

General principles:

1 - Finding a fit

Eight cards or more in one suit between the two hands suggests you'll want that suit as trumps

2 - Judging game

To make game you'd expect to need a combined 25 points

3 - Combining the above to reach the right spot

Remember: You need 9 tricks to make game in NT

You need 10 tricks to make game in ♥/♠

You need 11 tricks to make game in ♣/♦

You'll get the same bonus whichever game you're playing in (if you make it!), so it must be right to try to play in NT and major suit fits most of the time. Even if you don't get as far as game, partscores will reward the same number of tricks more highly in NT and major suits than in minors:

EG: 2♦ making exactly scores +90

2♠ making exactly scores +110

2NT making exactly scores +120

As a result of this, most systems are geared towards playing in NT or in major suit fits whenever possible, with the following corollaries:

- 1) We strive to bid a major over bidding a minor
- 2) Even with a minor fit we'll play in NT if it's not mad

To illustrate (2), consider:

♠ AT7

♥ K94

♦ AQ82

♣ 872

♠ KQ4

♥ A82

♦ KJT4

♣ AT6

Glossing over the auction, just consider the hands in the context of diamond contract vs NT contract - we'll make the same number of tricks. Will that be the 11 we require for a diamond game? Doubtful - we have to lose two clubs and a heart. On the other hand, we should easily come to the 9 tricks to make the 3NT game and in fact we'll have an overtrick.

That was a slightly contrived hand, so let's take a real one I played the other day:

♠ 72

♥ Q82

♦ KQT

♣ KQJT2

♠ KQ3

♥ AKT5

♦ 32

♣ A986

Declaring as East, you receive a spade lead to North's Ace against your contract. In 5♣ (certainly a credible contract) you'll lose the ♠A and the ♦A if everything breaks reasonably and score +600. In 3NT, though, you may well just lose the same tricks and make your contract *with two overtricks* for +660. Which must be better.

Opening the bidding

First up, let's remember that with a balanced hand and 12-14 points we'll be opening 1NT, and with a semi-balanced hand and 20-22 points we'll be opening 2NT. So that leaves us the unbalanced hands in the range 12-19 to contemplate.

5-4-2-2 and 5-4-3-1 hands

These are in many ways the easiest to deal with. You can start by bidding your five card suit; and after partner responds, bidding your four card suit promises the fifth card in your primary suit as well.

Sadly, things aren't quite as easy as that - there's a clear difference (hopefully!) between the two auctions below:

1♥ - 1♠ and 1♦ - 1♠
2♦ 2♥

The difference is that in the first auction, a weak responder can give simple preference at the 2-level (with a pass or by correcting to 2♥) whilst in the second the same responding hand will have to go 3♦ to give preference to that suit. Given responder only needs 6 points for his bid, that's going to be too high unless opener has extra values.

♠ 72	♠ QJ63	Oh dear.
♥ KQ82	♥ T7	
♦ AQ854	♦ T32	
♣ J7	♣ K986	

When we bid the suits "the wrong way round", it's called *reversing*, and you should have at least 16 points (and the right shape!) to do it. Partner isn't allowed to pass it, so we call it a *forcing* bid.

♠ A2	♠ QJ63	Much more plausible.
♥ AK82	♥ T7	
♦ AQ854	♦ T32	
♣ 87	♣ K986	

There is (as ever) an exception - the auctions

1♣ - 1♦ - 1♥ and 1♣ - 1♦/♥ - 1♠

still allow responder to give preference at the 2-level (which should be safe enough) and are hence not normally played as reverses (and are not forcing, either).

You can probably conceive of sequences where you bid your suits "the right way round" but still will force responder to the 3-level - the auction

1♠ - 2♥ - 3♣ springs immediately to mind. In this case, partner has shown 10+ points and the situation is different. You still need your 16+ points, so with partner's extra strength you know you're *forcing to game* ie you won't be stopping before game.

This has been a somewhat long (and perhaps tedious) diversion but it's important - if you're going to force partner to the 3-level to give support to your first suit, you need 16+ points.

The obvious corollary is that if you *don't* force to the 3-level, partner will draw the inference that you have fewer than 16 points and will appraise chances for game accordingly. This means that with strong hands where the suits are in the "right" order, you need to do some jumping, basically.

