

Basics of Standard American Bidding

Stephen Hicks

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1 Noncompetitive Auctions

The basic premise behind noncompetitive auctions is to efficiently identify a game, slam, or safe part-score. As such, there are a few important numbers to keep in mind:

26	number of points needed for 3NT, 4♥, 4♠
29	number of points needed for 5♣, 5♦

These points are based on a simple point-counting scheme, as follows. Aces are worth 4 points, Kings worth 3, Queens 2, and Jacks 1. Long suits with more than four cards get 1 point for each card past the fourth. Finally, if a trump fit (8 trump total) is found between a partnership, each partner may count (non-trump) doubletons as 1 point, singletons as 2 points, and voids as 3 points. Modifications may also be made, such as adding a point for all aces or several high spots (9s and 10s), subtracting one for no aces, a weak fit, or unprotected honors in short suits.

In order to ensure that a possible game is not missed due to lack of either partner opening, any hand with 13 or more points should open.

Out of all the ways a pair of hands can split, more often than not, there is at least one suit with an 8-card fit. 9-card fits are not as common. Out of possible 8-card fits, a 4-4 split is rather uncommon: 5-3 and 6-2 make up a much larger fraction of the cases. Thus, we require 5-card suits to open majors, and it is likely that one partner or the other will then bid this major suit. Because hands don't always have 5-card suits, we must allow minor openings with as few as 3 cards.

Whenever possible within the first couple rounds of bidding, it is desirable for one partner to significantly narrow his point range. This makes the other partner "captain": he can now add the small range of his partner's points to his own count and determine the total strength of the partnership.

This partner is then responsible for deciding which contract to ultimately play. In order to effectively communicate, it is prudent to break up the possible point ranges into smaller categories.

For the opener,

13–16	minimum opening
17–19	invitational
20–22	game strength
23+	slam strength

For the responder,

6–10	minimum response
11–12	invitational
13–19	game strength
20+	slam strength

Note that all these ranges are based on the 26-point goal for a major or no-trump contract. If a minor contract is inevitable, a small amount of shifting may be necessary.

First, we will look at the opener’s ranges. With 20 points or more, even a minimal response with 6 from the partner is enough to bid a game. Opener should therefore make bids which do not allow passing before game is reached. With 17–19 points, we only need 7–9 points from the responder to reach game (the top half of responder’s minimum range). The responder’s invitational range is similar, requiring 14–15 points from the opener (the top half of opener’s minimum range).

Thus, if one partner has game-going strength, it is his duty to force the bidding to game (or bid it directly if the correct game is obvious). If one partner has invitational strength, he must ask the other for “a little more” than previously promised. Much of the following bidding structure is based on this premise, as well as the (so far understated aspect of finding a fit in the first place).

1.1 Forcing bids

Forcing bids are an important enough aspect of an auction that I feel I am not jumping the gun to mention them already. It is critical to know when a bid is forcing, so that (a) you don’t end up in a contract from an artificial bid with no strength in that suit, and (b) you don’t bypass a possible game or slam.

In general, new suits and single jumps are almost always forcing. Single jumps are often forcing to game. 2/1 is twice forcing, promising a second bid if the opener rebids below game.

Preemptive bids (double jumps) and game bids are usually sign-offs and should generally be passed unless (a) you have a better preempt (assuming no help from partner who is probably singleton or void), or (b) you have unrevealed strength.

1.2 Opening bids

There are several options for the opening bidder. He may bid one of a suit, showing a broad range of 13–22 points and a suit of 5 cards (or 3 in minor). If he holds a balanced hand and between 15–17 points, he may open 1NT (or 2NT with 20–22), thus telling his partner a very specific range of points, making the responder captain, and opening the door for a number of useful conventions.

With a weak distributional (long and short suits) hand, the opener may take up bidding space by making a slight gamble, preemptively bidding a long suit at a higher level, to communicate both his weakness *and* his distribution simultaneously.

