



Intermediate- Lesson 3

Basic Principles of Bidding

Before we get stuck into detail about bidding systems, let's look today at some over-riding principles. They will help us understand what we're trying to achieve, and why we approach things the way we do.

High Card Point Count

We are all used to counting our High Card Points (HCP), and it's the first thing we should do once we've sorted our hand: 4 for an Ace, 3 for a King, 2 for a Queen, and 1 for a Jack. We know there are 40 HCP in the pack, so an average hand will have 10 HCP.

But as we progress through our lessons, we will see that the system, though very useful, isn't quite perfect. It slightly undervalues Aces and Kings, and slightly overvalues Queens and Jacks. And it describes only one feature of a hand of cards: it doesn't assess the value of SHAPE, for example – long suits, voids, singletons, etc. In some situations, HCP count will be of minor significance to the playing strength of your hand!

So we ARE going to count our HCP, but we're not going to be a slave to it. As we get more experience, we will learn to use it alongside other tools for evaluating our hand.

What is a Fit?

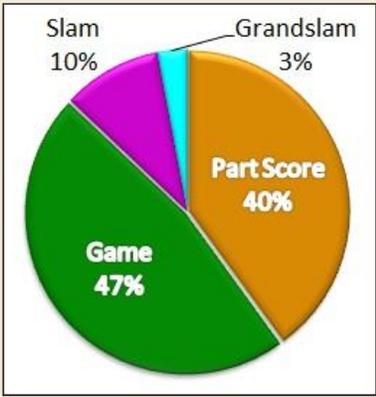
In our bidding, we are generally searching for a "fit" with partner, that is a suit in which we hold at least 8 cards between us. So, a fit can be for example 4-4, 5-3, 6-2 (or even 7-1). If we have 9 or more cards between us in a suit, so much the better, but 8 is the threshold number for a fit. If we end up declaring a contract in a suit where we only hold 7 cards between us, we are quite likely to get into difficulties.

Finding a Game contract, or even a Slam

Most inexperienced players underbid most of the time, leading to poor results. Experienced players bid far more game contracts and slams.

There are lots of reasons why the less experienced tend to underbid, but a big one is confidence: if you aren't confident in your declarer play, you will seek the comfort of less stretching contracts.

The good news is that as we progress in the course, we're going to get a lot better, and gain in confidence. And a good place to start is straight away – when we're playing our set hands, try to bid your hand to its full extent, rather than being too cautious. That will not only speed up the learning process, but it will also be a lot more fun!



Most players underestimate the likelihood of games and slams being possible. This chart shows the statistics for what level of contract can be made, on random deals. The numbers will probably surprise you.

You can see that game contract hands turn up more often (47%) than hands where the best either side can do is a part score (40%). And the possibility of a slam is a lot higher statistically than you might imagine.

So, bear this in mind when you're bidding, and enjoy having a go!

Major Suits and Minor Suits

We should get used to making a clear distinction between Major Suits (♥ and ♠) and Minor Suits (♣ and ♦).

A big focus in our bidding is to see if we can find a Game contract- you can see why, from the chart above!

To make game in a minor suit requires 11 tricks, which is generally a lot harder to achieve than the 10 tricks for Game in a major, or 9 tricks for Game in NT. So, if we have some strength, and can find a fit in a major, we are likely to be exploring to see whether we can bid 4♥ or 4♠; if our fit is in a minor suit, or we don't have a fit at all, we are probably going to explore for a NT contract.

To be bidding 5♣ or 5♦, we will want a lot of shape (shortages and long suits), and have identified a possible weakness in at least one suit, in which the opposition could take a lot of tricks if we play in NT.

And it's also worth noting that part-score contracts score better in a major than a minor. Making 8 tricks in 2♣ or 2♦ scores 90 points; making 8 tricks in 2♥ or 2♠ scores 110. The difference might not seem much, but as we'll see in Duplicate Pairs, it can be crucial.

Conventional and Natural Bids

Bids can be either conventional or natural.

