



## When is a bid forcing?

Many of you will already know the term ‘*forcing bid*’ – a bid that partner is not supposed to pass. I say ‘not supposed to’ rather than ‘not allowed to’ because, of course, there is no law of the game that prevents passing, but agreeing never to pass forcing bids is a matter of discipline and partnership trust, and you should almost never violate such an agreement. I am reminded of the last competition I played as a junior. Two of my friends, both also graduating juniors, were playing together, and one made a *forcing pass* of opponents’ 5♣ on the last board of the event, asking his partner to either double or bid at the five level. His partner knew that it was best to pass 5♣ out but doubled anyway, on the basis that his partner had made a forcing call, and it was ‘bad for partnership trust’ to ignore a forcing call. No one was able to persuade him that, as this was the last board they would ever play together, it was less important!

I am only going to address natural bids. Most artificial bids are forcing because you aren’t showing the suit bid and, if you play a convention, you will already know what you are supposed to do over it (right?).

I’d like to start by thinking about uncontested auctions, where your opponents aren’t bidding. We will look at competitive auctions later. Also, I am assuming that you are not already in a game force. If your side has set up a game force, such as by opening 2♣, all bids below game are forcing and these rules don’t apply.

Bids can be broadly categorised as *limited* or *unlimited*. These words are not synonymous with *forcing* and *non-forcing*, but they will be helpful to understand the topic.

**Limited bids** are what they sound like: bids that place an upper limit on your high card strength. Examples of limited bids include a 1NT opening (limited to 14 points) and a weak 2 opening (limited to nine points). Opener’s rebids can also

be limited, for instance 1♥–1♠, 2♦. Opener did not jump to 3♦, so can’t have more than 17 or a bad 18 points – it’s limited.

**Rule 1:** Natural limited bids are non-forcing, unless they promise at least enough for game. Note that this means that most natural NT bids are not forcing, unless they promise the strength for game – see Michael Byrne’s article on page 12.

**Unlimited bids** do not show an upper limit on your high card strength. Clearly the mechanics of the game do place such a limit – you can’t be dealt more than 37 points, and you will be lucky to ever get close to that, so we have to view this practically. For example, 1♦–1♠, 2♥. This is a reverse, showing 16+ points. Note that I didn’t write an upper limit, because opener could have 16 points or 21. They aren’t unlimited in the most literal possible sense of the word, but they are unlimited in the bridge sense, where they could have a stonking good hand and we mustn’t pass!

**Rule 2:** Unlimited bids are forcing.

It might feel like this has fully addressed the titular question, but I’m afraid bridge hands don’t always fall so neatly into these boxes. Imagine, sitting West, that you hold this hand, and the auction proceeds:

♠ 8 7 5 4 2	West	East
♥ A 7 4 3	Pass	2♣
♦ –	2♦	2♣
♣ K 6 3 2		

Your hand is absurdly good for partner, light years beyond what they could reasonably expect, and you think that your side can very likely make 6♣ or even 7♠. Your initial pass limited your hand. You clearly need to be able to make a forcing bid, though! This leads us to an important point: just because you have previously made a limited, non-forcing bid, it does not mean that you can never force later in the auction. If your partner shows

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enough strength that your side can have a game on you still get to tell them about that.

A less extreme example is a hand with a 10 count that initially passes. Partner opens and rebids 1NT to show a balanced hand with 15-17 points. You know that you want to play in game and might want to explore different fit options rather than just jumping to 3NT. You need some forcing bids in your box. It is in situations like these that auctions can become murky, so it's helpful to have some broad rules of thumb.

**Rule 3:** Bidding a suit that was previously bid naturally by your side is usually non-forcing.

**Rule 4:** If your side might sensibly have 25 points, new suits are generally forcing if they are not limited bids, and the person who makes the bid might know their side has 25+ points.

West	East
Pass	1♦
1♥	1NT
2♣	

This is a natural bid, showing four spades and a hand that is interested in game. Responder is limited by their initial pass, but it is not the 2♣ bid that imposes that limit – if responder weren't a passed hand it would definitely be an unlimited bid! The 2♣ bid is forcing and opener cannot pass it. There is logic here – responder must have a good hand, because they have no guarantee of finding a fit when they bid 2♣. Opener might have to bid 2NT when the hands fit badly, so responder must have enough points for that to be a sensible contract. In order for 2NT to be a good spot you probably want about 23 points between you, which puts responder on an invitational hand.

