

Bridge Etiquette for Beginners



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Introduction

For many beginners, embarking on regular club play can be rather like going to a smart banquet. Instead of a bewildering array of cutlery, there seems to be a bewildering set of rituals that you are sure you must be breaking. Will the Director be fierce with you when you do? This little booklet is designed not just to calm those fears, but also to make sure that you don't get bamboozled by other players.

Etiquette

The title of this booklet is deliberately misleading. The only example I can think of bridge etiquette not covered by the laws is that it is considered polite for declarer to say "thank you partner" when dummy goes down. Everything else that players think of as etiquette are actually things that the powers that be have decided that we have to do, in a system of laws and regulations.¹

In most clubs you will find that there is quite a bit of give and take on exactly how closely people have to stick to the rules. As a beginner you will mostly have been playing with other beginners and be blissfully unaware of the existence of these rules. Even as you move into playing at your local club, other members will usually be pretty forgiving of your transgressions. However, they may well find them irritating and eventually tell you so, in one way or another. At this point there is a risk that the beginner stops going to the club and tells everyone what an unfriendly place it is.

In fact, bridge is a wonderfully social hobby. I know of a widow who says that bridge was a life-saver for her when her husband died. As well as being supported by her friends at her local club, there are lots of bridge holidays here and abroad which go out of their way to welcome players who come on their own. Also, most clubs around the country, given a few days notice, will find a partner for someone visiting on their own.

This booklet is designed to help you fit in well at your own and other clubs, so that you – and those you play against – can have a relaxed and enjoyable time. As you play more and more, as in life, you will come across a wide selection of people. Some are really friendly and helpful, others might be more reserved, and regrettably some might even try to take advantage of a beginner. To help protect you against the last of these, I am not just going to cover your obligations as a player, but also your rights – to make it harder for others to bamboozle you.

Rules

This booklet makes no pretence to teach you the laws of bridge. In fact you are almost certainly never in your whole playing career ever going to meet anybody who knows them all. But you will come across lots of people who think they do. The

¹ Since this booklet is aimed primarily at beginners, I shall often just say "laws" – or even "rules" – rather than pedantically refer to laws and regulations.

booklet aims to give you enough pointers on when not to rely on advice from your opponents but that you need to call a director.

Your game of bridge is governed by a set of rules. The main ones are published by the World Bridge Federation and the printed version in England runs to a hundred pages. Each country is allowed to have certain variations. The English Bridge Union publishes theirs in two books: the Blue Book of around 30 pages, and the White Book of around 150 pages. The experts in bridge law have great fun arguing amongst themselves as to how some of the laws should be interpreted. On top of that, local clubs are also allowed a few variations too.

The main variation that may affect a beginner is whether you are allowed to look at your “crib sheet” or system card when you are playing. A lot of players will think that you are not allowed, but this is actually one of those variations that is up to the club to decide. So if you want to use your crib sheet, it is best to check with the director beforehand as to whether this is allowed.¹

If you absorb everything in this booklet, then you will know a lot more about the laws of bridge than the vast majority of people you play against. But that does not mean they will welcome you educating them! Aim for give and take and bite your tongue, especially with less experienced players, but stand up for yourself against the sort of player who wants to take advantage of you. The references to the laws and the Blue Book (BB) at the bottom of a page are just there to give you confidence that you are in the right. Copies of the books are available on the web site of the English Bridge Union.

Directors

The director is there to keep things running smoothly. Think of them as a friendly uncle or aunt keeping an eye on the game, rather than as a football referee with a whistle and a red card. They are also human and make mistakes. Unfortunately – and specially if they do not have a copy of the law book with them – they may not know the laws as well as they need to. In general, you just have to live with this as a fact of life. Never be discourteous or argue with the director.² If you feel things have not been dealt with in a fair way, have a quiet word afterwards with a member of the club committee.

At the risk of being too technical, a useful word is “infraction”. It is defined as “a player’s breach of Law or of Lawful regulation”. Saying someone “broke” the laws has connotations of criminal behaviour, so infraction is a much gentler term. Actually, most infractions are the result of an accidental slip of the memory or inattention and occur even amongst otherwise expert players. So do not be embarrassed when it happens to you. The director will not tell you off for making a mistake – they will often have made the same mistake themselves many times before

¹ Law 40B2(b)

² Law 74B5

– their job is to find a way of letting play continue as fairly as possible for all at the table.