So the plan is, with 5-4-2-2 and 5-4-3-1 hands you'll open your five card suit and rebid your four card suit. If you're not strong enough to do that based on the preceding rules then you should probably rebid your first suit (showing an extra card). Try some examples:

♠ AKJ92 This is a standout 1♠ opening. You'll have an easy 2♥ rebid
 ♥ KT92 unless partner has supported you or already shown hearts
 ♦ 83 himself.
 ♣ J7

♠ 2 Opening 1♣ looks best here. If partner responds 1♦ then your
 ♥ AQT2 1♥ will show your shape and point range; if he responds 1♥
 ♦ KT9 then you'll be looking to support his suit. Over 1♠ you can't show
 ♣ A9874 hearts without reversing, so you'll just have to rebid those clubs.

♠ A7 Open 1♥. After 1♠ or 1NT, 2♣ shows your shape and your
 ♥ KQJ62 points. If partner bids 2♣ or supports hearts then you've found
 ♦ 98 a fit. If partner tries 2♦ then you're simply not strong enough to
 ♣ KJ87 introduce clubs, but you can rebid 2♥ to show a fifth one.

♠ A You'll start by opening 1♣ - but note how nice your hand is. The
 ♥ KT92 extra strength (you have a full 17 points by my reckoning) will
 ♦ A83 allow you to show you shape fully - you'll rebid 2♥ over 1♦, 1♠
 ♣ AQT87 or 1NT, and raise a heart response strongly.

♠ QT62 Your 1♦ opening allows you a safe rebid to anything partner
 ♥ T comes up with. After his 1♥, your 1♠; after his 1♠ you will raise;
 ♦ AKT94 after his 1NT or 2♣ you will rebid your diamonds. Awesome.
 ♣ KJ4

A quick note on 5-3-3-2 hands

We normally open 5-3-3-2 hands 1NT if the five card suit is a minor, and 1 of the suit if the five card suit is a major - in line with our normal suit priorities. In the latter of these cases, it may be appealing to pass partner's 1NT response if you are weak, and I'll leave it to your discretion whether you wish to do so or wish to rebid your major.

5-5-3-0 or 5-5-2-1 hands

With two five card suits, you should always be opening the higher suit. In most cases this will simply be following the principle of choosing majors above minors, and in the cases with two minor suits or two major suits it will avoid you being trapped into a reverse you don't want to make. This should be easy to remember; here are a few quick examples:

♠ AJ974	♠ AJ3	♠ K9	♠ KQ975
♥ KQT32	♥ --	♥ KQJ82	♥ A
♦ T	♦ AT832	♦ T	♦ AKJ32
♣ K2	♣ QJ976	♣ AK432	♣ 82
Open 1♠	Open 1♦	Open 1♥	Open 1♠

Note that the same caveats about your rebid apply as in the previous section. Hands 1 & 2 above are minimum, while hands 3 & 4 are stronger. This will affect what your options are after partner's response.

Hands with six card suit (that aren't weak 2 openings!)

With a six card suit in your hand, it's likely you'll want it to be trumps. Opening the suit and rebidding it will promise a fifth card but will imply quite strongly that you have a sixth (if you think about it, you've either got a 5-3-3-2 hand that can't rebid 1NT, a 5-4-x-x hand that has been pushed too high to rebid the four card suit, or a hand with a six card suit. Most of the time it will be this last).

A simple rebid (1♥ - something - 2♥) shows a minimum opening hand (11-15). You need to jump (1♥ - something - 3♥) to show a stronger hand, and this must always guarantee a sixth card in the suit as well - you just can't have any other hand type now!

Even with your lovely six card suit, don't forget that bridge is a partnership game and if partner shows a major suit you have support for then don't plough a lonely furrow by rebidding your suit. If you have a major and partner a minor you can support, I think most people would advocate ignoring the minor fit in the short term to try to find a 6-2 or 6-3 major fit.

