

DEFINITION

A balanced hand has:

No void

No singleton

No more than one doubleton

No rebiddable 5-card major

No 6-card suit

It will therefore contain all four suits in one of the following combinations:

4-4-3-2

4-3-3-3

2-3-3-5 when the 5 card suit is a minor suit or a very weak major suit.

An opening bid of 1NT shows a balanced hand with 12, 13 or 14 HCPs - no more, no less.

Modern Standard English Acol – What is a ‘balanced’ hand?

1. Why do we care whether a hand is balanced or unbalanced?

The strength of a hand isn't just in its honour cards – it's also in the distribution of the suits. A long suit makes a hand stronger *providing* that your long suit is the trump suit. For example if you take your 13 cards from the board and discover that you have all the spades, you know you will make all 13 tricks if spades are trumps even though you only have 10 HCPs.

So a fundamental cornerstone of the bidding system is recognising the shape of your hand: whether your hand is ‘balanced’ – and therefore more suited to playing in no trumps – or ‘unbalanced’. You tell your partner about the shape of your hand through your bids.

2. When do you decide whether your hand is balanced or unbalanced?

You need to decide straight away – as soon as you look at your cards – as your very first bid will be based on the shape of your hand and its HCPs.

Imagine you are the dealer and you've just taken your 13 cards from the board. What's the first thing you're going to do? You'll count them to check you have 13 cards, sort them into suits and values within the suits and then count the honour card points (called HCPs from now on.)

We allocate 4 HCPs for an ace, 3 for a king, 2 for a queen and 1 for a jack. The ten is thought of as an honour card but it doesn't carry a point value. Each suit has 10 HCPs and there are four suits. Therefore there are clearly 40 HCPs in a deal. If the honour cards were distributed evenly among the four players, each player would have 10 HCPs. So an “average” hand has 10 HCPs and the more HCPs you and your partner have, the fewer the opposition have.

As dealer, you have the first opportunity to make a bid. You're going to *consider* opening the bidding if you have a better than average hand, that is better than 10HCPs.

[NB As you learn more you will discover some things called: 'the rule of 20', pre-emptive openings and weak 2 openings. With these you will bid with 10 or fewer than 10 HCPs. But don't think about these yet!]

You will **definitely** open the bidding if you have 12 or more HCPs:

With 12-19 HCPs, open at the 1-level.

With 20+HCPs, open at the 2-level.

[In fact with some hands you will open at the 2-level on fewer than 20 HCPs. Don't think about this just yet.)

If you have 25+ HCPs in your partnership you should be in a game contract – that is, 9 tricks in NT (3NT) or 10 tricks in a major suit (4♠/4♥).

Game in a minor suit is 11 tricks (5♣/5♦) so you need a few more HCPs - 28.

☺ Did you know? . . .

With 25 HCPs 3NT is likely to make 50% of the time and with 26 HCPs 3NT is 60% likely to make.

So if you have 12 or more HCPs you know you're going to make a bid, you just have to decide which bid to make!

That decision is based on the shape of your hand. If you have a long suit your hand is what bridge players call unbalanced. You'll want to open in the long suit with a view to establishing your suit as trumps if your partner can support you. If you have a flat or balanced hand no trumps is the route to go. These are bridge jargon terms – balanced and unbalanced. They need explaining and defining.

Remember the 13 spades hand – that is an unbalanced hand. If the number of cards in your two longest suits adds up to 9 or more, you have an unbalanced hand. In bridge there is a clear and fixed definition of a balanced hand which is detailed in the sidebar overleaf.

3. Your hand is balanced, what opening bid do you make?

Balanced Hand

12-14	1NT
15-16	1 of a suit , rebid NTs at lowest level - 1NT or 2NT depending on partner's bid.
17-18	1 of a suit , rebid NTs with a jump – 2NT or 3NT depending on partner's bid.
19	1 of a suit , rebid 3NT
20-22	2NT
23-24	2♣, rebid 2NT
25-27	2♣, rebid 3NT
28-30	2♣, rebid 4NT

Opening bids & rebids

The End