

Oxford Students' Bridge Association

Beginners' Lessons 2009

Lesson 7. Conventional Bidding

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Introduction

We have now developed a complete bidding system that will work for almost all hands that you are dealt (assuming you use it correctly!!). Today we will look at how we can improve on this simple system. From now on, it is a matter for you and your partner to decide how to develop a system, but I would suggest that you **keep it simple!** Success in Bridge is about how well you play your system and not how complex your system is.

What is conventional bidding?

A convention is, essentially, a series of artificial bids use to show details about your hand. We have met one convention so far (artificial strong 2C opening) and a few other artificial bids (unassuming cue-bids, 2NT negative after strong 2 opening). Here we will look at a few more. Details of others you might like to play are also added, but will not be discussed in lessons.

When to introduce conventional bids

We introduce conventional bids for two reasons:

1. To make use of otherwise meaningless bids, or those that come up so rarely in natural auctions (for example, the use of unassuming cue-bids, or what about 1S-3S; 4NT?)
2. To increase the number of hands that we can show to fill holes in the current system (see responses to 1NT opening).

Blackwood Convention

As 4NT is rarely used naturally a common use for this bid is to enquire about the number of aces held by partner when trying to find a slam. Usually a suit should be agreed first, but a sequence such as 1H-2D; 2S-4NT implicitly agrees spades (the last suit bid). So, for example, after 1S-3S, 4NT is Blackwood asking responder how many aces he holds. Responses are:

- **5C** 0 or 4 aces
- **5D** 1 ace
- **5H** 2 aces
- **5S** 3 aces.

Blackwood bidder can then use 5NT to ask for Kings (responses as above but at the 6 level) if he wants, but will only usually do so when looking for a Grand Slam. Rebidding the **agreed trump suit at the 5 level is signoff**. (*To signoff in 5NT, bid a suit at the 5 level that has not been agreed as a trump suit – this forces Blackwood responder to bid 5NT.*)

Use of Blackwood

Blackwood is used to **keep you out of bad slams** (if you are missing 2 aces, the slam will often fail!) and not to get you into them. One example of a good use for Blackwood comes from a slight modification of a hand in Lesson 5:

North: KQ9, KQ96, AKT7, K3

South: JT, A2, QJ9864, A95

North opens 2NT (20-22), S responds 4D (slam try in D). North is minimum but has excellent D support, so wants to accept the Slam try but is concerned about his lack of aces. Without guaranteeing 33 HCP it is very possible 2 are missing. If N uses Blackwood by rebidding 4NT, S rebids 5H (2 aces) and N can safely bid the small slam. If S had only shown 1 ace (by bidding 5D), N can pass.

When not to use Blackwood!

There are times when Blackwood should be avoided. These are mainly:

- **When you hold a void and a suit missing an ace.** You will never know whether the missing ace is opposite your void or not so will have to guess whether to bid the slam or not.
- **When any response that means Slam cannot make will take the auction beyond that suit at the 5 level.** If, in the example above, the minors are reversed (the original hand in lesson 5):
North: KQ9, KQ96, K3, AKT7 South: JT, A2, A95, QJ9864
then after 2NT-4C, 4NT for Blackwood is not a good idea since the 5D response (1 ace) tells North that Slam cannot make but he can no longer sign off in 5C. As N will be Dummy here, EW will have more information about the potential success of this Slam. Better just to bid 6C directly (or sign-off immediately in 5C depending on judgement). The lower the rank of the suit, the more careful you have to be when using Blackwood.
- **When you are not sure it is safe to play at the 5-level.** A small doubleton in a side suit is always a worry.

There are certain circumstances when 4NT is not Blackwood. Essentially these are:

- After a NT opening (1NT-4NT and 2NT-4NT are quantitative Slam invites)
- When it is not freely bid, for example, after a 4 level pre-empt or sacrifice (when NT has been agreed) by opponents. 4NT is to play in these circumstances.

Forth Suit Forcing

A sequence such as 1H-1S; 2C-2D has little meaning. It is unlikely that they want to pursue a fit in the forth suit and responder can bid NT if he holds this suit (or a stop) in it. This bid is used artificially to enquire more information about opener's hand, usually to decide which Game is best. The sequence should only be used when deciding between

Games, and is only non-Game forcing when the hands appear to mis-fit or will have to play in 5C/D when it looks unlikely. After a bid in the forth suit, responses are (illustrated for 1H-1S; 2C-2D):

- **2NT** (if available) shows a partial stop or better (K, Qx, Jxx) in the forth suit
- **3NT** shows a good stop in the forth suit (Kx, Qxx, Jxxx questionable)
- **2H*** (opener's first suit) shows 5+ cards
- **3H*** (jump in opener's first suit) shows at least a good 6 card suit, preferably 7.
- **3C*** (opener's second suit) shows 5+ cards, so implies 5+ hearts (with C longer than H, opener would have opened 1C)
- **4C*** shows a 2-suited hand unsuitable for play in NT (such as a 6-6 shape)
- **3S*** (responder's suit) show 3 card support (opener would have raised earlier with 4 card support)
- **3D** (raise of forth suit) shows 4 cards, hence a 1-4-4-4 shape, but do not take the auction past 3NT!!