A natural bid is one which means what it says – for example, if you open 1♥, you are saying you have an opening hand and a heart suit, and in principle are interested in playing in hearts. If you open 1NT, you are saying you have a certain range of points (in our system, 12-14) and a balanced hand, and are interested in principle in playing in NT.

However, as bridge has developed, an enormous range of bidding conventions have been invented, where bids have a special meaning, usually unrelated to the face value of the bid. There are some conventional bids we will use in this course, as they are fairly straightforward and very effective.

Examples are an opening 2♣, which says nothing about having a good club suit, but instead says “I have a very strong hand”. Another very common one is the Stayman 2♣ response to partner’s opening 1NT, which also says nothing about the club suit, but is a means to try to locate a fit in a major suit. We will also learn to use transfers in response to partner’s 1NT opening bid, where we bid the suit ranking below the one we intend our contract to be played in. We use transfers because at the cost of a small amount of complexity we gain a huge benefit over the weak take-out approach, and because it arises so often, so we are not likely to forget.

Conventions can be great idea and can make the bidding system much more powerful. But the problem with having too many conventions is that you and partner have to learn them and remember what they all mean. This becomes even more difficult if you don’t play frequently, or don’t have a regular partner. The scope for confusion and misunderstandings is large compared to the benefits. Therefore, on this course, we won’t be teaching too many conventions. We will confine ourselves to a limited number of very common and very useful ones, which most experienced players will know.

Alerting and Announcing

Now that we’ve just mentioned conventional bids, it’s a good time to touch on alerting and announcing. In general, whenever a player makes a conventional bid, their PARTNER should pull out the **ALERT** card, to let the opposition know that the bid was conventional. The opposition player next to bid **may** then ask the PARTNER of the player who has made the conventional bid to explain what the bid means. Note that it’s the bidder’s partner who may be asked – the person making the conventional bid must not offer any explanation herself, as that would provide unauthorised information to her partner. Note also that it is **may** ask, not **must** ask. There is no obligation to ask for an explanation, and if one is not asked for, one must not be given. There’s a good reason for this – the opposition might not want you to have the opportunity to explain to your partner what you understood by her bid.

Note also that whether or not an **ALERT** card has been shown, when it’s your turn to bid, you can ask for an explanation of the bid the opposition have just made. Again, it’s the partner of the person who has made the bid who must explain.

Some bids arise so often that we don’t use the ALERT system- we announce instead and try to do it straight away. Those aren’t confined to purely conventional bids. Common examples are

- If partner opens 1NT, you announce the points range (in our system, you just say “12 to 14”).
- If you bid 1NT and partner responds 2♣, you say “Stayman”.
- If you are playing transfers and open 1NT, and partner responds 2♥, for example, you will announce “transfer to spades”.
- If you’re playing weak twos, and partner opens 2♠, for example, you will announce “weak”.

Forcing and non-forcing bids

If you make a forcing bid, you are expecting the opportunity to bid again. If the opposition pass, then partner **MUST** bid, otherwise the bidding is over. An example is an opening bid of 2♣, which shows a very strong hand, and says nothing about the club suit. If the next opponent passes, then opener’s partner is forced to bid, even with a very poor hand.

Another common example is the Stayman 2♣ response to a 1NT opening bid. It says nothing about clubs, but simply asks partner if they have a 4-card major suit. The opening 1NT is not forcing – partner may pass – but the Stayman bid **is** forcing, and if the next opponent passes, you **CAN'T** pass 2♣ and risk leaving that as the final contract- you **have** to respond. So the Stayman 2♣ is a forcing bid.

If you open 1 of a suit, and partner responds 1NT, that's a limit bid (see below) and is non-forcing. Opener can pass, with the intention of leaving 1NT as the final contract. However, if you open 1 of a suit and partner responds in a different suit at the lowest level, you cannot pass unless there's an intervening bid by opponents. The opening bid of 1 of a suit bid guarantees you will rebid if partner makes an unlimited response, ie a change of suit at the lowest level, so in effect partner's change of suit bid is **forcing for one round**.

N	E	S	W
1♥	pass	1♠	pass
?			

