

Stayman

In our Modern Acol system, we choose to play a “weak NT” – opening 1NT with 12-14 High card points, and a balanced hand, ie no void or singleton, and (usually) no more than one doubleton.

We’ve seen the reasoning behind it: it’s such a useful bid, because it describes your hand to partner in one bid, and it has a good pre-emptive value – it makes it quite difficult for the opposition to enter the bidding.

And the first **convention** we learn is Stayman. It’s a response of 2♣ when partner opens 1NT, and it’s all about trying to find **a major suit fit** (ie 8 or more cards in a major suit, between yourself and partner).

It’s the most universal conventional bid in Bridge – so much so that it’s almost an automatic assumption that everyone is using it. But do we really know how to use it properly?

The first thing you must have to bid Stayman is at least one 4-card major suit. If you don’t have that, do not bid Stayman.

Note- this means **exactly** 4 cards, NOT “at least 4 cards”.

A common mistake for less experienced players is to bid Stayman without a precisely 4-card major. A 5-card major or a 6-card major DOES NOT COUNT. You will bid such a hand in a different way, usually by a transfer bid into your long major. You should already know about transfers and have adopted them into your system - we covered them in Lesson 8. If you missed that one, it’s a good idea to go back now and read it through – the lesson is on the website.

If you do bid Stayman where your major is 5+ cards, your partner will take it as 4 cards **because that is what your Stayman bid is saying**, and a fit (eg 5-3), and a perfectly good contract, might well be missed.

So, let’s assume we are all using Stayman, and our partner opens 1NT. When should you bid a Stayman 2♣, and when not? Let’s think about what opener might reply if you bid 2♣

Opener: 1NT

Responder: 2♣ = have you got a major suit of more than 3 cards, partner?

Opener: 2♦ - No, I don’t have a major suit of more than 3 cards.

2♥ - my heart suit has more than 3 cards, and my spade suit might also have more than 3 cards

2♠ - my spade suit has more than 3 cards, but not my heart suit

So, the key thing if you’re going to bid Stayman is to have thought through what you will bid in response to **any** of these possible replies. Typically, you’ll have 11+ HCP, and you’re interested in whether game is possible in a major, if you have a fit, and you can safely bail out into NT at the appropriate level if you don’t.

Here are some examples, for hands facing partner's 1NT opening bid:

Hand A (14HCP)	Hand B (12HCP)	Hand C (14HCP)
♠Q J 9 3	♠Q 9 3	♠K Q 8 2
♥A K 7 5	♥A K 7 5	♥Q 7 5
♦K 5	♦K 5	♦6 3
♣J 7 5	♣9 7 5 3	♣A K 6 2

With hand A, if partner rebids either major, you bid game in that major. If she bids 2♦, you bid 3NT.

With hand B, if opener rebids 2♥ you raise to 3♥, invitational. However, if opener rebids 2♦ or 2♠, you bid 2NT showing 11-12 points.

With hand C, if opener rebids 2♠, you bid 4♠. If she rebids 2♦ or 2♥, you bid 3NT. If partner had rebid 2♥ with both 4♥ and 4♠, she will know you have 4♠ and not 4♥, because you bid 3NT, so can convert to 4♠.

Rescue Stayman

Although Stayman is generally used when you have game or potential for game when partner opens 1NT, it can also be used in another scenario, when you have a weak hand and are looking for the best low-level contract. In such a case, what you need is a good response to *whatever* partner replies to your 2♣ Stayman bid. Look at this hand, Hand D

♠K 7 5 4 2 ♥Q J 8 3 ♦8 3 ♣7 2

You have a measly 6 points, so clearly opposite partner's 1NT there is no prospect of a game contract. Your objective is to locate the best low-level contract you can. You can work out that the hand is suitable for Stayman: **because you are 5-4 in the majors**, you have a reply whatever opener responds. If she bids 2♥ or 2♠, you pass, but if she bids 2♦, you can rebid 2♠, having 5 cards. This is sometimes called "rescue Stayman", and it's a better option than bidding 2♥ as a transfer to spades (if you're playing Transfers), or a weak take-out of 2♠, (if you're not playing Transfers), as you'd be foregoing the chance of finding a heart fit. It only applies in the case where you are weak but have 5-4 in the majors.

