

Opening 1 of a Suit- Choice of suit, reversing, and the “barrier”

We’ve already discussed in Lesson 4 the criteria for opening 1NT, or 1 of a suit. Let’s say we have a hand not suitable for opening 1NT, but suitable for opening 1 of a suit. Which suit to open?

Before we get on to discussing this, we need to refresh an important concept, to make sure it’s clear in our minds:

The Barrier, and Reversing

This concept can cause a lot of angst and confusion, but really it shouldn’t. Let’s try to break it down and understand why it matters.

Consider these two seemingly very similar bidding sequences:

| | | | | | | | | | |
|-----|----|------|----|------|-----|----|------|----|------|
| (1) | S | W | N | E | (2) | S | W | N | E |
| | 1♦ | pass | 1♠ | pass | | 1♥ | pass | 1♠ | pass |
| | 2♥ | pass | ? | | | 2♦ | pass | ? | |

In both, it looks as though South is probably 5-4 in the red suits, and will have bid the longer suit first. North might be quite weak for her 1♠ bid – perhaps having only 6 points and 4 spades. The hand might be as poor as something like ♠K 8 7 4 ♥7 4 3 ♦8 5 4 ♣K 4 2. Let’s imagine North is indeed minimum or close to minimum for her 1♠ response. She is thinking that the contract should probably be played at the lowest possible level, in South’s first bid (and longer) suit, with a presumed 5-3 fit. In sequence (2) that’s not a problem- she just bids 2♥– a simple preference bid. But what can North do in sequence (1)? To express a preference for the first-bid diamonds, she has to bid at the 3 level, ie 3♦. If South has a minimum opening hand, the 3 level will be too high, opposite a meagre 6 points or so from North.

The key difference between sequence (1) and sequence (2) is the ranking of the suits south has bid. In (1), she has bid the lower ranking ♦ first, then the higher ranking ♥. In sequence (2) she has bid the higher ranking ♥ first, then the lower ranking ♦.

We can express the difference between these two sequences in terms of the “barrier”. It’s based on the idea that if you open one suit, with the intent to rebid a second suit, a notional “barrier” exists **at the 2 level of your first suit**. In our example (1), South was 5-4 in diamonds and hearts. When she opened 1♦, and partner responded 1♠, she crossed the 2♦ “barrier” to bid her second suit, hearts, thus creating a problem for partner, with a weak hand, seeking to show a simple preference for South’s first suit, diamonds.

Similarly, if you are 5-4 in spades and clubs, and open 1♠, then the “barrier” is at 2♠. If partner responds, say, with 2♦, then to show your second suit you would need to cross the barrier and bid 3♣. A new suit at the 3 level requires extra strength, typically 16+ points, and/or very shapely).

Bidding a second suit above the barrier is called a **reverse**, and requires extra strength- as for a new suit at the 3-level, typically 16+ points, and/or very shapely.

The rationale is logical: it indicates that your first suit is longer than the second (if they were the same length you’d have bid them in the other order) **and** that you are OK with being at the 3-level if partner does want to show a simple preference (ie a bid of your first suit at the lowest possible level); it is extremely common for responder to want to do that, since she’s expecting your first bid suit to be longer than your second bid suit, so would need to be quite a bit better in your second suit to want to leave the contract in that suit.

Contracts at the three level require more strength than at the two level. If opener mistakenly reverses with a hand of only ordinary opening strength, and partner is near minimum for their change of suit response, and shows preference for opener's first bid suit, the contract will now be at the 3 level, which will probably fail, perhaps only holding 18 or 19 HCP's between the two hands.

Some players might choose to ignore the barrier altogether, and just bid 2 suits regardless, so that

1♦ - pass- 1♠ - pass - 2♥ promises no more strength than 1♥ - pass- 1♠ - pass - 2♦, even though in the first sequence partner will have to bid at the 3 level to revert to opener's first bid suit at the lowest level. This is not good bridge, for two reasons:

- it will get you into trouble, going off in hopeless 3-level contracts
- it forgoes the **extra information conveyed by a reverse**, showing strength

Because reversing requires a strong hand, it is played as forcing for one round. Look again at sequence (1) above. In this case, South has reversed, ie her second suit bid is above the 2♦ "barrier" set by her first suit being diamonds. This is forcing for 1 round, and North **must** bid again.

Now we've refreshed all that, let's get back to the situation where you want to open 1 of a suit.

Which suit to choose?