However, while we are on this topic, you must never, ever accuse someone of cheating – even when they are! Address what they did, not why they did it.

Spoiling Others' Play

Everyone has come out to enjoy a game of bridge, and we should do our best to help them do so. The most common nuisance is people talking too loudly and distracting others. Directors vary in how stridently they ask players to be less noisy.

A more serious offence is talking loudly about a hand so that it gives information away to people who have not played it yet, such as “I would have made that if I had known you had a singleton king”. It can make it impractical for some other players to play the board. You should be quick to apologise. On most occasions you will just be warned not to do it again, but if people are actually prevented from playing a board, you may find the director reduces your overall score for the session slightly as a way of compensating others for the trouble you have caused.¹

I suspect beginners think there are strange rituals at the table that make little sense, but they have actually evolved as a way of avoiding mistakes that can spoil the play for others. Once you join in these rituals, they become a habit that you do not even realise you are doing.

When you take your cards, count them without looking at them to make sure there are exactly thirteen.² Occasionally a card at the previous table gets put in the wrong pocket. If you have that extra card and it is an ace, you could have unfair knowledge as to who has that card. If that turned out to be the case, the director would then award you 40% for that board and give your opponents 60%. So always count your cards.

When you have finished the board, shuffle your cards before you put them away.³ If you ever pick up a card with ten high card points (HCP) which is sorted into suits, there is a fair chance that the board was passed out at the previous table. That gives you an unfair advantage over other players. Even when the cards are not sorted into suits, an unshuffled hand can often tell you what suit the hand was played in and how declarer went about making their tricks. Again, giving you an unfair advantage over others.

During play, you have to leave the board on the table pointing in the correct direction.⁴ Otherwise, there is a danger that the cards will be put back into the wrong pockets and so played wrongly at subsequent tables. This messes up the results for everyone in the room and is hard work for the director to deal with fairly.

¹ Law 90B3

² Law 7B2

³ Law 7C

⁴ Law 7A

Opening Lead

When you have finished bidding, leave your bidding cards on the table until the opening lead has been made.¹ The person leading may need to think about the implications of the bidding before choosing their lead. Develop the habit of always leaving them out, even if an opening 1NT was passed out – it is not up to you to decide whether or not an opponent should be reminded of the bids.

If you are making the opening lead, you take out the card and put it face down on the table.² This is to give people an opportunity to stop you making the lead when, in fact, it is your partner who should be leading – in which case you can put the card safely back in your hand. If the wrong opponent makes the opening lead face up, then always call the director. The director will give the declarer five choices. An opening lead is usually chosen so as to give the defender's partner useful information about the leader's hand. The five choices are designed to give some compensation to the declarer and it is only fair for the declarer to take advantage of that.

Occasionally, during play, a defender's partner will lead to the next trick when it should be their partner to do so. Again, that gives information to their partner and declarer should call for the director who, this time, gives them four choices. We will talk about the declarer playing from the wrong hand later.

Questions

Part of the ritual of the opening lead is that the card is not turned over until the leader's partner has asked any questions that they want to. Beginners playing with beginners rarely have the need to ask questions and so find the process rather bizarre. However, out in a club you may find players whose bids mean something completely different to your own. It is not uncommon, for example, for an opening bid of 1♣ to be made with only two clubs. The system of alerts and announcements – which we will deal with later – only gives you partial warning of what is going on. Fortunately, you are entitled to know what the bids mean in your opponent's system. That is not what cards they have in their hand! Just generally what information their partner should gain from their bid. In theory, everyone should have a system card describing what their bids mean; in practice they are absent at many clubs. If you notice that your opponents do have a system card, then it is very likely they are playing something a bit more complicated than you are used to. Before you start playing, it may be wise to ask them what system they are playing. After that, there are rules about when you can ask. I'll give an example.

The first “conventional” bid a beginner comes across is the use of Stayman i.e. an artificial bid of 2♣ over 1NT to ask whether partner has a 4+ card major. Nowadays, your partner has to announce that this is Stayman. What if 2♣ is bid but their partner does not announce it as Stayman? Have they forgotten to announce it? Have they forgotten that they are playing Stayman and are assuming it is a natural bid of a club

¹ BB 3Z C 1

² Law 41

suit? Or perhaps they do not play Stayman and they both know it is showing a club suit? Playing against them the answer might affect how you bid. In which case, when it is your turn to bid (and not until then) you can ask the partner of the person who bid the 2♣ what the bid meant. In this case, the question is often put as “is that natural”.