You might feel that this is all a bit complicated, and you are right! Resolving hands that want to force, invite, and sign off is a major reason for playing conventions such as checkback and fourth suit forcing – they can tidy up a lot of auctions that are otherwise very unclear and overloaded with too many possible hands.

Let's have a look at some example auctions. Do you think the last bid in each of these is forcing or non-forcing?

- |   |                              |    |                               |
|---|------------------------------|----|-------------------------------|
| 1 | West East<br>1♥ 1♠<br>3♥     | 2  | West East<br>1♣ 1♥<br>1NT 2NT |
| 3 | West East<br>1♣ 1NT<br>2♦    | 4  | West East<br>1♣ 1NT<br>2♦ 3♦  |
| 5 | West East<br>1♠ 3♣           | 6  | West East<br>1♠ 3♣<br>4♣      |
| 7 | West East<br>1♦ 1♠<br>1NT 2♥ | 8  | West East<br>1♦ 1♠<br>1NT 3♥  |
| 9 | West East<br>Pass 1♥<br>1♠   | 10 | West East<br>1♥ 2♣<br>2NT     |

**Auction 1:** Non-forcing. 3♥ is a natural and limited bid, showing 6+ hearts and 16-17 points. Responder can pass this if they have a bad hand.

**Auction 2:** Non-forcing. Natural no trump bids are almost never forcing, and this is a simple invite to game.

**Auction 3:** Forcing. This is a reverse, which is an unlimited bid showing 16+ points. Your side doesn't have to get all the way to game when 2♦ is bid but responder does have to bid again, even with a bad hand, in case their partner has 20 rather than 16.

**Auction 4:** Non-forcing. This is a simple raise of partner's suit, limited to nine points so it is non-forcing.

**Auction 5:** Non-forcing. Again, this is a raise of a suit that has been bid naturally, showing 10-12 points (therefore limited). It is strongly invitational but not forcing.

**Auction 6:** Forcing. This is a new suit when spades have been agreed as trumps. Different people will play different meanings for it, but spades are trumps so it must be some sort of slam try in

spades. I would play it as a natural slam try, but you may have other methods. No sensible method involves 4♣ being passable.

**Auction 7:** Non-forcing. This is a sneaky limited bid. It is different to the example I gave below rule 4 because it allows opener to return to spades at the two level rather than forcing opener to bid at the three level if they want to support the first suit bid by responder. With a minimum hand West can choose to play at the two level by either passing 2♥ or bidding 2♠. Since passing is an option, the 2♥ bid is non-forcing. Note the difference in bidding hearts first, as in the hand given in Rule 4. Now opener must bid to the three level to agree hearts so responder should only bid their suits in this way with ten or more points.

**Auction 8:** Forcing. This is what you do instead of auction 7 if you want to make a forcing bid in hearts on the same initial bids.

**Auction 9:** Non-forcing. It's true that one-level responses are generally forcing and that 1♠ is usually an unlimited bid so this appears to violate rule 4. However, as West passed initially, partner knows that the hand is in the range of six to 11 points. East may have opened light with perhaps only 11 or 12 points and will know whether to bid on to explore for game, so they are allowed to pass if there is no prospect of game and 1♠ is a playable contract.

**Auction 10:** Forcing. This is a rare example of a natural, limited bid that is forcing. It is forcing by logic: 2NT shows 15-19 points. 2♣ showed at least 10 points. Your side, therefore, has at least 25 points, so you should play in game! □

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The hands can be seen here:  
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# Forcing or not?

ONE of the problems that the improving player struggles with is when a bid can be passed (non-forcing) and when it can't be passed (forcing). In general, 'new' suits are forcing and 'old' suits (support, or preference) are limit bids showing the strength of the hand. Also, there are some situations where you mustn't pass, otherwise a game or slam will be missed.

This is a situation I see people get wrong quite often:

♠ K J 8 7  
♥ Q 3 2  
♦ 7 6 5 4  
♣ J 7

Partner opens 1♣ and you respond 1♠, (ignoring the poor diamond suit); partner re-bids 2♥; what now?

