Pre-emptive Bidding

What is a pre-emptive Bid?

A pre-emptive bid is an opening bid, usually of three of a suit, though in cases where you have more length in the suit it could be an opening bid of 4.

Why make a pre-emptive bid?

The theory is that if you have a weak hand, and your partner has either not bid or hasn't had the chance to bid, then there is a good chance that your opponents have the values for game. The purpose of the pre-emptive bid is to get in the way of your opponents. If you have a hand with fewer than 10 points and a seven card suit, by opening at the three level you deny your opponents the bidding space to describe their hands accurately. At the same time, because you have a long suit which will take several tricks when it is the trump suit, you minimize the chances of facing a very large penalty (more of this later).

What do you need to make a pre-emptive bid?

The pre-emptive bid is usually made with a weak hand and with seven cards in the suit.

For example, ♠ K Q J 9 8 7 6 ♥ J 2 ♦ 7 6 2 ♣ 4

The timing of your pre-emptive bid

The art of pre-empting is to know when to make the bid.

If you are the first person to bid, you should simply use the standard rule of bidding pre-empts – see below.

If you are in second position, you should be very careful – because there has been one pass, you are very likely to be pre-empting your partner. If you are vulnerable, you should certainly not pre-empt when sitting second unless you have at least a standard pre-empt hand. There's nothing more frustrating than sitting there with a really big hand and hearing your partner open with a pre-empt! If you are that partner, you should have reasonable values for your bid.

If you are in third position and there have been two passes, any bid you make will be disruptive, and therefore it is worth bidding on rather fewer points and a rather poorer suit.

Pre-empting in fourth position happens only rarely, and most people would say you should upgrade your hand and open with a bid of one of the suit.
The **standard strength and length** required by a pre-emptive bidder is **2 of the top 3 honours in a suit, seven cards in the suit, and between 6 and 9 points**. Here are examples of hands which you would open with a bid of 3 -

1. ♠️ K Q J 9 8 7 6 ♥️ J 2 ♦️ 7 6 2 ♣️ 4  
   (Open all these hands with a 3 level bid in any position)

2. ♠️ 7 4 ♥️ A Q 7 6 5 4 2 ♦️ 4 3 ♣️ K 2

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

Here are examples of hands which are **too strong** to open with a pre-emptive bid:

1. ♠️ K Q J 8 7 6 4 ♥️ J 2 ♦️ 3 ♣️ A 4 2

2. ♠️ 7 ♥️ A K 10 7 6 5 4 ♦️ K 7 4 2 ♣️ 3

3. ♠️ A Q J 7 5 4 2 ♥️ K 2 ♦️ J 4 3 2

**You would open all the above hands with a bid of 1 of suit**, even though they have fewer points than you think you need.

Here are examples of hands which are **too weak** to open with a pre-emptive bid **unless you are not vulnerable and there have been two passes**:

1. ♠️ Q J 7 6 4 3 2 ♥️ J 10 4 ♦️ 6 3 ♣️ J

2. ♠️ A 10 9 7 6 5 4 ♥️ Q ♦️ 10 4 3 ♣️ 6 4 (6 points – but Q♥️ can hardly be counted)

3. ♠️ 7 4 ♥️ K J 10 7 6 5 4 ♦️ 6 5 ♣️ J 10

You should always **be more cautious in your bidding when you are vulnerable** – if you were to be doubled and it was left in, the penalty could be very big. On marginal hands you can be **more ambitious when you are not vulnerable**.

**Bidding on as the partner of the pre-emptive bidder.**

This is a difficult area. If your partner is bidding in third seat, you **will already have passed - there is no way you should bid on. Your partner may be very weak for their bid.** If your partner is bidding in first or second position, you should be able to expect them to have 6 – 9 points and two of the top three honours in the suit bid. You need to assess your hand in the light of your partner's hand.

See the example below for the pitfalls of bidding over partner’s pre-emptive opener.
A common mistake is to bid 3 No Trumps opposite a 3♣ pre-empt with a hand like this:

♠ 6 ♥ A Q 10 7 ♦ A K 10 3 ♣ A Q 7 6

This hand has 19 points, and two stops in each of the un-bid suits. There are plenty of points between the hands. However, suppose these are the four hands at the table:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>North - dealer</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>♠ K Q J 9 8 7 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>♥ 9 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>♦ 7 6 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>♣ 4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>West</td>
<td>♠ 4</td>
<td>♥ K J 6</td>
<td>♦ Q 4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>♣ K J 10 9 8 5 3</td>
<td>Not Vulnerable</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>East</td>
<td>♠ A 10 3 2</td>
<td>♥ 8 5 4 3</td>
<td>♦ J 9 8 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>♣ 2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not Vulnerable</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>South</td>
<td>♠ 5</td>
<td>♥ A Q 10 7</td>
<td>♦ A K 10 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>♣ A Q 7 6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Vulnerable</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

On the lead of the 9 ♠ you would only make five tricks because when South leads 5♠ East knows that South has no more spades and it is safe to take the Ace on the first round. South has no entry to cash the two spade tricks that have been set up. You would be playing the hand entirely out of the South hand.