* Your priority is to show stops looking for 3NT and this should be done in preference to rebidding your own, or partner's suit.

Conventional Responses to 1NT (and 2NT)

Looking back to our responses to a 1NT opening, responder has no way to show 4 card major suits at all or 5 card major suits with invitational hands (11-12, with 13+, you can bid at the 3 level, FG). This will mean that a lot of 8 card fits in the majors are missed. A modification to the system allows us to find these major suit fits, but this is at the expense of weak takeouts into 2C/D.

Stayman Convention

After 1NT, **2C** is Stayman convention, asking opener to show 4 card (or longer) major suits. Responder promises a 4 card major. Opener rebids:

- **2D** with no 4 card major. Responder bids **2/3NT** as appropriate.
- **2H/S** with 4 cards in that major. With 4-4 in the majors, bid **2H**. Responder can invite (2NT, 3H/S with 8 card fit) or bid Game (3NT, 4H/S with 8 card fit). Opener can correct a NT bid to S if 4-4 in the majors.

Stayman can also be used as a weak takeout with a 4-4-5-0 (or similar shaped) hand where any response is guaranteed to find an 8 card fit. Do not do this unless you can tolerate playing opposite 4 cards in both majors or opposite a doubleton diamond.

Transfer bids

In addition to Stayman, we can modify the use of 2D/H/S. We use **2D/H** as **transfer bids** (showing the suit directly above it – 2D shows H, 2H shows S) and this asks opener to bid that suit at the 2 level. So, after 1NT, 2D asks opener to bid 2H, when he does so, responder can:

Pass. As a weak takeout.

2NT. Invitational (11-12), 5 card suit

3H. Invitational, 6 card suit

3NT. 13+, 5 card suit

4H. 13+, 6 card suit

Bid another suit: Shows 5-4 between the 2 suits and is Game invitational at the 2 level or Game Forcing at the 3 level. 4 level shows 5-5 or better, FG, no interest in NT

This leaves the **2S** response unused. There are many uses of the bid, but the most useful is to use it to show **5 spades and 4 hearts with Game Invitational** values (this gives us a Game Force and invite when both majors are held).

With a **maximum hand** (14 HCP) and **4+ card support** for partner, opener can **break** the transfer. He does this by:

2NT. To show 4 card support for responder's suit and a 4-3-3-3 shape.

3 of the anchor suit (i.e., the suit responder has shown, not the one he bid!). To show 5 cards in that suit.

A side suit at the lowest level. To show 4 cards that suit as well as in responder's suit (so a 4-4-3-2 shape)

By sacrificing weak takeouts in the minors, we have dramatically increased the number of hands we can show. Remember that **if the opponents bid over a 1NT opening, all bids revert to being natural.**

3 level major suit responses as Game forcing bids with 5 cards suits are no longer needed, so these can be used as slam tries in the way that 4C and 4D were previously. You can also make a Slam try by transferring then using Blackwood.

The same principles apply over 2NT and it is particularly useful then since it is often good to have the strong hand declare the contract to keep it hidden from defenders' view. This also allows the introduction of weak takeout bids over a 2NT opening.

OPTIONAL: Other conventions

I won't go into detail here. If you are interested in finding out more about these then there are many internet resources or bridge books. Some good pages are (but be careful – some of these are American so base their conventions on a different basic system):

<http://www.bridgeguys.com/>

http://www.blakjak.demon.co.uk/brg_menu.htm

Weak 2 bids

*Many people use 2D/H/S are **pre-emptive** bids and not strong bids. These work along the same lines as pre-emptive 3 level openings, but only a 6 card suit is required. These come up far more frequently than 2 level bids and are more useful at duplicate bridge. Many people then use 2NT as a Game enquiry (**OGUST** is popular). Some people use 2C and 2D and strong bids and 2H and 2S as weak, but I don't recommend this.*

Control cue-bids

*After a major suit has been agreed, there is little point in bidding another suit naturally. A common use of this is to use it to show a **first round control** of that suit and Slam interest. So, after 1S-3S, 4C would show the CA (or void) and slam interest. Responder*

can then show the D or H ace by cue-bidding them (cheapest first). Second cue-bids in the same suit show second round controls (Kings and Singletons).

Splinter bids

The sequence 1S-4C (or any other double jump) has little natural meaning. Often this is used to show a: good 4+ card support for spades, slam interest, a hand strong enough (including distribution) to force Game and singleton (or void) in clubs. Further bids are usually cuebids, 4S from opener shows no slam interest. This allows opener to assess slam chances. Holding xxx (or Axxx) opposite the singleton is useful (the losers can be ruffed), but KQxx opposite a singleton is devalued.

