



BEGINNING LEVEL	IMPROVING LEVEL	INTERMEDIATE LEVEL	ADVANCED LEVEL	EXPERT LEVEL
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HELP TRIAL BIDS – An Introduction

Improving Level

This lesson is dedicated to Peter Marley who taught us this foundational HELP TRIAL method. Peter was an Australian National Bridge Director, coach, teacher and mentor extraordinaire. He taught this introductory method to get us started on what can be a highly complex topic. Some players might progress this later but if this style of HELP TRIALS is all you ever play, that's OK!

GAME TRIAL BIDS (GAME TRY BIDS)

Known as GAME TRY bids in the USA, probably a more apt name, GAME TRIAL BIDS are about inviting partner to Game if it is safe rather than on points alone. Coming in in all shapes and sizes - Long Trials, Short Trials, Help Trials and mixtures - their different methods are often named after their inventors such as Kockish, Nagy, Klinger, Reverse Romex.

- ◆ One thing in common is they all seek Game *providing partner has the right type of hand*.
- ◆ Trial Bids allows you to decide about Game by finding out how well the two hands fit together.

The long and short of it is

LONG TRIALS usually ASK for HELP and SHORT TRIALS usually SHOW HELP.

HELP TRIALS

This lesson is about a Long Trial bid called a HELP TRIAL. HELP TRIALS involve asking partner for help in a problem. They are used when you have a Major fit at the two-level and an invitational hand.

Traditional points-based method of inviting to game

With a major fit at the two-level, the traditional way of inviting partner to Game is simply to repeat the suit if you have extra. 1M – 2M – 3M = *"I've got extra - do you want to go to Game?"*

Example

1H – 2H

3H *"I have a bit better than basic partner - what do you think?"*

This leaves the partner being invited with no option but to go by points, which does not often help. Generally, most Responders go to Game with 8-9 points and refuse the invitation with 6-7 points.

How often do you get disappointed when you see game making with only 23 or so points and not making even with 27 points? Inviting with a traditional repeat of the suit is all a bit hit-and-miss. It puts partner in a hard spot, requiring partner to make a less than well-informed decision.

Advantages of using a TRIAL BID instead

Rather than just relying on points, a method that allows partners to have a conversation about the hands once there is a fit is more accurate. HELP TRIALS allow partner to find out if the two hands fit nicely together to solve a problem. This is better than simply throwing out an open invitation.

"...having cards in the right place is more important than whether you have 6 or 9 points."

Barbara Seagram and Marc Smith with David Bird, 2022.

An introductory method

There are all sorts of different ways to play HELP TRIALS so it is important to agree with partner about what method you use. This introductory HELP TRIAL BID method should immediately improve your invitational decisions when a Major fit is raised to the 2-level and provide a foundation for later.

WHAT ARE HELP TRIAL BIDS?

Bids that can be used to ask partner for HELP in a certain suit. They can only be used by the partner with the invitational hand and when the bidding has seen a Major fit raised to the two-level.

- ✓ Partner has raised your Major suit to the two-level¹
- ✓ You have an invitational hand.

With an invitational hand you can look for Game by asking if partner can help with a problem. Obviously, we cannot have a spoken conversation with partner across the Bridge table about the problem. What we *can* do is ask for HELP by bidding the problem suit.

Three Ingredients needed for a HELP Ask

- ✓ A Major fit has been agreed at the two-level.
- ✓ You have an invitational hand - something extra and interest in Game.
- ✓ You have a problem suit. Our lesson suggests ONE problem only.

How it works

You bid the suit you need HELP in, instead of simply using 3M to invite to Game.

1H – 2H

3D “Can you help in Diamonds please partner?”

Opener did not suddenly want to play in Diamonds instead of Hearts.

Why did Opener suddenly switch to Diamonds? = HELP TRIAL.

- ◆ Opener is asking for Diamond help
- ◆ Opener has an invitational hand and one problem - the Diamond suit
- ◆ The HELP SUIT must always be below the three-level of your agreed Major.

What does Responder do?

YES I CAN HELP = GAME. If Responder can help in the HELP SUIT then goes to GAME

NO I CANNOT HELP = RETURNS TO 3M. If Responder cannot help then returns to three of the Major.

OPENER	RESPONDER	OPENER	RESPONDER
1H	2H	1H	2H
3D¹	4H²	3D¹	3H²
¹ “Can you help in Diamonds, partner?”		¹ “Can you help in Diamonds, partner?”	
² “Yes, I can help in Diamonds.”		² “No, sorry. I cannot help.”	