4-4-4-1 hands

One further hand type which can prove annoying is a 4-4-4-1 hand. After partner has responded, you'll be expected to make a rebid. Bidding your first suit again shows extra length, and bidding a new suit promises 5+ cards in the first suit you bid and + in the second. Rebidding 1NT has certain point constraints. So what can you do with

♠ AQ82
♥ AJ42
♦ 8
♣ KT82

We think it would be churlish to pass this (what if partner holds ♠KT965 ♥K76 ♦A63 ♣83 and can't open and we miss a good 4♠ contract?) so we prefer to just tell partner a small lie. The important thing about the lie we choose to tell is that partner won't get excited about us showing minor suit length, but may do so if we show major suit length. This will become clearer later, but the basic rule is:

With a red suit singleton open 1♣

With a black suit singleton open the middle of your touching suits

Try these:

♠ KQT7	♠ T	♠ AQ96	♠ KJ97
♥ AJ82	♥ KQT5	♥ Q852	♥ 3
♦ KJ87	♦ AJ92	♦ 8	♦ AK42
♣ 2	♣ AT96	♣ AJ32	♣ QJ32

Note that we consider clubs and spades to be "touching" for the purposes of the memory aid. So you'll open 1♥, 1♦, 1♣ and 1♠ respectively. Notice you won't ever open a spade in this system, and so only one hand in four requires a major suit lie.

Responder's first bid

Broadly speaking, this differs depending on whether it was a minor suit or a major suit partner opened.

Partner opens a major

Supporting

If partner has opened 1♥ or 1♠, that's promising at least four cards in the suit and at least the 12 points we've agreed you need to start bidding. If you have four or more cards in that suit then magic, you've found your 8+ card fit and you definitely want that as the trump suit.

The next thing your partnership needs to do is to evaluate is the chance of game. Luckily, if you have support it's easy to give partner quite good information about your point count, since you don't have to faff about finding the right denomination in which to play; so, over a hypothetical heart opening:

2♥	shows 6-9 points and 4 card support*
2NT	shows 10+ points and 4 card support
3♥	shows 0-9 points and 5 card support

* Some people like to do this with 3 card support if they have a doubleton or singleton that may allow the trumps to be used for ruffing something. If you're going to do this, it's best to discuss it with partner first, so she doesn't go wild in the aisles upon hearing of your trump "fit".

A simple raise is constructive, but your partner can pass it with up to 15 points.

A double raise is more pre-emptive, since you know you have a big fit. Partner will be passing a good chunk of the time.

Finally, 2NT is strongly suggestive that you want to go to game, and partner has to come up with another bid (we say 2NT is *forcing*) to further describe her hand.

Not supporting

You need 6+ points to change suit at the 1-level, and 10+ points to do so at the 2-level.

Especially over a major, you'll often have a hand with between 6 and 9 points where you can't show your suit since you're too weak. The solution in that case is to bid 1NT. Note that the auction 1♥ - 1NT must deny your holding four spades since if you did you'd just have responded 1♠, right?

This isn't too tough, so a few quick examples:

♠ AK72 This is a clear 1♠ response to a 1♥ opening.
♥ T92
♦ 83
♣ Q972

♠ K72 You still don't have support for partner, but with 14 points you
♥ A2 can show your club suit now. You know the partnership has
♦ A93 enough points for game, but there's no rush to leap straight
♣ QJ984 there - more exploration might find a better spot.

♠ 72 Here, you have a club suit, but without the values to go to the
♥ Q62 2-level. For now, 1NT describes your hand adequately to
♦ T3 partner over a 1♥ or 1♠ opening.
♣ KQ762

Partner opens a minor

In all but the very extreme cases, the ideas we had about supporting partner's suit before go out of the window - minor suit contracts are a rubbish place to play, remember. So most of the time you'll be introducing a new suit of your own, and the rules are the same as above - longest suits first; 6+ to do it at the 1-level; 10+ to do it at the 2-level; 1NT shows 6-9 and denies four card suits.

How about these, then?

♠ AQ52
♥ Q2
♦ 9843
♣ K63

Even if partner opens 1♦, your first bid should be 1♠. As the auction develops, it may become clear that diamonds will represent the best choice, but that's another story. 1♠ is clearly right over a 1♣ opening as well.

♠ AJ52
♥ AQT2
♦ 98
♣ K63

With equal length in the majors, we should revert to our original rules for opening (remember? lower of majors and respond with 1♥, in an effort to constructively locate the best game contract.

