

BEGINNING BRIDGE

Lesson 1

SOLD TO THE HIGHEST BIDDER

The game of bridge is a refinement of an English card game called whist that was very popular in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The main difference is that whist is a deal and play game, with the trump suit determined randomly. The first couple of hands we'll play are going to use the whist rules as set out below:

Number of Players--Four people can play in partnerships of two against two.

The Pack--The standard 52-card pack is used. As in many bridge games, two packs of cards of contrasting back design are recommended. While one pack is being dealt, the other can be shuffled for the next deal.

Rank of Cards--A (high), K, Q, J, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2.

The Deal--The dealer gives each player one card at a time, face down, beginning with the player on his left, until he comes to the last card. The dealer places the last card of the pack face up on the table before him, and every card of its suit becomes a trump. When it is the dealer's turn to play to the first trick, he picks up the trump card and it becomes part of the dealer's hand.

In some variations of whist, the first (or last) hand of a four-deal rotation will have no card placed face up at the end of the deal, and so the hand will be played in notrump, i.e. without a trump suit.

Object of the Game--Each of the partnerships tries to score points by taking any trick in excess of six. The partnership with the most points at the end of play wins the game.

The Play--The turn to play is in clockwise rotation. The player on the dealer's left leads first and may play any card. Each player in turn plays a card, following suit if possible. If he cannot follow suit, a player may play any card. Four cards played (including the card led) constitute a trick.

A trick is won by the person who played the highest trump. Any trick not containing a trump is won by the person who played the highest card of the suit led. The winner of each trick leads next.

How to Keep Score

Each odd trick (a trick in excess of six) counts one point for the side winning it.

We'll now play two hands of whist to get the hang of how the play will go. The only recommendation I'm going to make is that the person on lead starts out with the suit he has the most number of cards in. We'll then see which side takes the most tricks, and whether they've been taken primarily with high cards, or also with smaller cards from long suits. On the companion deal, where the last card is turned up and becomes the trump suit, we can see how that affects the tricks scored by each side. Often, one side could have more face cards (A, K, Q and J) but the other pair could have the majority of trumps.

The first six tricks don't count for the purposes of scoring in whist. They are referred to as the "book". That is an important term to keep in mind for when we talk about bidding, the facet of bridge that distinguishes it from whist.

From Whist to Bridge—The First Steps

In bridge, the play of the hand does not start once the cards are all dealt out. Before we get to that stage, each partnership will have the opportunity to exchange information and vie for the privilege of naming the denomination (trump suit or notrump) along with the number of tricks they will attempt to make. Each player can do so by making a bid that describes the strength and distribution of his hand. The process of the four individuals making their calls in turn is called an **auction**. While you can bid, you don't have to, if your assessment of the hand is that it's not strong enough to take action. In that case you can pass.

A bid consists of a number and a word. The number can range from 1 to 7, and are indicative of the tricks you're willing to take, in excess of the "book" of the assumed six tricks. The word is any one of the four suits; clubs, diamonds, hearts or spades. Alternatively, you can decide not to suggest any particular suit as trumps, and bid **notrump** instead

Ergo, a bid of 1S means that you're willing to take 7 tricks (1 + 6) with spades as trump. That may not be the end of it, however. Suppose the player on your left then bids 2H. That means your 1S bid is cancelled because your opponent has indicated that he's prepared to take eight tricks (2+6) with hearts as trump.

The bidding aspect results in a couple of more key differences between the two games. In whist, there is no difference between the suits, except for the random selection of the trump suit by the turn of the final card. Also, the points awarded at the end of the hand are one for each trick taken in excess of six. In bridge, the suits are ranked with notrump at the top of the ladder, and there is also a variance in the trick score, depending on what suit you are in. The table below will serve to illustrate:

Rank of Suits (from top to bottom)	Trick score (per trick after first six)
Notrump	40 for first trick, 30 for every other one
Spades	30 per trick
Hearts	30 per trick
Diamonds	20 per trick
Clubs	20 per trick

Because hearts and spades are ranked higher **and** score better, they are called the "major" suits, whereas clubs and diamonds are the "minor" suits.

The upshot is that if you want to bid a suit, you might have to go a level higher because of the rank of the suits. For example, if the person on your right bids 1D and you'd like to bid hearts, no problem as they are higher ranking and you can venture in with 1H. However, if you have long clubs with a fair amount of high cards, you'd need to go to the two-level as they are a lower-ranking suit.

Trump Suit Agreement and Games

When should the partnership decide to play in a trump suit rather than notrump? The general rule of thumb is that when you have eight or more cards in a suit between the two hands, you can agree to have that suit as trumps. Typically, if a good trump fit exists, your side will take on average at least one more trick in the suit contract than in notrump.

