

# Introduction to Bridge Scoring and Bidding

By Matthew Kidd

Bridge is about taking tricks. On each hand, one partnership promises (“contracts”) to take at least a certain number of tricks, often aided by a trump suit but sometimes without the help of a trump suit, i.e. in a *notrump* contract. Each trick taken beyond the 6<sup>th</sup> trick is worth a small amount: 20 points if the trump suit is clubs or diamonds, 30 if the trump suit is hearts or spades, and 30 if there is no trump suit, except that in no trump the first trick is worth 40 points.

But the big money comes from the *game bonus* of 300 or 500 when the value of your tricks equals or exceeds 100. Therefore the minimum game levels are:

|       |                           |                                    |
|-------|---------------------------|------------------------------------|
| 3 NT  | $40 + 30 + 30 = 100$      | NT = no trump                      |
| 4♠/4♥ | $30 \times 4 = 120 > 100$ | ♠ and ♥ are the <i>major</i> suits |
| 5♦/5♣ | $20 \times 5 = 100$       | ♦ and ♣ are the <i>minor</i> suits |

You must bid to the game level or higher to get the game bonus. For example, if you bid to 3♠ and take 10 tricks, you will only score  $4 \times 30 = 120$  + the small *part-score bonus* of 50 points for a total of 170. Bidding 4♠ and taking the same 10 tricks would have been worth either 420 or 620 ( $4 \times 30 + 300$  or 500).

The different game bonus values depend on something called the *vulnerability* which comes from the old *rubber bridge* form of scoring. A *rubber* ends after one partnership scores two *games*. After winning one game, a partnership is said to be *vulnerable*. In tournament play the vulnerability is simply assigned for each hand. In this class everyone is always *non-vulnerable* until we tell you otherwise, i.e. the game bonus of 300 applies.

If you fail to make your contract, penalties apply: 50 points for each trick you fall short (each *undertrick*) if non-vulnerable and 100 if vulnerable. These penalties are severely increased if the contract is *doubled* by opponents who believe the contract will fail (more on this later); however the reward for making a doubled contract increases.

If you bid to the six level, promising to take all but one trick, and make your contract, a *slam bonus* (500 or 750) applies in addition to the game bonus. If you bid to the seven level, promising to take all the tricks, and make it, a *grand slam* bonus (1000 or 1500) applies. This is rare.

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Bidding is a discussion between you and your partner about how high to bid and what to choose as the trump suit (if you choose to have a trump suit). The opponents are having a similar discussion. Sometimes the discussion is rather one-sided; other times it is very competitive.

Collectively the four suits plus no-trump are called *denominations*. During the *auction*, the allowed actions (termed *calls*) are either a number and a denomination stated together, e.g. 1♣ or 3 NT (termed a *bid*), Pass, Double, or Redouble (more on *double* and *redouble* later). If a bid is made and the next three players pass, that bid becomes the contract, e.g. 3 NT means your side will play without the aid of a trump suit and needs to take at least 9 ( $6 + 3$ ) tricks to succeed. Why  $6+3$ ? Think about it this way: if your partnership is on offense, your partnership should be taking at least the half the tricks, i.e.  $13/2 = 6\frac{1}{2}$ ; however, there is no such thing as a half of a trick; therefore the cheapest commitment is 7 tricks and that is what a one level bid means.

Each bid must be higher than the previous bid. The order of the denominations from lowest to highest is: clubs, diamonds, hearts, spades, no trump. A useful mnemonic is that the suit order is alphabetical: C, D, H, S. For example, you may bid 3♦ over 3♣, but to bid clubs over 3♦, you must bid at least 4♣. Keep in mind that good poker players know when to fold'em; good bridge players know when to pass (or sometimes double). Pass is the hardest call to master.

You may bid any *sufficient* bid at your turn, i.e. one that is high enough. But crazy bids will probably confuse your partner and/or do more damage to your side than the opponents. Don't worry though – there are aggressive bids you can make with the right sort of hand that will not confuse partner and will make life difficult for the opponents. These bids are part of the fun and competition of bridge.

There are many bidding dialects. The words are always the same but the meaning conveyed varies. A dialect (*system*) called Precision is popular in Asia. ACOL is popular in England. We are teaching you Standard American. Regardless of the dialect the two goals are determining how high to bid and in what denomination. Broken down further, the goals of all bidding dialects are to:

1. Determine whether to bid game or not (and much less often slam / grand slam)
2. Find an 8 card or longer heart or spade fit (a *golden fit*) and choose that suit as trump.
3. Play in no trump if there is no 8-card or better fit between your two hands.
4. Choose between no trump and clubs/diamonds if your trump fit is in clubs/diamonds.
5. (Advanced) Find *sacrifice* contracts where you expect to go down but nonetheless suffer a smaller penalty (even doubled) than the reward the opponents will get if let to play.

Why 8+ cards to play in a trump suit? If you only have a 7 card fit, the opponents have 6 of your trump and that will makes things difficult for you. You may not control your own trump suit!

Three major things help you take tricks: high cards (aces, kings, etc), long suits, and **useful** short suits, much as advantages in material, position, and tempo win chess games. There are various *point count* systems to help you estimate your side's trick taking potential. The common one, which we teach is:

1. Count high cards points (HCPs) for each ace (4 pts), king (3 pts), queen (2 pts), jack (1 pt).
2. Add length points, one for each card beyond the fourth card, in each long suit.
3. Add *dummy points* **after a trump fit is found**: 5 for each *void* (missing suit), 3 for each *singleton* (one card suit), 1 for a *doubleton* (two card suit) outside the trump suit. When counting dummy points, ignore length points.

Experience shows that most of the time you can make 3 NT, 4♠, or 4♥ with 25-26 points. Making 5♦ or 5♣, a *minor suit* game, usually requires 28-29 points. Slam usually requires about 33 points. Extreme length in a suit can lower these estimates quite a bit.

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The first player to make a *bid*, as opposed to a Pass (which is a *call*, not a *bid*), is said to have opened the bidding. You should have 13+ points to do this. Both these hands qualify: ♠ A843 ♥ KQ87 ♦ 94 ♣ AT4 and ♠ A843 ♥ KQ876 ♦ 94 ♣ KT, the first because it has 13 hcp and the second because it has 12 hcp and one *length point* for the five card heart suit. Here are the guidelines for opening the bidding, listed in order of priority.

1. (Advanced) with 23+ hcp, open 2♣. This is a special bid. Ask a teacher for help.
2. With 15-17 hcp and at least two cards in every suit (*balanced shape*), open 1 NT.
3. With 20-21 hcp and at least two cards in every suit (*balanced shape*), open 2 NT.
4. Open 1♥ or 1♠ if you have **at least five cards** in hearts or spades (the *major suits*).
5. Open 1♦ if you have four diamonds and four clubs.
6. Open your longer minor (diamonds or clubs). Open the better suit with three of each.
7. (Advanced) with a decent 6 card suit (except clubs) and 6-11 hcp, open at the two level, a *preemptive* bid, intended to jam the opponent's discussion. With 7 cards, preempt at the 3 level.

Modern Standard American bidding is based on **five card majors**. When you hold a hand like ♠ A843 ♥ KQ87 ♦ 94 ♣ AT4, you must open 1♣ even though the heart and spade suits are longer. This is fine. Your partner will know that your minor suit may be as short as three cards and will bid accordingly.