Finally, with an amazing hand of 23 points, he opens with a conventional artificial 2♣ opening, which the partner may not pass, since it says nothing about clubs, and since the hand is strong enough on its own to reach the 3-level, even if partner has nothing.

[Brief aside: a **reverse** is a bid in which one partner bids a new suit which is higher in rank (and at a higher level) than the suit he began with. This applies to the first couple rounds of bidding while still searching for a fit. A reverse promises a stronger hand than a non-reversed order, and promises at least one more card in the first suit than the second (6-5, 6-4, or 5-4, since a second new suit must always have at least 4 cards). Thus, 1♦-1♠-2♥ and 1♣-1♥-2♦ are reverses, while 1♣-1♦-1♠ and 1♦-1♠-2♣ are not. 1♣-1♦-2♠ is a *jump shift*, since 1♠ could have been bid but was bypassed.]

Most of the time, an opening of one of a suit is most appropriate. In these cases, we must decide which suit to open in. Generally, one should open the longest suit first, regardless of where the honors are (although having honors in longer suits should increase slightly the perceived value of the hand). Possible exceptions exist with weaker hands: 4 strong ♦'s should take precedence over 5 weak ♣'s with a minimal (13–16) opening, since reversing (e.g. 1♣-1♥-2♦) would imply invitational (17–19) strength. Likewise, with a 5-6 split between two suits and a minimal opening, the higher ranking suit should be bid first to prevent a reverse (unless 6 ♣'s and 5 ♠'s, since ♠ can be bid at the 1-level after either non-fitting suit response from partner). With a 5-5 split, the higher ranking suit should *always* be bid first, since a reverse implies a *longer* first suit (except with a *very* weak ♣/♦ opening).

1.3 Responses to one of a suit

There are a number of variations which may be implemented at this point. Each variation has its advantages and disadvantages. The traditional method is difficult for the responder to show an invitational-strength fit, since a simple raise is minimal and a jump raise is game-forcing. The responder therefore must bid a different suit and then return to the original suit in the next round. The convention of *limit raises* was implemented to fill this gap, but this comes at the cost of giving up the weak preemptive responses and 2NT responses. Moreover, limit raises only applies to major suits, so the roundabout method still applies to minor suit fits. I will there begin with no limit raises.

Since an opening of one of a suit is nearly unlimited in the point range, the responder wants to narrow his point range if possible. A **simple raise** of opener's suit with 8 total trump shows minimal responding points (6–10), while a **jump raise** shows 4 trump and maximal (13–16 or more) points, with the possibility of a slam. A **jump shift** shows maximal points and a different long suit. A **1NT** response shows a minimal response (6–10), and denies the possibility of bidding a major suit (with 4 cards) at the 1-level. This is a last-resort response. Finally, **2NT** shows 13–15 points and a balanced hand.

Barring any of these range-specific responses, the responder must bid his longest suit at the cheapest possible level. Note that with invitational strength, this is the only reasonable option, even with a fit. Bidding at the 1-level (“1 over 1” or **1/1**) requires a 4-card suit and 6 or more points (no maximum), while the 2-level (“2 over 1” or **2/1**) requires a 4-card suit (or 5-card major (♥, since one can always shift to ♠ at the one-level) and 10 or more points (hence the 1NT response, if the longest suit is unavailable at the 1-level with a minimal hand). Both of these responses are forcing, and 2/1 promises another bid by responder, so it is forcing twice. Thus, the responder must be cautious that he *has* another reasonable bid, and if not, may undervalue his hand and bid 1NT.

After a 1/1 (or 2/1) response, the responder is the captain, because the opener will now clarify his hand a little more. After any other response, the opener is captain.