We've seen in the above chart that you get a **trick score** for making your contract. There is also a **game bonus**, which is achieved if your side bids and makes a contract where the trick bonus adds up to 100 or more points. The five game contracts are:

- 3NT-- nine tricks (40 + 30 + 30)
- 4H or 4S-- ten tricks (4 x 30)
- 5C or 5D-- eleven tricks (5 x 20)

As your homework before the next lesson, you can refer to the document on scoring, which goes into the topic and the bonuses for games and slams in far greater detail. For now, the awareness that you get extra points for bidding games will suffice.

Of course, to bid contracts where you need that many tricks requires some assets in the way of high cards. There are several features that may add to the value of a hand, but the most basic tool is that of adding up your high-card points. This was first mentioned by Bryant

McC Campbell in 1915, reintroduced by Milton Work in the 1930s and then popularized by famous bridge author and teacher Charles Goren in the 1940s. It remains the most popularly accepted way of counting your hand even now.

The honor cards are the Ace, King, Queen and Jack. The values assigned to them by Work are:

Ace--	4 high-card points (or HCP for short)
King--	3 HCP
Queen--	2 HCP
Jack--	1 HCP

Ah, but how many high-card points are required for the partnership to bid a game? For 3NT, 4H or 4S, the answer is 25 HCP. Why don't you need a greater number for the major-suit games? The reason is that as previously discussed, an adequate trump fit will produce one more trick than the same cards would in notrump. So the notrump and major suit games will all usually succeed on 25 combined high-card points. A good memory aid for you would be the cult hit song from 1969, "In the Year 2525". That tells you that 25 is the magic number for 3NT, and also for 4H and 4S.

But not for 5C or 5D. An eight-card or better trump fit may play one trick better in the suit contract than in notrump, but seldom give you two extra tricks. Therefore, 25 HCP won't cut it insofar as making 11 tricks in a minor suit and you'll need closer to 28 or 29. As we'll find out in subsequent lessons, the game contracts we'll try and aim for are 3NT and four of either major.

Opening the Bidding

Some books advocate that players should factor in long suits along with their high-card points to determine the value of their hand. However, to do so puts a lot on our plate at the very start, so I'm going to wait until later on to broach that subject.

In this day and age, virtually all hands of 12 or more high-card points get opened. It's possible to have a hand strong enough to insist upon game but those are very rare. The vast majority of hands will open at the one-level, giving the partnership ample room to find out if it has a playable trump suit and/or the values to bid game. The range of a one-level opening bid, except for 1NT, is fairly wide, from 12 HCP all the way up to 20 or 21.

Throughout these lessons, we'll often make reference to "balanced" and "unbalanced" distribution. If a hand contains a void (no cards in a suit) or a singleton (just one card in a suit), then the distribution is unbalanced. Hands that contain a six-card suit or 5-4 in two suits would also be unbalanced. There are only three hand patterns that are considered to be balanced, and they are 4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2, and 5-3-3-2.

The priorities when opening the bidding, aside from having 12+ HCP, are:

- If you have a five-card or longer major (hearts or spades), open that suit.
- With no five-card major but 15-17 HCP and a balanced hand, open 1NT.
- Without sufficient points but neither of the above two hand types, you'll then open your longest minor. If there is a tie in your minor suit length, open 1D with 4-4 in the minors and 1C with 3-3 in those suits.

As we can see from these parameters, while 1H and 1S opening bids guarantee at least a five-card suit, there are no such assurances for 1C or 1D.

One more thing before we get cracking with some examples is that if you are fortunate enough to have two five-card suits, open the higher-ranking of them ("high-five").

With those guidelines etched in our minds, we're off and running!

S-- AKJ54 H-- 1074 D-- AQ7 C-- 96

1S. You have 14 HCP, and the first commandment of opening is to bid a five-card major if you have one.

S-- AJ5 H-- KQ93 D-- 985 C-- KQJ

1NT. 16 HCP and a balanced hand. You do **not** require a high-card in every suit if you're in the 15-17 range and the proper distribution.

S-- Q104 H-- A10652 D-- AK9 C-- K84

1H. 15-17 and a balanced hand, but the five-card major takes precedence.

S-- A10 H-- J65 D-- KQ1084 C-- K86

1D. Balanced hand but not enough points for 1NT.

S-- AQJ6 H-- 3 D-- QJ86 C-- K1072

1D. Can't open 1S as you don't have five of them. So it will have to be a minor suit, and with 4-4, open the higher-ranking.

S-- AK5 H-- K964 D-- J108 C-- Q63

1C. Not an appetizing choice, but with 13 HCP, the hand is worth a bid, and your major isn't long enough to open 1H.

Responding to an Opening Bid

At this point, we're not going to get ahead of ourselves on **what** to respond, as that will be covered in subsequent lessons.

The important question is whether you should respond, and how much do you need to keep the bidding alive. The answer to that is that 6 or more high-card points is enough to take action once partner opens.