Remember, partner is *not* asking you how many points you have, only if you can help in the HELP SUIT. Even with a bad hand, you really should do as you are told!

What is help?

For this introductory method we are saying that Responder has HELP if their holding in the HELP SUIT can keep that suit to only two losing tricks or less.

HIGH CARDS IN THE HELP SUIT or SHORTAGE IN THE HELP SUIT²

Something like Axx, KQx, QJxx, KJ109

Void, singleton or doubleton*

Shortage is always more helpful if you have ruffing potential, for example extra Trumps or a 4-4 fit.

¹ For this lesson we are only looking at Opener and Responder. You can use HELP ASK BIDS in other situations such as Responder might be interested in Game, example 1C – 1H – 2H. This will come to you with practice.

² In much more sophisticated methods of HELP TRIALS there are ways of showing HELP in something else – this is not for now, though.

Example 1

Bidding is 1H – 2H

OPENER

♠ AQJ
♥ AK1032
♦ K10
♣ 943

Opener has an invitational hand and only one problem – The Clubs.

- You can see that the opposition could potentially take 4 tricks “off the top” - three Clubs and ♦A.
- Help would be an A or KQ or QJ of Clubs or Club shortage.
- If partner cannot help you are probably safe to stop at 3H.

BIDDING

1H – 2H

3C

RESPONDER A

♠ 932
♥ Q65
♦ QJ92
♣ A52

RESPONDER B

♠ K32
♥ Q65
♦ QJ92
♣ J43

RESPONDER A can help.

1H – 2H
3C – 4H

RESPONDER B cannot help.

1H – 2H
3C - 3H

- ◇ In both cases Responder has the same amount of points = 9
- ◇ Opener can make GAME with Responder A’s hand but not with Responder B’s hand.
- ◇ If left to Responders to simply look at the higher end of their 6-9 points, the traditional way of deciding about an invitation, then both will go to Game. That will not fare well for Responder B.

Example 2

Bidding is 1S – 2S

OPENER

♠ KQJ98
♥ -
♦ J542
♣ AJ109

Opener has an invitational hand and only one problem – The Diamonds.

- You can see that the opposition could potentially take 4 tricks “off the top” - Three Diamonds and the Ace of Trumps.
- Help would be an A, or KQ or QJ of Diamonds or Diamond shortage.

BIDDING

1S – 2S

3D

RESPONDER A

♠ 765
♥ 432
♦ KQ98
♣ Q42

RESPONDER B

♠ 765
♥ K32
♦ Q987
♣ Q42

RESPONDER A can help.

1S – 2S
3D – 4S

RESPONDER B cannot help.

1S – 2S
3C - 3S

- ◇ In both cases Responder has the same amount of points = 7
- ◇ If relying on points, RESPONDER A would not go to Game yet Game can make.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I HAVE AN INVITATIONAL HAND?

Sometimes Opener's decision to go straight to Game or pass is easy. If Opener's hand is very good they will go to Game and with a basic hand will pass. The in-between hands are harder to assess.

Points-based method

Using a points-based assessment, Opener usually has a bit better than a basic hand - around a very good 15 or 16-18 Total Points. Total Points include your shortage points once a fit has been found.³

Losing Trick Count

Most reputable published Bridge authors, and a number of on-line sites, recommend Losing Trick Count as a better predictor of an invitational hand for a HELP ASK.

A good method for HELP TRIAL BIDS using Losing Trick Count

Opener has 5 losers ● **GO**
Opener has 6 losers ● **INVITE** with only one problem – otherwise PASS
Opener has 7 losers ● **STOP**

A six loser hand is recommended by most authors even with more advanced HELP TRIAL methods.

This introductory lesson recommends inviting with 6 losers BUT with ONE problem only in the hand.

HOW TO COUNT LOSERS (LOSING TRICK COUNT ⁴)

Many of you already know how to find your Losing Trick Count (LTC). Our Lesson showed the basic method of "counting losers" (also see Appendix 1). This can be refined with practice (Modern LTC). One thing that will improve your accuracy for now is counting Qxx as 2.5 losers not 2 losers.

HOW DOES OPENER DECIDE IF THEY HAVE A PROBLEM

No hand is perfect and Trial Bids are a % proposition. They will work a good proportion of the time. Opener should look at the overall hand. Remember partner has something even though it may not be much and you have an invitational hand, so must have something extra.