1.3.1 Opener's rebid

After a specific response, the opener must try to figure out where to play the game. If the opener's suit was raised, then the opener can judge based

on points where to play the game, possibly inviting the responder to game with an invitational hand. After a jump (which is game-forcing, showing at least 26 total points), a fit may still need to be found, and this can be accomplished by bidding other suits, and eventually NT if no fit is found. Slams are also a possibility after a jump, and one partner may invite a slam with a still-stronger hand than he already promised. After 1NT, the opener should assess whether game is still possible, and attempt to either sign off, or find a fit.

However, the 1/1 and 2/1 responses are still the most common. After a 1/1 response, the opener has a chance to narrow his point range very specifically. With a minimum opening (13–16), he may **raise** either his own suit (with 6 trump), or his partner’s suit (with 4-card support), or bid **1NT** with a balanced hand and 13–14 points and no biddable 4-card major suit (with 15–17 he would have opened 1NT). He may also bid a *new* 4-card suit (as long as it isn’t a reverse), although this does not narrow the point range, and the opener again becomes captain.

With invitational strength (17–19), the opener may bid **any new** 4-card suit at the lowest level. If it happens to be a **reverse**, then his strength is apparent, but if not, he is still not allowed to jump shift, because that would imply 20 points. He may also **jump-raise** either his own suit (with 6 trump) or his partner’s suit (with 4 trump support). A bid of **2NT** shows a balanced invitational hand and stoppers (A, K-x, or maybe even Q-x-x) in all the unbid suits.

Finally, with game-forcing strength (20–22), he should **reverse** or **jump shift** to force the bidding to game. If a fit was already established, bidding game directly is advised if no slam possibilities exist (*note that a game bid is usually a sign off*, unless the other partner has not fully revealed all his strength). Otherwise, with slam interest, he should avoid bidding game and instead ask the partner about his holdings to determine if it is possible (i.e. with Blackwood, or control-asking bids).

After a 2/1 response, the invitational (17–19) opening range is now game-forcing, since $17 + 10 > 26$. Thus, with 17 points, the opener may make any jump rebid, and any non-jumping rebid suggests a weaker hand. Any new suit may be bid at lowest level, although reverses should still be reserved for 15 points or more. Raising the responder’s suit (with 4-card support, to the 3-level) is dangerous, because the responder *must* bid again, and the contract will end up in game. Thus, prefer a weaker bid if this might cause a problem. 2NT shows a balanced hand and stoppers in the unbid suits, and as always, any new suit shows at least 4 cards.

1.3.2 Responder's rebid

At this point, it should be clear who is the captain. If the captain knows enough to bid a final contract (typical if a fit has been found), he should do this. If not, he must continue to give and get more information. If three suits have been bid and still no fit has been found, then responder should begin to consider notrump as an option.

1.4 Responses to 1NT openings

The 1NT opening gives very specific information: a three-point range for the opener, and only three possible distributions (4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2, or 5-3-3-2), and denies a 5-card major. The responder can, with a balanced hand, invite or bid game in notrump. With a 4-card or better major suit, he can use conventional responses.

Stayman is a bid of $2\clubsuit$ to ask the opener if he has a 4-card major, and if so, to bid it. $2\diamondsuit$ is a negative response. If both partners have the same 4-card major, a fit has been found. The $2\clubsuit$ bidder then has rebids to show 5-4 in the majors, to deny a fit, or may raise to show a successful fit.

Jacoby Transfers are a way to show a single long (5-card) major. The responder bids $2\diamondsuit$ or $2\heartsuit$, one suit below his actual long suit, and then the opener bids the long suit so that he is the declarer. Since responder is captain, he may decide that game is unreachable and sign off, or he may continue with forcing bids to press on to game. With a good fit, the opener may complete the transfer at the 3-level instead.

Busts occur when the responder has minimal strength and is convinced that a notrump contract will fail. He will then bid 3 of a long minor suit (since $2\clubsuit$ and $2\diamondsuit$ are forcing conventions) as a sign off. Thus, to show a *good* long minor suit, responder will first bid Stayman (regardless of major suit holdings), and then raise to 3 of his minor afterwards. 3NT should still be an option, since it is easier than 5 in a minor.