♠ T82
♥ 965
♦ 98
♣ AKJ63

I guess this is that extreme case I talked about before. If partner has opened 1♣, you really do have no alternative but to support him. 3♣ looks about right (as per with majors). Obviously after 1♦ is opened you'll be bidding 1NT.

Opener's second bid

So you opened, and partner dredged up some response - probably not the one you were hoping for, in my experience. What next? You should have had a plan when you opened for what you'd be doing if partner failed to either support you or show a suit you had support for; you should follow this plan through now, please.

Partner has supported

Why don't I ever have a partner like yours? From reading the responder's bit previously, you should have a fair idea what she's shown - let's discuss major fits first as partner is much more likely to support us if we've opened hearts or spades.

You know you have a fit. But do you have the points for game? If partner is limited (ie unless they've chosen 2NT as their response), then you're allowed to:

Pass if you **can't** have enough between you for game

Invite if you **might** have

Bid it if you **definitely** have

On the other hand, if partner has responded 2NT they could have anything from ten upwards and you can't pass. However, you can

Bid 3 of your major if you really can't see game being on (11/12 points)

Bid a 3-level suit below your major to show length in that suit and a *game try* - ie you quite fancy game, but will need partner to hold more than a minimum hand, or help in your suit

Bid 4 of your major to show about 14/15 and to deny any interest in slam.

To illustrate what on earth I'm jabbering about in the second of these options over 2NT, consider the chances for game in the following two scenarios:

♠ 92	♠ AJ63	A combined 23 points here is unlikely to be sufficient for 4♥ to make (you must lose a spade and there's every chance of three minor suit losers as well)
♥ AKJ82	♥ QT74	
♦ KJ54	♦ 32	
♣ 87	♣ KJ62	

♠ 92	♠ A6	Here, you have one point fewer but the double fit gives good chances for game to make.
♥ AKJ82	♥ QT74	
♦ KJ54	♦ AT832	
♣ 87	♣ 63	

Although the latter hand may seem an unlikely double fit, if it comes up then you'll be disappointed to languish in 3♥ when the simple auction:

1♥ - 2NT
3♦ - ?? will get to you 3♥ on the first hand and 4♥ on the second.

Partner shows a suit you can support

This is definitely a good thing too. And better still, your options are simple. A single raise shows a minimum opening, and a jump raise shows a better hand. As ever, we may try for no trumps instead of minor suit contracts, although in principle the rules should be the same as for majors.

Deciding on how good your hand is has a lot to do with the context, but we use roughly the same rules as for reversing - remember these hands from the opening section?

♠ AKJ92	You opened this 1♠. Partner has bid 2♥, and you have support. You only have a minimum hand, so even though partner has promised you 10 points he'll have to persist over your 3♥ raise if he has the values for game.
♥ KT92	
♦ 83	
♣ J7	

♠ 2	Opening 1♣ looked best; once partner responds 1♥ then we're in business. Again, you have a minimal kind of hand so just make a simple raise.
♥ AQT2	
♦ KT9	
♣ A9874	

♠ A7	Having opened 1♥, partner surprises you with 2♣. Your hand isn't bad, and opposite partner's guaranteed 10-count you look good for game. You may have better chances in 3NT than 5♣, however, so bidding straight there should show a hand like this.
♥ KQJ62	
♦ 98	
♣ KJ87	

♠ A	You began with 1♣ and yet again partner finds your suit, responding 1♥. With 17 points you can afford to jump to 3♥, strongly suggesting that game is on unless partner has a bit of a bag.
♥ KT92	
♦ A83	
♣ AQT87	

♠ QT62	Finally, you opened this 1♦ and partner completes his five-hand wonder by responding 1♠. Your minimum hand should probably just show support with 2♠ here - partner could still be very weak, remember!
♥ T	
♦ AKT94	
♣ KJ4	

Responder's second bid

We've got quite far now, and there are an enormous number of auctions that could have occurred. You need to be making practical judgements at this point since it's tough to prescribe an action for every single hand (and this is a long document already!) but there is some guidance as to what you should be doing.

I supported partner, now he's done something else

As per the "Opener's second bid" section, you now know a lot about partner's hand. If you didn't respond 2NT as a good major raise, then you'll be passing here unless he's done something mad. After 2NT, you'll probably just be deciding between game and partscore based on the strength of your hand and how it fits with what partner has shown.