On the other hand, if you are not planning to bid there is no point in waking them up if they are sleepwalking into a series of mistaken bids – just quietly pass. At the end of the bidding, defenders get the opportunity to ask what any or all of the opponents’ bids meant. If you are on lead, you do so before making your lead face down. If you are not on lead, then you do so after the lead is made face down and before it is turned over. If the lead is made face up, you are not allowed to ask questions.

You are entitled to a full explanation of what a bid means. Answers such as “Benji”, “multi” or “precision” are not full answers. If you need to know, ask for more detail. People are entitled to use systems that they think will give them an advantage over other players, but they are not allowed to gain an unfair advantage by not telling the full story. Stand up for your rights!

Sometimes, when your partner is asked a question during the bidding, they may give the wrong answer. I’m afraid you are not allowed to correct them until much later. If your side ends up declaring, then you must tell the opposition before they make the opening lead face down. Otherwise, as defenders you tell the opposition at the end of the play. If the opposition have been misled by your answer, the director can adjust the result to make things fair.

You are also allowed to ask questions during play, although only when it is your turn to play a card. Late in the session, the most common question may be “what contract are we in?”. Otherwise, the most asked question is the declarer saying “do you have a discard system?” The time to ask this is when an opponent has discarded and everyone has turned their cards face down. The reason you wait is that there is a fair chance that their partner has not noticed what card was discarded and, once all the cards are face down, none of them can be shown to any other player. As with bids, you are entitled to a full answer: if you do not know what “McKenney” means, you are entitled to know.

Mistakes in Bidding

As a beginner, you may find it difficult to decide what to bid. But you are not allowed to say to your partner, “I’m not sure whether to open one diamond or one no trump”. Nor can you do it with bidding cards: you cannot pull out the one diamond card, and then put it back and take out the one no trump card. Decide what you are going to bid before you put your hand anywhere near the bidding box and then take the bid cleanly out.¹ If you start to pull out the pass card and then change and pull out another bid, it looks as though you are saying to your partner “well, I’m making this bid but I’m not very strong so please do not raise me unless you have a very good hand”.

¹ BB 3 Z A 2

That can create a lot of bad feeling, so get into the habit of thinking before you put your hand towards the box.

Playing with other beginners you may have got away with changing your mind about what you wanted to bid, but in club play once a bid is made then you are not allowed to change your mind. However, occasionally you may pull out the wrong card, for example bidding Stayman over 1NT you may accidentally pull out the 3C card. Immediately you realise what you have done, say so. It may be possible for you to change your bid. Other players may tell you that you are not allowed to. Just say that you would like to have that explained to you and call the director. The laws on this have changed over the years and there is a chance that your opponents are not aware of what is now allowed – you just have to hope that the director is.¹

If someone bids when it is not their turn, then always call the director. The bid, even if it is a pass² has given information to their partner. Ways of dealing with this in as fair a way as possible have evolved over the years and changed quite recently.³ A director will usually need to refer to the law book to tell you what to do, so do not assume that your opponents will be right.

Occasionally someone may make an insufficient bid: for example dealer opens 1♠ and the next player bids 1♥. The laws on insufficient bids have changed recently and are now considered the most difficult thing a director has to deal with – so be slow to accept advice from your opponents!⁴ The first point to make is that, however surprising it may be, the third player could accept that 1♥ bid and then even bid 1♠ themselves, which they can find very helpful. If the 1♥ bid is not accepted then they can replace it with 2♥ and bidding continues as though nothing happened. But if they want to do anything else, or the insufficient bid was not a natural one then call the director so that they can explain the implications of the choices that can be made.

You may find that the opponents tell you that, if you do certain things, you or your partner will not be allowed to make any further bids. They may be right, but always call the director and get them to explain your options.

Misinformation

Partnerships sometimes forget their own system. For example, you may ask what the 4NT bid meant and be told Blackwood when, in fact, they are using Roman Key Card Blackwood. Or there may be no alert or announcement of a 2♦ bid which you assumed was a weak two but, in fact, it was a Multi two diamond bid. In these cases you have been misinformed.

