

Free Bids
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Definition: A free bid is a bid made by responder after RHO has overcalled. In this situation, responder can typically pass with a weak hand because opener will still be able to bid if desired.

Example: Partner opens 1H. If you, as responder, hold 6 HCP, typically, you must bid because partner could have up to 20 or 21 HCP, and you might miss game if you pass, and the hand gets passed out. But, if your RHO overcalls the 1H opening bid, now you as responder can pass since partner will have another chance to bid.

So, what is the meaning of a free bid? How strong is it? Is it forcing for one round? Is it forcing to game? How weak can it be? As with most things in bridge, it is a matter of partnership agreement, but most partnerships do not have an explicit agreement on this!

STANDARD TREATMENT (standard does NOT imply recommended):

After 1H-(2C), a bid of 2D or 2S promises 5+ cards in the suit, and a minimum of 10 or 11 HCP. The bid is forcing for 1 round (responder is still unlimited in strength). So, what do you do if you don't have 10 or 11 HCP, but you do have a nice 5-card suit? You have 2 choices:

- a) You can make a negative x if you have at least 4 cards in the unbid major, and at least 6 HCP. Sometimes, you will make this negative x with more than 4 cards in the unbid major, but with less than 10 HCP because you are not strong enough to make a rebid.
- b) Without length in the unbid major, and without 10 HCP, you will usually have to pass. With extra length in a suit (like 6 or 7 cards), you might be able to make a jump shift if you have agreed to play those as weak.

Examples after partner opens 1H, and your RHO bids 2C:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
|---------|--------|---------|----------|
| ♠ K54 | ♠ QJT5 | ♠ KJ4 | ♠ 86 |
| ♥ 87 | ♥ K7 | ♥ Q3 | ♥ 7 |
| ♦ AQJ86 | ♦ K974 | ♦ K8743 | ♦ AJT864 |
| ♣ 975 | ♣ 876 | ♣ 864 | ♣ J543 |

Advantages/Disadvantages of the standard treatment:

ADVANTAGES

A free bid shows strength, Easier to bid game.

DISADVANTAGES

You must pass a lot of hands that you would like to compete with.
You rarely have enough strength for free bid

NEGATIVE FREE BIDS

But, there is an alternative to the standard treatment that is being used by a lot of experts-the Negative Free Bid. The negative free bid is NON-Forcing, shows roughly 6-10 HCP, 5+ card suit, and can be made with less than 6 HCP if the suit is longer. The thinking is that bridge is a bidder's game, and it is more important to locate a fit and compete, if

possible. Opener, with up to 15 HCP, will pass the negative free bid unless he is very short in the suit. He may rebid his own suit with a minimum, with no tolerance for partner's suit. Any other action by opener promises 16+ HCP, and invites game.

What does responder do when he has a stronger hand (11+ HCP) and a good 5+ card suit? The answer is that he doubles. Initially, this is taken as a negative x by opener. But, if responder bids a new suit at his next turn, he is indicating a good hand with 11+ HCP, and a good 5+ card suit. These auctions are often game going. In fact, some play a negative x followed by a new suit bid as game forcing. So to clarify: A double initially shows a hand with 6+ HCP and negative x shape (at least 4 cards in the unbid major). But, if responder bids a new suit at his next turn, he is showing 11+ HCP, 5+ cards in the bid suit, and he may not have 4 cards in the unbid major. Some examples with negative free bids, how would you bid these hands:

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 |
|---------|--------|---------|----------|-----------|---------|
| ♠ K54 | ♠ QJT5 | ♠ KJ4 | ♠ 86 | ♠ 875 | ♠ J65 |
| ♥ 87 | ♥ K7 | ♥ Q3 | ♥ 7 | ♥ - | ♥ 85 |
| ♦ AKJ86 | ♦ K974 | ♦ K8743 | ♦ AJT864 | ♦ KJT8642 | ♦ AT754 |
| ♣ 975 | ♣ 876 | ♣ 864 | ♣ J543 | ♣ 542 | ♣ J64 |

Negative free bids have the main advantage that they let you compete for part scores better. You get a chance to introduce your suits more often, and hopefully find a fit. They are more cumbersome when you have game going hands, but that tends to be more rare. Also, a negative free bid is alertable (when asked, you simply answer, "non-forcing"). Also, when responder doubles, and then bids a new suit, showing 11+ points and 5+ card suit, you should alert that bid and describe what it now shows. But, you don't need to alert the initial x because most of the time it is a simple negative x, and you will play it as such initially.

Which method is better? It is really a matter of partnership style. For aggressive bidders, negative free bids is probably better. But, whatever approach you take, make sure you have some agreement with partner on how you play free bids.

Finally, there are also free bids when opponents have opened, and your partner makes an overcall, and then your RHO bids further (raises or something). As advancer, a new suit bid by you is a free bid. But, the good news is that the standard treatment for free bids by advancer is that they are non-forcing (kind of like negative free bids). No alert needed here, and I don't know anybody who plays a new suit by advancer as forcing or strong.