Here are the general guidelines:

1. If you have one suit longer than all the others, open with that one. It doesn't matter if you hold 5 little spades and ♦AKQJ, open 1♠. The primary objective of bidding is to find a fit with partner, ie a suit in which your two hands together have at least 8 cards. Aces and kings will probably win tricks whatever is trumps, but small cards are usually only useful if they're trumps.
2. If you have two suits of equal length, open the higher-ranking suit. This way, you'll bid a major before a minor, so any fit is more likely to be found. With two 5-card suits, it will usually be possible to describe your hand economically, ie you'll be able to bid your second suit without using up too much bidding space. There are, however, two exceptions to remember:
 - a. With 4 cards in ♥ and ♠, bid the ♥ first! The reasoning is as follows: unless your hand is 4441 (which is a different case that we'll look at in a moment), with two 4 cards suits as your longest, you are balanced, ie 4432. Your priority is always to try to find a major suit fit, so with two four card majors you'll probably only get a chance to bid one of them: if partner has 4+ spades, he/she will bid them in response to your 1♥ opener, unless he/she has a good fit with your hearts. If you are strong enough (15+ HCP) you'll be looking to rebid NT to show partner your strength and the balanced nature of your hand.
 - b. With 5-5 in ♣ and ♠, the best suit to bid first is debatable, and experts differ. However, at this level I advocate opening 1♣. With any red suit response from partner, you can bid 1♠, then later rebid your spades to show you are 5-5. If you open 1♠, and partner bids 2♦ or 2♥, unless you're very strong, and can show a new suit at the 3-level, you'll never get a chance to mention your clubs, and be forced to rebid your spades. There are some drawbacks with opening 1♣, however. For example a 1♠ opening bid has more pre-emptive value: a 1♣ opening bid allows the opposition to overcall at the one level.
3. 4441 hands: these are awkward, and hard to bid. There are various systems suggested; none is perfect, and you'll always find hands where one system works better than another. The one I prefer is to bid hearts with a black suit singleton, and clubs with a red suit singleton. It's also very easy to remember: the mnemonic is "taps" ie Hot & Cold, or H & C.

These guidelines should ensure that if you are going to open with 1-of-a-suit, you'll choose the right one. However, the other consideration you should always think through before making your opening bid is **what your planned rebid will be, for any response that partner might bid.**

Shape: if you are balanced or semi balanced, you are probably aiming at a NT contract. If you are unbalanced, with one or two good suits, you are probably aiming at a suit contract. I say "probably" here, because in practice a lot will depend on partner's hand. We'll explore more about 1-of-a-suit opening bids, responses, and rebids next time.

Let's look at an example of a 5-4 opening hand.

| | | |
|-----------|--------------|------------|
| ♠ K 8 4 | ♠ Q 10 9 5 | ♠ A 7 6 2 |
| ♥ Q J 4 | ♥ 9 6 | ♥ 10 7 5 2 |
| ♦ K J 5 4 | ♦ Q 6 2 | ♦ 9 |
| ♣ A 10 8 | ♣ K 9 6 2 | ♣ Q 7 4 3 |
| | ♠ J 3 | |
| | ♥ A K 8 3 | |
| | ♦ A 10 8 7 3 | |
| | ♣ J 5 | |

Dealer South, both sides vulnerable

South, with 13 HCP, a 5-4 shape, and a good looking second suit, opened 1♦. West passed, and North bid 1♠. East also passed. South then rebid her second suit, 2♥. Recognising partner's reverse, North had to bid again. Knowing partner must have more diamonds than hearts, North expressed a simple preference for diamonds and bid 3♦. That was the final contract.

The best declarer could do was 8 tricks: a club, two hearts, 4 diamonds in hand, and a heart ruff in dummy. 1 down for -100.

What should have happened:

South thought "rebid" and realised that bidding diamonds, then hearts, would go through the barrier, and her diamond suit looked a little too weak to rebid. The "reverse" would indicate a strong hand, and force partner to bid again over the heart rebid. South, though only semi-balanced (holding two doubletons) opened 1NT. This was passed round and became the final contract.

It's a 20-20 deal, and with the lead of ♦4, declarer can make 7 tricks for +90.

Alternatively, South having opened 1♦, could rebid her diamonds in response to partner's 1♠, and the final contract would be 2♦. Fortunate to find partner with 3 diamonds including an honour, she would chalk up 8 tricks, also for +90.

What South *mustn't* do is to bid her ♦ then her ♥, as this is a reverse, telling partner she's got a stronger hand than she actually has, forcing partner to bid again, and getting too high.

So if you have a 2-suited hand, which would require you to cross the barrier to bid your second suit:

- If you have a minimum or near-minimum opener, you can't bid your second suit. You must either rebid your first suit after a change of suit response from partner, or if the hand is suitable, avoid the problem altogether by opening 1NT.
- If you have a strong hand, then DO reverse, by going through the barrier to bid your second suit. Partner should recognise that your sequence is strong, and that it forces a response to your second bid.

And if you've a 2-suited hand which **doesn't** require you to cross the barrier to bid your second suit:

- If you have a minimum or near-minimum opener, you simply rebid your second suit. Partner can pass your rebid or bid your first suit as a simple preference.
- If you have a strong hand, and want partner to bid again, you must jump in your second suit. If you simply bid your second suit at the lowest level, partner will take you for a weak hand and might pass.