Why is that? Won't our side get into trouble if we bid on such paltry values? It's because opener could have as much as half the deck in high-card points and even with your meager collection, there could be a game your way. The next two hands are both examples of a very powerful hand opposite 6-7 HCP.

Hand 1

North dealer

North

S-- A9
H-- Q972
D-- AKJ5
C-- KQ4

West

S-- J10873
H-- K54
D-- 1087
C-- 76

East

S-- Q52
H-- A83
D-- 9432
C-- A93

South

S-- K64
H-- J106
D-- Q6
C--J10852

Here North has 19 HCP and will open 1D, his longest minor. If South passes with his 7 HCP, the partnership will languish there despite having enough combined points to make game.

Let's say South plays in a contract of 3NT. We'll discuss in a future lesson how the auction could go that the weaker of the two hands ends up as the declarer. Against a notrump contract, it's usually best for the defenders to lead their longest suit, so West begins with a spade. Some might lead a small one and others the Jack, but either would be fine.

3NT requires nine tricks to make. The sure winners for declarer are the Ace and King of spades and four diamond tricks. South will need three more to bring the contract home. The suit that offers the potential for those extra tricks is clubs. True, you have to give up a trick to the Ace to get them, but losing the occasional trick is a small price to pay if it gets you to where you want to be. Upon winning the first spade, South can drive out the missing honor in clubs, playing the King and Queen from dummy. That will bring him to ten tricks in all.

Hand 2

East dealer

North

S-- K9642

H-- J63

D-- 985

C-- Q8

West

S-- J5

H-- K8742

D-- QJ63

C-- 92

East

S-- A3

H-- AQ105

D-- K2

C-- AJ1064

South

S-- Q1087

H-- 9

D-- A1074

C-- K753

Auction:

North	East	South	West
	1C	pass	1H
pass	4H	pass	pass
pass			

East opens his longest suit, and West doesn't have much but knows that 6 HCP is barely enough to respond. His choice of suits, hearts, strikes a goldmine with partner, who briskly raises all the way to game.

In notrump contracts, we count winners and look for ways to develop additional ones if we don't have enough. In suit contracts, we try to identify what losers there might be and look for ways to eliminate some of them if there are too many. Here, if the defense leads spades, there will be a spade loser, a club loser, and possibly two losers in diamonds. However, you can take care of the fourth small diamond by ruffing it on table.

High Card from the Short Side

In this and each of the next five chapters, we'll focus on a play technique before moving on to the example hands. For this lesson, the object is to take our winners in a suit quickly and easily, without getting stranded in the wrong hand at some point. Consider the following two holdings in the diamond suit:

North #1 KQ94
South #1 AJ75

North #2 KQ4
South #2 AJ75

With the two hands on the left, it doesn't matter in which order you play the diamond honors as there is the same number of cards in each hand and you'll be able to take all four tricks no matter what.

A little more care is required with the example on the right. When one player has greater length in the suit than the other, then you need to play the top cards from the shorter holding first so that you have a low one to lead back to the remaining honors in the companion hand and get all the tricks you're entitled to. Ergo, you'd play the King and Queen first, then the 4 to the remaining winners in the South hand. This principle is also called "high card from the short side."

If by contrast you were to play the Ace or the Jack from the diamond length on the first or second round of the suit, the end result is that you could get marooned in the North hand and unable to take your tricks immediately.

Hand 3

North dealer

North

S—AJ3
H—72
D—A10876
C—AK4

West

S—K974
H—Q109
D—Q2
C—9653

East

S—Q105
H—KJ854
D—KJ3
C—108

South

S—862
H—A63
D—954
C—QJ72

Auction:

North	East	South	West
1NT	pass	pass	pass

North's hand meets all the requirements for a 1NT opening; balanced hand, 15-17 HCP, no five-card major. He does **not** need to have a high card in every suit, so you should not fret about the low doubleton in hearts, that's perfectly allowable.

South has 7 HCP, so there won't be enough combined points for his side to make game. Since he is perfectly balanced himself, there is no reason to play the contract anywhere but in notrump, so he passes.

The Play:

East's long suit is hearts, and he will probably start out with a low one as his honors are not touching.

In notrump, we count our sure winners, the tricks we can take without having to surrender the lead, and compare that number to our objective. While you might have enough on occasion, most of the time you'll be short of your goal and might have to develop additional tricks.

Fortunately, on this hand you **do** have enough fast winners, with three Aces and four club tricks. However, the opponents will play hearts until dummy is forced to take the Ace, so handling the club suit properly is essential.

North can either take the Ace of hearts right away or hold back on it until the third round of the suit. In this case, it doesn't matter, although on other hands it could make a difference when it is taken. Now he plays a low club from dummy and takes both the Ace and King in his hand, leaving a small one to lead up to the other two winners in the suit.

If declarer fails to play the high cards from the short side, at least one of the club winners will be stranded, and there isn't any way to get back to dummy and take it later on.