**The correct bid over the 3♣ pre-empt is for South to bid 4♠.** This has a very good chance of making, since South should make 5 or 6 spade tricks, A♥ AK♦ and A♠ with several chances to make another trick.

However, change the S hand to: ♠ A 4 ♥ A 4 2 ♦ Q J 5 4 ♣ A 7 3 2 and Three No Trumps becomes almost a certainty even though you only have 15 points.

The point of these hands is that South should be able to know what North holds for their pre-empt if they are bidding in 1st or 2nd position. In this case, because North has been the opening bidder they should have 6 – 9 points and 2 of the top 3 honours in spades. This means that when, as here, South has the A♠ and another spade, South should usually make seven spade tricks.

Bidding opposite a pre-empt in diamonds or clubs is more difficult, because to make a game with these suits as trumps means making 11 tricks. **Bidding 3 No Trumps however opposite 3 clubs or 3 diamonds is still only likely to be a good bet if you have at least two cards in your partner's pre-emptive suit.** With only two, one should be an honour – otherwise as in the example above you may never be able to make tricks from the long pre-emptive suit.
Defence to a Pre-empt

When and how do you bid when the opposition has opened with a pre-empt and you are sitting over the pre-emptive bid?

We started with the fact that the purpose of a pre-emptive bid is to prevent your opponents from reaching their best contract. By bidding at the 3 level, you deny them bidding space to find out what their best contract is. If we now switch sides, and become those opponents, you now have to decide how to counteract this pre-emptive bid. Bidding over a pre-emptive bid follows roughly the same lines as bidding over a one-level bid, but because you are bidding at a higher level you have to be careful about overcalling. You must also watch the vulnerability and be even more cautious if you are vulnerable.

Make a take-out double as you would after a one-level opening bid with 14 or more points, a shortage in the bid suit and tolerance for the other three suits.

Make an overcall with a six card or good five card suit and about 15 – 18 points. With 18 or more points and a good six card suit you can make a jump overcall.

With a balanced 16+ point hand, a stop, or preferably two stops, in the pre-empted suit, bid 3 No Trumps. With only one stop in the pre-empted suit this might be taking a risk, but it will usually be worth it.

What if you want to double the person who has pre-empted for penalties? (by this, you mean you think the person who has pre-empted is not going to make the contract and you want to increase the penalty on them). A double after a pre-empt is always, initially for take-out, so that as the partner of the person doubling you are obliged to bid, however poor your hand is. The only exception to this is when the partner of the person who has doubled has very good values in the pre-emptive suit. In that case, the double can be left in for penalties.

Your right hand opponent opens 3H. What do you bid with:

1) ♠ AKJ8 ♥98 ♦KJ98 ♣ Q98
2) ♠ KQ73 ♥64 ♦AQ76 ♣ 843
3) ♠ KQJ64 ♥AJ1032 ♦ A ♣ K7
4) ♠ AK7 ♥64 ♦ AQJ943 ♣ AQ
5) ♠ KQ5 ♥AJ3 ♦KJ98 ♣ K87

1) Double. Your expectation is that partner bids their best suit.
2) Pass. You do not have a long suit, and you do not have enough points to double.
3) You want to double for penalties, but if you double your partner will bid a suit. Your choice is between bidding 3 No Trumps, bidding 4♦ or not bidding at all, knowing that the pre-emptive bidder is going to go down. I would bid 4♦ because of the singleton diamond and doubleton club.
4) you should bid 4 D, and if your partner has got anything you should hope that they raise you to 5 D.
5) you should bid 3 No Trumps. It is a good if not certain contract.
Consider these examples:

1. Suppose you are North, East has pre-empted with 3D, South has doubled and West has passed.
You hold: ♠ Q 10 7 4 ♥ A ♦ K 10 4 3 ♣ J 10 4 2 What should you bid?

Your partner has support for all three un-bid suits, you have diamonds, plus a singleton heart. They have at least 14 points and a shortage in diamonds.
**You could on this hand leave the double in for penalties.**

2. Suppose you are North. East has pre-empted with 3S, and South has bid 4D.
You hold ♣ 10 9 5 ♥ 6 4 ♦ 7 6 5 4 ♠ A K Q What should you bid?
Your partner should be showing 16+ points, plus a shortage in Spades. They will have a good diamond suit, almost certainly six headed by the AK. They are unlikely to hold more than one spade.
**You should bid 5 D.**

3. Suppose you are North. East has pre-empted with 3H, and South and West have passed.
You hold ♠ A K J 7 6 5 ♥ 9 ♥ A J 4 ♦ A J 3 What should you bid?
You have a good six card spade suit, a single heart, and the A of the other two suits.
**You are good enough to bid 4♠.**

Pre-empting and bidding on after a pre-empt is challenging.