A suit that can lose three tricks needs HELP or even one that can lose two tricks

- ◆ Three small in a suit needs some HELP
- ◆ A poor quality Trump suit needs HELP
- ◆ Qxx probably needs some HELP as you could easily lose three tricks - definitely Jxx

What usually does not need HELP

- ◆ Singleton
- ◆ Doubleton - but if you have two small doubletons that could be problematic
- ◆ Good quality Trump holding – extra Trumps can resolve this problem
- ◆ Suits with good Honour cards.

Axx is not so bad as Aces can control. Some more advanced methods call this a problem so it is important to stick with your "one problem only" rule. An example of this is HAND 4 from the lesson – see HAND ANALYSIS. Sometimes it might matter – weigh up the whole hand and partner's likely holding.

Another difficult decision is HAND 3. The decision about the Trumps being a problem or not needs some weighing up of partner's likely fit, given partner has a basic hand.

³ Opener's shortage points are not as straightforward as Responder's but if you go with what you have been taught for now, that should do. Do not add an extra three points for a singleton King though – we all know he is *sooo* not worth it.

⁴ Losing Trick Count is different to how Declarer counts losers to plan the play of a suit contract. People tend to refer to LTC as loosely as "losers" so this Handout goes with the flow.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I CAN HELP WHEN PARTNER ASKS?

For our HELP TRIAL method used here, Opener is asking if you are able to keep the HELP SUIT to the loss of only two tricks at the most. Opener has at least two losers in the HELP SUIT, maybe three. For example, if you have Axx in the HELP SUIT that is great, whereas the Kxx is not so reliable.

Help is usually

1. HIGH CARDS IN THE HELP SUIT – A, KQ, QJ is safe

It is OK to have some spot cards with these Honours, example Axx, KQx, QJx.

Kxx may not be much use as the opening lead through you will probably be the HELP SUIT.

2. SHORTAGE IN THE HELP SUIT – Void, Singleton, Doubleton

Shortage is only useful though if your hand can ruff partner's HELP SUIT.

If you have an extra Trump or two, or the fit is 4-4, the help value of your shortage increases.

Example

OPENER

♠ A7
♥ AKJ1098
♦ AQ
♣ 943

RESPONDER A

♠ 9876
♥ J32
♦ 843
♣ AQ4

RESPONDER B

♠ A543
♥ 8542
♦ Q765
♣ 9

1H – 2H

3C

RESPONDER A can help.

AQ in the HELP SUIT.

RESPONDER B can also help.

Shortage in the HELP SUIT and extra Trumps.

Example

OPENER

♠ KQJ543
♥ -
♦ J53
♣ AQJ10

RESPONDER HAND A

♠ 987
♥ J32
♦ A8762
♣ K4

RESPONDER HAND B

♠ 987
♥ AQ2
♦ 876
♣ 9432

1H – 2H

3D

RESPONDER A can help.

An Ace in the HELP SUIT usually keeps D's to 2 losers.

RESPONDER B cannot help.

The opposition can take three small diamonds off-the-top.

A LITTLE TWIST

As mentioned, the quality of your Trump suit can also be a problem. Since 1M – 2M – **3M** as an invitation is not particularly needed with HELP TRIALS, the 3M can be used to ask for HELP in the trump suit itself – the quality.

Example

1M – 2M

3M “My only problem is Trump quality, partner. Can you help please?”

Opener is asking if you have a good Honour – Ace or King.

Does this still apply in competitive bidding? When both sides are bidding?

When both sides are bidding you might be just raising the Major to the three-level in order to compete. Talk with partner about what your 3M means. You might prefer that three of the Major is a HELP ASK but this does not apply when the opposition competes and puts their two bob's worth in.

TWO TRICKY ONES JUST FOR MENTIONING – NO NEED TO WORRY RIGHT NOW

1. Opener rebids 2H after 1S – 2S.

1S – 2S

3H The **3H** can be a HELP TRIAL BID but decide together about this

Some Openers use this sequence to show a four-card heart suit.

The opener in that case is looking for a 4-4 fit rather than settling for the 5-3 fit.

◆ This is because Responder might have four or more hearts and could not bid them.

◆ A 4-4 fit is better than a 5-3 fit (the Spades).

This situation needs a partnership agreement.

If you are not currently using the 3H to show another suit, you might be happy to use this as a HELP SUIT for now. It then gives some consistency to your HELP TRIAL BIDS.