If those who misinformed you end up as the declaring side, then they must give you the correct information before the opening lead is made (face down). If you feel that you would have bid differently with the correct information, then call the director

¹ Law 25A

² Technically a Pass is not a “bid” it is a “call”, but you probably did not want to know that.

³ Laws 29-32

⁴ Law 27

who will explain what can be done to put matters right. However, if it was the defending side that gave the wrong information they must wait until the end of the play before telling their opponents.¹

Alerts and Announcements

The alert card is used to warn your opponents that your bid is not what it might appear. However, in recent years, the English Bridge Union has replaced some of the alerts with announcements. In both cases, it is the partner of the player who made the bid that makes the alert or announcement.

Exactly what gets announced is not always “obvious” and changes from time to time but here are the most common ones that will be used by a beginner:

- Announce the high card point range of an opening 1NT
- Alert your 2♣ opening bid
- Announce whether your opening 2♦, 2♥ and 2♠ are weak or strong
- Announce any use of Stayman or transfers

Bids over 3NT – which includes any version of Blackwood – are not announced. A little strangely, a jump overcall – whether weak or strong – is neither alerted nor announced.

Dummy

After being told that when you are bidding or defending you must remember that bridge is a partnership game, it can be a surprise at just how much the declarer is on their own. The dummy’s job is to play the card that the declarer tells them to, and to place it in front of themselves at the correct angle to show whether the trick was won or lost.² And that is almost all they are allowed to do.

One of the few things dummy can do is to intervene to avoid revokes by the declarer. If declarer plays a spade from hand then calls for a heart from dummy, despite dummy having a spade, dummy should point this out. Similarly if declarer fails to follow suit in hand, dummy can ask “having none” to make sure they haven’t revoked. But dummy cannot do the same if they notice a revoke by a defender, they have to wait until the end of the hand before they say anything.³

In fact, dummy is not allowed to draw attention to any other infraction. Most players are not aware of this. A common mistake is when the declarer should be leading from their hand but, instead, calls for a card from dummy. Dummy must just play the card. Without making any comment. The opponents then get the choice of whether to accept that lead or insist on the lead coming from the declarer’s hand. Similarly,

¹ Laws 20F and 21

² Law 42A

³ Law 42B1

when the lead should be from dummy but is made from the declarer's hand, dummy stays quiet.¹

Although dummy cannot draw attention to a mistake once it is made, they can try to prevent a mistake being made by declarer – but they have to be quick. If the lead should be from dummy, but you see them start to pull a card from their hand you can say something like “you're on table partner” but if they actually play the card then it is too late to say anything.²

Cards are played from dummy by the declarer saying which card they want played.³ I am not the only one who finds it annoying if declarer plays by touching the cards in dummy and it is only permitted in exceptional circumstances such as the dummy having to leave the table for some reason.

It should go without saying that dummy cannot suggest to their partner what cards are to be played from dummy. Personally, when dummy, if the only cards in a suit are all touching in value then I automatically play the lowest – and I have never had an opponent complain. However, if they are not touching and despite knowing that the missing ones have been played, I still wait until declarer tells me which card to play. If declarer calls for, say, a club from dummy without saying which one, then dummy just plays the lowest and does not ask which one.⁴

Mistakes in Play

People are often embarrassed when they revoke i.e. fail to follow suit. But it is quite a common occurrence and every director should know what to do without referring to the law book. Many years ago there were strict penalties – in the form of removing tricks from the revoking side – for revoking. Nowadays, you may or may not get a penalty; it is all designed to be as fair as is reasonably practical. However, not everybody knows the modern laws, so always call the director to tell you what to do.⁵ There should be no need for the director to look at the face of any cards that have already been played. However, it will help them if you can point to the card that was incorrectly played and say whether that card won the trick.

Most importantly, as soon as you know there has been a revoke, say so. (Except for the dummy who is not allowed to alert players to a revoke until the hand is finished). If the revoke is noticed soon enough, things can be put right without any penalty.

