Vulnerability: none)

| 1 | ♠A 3 | ♥K Q J 9 8 7 | ♦A 8 7 | ♣5 4 | 14 HCP |
| 2 | ♠ K Q 3 | ♥A 4 | ♦Q J 10 9 5 4 | ♣A 7 | 16 HCP |
| 3 | ♠A 10 9 8 7 6 | ♥ J | ♦Q J 10 9 2 | ♣ A | 12 HCP |
| 4 | ♠7 6 5 | ♥Q J 10 9 6 5 | ♦A K | ♣8 7 3 | 10 HCP |
| 5 | ♠K J 8 4 3 | ♥ Q 8 | ♦J 2 | ♣ A J 9 2 | 12 HCP |
| 6 | ♠A 5 4 3 | ♥Q 5 3 | ♦A J 4 | ♣ A 6 4 | 15 HCP |

Suggested answers:

**Hand 1**  Open 1♥. You have an excellent 6 card heart suit, and can rebid it if partner responds in any other suit.

**Hand 2**  Open 1♦. With 16HCP, and all suits stopped, you will bid 3NT if partner responds 2♣. If partner responds 1 ♥ or 1♠, you can rebid 2NT to show 17-18 HCP. You only have a 16 count, but it's worth more with the 6 cards and sequence in ♦, which should be worth at least 4 tricks, and more if partner turns up with the A♦ or K♦.

**Hand 3**  Open 1♠. A lovely shapely 6-5 two suiter, with only 5 losers if played in a ♠ or♦ fit. If partner responds 2♣ or 2♥ you can rebid 3♦.

**Hand 4**  You have 10HCP, but 7 of them are in a short suit. Tempting to open a light 1♥ , with such a good suit, but I prefer a weak two here. Open 2♥.  This doesn't promise a rebid.  Don't worry if you're unfamiliar with weak two openers at this stage – we will be covering them in detail in a future lesson, because they are so useful, and far preferable to playing strong twos.

**Hand 5**  You have a 5-card major, and 5-4 in ♠ and ♣.  But if you open 1♠, what will you rebid if partner responds 2♦ or 2♥? You aren't strong enough to bid 3♣, a new suit at the 3 level, so you have to rebid your spades.
It's close call- some would bid 1♠ here, and it's not a bad bid. But with 12 points and a semi-balanced hand, I prefer to open 1NT.
If the red suits were 3-1 rather than 2-2, I'd open 1♠.

**Hand 6** You have 15HCP, and a 4-card major suit. Many would open 1♠, planning to rebid 2NT if partner responds in a new suit at the 2 level: if partner is strong enough to bid 2♣/2♦/2♥, she will be satisfying the "rule of 14", ie at least 10HCP and a 4 card suit (or 9HCP and a 5 card suit, or 8HCP and a 6 card suit). Again, don't worry if you don't know about the Rule of 14- we will be covering that in a future lesson.   Say partner responds 2♣. You rebid 2NT as planned, counting on at least 24 points between you and partner, if she has say 9 points and 5 clubs.  You are inviting her to bid 3NT if she is better than minimum.
So the bidding has gone 1♠ – pass- 2♣ – pass – 2NT- pass-??
            *(your bids are highlighted in yellow, opposition are passing)*
Here is partner's hand:
        ♠K 6 2     ♥7 4 2    ♦K Q 2    ♣K 8 7 5
She counts 11HCP, ie at least 26HCP between you, and duly bids 3NT.

| You | ♠A 5 4 3 | ♥Q 5 3 | ♦A J 4 | ♣ A 6 4 |
| Partner | ♠K 6 2 | ♥7 4 2 | ♦K Q 2 | ♣K 8 7 5 |

and you are declaring in 3NT.
You make 7 tricks (or 8 if you're very lucky).

What went wrong?

Was it just bad luck, or could you have avoided it?

Your hand turned out not to be good enough to rebid 2NT, and you had no other rebid.
What should you have opened?

This is a taster for a lesson we'll do later, on **evaluating your hand**: deduct a full point for 4-3-3-3 (because there are no long suits to establish, and no ruffing values), and add points for useful intermediates (eg a 10 with another honour in the same suit is worth about ½ a point).
Note that hands can be upgraded as well as downgraded- as we'll see when we get to that lesson.

In this case, your shape is the worst (4-3-3-3), and you have no intermediates – very little chance of developing extra tricks. So you deduct a point, and evaluate your hand as worth only 14, so you open 1NT.

Don't worry that partner will announce 12-14 when you bid 1NT, and you actually have 15. Everyone round the table will take it you have 12-14, including your partner, and you have not told a lie – you have genuinely rated your hand as worth 14HCP.

What should partner do in response to your 1NT? He/she will evaluate their hand opposite a 12-14 count. It is also 4-3-3-3 with no intermediates, so will DOWNGRADE to 10HCP, and pass. Final contract 1NT, making 7 (or 8) tricks.

This illustrates the importance of not focussing just on your point count, but on evaluating the real worth of your hand.


There are quite a few concepts mentioned in this lesson which might be new to you, or which you might not be entirely clear about:
- Stayman
- Transfers
- Rule of 20 (for opening light)
- Losing Trick Count
- High Fives- bidding the higher ranking of two 5 card suits
- Reversing, and the "barrier"
- Rule of 14 (for responding in a new suit at the two level)
- Hand evaluation (upgrading or downgrading a hand from its raw HCP count)


Don't be concerned if you are unclear at present– we will work through them all systematically during the course.

♣♥♠♦