

Bridge Basics

The Players:

Bridge is a card game played by 4 people in 2 pairs or partnerships. Partners sit across the table from each other. One pair is the North/South pair and the other is the East/West pair.

The Cards:

The card deck consists of 52 cards in 4 suits: clubs, diamonds, hearts and spades. There are 13 cards in each suit. Five are known as honor cards: Ace, King, Queen, Jack and Ten. The other eight are called spot cards: the 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3 and 2. Their rank from strongest to weakest is A K Q J T 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2.

The Deal:

Each player gets 13 cards. Keep your cards to yourself; do not show them to the other players. At home, one player is the dealer. The dealer shuffles the deck of cards and has them cut by the player to the right. The dealer deals out one card at a time to each player in clockwise rotation starting with the player to the left until all the cards are dealt out ending at the dealer. At a duplicate bridge club, the cards are usually pre-dealt prior to the start of the game and passed from table to table in a carrying tray.

The Play:

A card is led (put on the table) by one player. Each player in turn, clockwise, plays a card until all 4 players have played. Each set of 4 cards played by the 4 players in this manner is called a "trick". If no trump card is played, the highest card in the suit that was led wins the trick. If a trump card is played, the highest trump card wins the trick. You must follow suit if you have a card in the suit that was led. If you cannot follow suit, you can play a trump card to attempt to win the trick or play any other card (which will not win the trick). The player winning a trick plays first to the next trick. Each player has 13 cards, so there will be 13 tricks. After the first trick is finished, turn your card face down on the table in front of you. Point the card in your pair's direction (vertical) if your side won it, in the opponents' direction (horizontal) if they won it. Do the same for each subsequent trick, offsetting it a bit from the previous trick. After all 13 tricks are completed, you will have a row of cards in front of you, some pointed vertical and some horizontal. This allows you to keep track of the tricks won/lost by your partnership (and to resolve any disagreement that might arise).



At the end of a hand, your cards should look something like this on the table in front of you.

The Auction:

Each bridge hand begins with an auction where a player indicates the number of tricks the pair expects to make (the level) with a particular suit as trump or with no trump suit (the denomination). Players bid more or less according to the number of cards they hold in a suit and the strength of their hand. The dealer is the first to bid. Each subsequent player in clockwise rotation then makes a bid. The suits rank in alphabetical order: Clubs (lowest), Diamonds, Hearts, Spades (highest). No trump ranks higher than any suit. Each bid must be higher than the previous bid, or a player can pass if the bidding has gotten too high for them. The lowest bid is 1 Club (1C). The next higher bid is 1 Diamond (1D). The highest bid at the 1 level is 1 No Trump (1NT or 1N). Any bid at the 2 level is higher than any bid at the 1 level. The full sequence of bids from lowest to highest is:

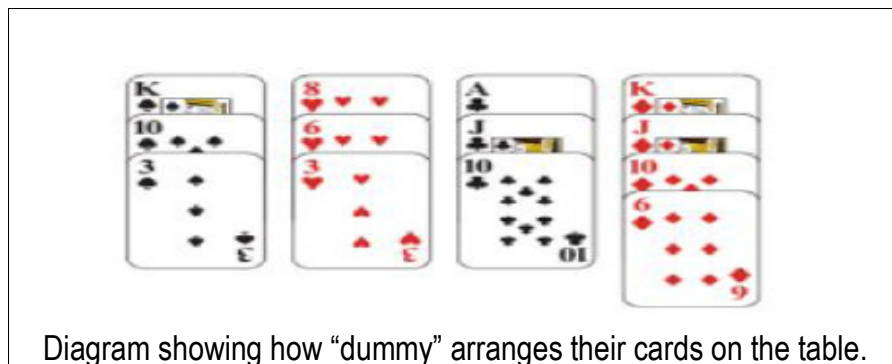
1C 1D 1H 1S 1N
2C 2D 2H 2S 2N
etc
7C 7D 7H 7S 7N.

The auction ends when each player has had at least one turn to bid and 3 players in succession have passed. The pair that makes the highest bid wins the auction. Their last bid becomes the contract.

The bids range from 1 to 7, but there are 13 tricks. Why is there a mismatch? The first 6 tricks do not count towards the contract. A contract of 1S is a contract to take 7 tricks. A contract of 3N is a contract to take 9 tricks. A contract at the 7 level is a contract to take all 13 tricks.

Declarer & Dummy:

The pair that wins the auction is said to play or "declare" the hand. The player of this pair who first mentioned the winning denomination (a suit or no trump) becomes the "declarer". The other pair are the "defenders". The defender to the left of the declarer makes the opening lead, the lead to the first trick. The partner of the declarer becomes the "dummy". This player places his/her cards face up on the table, pointed towards the declarer, aligned in suits with the trump suit to the right if there is one. The dummy does not choose which card to play; dummy must play the card that the declarer indicates. Declarer plays both hands for the declaring side. It is an advantage for the declarer to be able to see all 26 cards for their side. Declarer plays last to the first trick. You will soon realize that it is an advantage to play last to a trick.



Scoring:

You score points if you win the auction and make your stated contract. You lose points if you win the auction but do not make your contract. You will want to bid as high as you can make, but no higher. You make a large bonus if you bid and make a game contract: (3NT, 4S, 4H, 5D or 5C). You make another large bonus if you bid and make a contract at the 6 level, a "small slam". You make an even larger "grand slam" bonus if you bid and make a contract at the 7 level. See the Bridge Scoring handout for the full details.

No Trump Scoring: When playing in NT, the first trick is worth 40 points and subsequent tricks are worth 30. You need 100 points for game. You need to bid and make 3NT, $40+30+30 = 100$ points, for a game.

Major Suit Scoring: Spades and hearts are called "major" suits. They score 30 points per trick. Bidding and making 4S or 4H, $4 \times 30 = 120$ points, is a game.

Minor Suit Scoring: Diamonds and clubs are called the "minor" suits. They score 20 points per trick. You need to bid and make 5D or 5C, $5 \times 20 = 100$ points, for a game.

Bidding Systems:

Bridge players have developed and evolved many different bidding systems over the years. The "Standard American" system was the most popular in North America from about 1950 to 2000. Since then the "2 over 1 Game Forcing" system, which is very similar to Standard American, has gradually taken over as the most popular system in North American duplicate bridge.

Within a bidding system there can be many bells, whistles, additions, modifications that a partnership can use. Beginning bridge players would do well to keep their bidding system natural and simple at first. As you and your partner gain experience over time, you can decide which extra features you would like to gradually add to your bidding agreements.