



Cambridge University Bridge Club

Beginners' Lessons 2011

Lesson 6. Competitive bidding

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Introduction

We now have a complete bidding system constructed for the occasions when your side open the auction and no other side bids. We have also seen how we can go about disrupting our opponent's bidding using pre-emptive bids and discussed sacrifice bids over Game contracts. Today we will look at entering the auction after the other side opens at the 1 level.

Concept of competitive bidding.

The bidding system we have is constructed as a way of exchanging information about our hands so we can decide whether to play in Game (or Slam) and, if not, sign off in the lowest possible partscore. We have seen that this is made harder by opponent's pre-emptive bids removing our bidding space. This is one reason why we might want to bid competitively – to interfere with opponent's sequences.

However, just because opponents have opened the auction doesn't mean we don't have useful hands (maybe even enough for Game), so an ability to get into the auction after opponents have bid is critical to success in Bridge.

There are a vast number of possible bidding sequences, and it would be impossible to go through them all. We will go through a number of common situations. Moreover, in many situations, there isn't enough space to know exactly what's going on - **you'll often have to jump into the dark!**

As a result, there is frequently no "right answer" - experts frequently disagree on the correct action and argue their opinion passionately with one another. So - don't be afraid of making mistakes. The best way to get to grips with competitive bidding is through playing - try things out, see what works and what doesn't, and don't be afraid!

Overcalling over 1 level bids

Simple suit overcalls after 1 of a suit opening

Suppose North opens 1♥ and you, as East, hold: AKTxx, xx, QJxx, xx. The spade suit is clearly of value, so it would be nice to jump in with 1♠. In order to **overcall** (that is, bid after the opponents have bid) it is normal to bid on fewer HCP than when opening, but

therefore require the suit to be of greater quality. So, an overcall at the **1 level**, like the 1♠ bid, shows:

- **8-15 HCP** (may be lowered for suit length and distribution)¹
- A good **5 card suit** (or longer). Usually 3 of the top 5 cards should be held in a 5 card suit (but AKxxx is OK and QJTxx is questionable). The suit quality can be reduced *slightly* as the general strength of the hand is increased.

For a simple overcall (i.e., not a jump) **at the 2 level**, the same applies, but you need a little more HCP. So after N opens 1♥, E can bid 2♣ to show **11-15 HCP** and a **good five card suit**. Responses are dealt with later.

Overcalling in NT after a 1 of a suit opening

By contrast, overcall 1NT (or higher) is done on a stronger hand. There is a risk of being doubled for penalties (if N opens 1H and E bids 1NT, S knows quite a lot about partner's hand, for example, if NS holds the **balance of HCP**). Generally:

- a **1NT overcall** is made on **15-17 HCP**, a balanced hand and a **good stop** in opener's suit (Kxx is OK, but Qxx and Jxx should be avoided if possible). Responses are as over a 1NT opening but the HCP are adjusted to take into account opener's extra strength (2NT invite on 8-9, not 11-12, etc.).
- **2NT overcall** is made on **20-22** balanced.
- With **18-19** balanced, make a **takeout double** (see below) and rebid NT at the lowest level.

Takeout doubles after 1 of a suit opening

Last week we saw the **takeout double** as a way of overcalling an opponent's pre-empt with shortage in that suit and length outside. A double of a 1 of a suit opening is still takeout (penalty doubles are not useful here), shows the same hand shape (after 1♥, a 4-1-4-4 is ideal and 4 spades is necessary since it is the most likely response) and **opening values** (i.e., 12+ HCP, maybe as few as 9HCP in the pass out seat).

After (1♥) X (Pass), the responses to the double are as follows:

- **1♠/2♣/2♦** (suit at lowest level) 0-10 HCP longest suit (or cheapest bid of 2 suits up the line). Any further action by doubler (except a competitive raise, see later) shows 16+ HCP, forcing for one round.
- **1NT** typically 8-10 HCP, balanced, stop in opener's suit (2NT is rarely used naturally, but shows 11-13 HCP; 3NT is to play with double stop in opener's suit)
- **2♠/3♣/3♦** (jump response) 11+ HCP, strongly Game inviting. Doubler passes with minimum. A change of suit by doubler shows 16+ HCP, Game forcing. Simple raise is invitational or competitive (see later).
- **3NT/4♠/5♣/5♦** (direct Game bid) to play. May be expecting to make or be simply pre-emptive, but will show a long suit.
- **2♥** (cue-bid) shows 10+ (strongly game invitational) and length (at least 3 cards) in all of doubler's suits.

