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Fourth Suit Forcing: The Artificial Bid That Keeps Game Auctions Alive

Fourth suit forcing is a check-back tool that asks partner for more information before committing to a final contract. Learn when to use it and how to respond to it.

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You've opened 1♦, partner responds 1♥, and you rebid 1♠. Now partner has 10+ HCP and a problem: they don't know where to go. They want to be in game, but the contract — 3NT, 4♥, 4♠, 5♦ — depends on information they don't have yet. Is opener 5-4? Does opener have heart support? Is notrump safe?

The natural bid in the fourth suit — 2♣ here — would show clubs. But what if responder doesn't have clubs and just needs more information? That's where **fourth suit forcing** (FSF) comes in.

Fourth suit forcing is a convention where bidding the one remaining suit (the "fourth suit" — the suit nobody has bid yet) is artificial. It says: *I don't necessarily have this suit; I need more information before choosing our final contract.*

The Problem It Solves

By the time three suits have been mentioned in an auction, responder often faces a decision problem without enough information to decide confidently. Standard bids are either too high, too committal, or potentially wrong.

Consider: 1♦ — 1♥ — 1♠ — ?

If responder has ♠J3 ♥KQ875 ♦Q6 ♣AK84, game is certainly on (12 HCP, partner has opened). But which game?

- 4♥ if opener has 3-card heart support
- 3NT if opener has a club stopper and balanced shape
- 4♠ if opener has 5+ spades (unlikely but possible)
- 5♦ if opener has 6+ diamonds and a misfit hand

Without FSF, responder has no safe way to find out. A jump to 3NT might be wrong. A bid of 2♥ might not force. Bidding 2♣ shows clubs (which responder doesn't have).

Fourth suit forcing lets responder ask the question instead of guessing the answer.

Which Bid is the "Fourth Suit"?

The fourth suit is simply whichever suit hasn't been mentioned. In any auction where opener and responder have each bid a suit, and opener has rebid a second suit, the fourth suit is the one remaining.

Common Fourth-Suit Sequences

1♣ — 1♦ — 1♥ — 1♠ 4th suit = spades (artificial)

1♦ — 1♥ — 1♠ — 2♣ 4th suit = clubs (artificial)

1♣ – 1♥ – 1♠ – 2♦

4th suit = diamonds (artificial)

1♥ – 1♠ – 2♦ – 3♣

4th suit = clubs (artificial)

What FSF Requires

To use fourth suit forcing, responder typically needs:

- **Game-going values** (10+ HCP) — FSF creates a game-forcing situation
- **Uncertainty about the right game** — if you know the contract, just bid it
- **A reason to ask** — usually needing to know about support, a stopper, or shape

Is FSF Always Game-Forcing?

Most partnerships treat FSF at the two level as game-forcing. Some treat it as "one round forcing only" with invitational values. Confirm with your partner — the standard treatment is game-forcing.

How Opener Responds to FSF

When partner bids the fourth suit, opener provides the information they haven't shown yet. The priority order:

Opener's Response Priorities After FSF

- 1st Show 3-card support** for responder's first suit (if available). This is usually the most important information — it confirms a major-suit game.
- 2nd Bid notrump** with a stopper in the fourth suit. This suggests 3NT as a possible landing spot.
- 3rd Rebid your own suit** to show length (5+ or 6+ cards). Confirms that contract remains an option.

4th Repeat the **second suit** to confirm genuine length there. Shows 5-4 distribution in opener's two suits.

Complete Auction Example

West (Opener)

♠ KQ74
♥ A3
♦ AJ862
♣ 95

13 HCP — 5-4 in diamonds and spades

East (Responder)

♠ J3
♥ KQ875
♦ Q6
♣ AK84

12 HCP — wants to reach the right game

WEST

1♦
1♠
2♥ (3-card heart support!)
Pass

EAST

1♥
2♣ (4th suit — artificial)
4♥ (found the right game)

East could not have known that West held three hearts without FSF. The 2♣ bid gave West the chance to show the heart support, and East placed the final contract correctly.

Without FSF, East would either guess 3NT (wrong — the spade suit needs development), bid 2♥ (non-forcing in some systems), or be stuck.

Example 2: FSF Finds 3NT

West

♠ KQ74
♥ 54
♦ AJ862
♣ AQ

14 HCP — club stopper, 2-card hearts

East

♠ J3
♥ KQ875
♦ Q6
♣ K984

11 HCP

WEST

1♦

1♠

2NT (club stopper, no 3rd heart)

Pass

EAST

1♥

2♣ (4th suit)

3NT (right contract)

West's 2NT rebid shows a club stopper without 3-card heart support. East now knows 3NT is the right spot — hearts likely run for 5 tricks, the suits provide entries, and no major-suit game is available.

When FSF is at the Three Level

Sometimes the fourth suit is only reachable at the three level. The auction 1♥ — 1♠ — 2♦ — 3♣ places the fourth suit at 3♣. This is generally still game-forcing, but it's at a higher level and leaves less room. Most partnerships still treat it as FSF, but be aware the auction has become more committal.

FSF Versus a Natural Bid

The downside of FSF is that you can't bid the fourth suit naturally anymore. If partner opens 1♦, you respond 1♥, opener rebids 1♠, and you have a genuine club suit (♠J3 ♥KQJ87 ♦Q6 ♣KJ75), you can't bid 2♣ to show clubs — your partner will treat it as FSF.

The solution most pairs use: bid the fourth suit as FSF, then follow up by rebidding it to show genuine length. This way, a single fourth-suit bid is always the asking bid; a second bid in that suit shows the real holding.

Showing a Real Fourth Suit

1♦ — 1♥ — 1♠ — 2♣ (FSF) — 2♥ — 3♣ (now natural)

The first 2♣ was FSF. After opener's 2♥ rebid, responder bids 3♣ to show genuine clubs.

This sequence of FSF-then-rebid communicates both the asking need AND the real suit.

Partnership Agreement Checklist

Before using FSF, confirm these points with your partner:

1. **Is FSF at the two level game-forcing or one-round forcing?** (Standard: game-forcing)
2. **Is FSF at the three level also game-forcing?** (Usually yes)
3. **How do we show a genuine fourth suit?** (Bid it again)
4. **What's the priority order for opener's responses?** (Support → NT stopper → rebid suit)

With those answers, you're equipped to use FSF in practice. It's one of those conventions that looks intimidating in theory but feels natural quickly — because it solves real, recurring problems at the table.

Frequently Asked Questions

► **What is fourth suit forcing in bridge?**

► **How does opener respond to fourth suit forcing?**

► **Is fourth suit forcing always game-forcing?**

► **What if I actually have the fourth suit?**

Is This the Right Bid for This Auction?

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