2. Opener's rebid is 2NT.

1M – 2M

2NT

Opener has an invitational hand and the only problem is that the hand is very balanced.

Opener wonders if it might be better to play in NT's instead.

What should Responder do?

If Responder is unbalanced, especially with extra trump/s, then return to the Major.

If balanced and the upper end of the points (NOW the points matter!) then bids 3NT.

FAQ's

Won't the opposition just lead the HELP suit?

Probably. At Club we often see the opposition asking about our HELP ASK bid, see partner denying help and *still* not leading our problem suit. Unless there is a compelling reason to lead something else, the opposition should probably lead the problem.

- If Opener has been diligent in their problem assessment and Responder has been careful in their helpability, then stopping in three of the Major or GAME should still be sound, despite the lead.
- More advanced TRIAL BIDS can overcome this as the opposition will not know your exact holding.
- All conventions potentially give away some information to the opposition. Generally, it is far more advantageous to have a great conversation with partner than to worry too much about the opposition knowing things. In certain situations you might need to be more prudent.

Can I use HELP TRIAL BIDS when the opening is in 3rd seat and 4th seat?

If bidding is 1M – 2M, there is no reason not to use a next level suit change as a HELP ASK.

How will I know that partner's change of suit is a HELP ASK?

You decide together, right from the start – are we using HELP TRIALS or not, then stick with it for the session. Remember, a change of suit to the next level below Game is only a HELP ASK when the bidding is 1M-2M.

Should HELP BIDS be alerted?

Yes, especially if we play this method. There is no intention to play in the new suit named and it might only be a two card holding. This includes your 3M asking for help in the quality of trumps.

REFERENCES and FURTHER READING

Grant, A. 2007. *Bridge Basics 3: Popular Conventions*. Baron Barclay: Kentucky.

Hardy, M. 2000. *Standard Bidding for the 21st Century*. Squeeze Books: New York.

Seagram B & Smith M. 2022. *25 Bridge Conventions you should know*. Masterpoints Press: Toronto.

- See Mike Lawrence for more advanced methods.

APPENDIX 1 LOSING TRICK COUNT (LTC)

Looking at the top three cards in each suit, count anything that is not an Ace, King or Queen.

Loser Count – how to count

Look at the top 3 cards in each suit
Count anything that is not an A, K or Q.

Only two cards? Count anything that is not an A or K
Only one card? Count anything that is not an A
This hand has 0 losers

How many losers in this hand?

LTC = 6
Hearts = 2. Clubs = 2. Diamonds = 1. Spades = 1.

If a suit has only two cards, count anything that is not an Ace or a King.

If a suit has only one card, count anything that is not an Ace.

If a suit has zero cards (void) = 0 losers.

This is a basic LTC count. There are ways to refine it. For now the main one is 2.5 for Qxx.

Examples

♠ K876	2 Spades	6 losers
♥ 32	2 Hearts	
♦ A5	1 Diamond	
♣ KQJ109	1 Club	

♠ 10932	3 Spades	8 losers
♥ QJ6	2 Hearts	
♦ QJ69	2 Diamonds	
♣ A4	1 Club	

♠ 109	2 Spades	6.5 losers
♥ AKQ	0 Hearts	
♦ Q43	2.5 Diamonds	
♣ A5432	2 Clubs	

♠ 6543	3 Spades	12 losers
♥ J109	3 Hearts	
♦ 543	3 Diamonds	
♣ 432	3 Clubs	

Some trickier ones:

♠ A	0 Spades	4 losers
♥ 5432	3 Hearts	
♦ AKJ	0 Diamonds	
♣ KQJ109	1 Club	

♠ A4	1 Spade	4 losers
♥ -	0 Hearts	
♦ A5432	2 Diamonds	
♣ KQ6543	1 Spade	

♠ K	1 Spade	5 losers
♥ K3	1 Heart	
♦ QJ1098	2 Diamonds	
♣ KQJ109	1 Club	

♠ 98765432	3 Spades	7 losers
♥ -	0 Hearts	
♦ AJ10	2 Diamonds	
♣ J2	2 Clubs	

Losing Trick Count is a way to assess the playing strength of your hand once you have a good fit.

A good fit is 5-3 or better. 4-4 is better than 5-3. 6-2 is not that good. A 10 fit is worth -1 loser.

- LTC is not used to decide whether or not to open one of a suit.
- Most authors recommend LTC for HELP TRIAL BIDS. 6 LTC is an invitational hand.