¹ With more than 15 points, it is typical to make a take-out double and bid your suit later.

- **Pass.** Rare! Made with a long, strong heart suit. You need to be sure that 1♥ will go off, and no EW contract will make, so W passes for penalties.

If South bids after East's takeout double, then West is no longer forced to bid, and is entitled to pass with 0-8 HCP.

After the bidding goes (1♥) X (Pass) 2♣ (Pass), then West's normal action is to support East's suit (clubs). If West bids something else, such as 2♠, then this shows a hand too strong to initially bid 1♠ (15+ HCP).

Overcalling an opponent's 1NT opening

When an opponent makes a limit bid (e.g., N opens 1NT opening), his partner knows a lot about his hand. This makes it very easy for S to **penalty double** any action E may take and punish him for anything too aggressive. Therefore overcalling 1NT (12-14) openings is done with care. Overcalls are:

- **Double.** For penalties with 18+ HCP (assuming 12-14 opening). Partner will pass the double, unless extremely weak - when it may be better to bid a long suit at the 2 level.
- **2♣/♦/♥/♠.** 6 card suit (or a really good 5 card suit, especially with a good side suit), 14+ HCP. Partner invites / raises accordingly (a new suit by partner shows about 10 points and suggests bidding on). May be weaker in pass out seat.
- **3♣/♦/♥/♠.** Pre-emptive overcalls - requires a good 7 card suit.

Competitive Auctions

When both sides bid in an auction, the auction becomes **competitive**. Both sides typically have a similar number of points, so the most important thing in a competitive auction is **the trump fit**.

In unknown situations, a good rule of thumb is as follows: **with a combined trump fit of x cards, bid to make x tricks.**² So, if partner has showed 5+ spades, and you have 3 spades, bid to 2♠ (8 spades, 8 tricks). Partner can always raise with more spades.

Competitive and Pre-emptive Raises

Even without game values, we often want to keep bidding in an attempt to out-bid opponents and play the contract ourselves.

We usually want to show length with raises, and this leaves us with a problem if we want to show strength. However, after North opens 1♥ and East overcalls 1♠, South is unlikely to want to bid spades naturally. This leaves 2♠ as an "unused bid" (i.e. it has no sensible natural meaning) so we can assign any **artificial** meaning we want. Typically, we use it to show strength, in addition to support for partner's suit.

So, after 1♥ (1♠): (bids in brackets show bids made by the opposing side)

With under 10HCP, bid a suit:

² This rule of thumb is a consequence of the **Law of Total Tricks**. The guideline is often quoted as being the Law which, strictly speaking, is not true.

- **2♥** is **competitive**, often with 3 cards and possibly a very weak hand (maybe even as poor as xx, QJx, Jxxxx, Qxx.)
- **3♥** is **pre-emptive**, showing 7-10 HCP, 4 card support and is pre-emptive - keeping opponents out of the auction and possibly suggesting a sacrifice later. Responder can treat this as a 8-10 limit raise and bid Game or pass accordingly.
- **4♥** is a pre-emptive raise with no slam interest; usually with 5 card support.

With 10HCP or over, use an **unassuming cuebid**:

- **2♠** shows a **good** raise to **at least 3♥** (i.e., 10+, 4 card support). Opener rebids 3♥ with 12-14HCP, or raises to game with 15+HCP or strong distribution.

Similar principles apply when responding to an overcall, but the HCP and suit length need to be adjusted since an overcaller has 8-15HCP and a 5card suit - not 12-22, 4cs, as an opener does.

As an example, after (1♥) 1♠ (P) or (1♥) 1♠ (2♣):

- **2♠** is a competitive raise, may be a doubleton and a very weak hand.
- **3♠** is a pre-emptive raise, E can raise if maximum or for pre-emptive reasons.
- **4♠** is pre-emptive raise with no slam interest.

- **2♥** shows a raise to **2♠** (8+, 3 card support, as E is 8-15, 5 cards).

(It is rare to bring in a new suit in this situation, but one can bid e.g. 2♦ with a good 5+ card suit.)

Bidding NT in competitive auctions

If North opens 1♥, and East overcalls 1♠, then South's 1/2/3NT responses are as if the 1♠ interference hadn't happened - with one exception. South should now hold a stopper in spades, otherwise NT is going to play very badly!

It is extremely rare to want to bid NT after opponents have opened.

Negative doubles

We have already seen that (1♥) X is takeout, asking partner to bid one of the unbid suits.

Similarly, after 1♥ (1♠), X is a **negative double** showing length in both of the unbid suits and 8+ HCP. The negative double should be made with at least 2 hearts, since partner may be forced to rebid 2♥.