Failing to use Stayman when you should

Sometimes people are tempted to skip Stayman and leap straight to 3NT in response to partner's 1NT opener. "We had enough points for 3NT, and I didn't want to give the opposition any free information". Sometimes you'll be lucky and get away with it, but it's not percentage bridge, and you can come unstuck.

If you have a precisely four-card major, **you should seek to locate a 4-4 major fit** (unless you're 4333 — too balanced for playing in a suit to be a better bet than playing in NT).

Here's an example of coming unstuck by failing to use Stayman:

Hand E Dealer South

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

South opened 1NT, and North, with her 13 points, bid 3NT. West led 2♥, and EW took the first 5 tricks: 4 hearts and the A♣. 1 down. If declarer had got the club guess wrong and played the K♣ on East's 10♣ lead to the 5th trick, rather than the J♣, it would have been even worse.

What should have happened? North should have bid Stayman 2♣. South would have replied 2♠ (I have 4 spades, partner), and North, knowing the 4-4 spade fit, would bid 4♠.

As you can work out, the 4♠ contract is successful. West leads a spade, not willing to underlead her K♥ or lead the unsupported A♣. Declarer draws trumps in 3 three rounds, and cashes four rounds of diamonds (♦KJ first), discarding 5♣ from hand. At trick eight, she leads 2♣ from dummy and, when East plays low, guesses to play J♣ (not ♣K), on the grounds West may have led a club from the Q♣ but never from the A♣ (also East may have risen with A♣ — or flinched). The J♣ draws A♣. The defence also win their two heart tricks, but that's 10 tricks and game made.

When not to bid Stayman

So, it's important to use Stayman when you should. The other side of the coin is **NOT** to use Stayman when you shouldn't. Here's an example:

Hand F ♠K 8 6 2 ♥J ♦K 9 7 3 ♣J 10 6 2 (8 HCP)

What can you do if partner opens 1NT, you bid 2♣, and partner responds 2♥? You can't bid 2♠ as it would promise five spades, and you can't bid 2NT as it would promise 11-12 points. Before bidding Stayman, think through what you will bid to each possible response partner might make. If you're in trouble with any one of the possible replies, DON'T BID STAYMAN. On this hand, it's best just to pass partner's 1NT.

Here's another example of bidding Stayman when you shouldn't.

Hand G Dealer South

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

South with 12 points balanced, opened, quite correctly, 1NT.

North counted her 14 points and wanted to go for 3NT. However, there was a concern about the majors, particularly hearts, so thought she could use Stayman to find out if partner had cover in the majors, and bid 2♣.

South duly replied 2♥, telling partner that she had 4 hearts, with possibly 4 spades as well. Pleased with this news, North then bid 3NT. However, South knew the Stayman system perfectly well, and interpreted North's 2♣ bid mean she **must hold** a 4-card major. As she'd reverted to 3NT after a 2♥ response to Stayman, it couldn't be hearts, so it must be spades. So, confident of

a 4-4 spade fit, South bid on to 4♠. North, with only 2 spades, was now in trouble - and had to bid 4NT. Frustratingly, 4NT failed, while 3NT was a good contract, winning 4 tricks in spades, 3 in clubs, and the two red aces. The bidding should have been 1NT-3NT. Of course, 3NT is not certain on north's hand facing an opening 1NT – south could unluckily have no stop in hearts - but on average it will be winning bridge.

Extended Stayman

We saw in Lesson 8 that we should use transfers and Stayman in response to a 2NT opening bid from partner. It is similar to responding to 1NT, except allowing for the higher point count.

The bid of 3♣ in response to partner's opening 2NT, called "extended Stayman", asks for a 4-card major, just as 2♣ does in response to an opening 1NT. The usual situation is to try to find a 4♥ or 4♠ contract, or if opener denies a 4-card major, to bid 3NT.

