



Three-Level Pre-empts

Why do we pre-empt? There must be some good reasons to compensate for wasting two levels of the auction.

- DISRUPTION.** Wasting two levels of the auction is the first good reason! You disrupt your opponents' bidding by taking away their space.
- DESCRIPTION.** This second reason is also very important: a pre-emptive bid gives an accurate description of your hand: a seven-card suit and a weak hand. One of the aims of all systems is to be able to show your hand accurately; to do so in one bid is very handy and usually means that you don't have to bid again.

Let us consider these attributes of pre-empts in action. Look at these two hands having a smooth auction:

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

West	East
1♥	2♦
2♥	3♥
4♥	End

West opens 1♥; East, with enough strength to bid at the two level, responds 2♦, and then West rebids 2♥: he is not strong enough to bid his clubs. East now knows that the partnership have a good heart fit (opener's rebid has promised at least five) and with a healthy 10 points he tries for game by raising to 3♥. Now

West is a lot happier; his hand has just increased in value: from being medium-range it has now become strong. With a singleton, 14 points and the king of diamonds in his partner's suit, he has a comfortable raise to game.

The partnership has had a great conversation to reach the best contract.

Unfortunately, as I am sure you have guessed, the dealer was not West, but South – who chose to open 3♠!

What a difference that makes! No time for the relaxed and neat messages passed from partner to partner – the conversation now has to start near the four level. The likelihood is that West would try a take-out double and East would respond 4♦ and that is where they would play. Eleven tricks in 4♦ are comfortable, but of course there is no game bonus.

This deal demonstrates the disruptive value of pre-emptive bidding. As long as your suit is good, you are not usually taking too big a risk, while the upside can be huge: by taking your opponents' bidding space away, you will often force them to guess the final contract, and when they are wrong it can be very costly.

Take a look at these two hands now:

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

The auction is simple: 3♣ – 3NT.

East knows that his partner has long clubs and is hoping for seven tricks from the suit. The ace of spades makes eight and on a heart lead 3NT will be romping home.

This is bold bidding, but a good auction too, based on the accurate description of West's hand to find the best contract. Note that you are likely to make the same number of tricks in no-trumps as you are in a club contract. Furthermore, even if 3NT does get defeated, it might turn out to be a reasonable score, in case North-South reach the makeable contract of 4♥.

There is no doubt that the descriptive element of pre-emptive bidding is just as important as its disruptive function, allowing partner to judge whether game is on or perhaps even whether to make a sacrifice bid.

Pre-empting essentials

A pre-emptive three opening bid shows a good seven-card suit in a hand of below opening strength.

That is the basic description but there are a number of very important aspects about pre-emptive hands which I would like to discuss:

1. High-card point strength
2. Suit quality
3. Defensive values
4. Distribution
5. Vulnerability
6. Position

Let us consider them in order.

1. STRENGTH

The strength for an opening pre-emptive bid is 5-9 points.

To open the bidding at the one level, the rule is that you need 12 HCP or 13 points including length, so the maximum strength for a pre-empt would be 9 points. This is because if you have 10 HCP and a seven-card suit, your total points would be 10 + 3 (three length points) = 13, i.e. enough to open at the one level. For example, with the hand below:

♠ K Q J 8 7 6 4
♥ 3 2
♦ A 4 3
♣ 7

You would open 1♠.

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♠ K Q 10 9 7 6 4
♥ 3 2
♦ 7 4 3
♣ 7

Five points might seem a little weak to open the bidding at the three-level, but if all your points are in the long suit then the hand can be suitable; the hand above would be a minimum 3♠ opener.

2. SUIT QUALITY

This is a tremendously important part of pre-empting. As will be seen later under “Vulnerability” and “Position”, other factors will affect how you evaluate your suit. However, the main consideration must be that, since by definition (see previous page) a pre-emptive bid shows a “good” seven-card suit, a good suit is what you should hold!

When opening a *vulnerable* pre-empt you should have at least *three of the top five cards* or the ace-king; this is in order to try to avoid conceding minus 200 on a part-score hand (i.e. when your opponents cannot make a game) by going two off vulnerable.

Solidity is also very important; it might seem that tens and nines make little difference, but trouble tends to come when the suit breaks nastily and your opponents have doubled your pre-empt. Consider these two suits:

Suit A **Suit B**
♣ K J 10 9 8 4 3 ♣ K J 8 5 4 3 2

Let us put Suit A in the context of a full deal:

Dealer: South. Game All.

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

South opens 3♣, and finishes up as declarer in 3♣ doubled. He loses two clubs, two diamonds and one trick in each major for two down and minus 500. This should not be an unmitigated disaster, however, because with 25 points between them you would expect East-West to reach game and with the cards lying well they should make 3NT with ease – and thus North-South might even make a profit of 100 points on the deal.

Change a few clubs around, though, so that South holds Suit B, and you can see that things change rather a lot:

Dealer: South. Game All.

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

This time there will be two extra trump losers in 3♣ doubled, which means four down and minus 1100 – now *that* certainly is an unmitigated disaster!

Do not to take risks with the quality of your suit when you are vulnerable.

3. DEFENSIVE VALUES

Always remember that you have a partner! When you make a pre-empt you are not only disrupting the opponents, you are being descriptive, and as part and parcel of that description goes the suggestion that your side might want to make a sacrifice bid.