I introduced my own suit, and now partner has supported it

Well good work, you've found a fit. By now partner should have shown you a point range for his hand, and you can pass if game isn't on, or bid if it is. If the auction has gone something like

1♣ - 1♥
2♥ - ??

Then you know partner should have 11-15 with four hearts. You can now pass (<10 points); invite (10-12 points, by bidding 3♥) or bid game (with 13-16). More than 16 points should have you looking for a slam, but again that's a topic for a later week.

Partner has shown both his suits and I have support for one of them

This is a situation much like when you responded the first time, only with extra knowledge about partner's hand. You might be looking at something like:

♠ Q862 with an auction like 1♥ - 1♠ - 2♦ - ?? to chew on.
♥ T98
♦ A4
♣ K542

You now know quite a lot, though. Partner has 11-15, five hearts, four diamonds, not four spades. So your best fit is going to be with his heart suit, and you know you can't have game on since you just don't have enough points. Bidding what you think you can make (2♥, here) is the way forward.

With a bit more strength (even a point or two), but the same shape in the same auction, you might jump to 3♥ to show an invite to game.

With a lot more strength (another Ace, say), chances are you'll be bidding straight to game since you can see it's almost certainly going to be right.

Partner has shown two suits but I only have my own

Yeah, this happens too. You're feeling all perky about your five card spade suit and partner goes and shows hearts and clubs. You have two real options to choose between here:

You can bid your suit again (promising extra length)

You can make a practical NT bid (bid what you think you can make)

There are too many possibilities to cover individually, but in the former case you'll be considering (as ever) whether there are chances for game given what partner's shown, and trying to intelligently represent the values and shape you hold. The latter normally occurs when you have a longer minor suit and no support for a limited partner, as then you're well-placed to judge the appropriate NT level.

Aargh, none of this has happened, we still haven't found a fit and I'm getting nervous

Calm.

If you haven't got a suitable fit (or it's a minor fit and you don't want to play there) then there's always our stalwart of no trumps to call upon. If you bid 2NT at *this* stage of the bidding, then that shows 10-12 points in a balanced hand without a fit for partner, allowing partner to judge whether game in 3NT will be right.

Say:

♠ K762 on the auction 1♥ - 1♠ - 2♦ - ??
♥ J9
♦ A64
♣ KJ72

Or:

♠ 764 on the auction 1♥ - 2♣ - 2♦ - ??
♥ Q9
♦ K72
♣ AQ764

This still applies if partner has reversed - he may well value the information:

♠ K2	♠ AQ63	The auction has gone 1♦ - 1♠ - 2♥ - ??
♥ AQ82	♥ T97	You know you have enough for game, but
♦ AKJ54	♦ T8	partner doesn't. Give him the chance to
♣ 76	♣ A983	either describe his hand further or bid 3NT.

(Attempted) Summary of what to do with unbalanced hands

Opener's first bid (grazi, Rob Morris)

Points	Opening
20+	2C
16-19	1 of suit, strong rebid
11-15	1 of suit, normal rebid
6-9	Pass, or open Weak 2D, 2H, 2S
< 6	Pass

Responder's first bid

With **major suit support**, bid

- 2maj 6-9 points and four card support
- 2NT 10+ points and four card support
- 3maj 0-9 points and five card support

With **minor suit support**, bid a major suit first if you have one, or support it.

Without **support**, introduce your longest suit first:

- Prioritise majors ahead of minors
- A new suit at the 1-level promises 6+ points
- A new suit at the 2-level promises 10+ points
- 1NT show 6-9 balanced and denies four cards in between

Opener's second bid

Follow your plan unless partner has supported or bid a major you'll support.

If partner has supported then decide whether to pass, try for game or just bid it

If you have support then

- Make a **single raise** with a minimum
- Make a **double raise** with a reversing-type hand

Possibly pass if partner has responded 1NT and you can't have game on

Responder's second bid

If you've found a fit then judge whether you have game on.

If you haven't then

- You can show extra length in your own suit
- You can bid 2NT with 10-12 points
- You can pass if partner is limited and you're weak.