Responses work in a similar way to those over take-out doubles. North can:

- Re-bid 2♥ if minimum, with 5+ hearts and without 4 cards in one of the unbid suits.
- Bid one of the unbid suits at the lowest level if minimum (12-14HCP)
- With 15+, jump-bid in any suit (except spades, of course).

Penalty doubles

As well as using double as an attempt to find a suit fit, it is often good to be able to double opponents for penalties if they over-bid. If you think that opponents have bid too high and you will get a better score by defeating them doubled than by playing the contract, double them. In competitive auctions, a double is for penalties if:

- The doubled bid is higher than 4♦
- The doubled contract is NT
- Doubler's partner had made a limit bid (such as a 1NT opening)
- The doubling side has established a good suit fit

Otherwise, the double is probably takeout or negative. It is essential that you agree on meanings for double with your partner, or great embarrassment can result!

Overcalling in the pass-out seat

After (1♥) P (P), it is likely that your partner has some values (since responder has fewer than 5 HCP). You can enter the auction slightly more readily than you would do in the direct seat and it is usually preferable to allowing opponents to play in a suit contract at the 1 level. Generally, the practice of "add a king" that we met last week applies.

1NT in the pass out seat usually shows 11-14 HCP, balanced and may not hold a full stopper in opener's suit (Qx will suffice). Responses are adjusted accordingly.

Jump overcalls

After North opens 1♥, jump bids from East (2♠, 3♣, 3♦) are pre-emptive. Treat these as if the 1♥ bid wasn't there - i.e. around 6-9HCP, 6+ card suit for the 2-level (7+ card suit for the 3-level).

The dangers of entering an auction

There is often a temptation to get into an auction, but it is dangerous to do so if there is little hope of your side playing the contract. If the auction goes (1♥) pass (2♣) and you hold Kxx, xx, KQTxx, Qx, the opponents have at least 22 HCP and both hands are unlimited. If you bid, opponent might penalise you, for example by a negative double being passed for penalties. Also, you give away a lot of information to the eventual declarer about your hand. There is very little chance of buying the contract and you do not consume bidding space. Better just to stay silent and not give anything away.

Card play after competitive auctions

As declarer, you will have much more information about the distribution of suits and honour cards around the table than before and you should adjust your play accordingly.

Key Points from Lesson 6

No full bidding summary this week, since the number of sequences are far too great. However the important points are: Overcalling on fewer HCP, but greater suit quality; overcalling 1NT with 15-17 HCP; the takeout double; weak (pre-emptive) jump overcalls; negative doubles; unassuming cue-bids; principles and priorities in competitive

auctions; competitive and pre-emptive raises; importance of vulnerability in competitive auctions.

Competitive bidding is the hardest parts of the auction (Slam bidding rivals it, but happens much less frequently), and as a result needs to be practised. Because the tactics of bidding vary depending on the competition, you need to practice this in the right environment - a good reason to come to the UBC next term! Accurate competitive bidding is essential to success in duplicate Bridge, much less so in Rubber Bridge.

You now have a bidding system to cope with the vast majority of hands of Bridge! Next week we will look at some tweaks to the system to deal with particular cases.

—written by Rob Richardson, 2004; updated by Jonathan Cairns, 2011

Table of common overcalls

(brackets indicate an opponent's bid):

(1♥) 1♠	Simple overcall at the 1-level - 8-15HCP, 5+ card suit. (With more than 15HCP, double and bid suit later)
(1♥) 2♣	Simple overcall at the 2-level - 10-15HCP, 5+ card suit. (With more than 15HCP, double and bid suit later)
(1♥) 2♠	Jump overcall. 6-9 HCP, 6+ card suit. (Same as 2♠ opening.)
(1♥) 1NT	1NT overcall - shows 15-17 balanced, and a heart stop.
(1♥) X	Takeout double. 12+HCP, at most 2 hearts. Forces partner to bid, unless opponents bid first.
(1NT) 2♠.	Overcall over 1NT - 14+ HCP, good 6+ card suit. (or very good 5+ card suit)
(2♥) 2♠	Overcall over 2-level pre-empt - 15+HCP, 5+ card suit.
(2♥) 2NT	15-18 balanced, and a heart stop.
(2♥) X	Takeout double. 15+ HCP, at most 2 hearts. Forces partner to bid, unless opponents bid first.
(1♥) P (P) ?	Indirect overcall. As direct overcalls, but pretend your hand has an extra King (add 3HCP).