An ideal hand for a pre-emptive bid is:

♠ 2
♥ 8 4 3
♦ 9 7
♣ K Q J 10 9 3 2

This hand has *no* tricks in defence (your clubs are unlikely to score since someone will usually be able to ruff the second round), but you can count on a very comfortable six tricks if playing with clubs as trumps.

You must never have the potential for more than two defensive tricks.

What this means is that most of your high-card strength should be in your long suit, with ideally no more than one high honour outside the suit. However, if you do have more than one outside honour, they should be in the same side-suit.

If your partner can rely on you having very few tricks in defence against an opponents’ contract, then he can make an accurate judgement over their bidding. For example, if they have bid to 4♠ and he can only see one or two tricks in his own hand, then he can be almost completely sure that 4♠ will make and might therefore contemplate bidding 5♣ over it – going off, but probably giving less away than allowing the other side to make game.

4. SHAPE

Do not pre-empt with a good four-card major in your hand because you might miss a better contract in that suit.

Remember that once you have pre-empted, your partner will almost always settle for playing in the long suit you have shown – hence the rule above.

Another point to be aware of when considering shape is that 7-2-2-2 hands (with three doubletons) are the weakest-shaped hands of all possible pre-empt; you should prefer hands with a singleton or void.

5. VULNERABILITY

Being doubled and going down is not necessarily going to lead to a bad score if your opponents can make game, but, even then, how well or badly you fare will largely depend on the vulnerability, which is a huge factor when considering whether to make a pre-emptive bid.

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	DOUBLED UNDERTRICKS	OPPONENTS' GAME
Love All	2 off = 300	420
Game All	2 off = 500	620
Favourable	3 off = 500	620
Unfavourable	1 off = 200	420

This table shows the number of tricks by which you can be defeated while still making a profit against your opponents' game, at various vulnerabilities.

At equal vulnerability you would open normal pre-empts and play a steady game, but at favourable vulnerability (when you are non-vulnerable against vulnerable opponents) you can be a lot more aggressive and perhaps take a few risks to disrupt your opponents. The opposite is true at unfavourable vulnerability (i.e. when you are vulnerable against non-vulnerable opponents): now you should be on your best behaviour and make sure your bid is up to scratch, or your partner might have something to say in the post-mortem!

Don't forget what I mentioned under "Suit Quality": when vulnerable, you need a more robust suit to avoid getting bad scores on part-score deals.

6. POSITION AT THE TABLE

Another very important factor in pre-empting is your position at the table, because it affects the likelihood of you disrupting your opponents rather than partner. Do not forget how annoying it is to be holding 18 points yourself and hear your partner open with a pre-emptive bid – so you do need to take this effect into account.

POSITION	OPPO	PARTNER	STYLE
1st	2	1	Aggressive
2nd	1	1	Constructive
3rd	1	0	Disruptive

This table shows whom you might pre-empt depending on the position in which you are sitting. ("First position" means you are dealer; "second position" means

that one opponent has passed, and "third position" means that both partner and an opponent have passed before you.)

Perhaps the most important case is when you are in second position. It is very important to realise that if one opponent has already passed, then half the time your pre-empt is going to disrupt your partner rather than your left-hand opponent.

Always keep this in mind. It is for this reason that I strongly advocate the following rule:

Second-seat pre-empts need to be constructive: they should promise two of the top three honours in your long suit.

This allows your partner to evaluate his hand accurately opposite your pre-empt, and therefore your bid will be less of a disruption to him.

In stark contrast to this is a third seat pre-empt when your partner has already passed; now you *know* that you must be pre-empting your opponents and can thus be a bit freer with your pre-empts. Knowing that the last player to bid is probably holding a very good hand, you would like to make his life as difficult as possible.

Putting this together with the considerations outlined under "Vulnerability", you might have worked out that third in hand at favourable vulnerability you can pretty much pre-empt on anything you like (and some players do)!

In first seat you are pre-empting two opponents and one partner, so your pre-empts should be *good* but can also be *aggressive*.

Conclusions

We have looked at the six major factors concerning pre-emptive bids; now you need to put them together to evaluate whether a pre-emptive opening is worthwhile.

Generally I advocate an aggressive style, but when your suit is weak you must be very circumspect indeed.

You might like to get some practice with the bidding quiz on page 15. Then turn to page 39 to see how well you have done. ■

CODE	TITLE
BS01	Asptro
BS03	Benjamin Two Bids
BS04	Bidding 4-4-4-1 Hands
BS05	Blocking and Unblocking
BS06	Counting
BS07	Crowhurst 2♣
BS09	Declarer Play in 1NT
BS10	Defence against Pre-empts
BS11	Defence to the Multi 2♦
BS13	Doubling
BS14	Dummy Reversal
BS15	Duplicate Bridge Terms
BS16	Elimination Play
BS18	Forcing 1NT Response
BS19	Fourth Suit Forcing
BS20	Hold-up Play
BS21	Law of Total Tricks
BS22	Lebensohl
BS23	Losing Trick Count
BS24	Multi 2♦
BS25	Negative Doubles
BS27	Overcalls
BS28	Pre-emptive Bidding
BS29	Re-opening & Balancing
BS30	Reverse Bidding
BS31	RKC Blackwood
BS32	Ruffing
BS35	Splinter Bids
BS38	Suit Combinations
BS39	Switching
BS40	Transfer Bidding
BS42	Trump Coups
BS43	Two-suited Overcalls
BS45	Wriggle

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