Trial bids

A change of suit after a single limit raise (e.g., 1S-2S; 3C) is Game invitational and shows a **weak long C suit** (typically xxx or Jxx) when opener is worried that losers in that suit might hinder his Game chances. Responder bids 3S (reject), 4S (accept) or can make a second trial bid in his own weak suit after re-evaluating his hand based on that knowledge. If these are being used in combination with control cue-bids then discussion is needed, but generally a bid is a trial bid when the agreed suit can be rebid below Game, and cue when it cannot.

Roman Key-Card Blackwood

This is a variation on Blackwood where the trump K is counted as an ace and you can also show the trump Q in certain circumstances. Useful, but can lead to problems as to which the agreed trump suit is.

Two suited 1NT overcalls

Overcalling 1NT can be done more aggressively when showing 2 suited hands. I don't recommend using this too soon, but it is pretty useful for serious duplicate players. **Astro** is common (2C shows H and a minor, 2D shows S and another, 5-4 or better). Continuations are complex and need discussion.

Key Points from Lesson 7

We have seen when we might want to add conventions to our bidding system and discussed a couple of useful ones. I don't suggest that you make your system too complicated until you have established a partnership. All conventions have the drawback in that they can lead to misunderstandings and this always has to be weighed up against the advantage the convention offers.

Bidding Summary

Blackwood (4NT to ask for aces, not after a 1NT or 2NT opening). Responses are:

5C 0/4 aces; 5D 1 ace; 5H 2 aces; 5S 3 aces.

Blackwood bidder's rebid:

Agreed trump suit at 5 level: signoff

Suit not agreed as trumps at 5 level: forces responder to bid 5NT, signoff

5NT asking for kings, responses as above but at 6 level.

It is the Blackwood bidder's job to place the contract.

After a bid in the fourth suit (Fourth Suit Forcing, illustrated for 1H-1S; 2C-2D)

2NT (if available) shows a partial stop (K, Qx, Jxx) in the fourth suit

3NT shows a good stop in the fourth suit (Kx is OK; Qxx, Jxxx questionable)

2H (opener's first suit) shows 5 card suit

3H (jump in opener's first suit) shows at least a good 6 card suit, preferably 7.

3C (opener's second suit) shows 5 cards in that suit, so implies 5+ hearts (with C longer than H, opener would have opened 1C)

4C shows a two suited hand (usually 6-6)

3S (raises of responder's suit) show 3 card support (opener would have raised with 4 card support earlier)

3D (raise of fourth suit) shows 4 cards, hence a 1-4-4-4 shape, but do not take the auction past 3NT!!

Conventional responses to 1NT (12-14). After interference, bids revert to natural

Responder	Opener's rebid	Responder's rebid	Opener's 3 rd bid
Pass 0-10, no 5cM	-		
2C Stayman, has a 4cM	2D no 4CM	Pass used as weak takeout	-
		2NT 11-12, invG	Pass/3NT
		3NT 13+, to play	-
This also applies at a higher level over 2NT but there are no invitational bids, only signoffs and FG	2H 4×H, maybe 4×S	Pass used as weak takeout	
		2NT not 4×H, 11-12, invG (implies 4×S)	Pass 12-13 3S 12-13, 4×S 3NT 14HCP, to play 4S 14, 4×S, to play
		3H 4×H, 11-12, invG	Pass 12-13 4H 14HCP to play (3NT 14HCP 3433, p/c)
		2NT not 4×H, 13+ (implies 4×S)	Pass 4S 4×S, to play
	2S 4×S, denies 4×H	as over 2H but opener will not correct to H over NT bids	
2D transfer to H	2H forced response (12-13 any shape or 14 w/o 4+ H)	Pass used as weak takeout	
		2NT 11-12, invG, 5×H	Pass 12-13, 2×H 3H 12-13, 3+×H, singoff 3NT 14HCP, 2×H 4H 14HCP, 3×H
This also applies at a higher level over 2NT but there are no invitational bids, only signoffs and FG		3H 11-12, invG, 6×H	Pass 12-13, 4H 14
		3NT 13+ 5×H	Pass 2×H, 4H 3×H
		4H 13+ 5×H	-
		2S 5+×H, 4×S, invG	logical
		3C/3D/3S 5+×H, 4cs, FG	logical
		4C/4D/4S 5-5 or better, FG	logical
	2S/3C/3D 14HCP 4×H 4cs	3H used as weak takeout	-
		Others nat, FG	
	2NT 14HCP 4×H 3433	3H used as weak takeout	-
		Others nat, FG	
	3H 14HCP 5×H	Pass used as weak takeout	
		Others nat, FG	
2H transfer to S	same pattern as after 2D as transfer to H, but 5-4 S-H game invite does not use transfer		
2S 5×S 4×H 13+ invG	Logical		
2NT 11-12, invites G	Pass 12-13	-	
same as natural system	3NT 14, no 5cM	-	
denies 4/5cM	3H/S 14, 5cs, FG	3N / 4H/S to play	
3C/D natural, FG	Responses as in natural system		
3H/S nat, slam try	3NT 4H/S 5C/D to play		
	Others accept slam try		
3NT 13+, no 4/5cM	-		
4NT 19-20, inv slam	Pass/6NT		