If a declarer shows his hand to the opponents, then that would be a strange thing to do but it gains them no advantage, so no action is taken. However, it is quite a different matter if a defender shows their partner a card which is not played immediately. This can happen for a variety of reasons: revokes, leads out of turn and simply accidentally dropping a card. Most players will tell you that this becomes a

¹ Law 42B3

² Law 42B2

³ Law 45B

⁴ Law 46B2

⁵ Laws 61-64

“major penalty card”: you have to leave the card face up on the table and play it at the first possible opportunity. They are quite correct, but that is not the whole story. If the partner of the person with the penalty card comes on lead while the penalty card is still on the table, they must first give the declarer the option of exercising what is called their “lead restriction” rights. These are spelled out when there is a lead out of turn, but not many people realise that they apply in other circumstances, too. Declarer has three choices: (1) they can insist on a lead of the same suit as the penalty card, at which the penalty card goes back into the player’s hand and they can play whatever card they wish at their turn, (2) they can insist that the lead not be of the same suit as the penalty card, at which the penalty card again goes back into the player’s hand and they can play whatever card they wish at their turn, or (3) just leave things as they are with the penalty card being played at the first opportunity. You might surprise people if you exercise your own rights as I’ve rarely seen it happen at club play.

Hesitation

Hesitations are probably the biggest minefield for any beginner as they enter club play. Keen to get things right, they spend even longer making sure they are making the right bid – and may be so engrossed that they do not even notice the time passing by. The problem is that more experienced players are used to faster bidding. They think that when a player spends a lot of time thinking it is because they have more or less equally attractive options to choose from. So, if a beginner has a long pause before bidding, and they then pass, people assume that there was something to think about.

This is exactly the same situation as if the bidder’s hand had wandered through the cards in the bidding box before finally settling on the green Pass card. Suppose the bidding had been:

1♥-1♠-Pass (after a long pause)-2♠-3♥

The question would be whether the 3♥ was in part based on the fact that their partner must have something worth thinking about? If so, this would clearly be taking an unfair advantage.

To compensate for this the partner of the one who took a long pause has to “bend over backwards” not to be seen as taking advantage of the pause. It is not enough to say “I would have bid that anyway”. They need to be able to say, “surely, anybody holding my hand would have bid that over a pass from partner”. It is a big hurdle, but that is the one that has been set – and good players with hesitating partners live with it day by day.

If there is a hesitation, your opponents may want to register the fact in case they feel some advantage was given by it. They would usually ask for confirmation that there had been a hesitation and may then say they “reserve their rights”. This is just a warning that if they feel after seeing the play of the hand that your bid was not an obvious one, they may ask the director to decide whether it really was obvious and ask for the score to be adjusted if appropriate.

If they tell you that you cannot bid because your partner hesitated, do not argue, just call the director. It is just not as simple as that and you need proper advice.

Claims

Saying “the rest of the tricks are mine” or “I’ll give you the heart” can cause a beginner to scratch their head and they may even think it is rude. However, the reverse may be the case for more experienced players who consider it tedious to watch the declarer play winner after winner.

If you think that the declarer is wrong and that you can take more tricks than they are suggesting, do not ask the declarer what he plans to do and do not agree to play out the hand; just call the director. Unless the declarer has said exactly how they will make the tricks when they made their claim, the director will assume that the declarer will be careless (although not stupid) in their play – for example failing to draw the last trump, which then enables you to ruff their master in another suit. Otherwise, having been alerted to the fact that they had forgotten your trump, the declarer may say that they had, of course, intended to draw it out!¹

Director, Please!

I have remembered: there is another piece of etiquette not covered by the laws. It is generally considered bad manners to just call out “Director”. You need to add a “Please”. In some clubs it is even considered bad manners to call “Director”; they prefer you to call the director by name.

Also, it is much better if the person who made the mistake makes that call – it is better to confess than accuse.

Finally

As your experience and confidence grow, you may become willing to resolve minor infractions with your opponents but you very much have the law on your side for that call of “Director, Please”.

Law 81 states that:

The Director (not the players) has the responsibility for rectifying irregularities and redressing damage.

Moreover, the Laws and Ethics Committee of the English Bridge Union strongly recommends that you call the Director immediately in the following cases:

- When there is a defender's exposed card
- When an opponent has corrected any information he or his partner has given – and this includes saying that something should or should not have been alerted.
- When there is any bad behaviour.
- When there has been an insufficient bid.

¹ Law 70

- When there is a dispute over a claim
- When a player can't (or won't) answer questions about the meaning of a call (or play).

The reason is that failing to do so can result in much worse problems later in the hand.

As you look around you, however nice everyone may seem, remember that the only true friends you may have are your partner and the Director. Everyone else is likely to benefit by you underperforming at the table. The Director's job is to give you a fair chance of doing as well as you can, even when mistakes are made.