In this example, North has opened 1♥, and partner has responded with 1♠, the opposition passing. The opening 1♥ was not forcing – South could have passed – but now that South has made a change of suit response at the lowest level, North is obligated to bid again.

Note that keeping the bidding at a low level if strong is a feature of the modern game, as it provides more bidding space for communications. In “old-fashioned” Acol, we would have jumped a level when bidding a new suit in response to partner's 1 of a suit opening bid, if we held a strong hand, eg

N	E	S	W
1♥	pass	2♠	

But in modern Acol (which we are teaching on this course) we use a jump response in a new suit for a completely different meaning: holding a very weak hand with a long suit. So in this example, South is showing a weak hand (certainly fewer than 6 points), a dislike of partner's hearts, and a long spade suit. It is in effect saying “unless you are very strong partner, I suggest that our best contract on this hand is 2♠”. So the 2♠ bid is non-forcing – South expects that partner will probably pass.

Forcing bids can be forcing for 1 round or can be forcing to game. As we encounter them in our course, we will explain which is which, and why.

If there is misunderstanding between you and partner about what constitutes a forcing bid, you might well get into a mess. If partner makes a forcing bid and you mistakenly pass, you will almost certainly end up in the wrong contract. If partner makes a non-forcing bid which you wrongly take as forcing, and bid on, with a weak hand, because you think you *must* bid, you are likely to needlessly get too high, into a hopeless contract. That's why in our modern Acol system, we will have a lot of clarity and standardisation on what constitutes forcing, and what doesn't.

Limit bids

A limit bid is a bid which closely defines a maximum strength for your bid. If you make a limit bid, partner may pass – it is not forcing. For example, opening 1NT is a limit bid – it says “my hand is in the range 12 to 14HCP”. A non-limit bid is much more open-ended about how strong the hand is, and in some circumstances will be forcing.

Which of the following of the N/S bids here are limit and non-limit bids?

(1)	N	E	S	W
	1♥	pass	1♠	pass
	2♥			

Answer: North's opening 1♥ is a non-limit bid, with a wide range of strength: anything from a light opener, up to 19 (or sometimes more) HCP. It is not forcing, as with a very weak hand partner may pass. South's 1♠ response is also non-limit, but in this case is forcing -North MUST rebid. The 1♠ could mean as few as 6 HCP (or even 5HCP with a good spade suit), but has no upper limit of strength. However, North's rebid of 2♥ **limits** her hand to not a lot more than enough to open, and probably 6 hearts. South is free to pass partner's 2♥ bid. (Though of course she can bid on if her hand merits it).

(2)	N	E	S	W
	1♥	pass	1NT	pass
	2♦			

Answer: North's opening 1♥ is the same as in (1). South's 1NT response is a limit bid, showing 6-9 HCP, and is non-forcing. However, North chose to bid again anyway— she has a two suited hand in ♥ and ♦, and doesn't like the look of 1NT if partner is short/weak in either ♣ or ♠, or both. The 2♦ bid is non-forcing: South can pass, if she prefers the contract to be in diamonds, or bid a simple preference of 2♥ if she prefers it to be in hearts. Since North's hand is almost certainly longer in the first suit bid, if South has equal length in both red suits, she will bid 2♥.

Note that South cannot have 4 or more spades, or would have bid 1♠ rather than 1NT. Another possible scenario is that South has a good club suit but doesn't satisfy "rule of 14" to be able to respond 2♣.

(3)	N	E	S	W
	1♥	pass	2♥	pass

Answer: North's opening 1♥ is the same as in (1). South's 2♥ response is a limit bid, showing 6-9HCP and 4-card heart support (or possibly only 3 hearts, if they include an honour or the hand has some shape), or an unbalanced hand with 4+ hearts and exactly 9 losers, irrespective of its HCP count— using Losing Trick Count (which we will come to in a later lesson). North is free to pass partner's 2♥, or to bid on, depending on her hand. Note that if South had responded 3♥ instead of 2♥, that would still be a limit bid (eg an 8 loser hand using LTC), which North could pass, or bid on.

Next time, we will look at opening the bidding at the 1 level:

- when to bid 1NT
- when to bid 1 of a suit