You cannot pass. Partner's bid is a reverse bid, showing 16+ points, and is forcing for one round. He could have 21 points and you might even have a slam on (though that is very unlikely!). The right bid is to give preference to 3♣, following the idea of putting partner back to the 5-2 fit rather than leaving him in the 4-3 fit. Partner will pass 3♣ with a minimum reverse (16-17) and press on to game with a bit more.

What about a different situation, where people want to bid on when they should be passing?

♠ 7 2  
♥ K 9 8 6 4  
♦ Q J 9 8 4  
♣ 5

Partner opens 1♣ and re-bids 2♣ over your response of 1♥; what do you do?

As hard as it seems, the only sensible call is to pass. It may not be pretty, and 2♣ might go down but quite simply, if you carry on bidding, you will get too high. Changing the suit to 2♦ is forcing for one round, and you will only get out alive if partner supports your diamonds. In all probability partner will rebid clubs and you will have 'rescued' partner from 2♣ to 3♣!

You should reserve the change of suit for hands where game is on the radar such as this one (*top of next column*):

♠ A 2  
♥ K Q 9 8 4  
♦ Q J 9 8 3  
♣ 8

What about when partner produces more than just a feeble re-bid of his own suit at the two level?

♠ K 3  
♥ A J 9 8 6  
♦ K J 7 6 4  
♣ J

Partner opens 1♣ and jumps to 3♣ over your response of 1♥; your choice?

You have a great hand, and your jack of clubs will be just what partner needs to fill in the gap in his suit. Should you leap to 4NT, or perhaps to 4♦?

As usual, there is no need: although partner's 3♣ bid is non-forcing (showing a good 15 to a poor 18), any continuation is game forcing; simply bid 3♦ and await developments. At this stage you have no idea what you want as trumps: it could be diamonds, hearts or clubs (or even no-trumps!) so tread gently and see where the tide takes you.

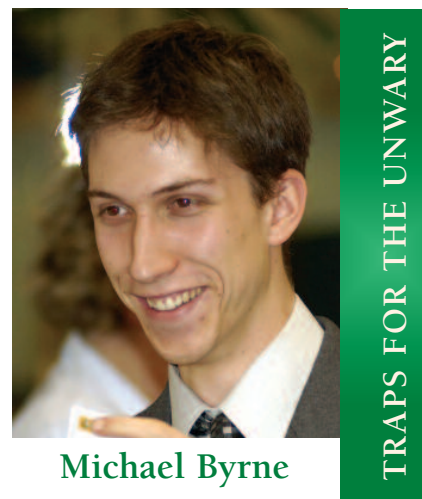
Are there any times when a new suit might be non forcing? There are a few cases, mostly when the opener has had a choice of whether to rebid two or three of a suit, and has chosen to rebid two.

♠ K 8 3  
♥ 8  
♦ Q 4 3  
♣ J 9 8 6 5 4

Partner opens 1♥ and rebids 2♦ over your 1NT response; what is your call?

This time a hasty pass is in order. Partner could have jumped to 3♦ if he had enough for game forcing the 6 points you have shown by responding, and he has chosen not to do so. However lowly a contract of 2♦ is, it's always better to stop low and take the points in the bank rather than aim high and miss.

What about bids in no-trumps? Almost exclusively these are non-forcing limit



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bids, which mean you can pass them if you don't think game will make. Let's see one in action:

♠ K J 6 5  
♥ Q 10 8 7 4  
♦ A 2  
♣ Q 4

This time you are the opener and your 1♥ opening is greeted by a 1NT response; what now?

It is absolutely crystal clear to pass. Partner has denied a four-card spade suit (see 'Traps' article in the October issue) and won't have four-card support for hearts or three-card support and a ruffing value as he could have raised. Partner's range is 6-9, so there is no chance of game. Believe it or not, I have seen quite sensible players rebid 2♥ on a hand like this.

Let's review a few points about forcing and non-forcing auctions:

### Don't:

- Pass when partner makes a reverse bid, as it is forcing for one round.
- Carry on bidding when there is no chance of game and the hand is a horrible misfit.
- Jump the bidding when you are in a forcing auction and you haven't worked out what will be trumps; just keep the bidding low and consult partner.

### Do:

- Pass when there is no chance of game and partner could have shown a strong hand but has chosen not to.
- Bid the full value of your hand; remember a raise of partner's suit is a non-forcing limit bid.