1.5 Responses to strong $2\clubsuit$ opening

An opening of $2\clubsuit$ shows 23 points or more and is almost always forcing to game. The only exceptions to this are when the opener (who is captain) rebids bids 2NT or raises his own suit one level. Since the opening is artificial

and says nothing about clubs, it is forcing. With a weak hand (0–7 points), the responder bids $2\heartsuit$ as a first negative. With a stronger hand he bids his best suit or notrump at the lowest level, giving the captain more information about both strength and shape.

The opener will rebid either notrump (2NT opens Stayman, Jacoby, and all the normal 2NT responses, except it shows a slightly stronger hand) or a suit at the lowest level (which is forcing).

If the responder previously bid the first negative, he must again cut his possible point range in half by bidding a *second negative* with 0–4 points. The second negative is shown by bidding the cheapest minor, or 3NT if the opener rebid $3\heartsuit$. Any other bid shows 5–7 points and gives information about a long suit (or 2NT if balanced).

After a positive response, responder will bid game with a fit, show another suit if no fit has been found, or will investigate slam possibilities with more than a minimal positive response (10 points or more). Exciting times.

2 Passed Hands

When the first two seats pass, the dynamics change slightly. The third seat may open with a slightly weaker hand than he otherwise would. The typical rule for third seat openings is the “rule of 20” in which the player adds his high card points to his two longest suits, and if it adds up to 20, he opens. In fourth seat, the “rule of 15” says that if the high card points plus the number of spades is 15 or more, he should open (since spades are favored in competitive auctions, which are likely to ensue). But since passing in fourth seat leads to a redeal, he shouldn’t open any hands he wouldn’t want to play.

When responding from a passed hand, the meanings change, for two reasons:

First, there is already a known upper limit on the responder’s point count (although it may be more than 13 due to short-suit points if a fit is found). The upshot is that any bid which would show the passed hand to be strong (except possibly raising a fitted suit) has a new meaning, typically showing invitational strength. (This, in turn, pushes the weaker responses down slightly).

Second, the opener may or may not have full opening values. If the opener opened with subminimum values, he should almost always pass the next bid. Any encouraging bid (other than possibly a desperate correcting rebid of his own suit) then shows that he did indeed have full values.

3 Limit Raises, Jacoby 2NT, and Splinters

A conventional improvement on the system described above involves shifting a few responses. Since an invitation fit (11–12 points) is difficult to show, requiring 1/1 or 2/1 and then later raising to show more than 10 points, many have redefined the jump raise for major suits to be invitational, rather than game-forcing.

Thus, after a major suit opening, 1♥, a 2♥ response is minimal (showing 3 trump, 6–10 points), and requires 17–19 points from opener to invite 3♥, and 20 points to bid 4♥ directly. A response of 3♥ is a limit raise, showing 11–12 points and 3 trump support (sometimes 4, depending on whether another convention, 1NT forcing, is being used).

This raises the question of how a responder can show a *good* fit. Enter: Jacoby 2NT and splinter bids. A response of 2NT to one of a major is Jacoby and shows a 4-card fit and 13 or more points. The responder is captain, and the opener is now asked to show more about his hand (either side honors or singletons/voids). Splinter bids are double-jump shifts by the responder after one of a major, showing a 4-card fit, 13 or more points, and a singleton or void. These are all game-forcing and investigate the possibility of a slam.

Several other conventions work well with these responses, but each comes with the cost of giving up (or at best obfuscating) the natural bids.

4 Competitive Auctions

4.1 Overcalls

When the opposing side has opened the bidding, the other side must make an overcall or a takeout double to get into it. These all have different meanings than the ordinary openings.

Direct overcalls at the 1-level show 9–17 points and a 5-card suit. Overcalls at the 2-level require a 6-card suit, and/or possibly better values. An overcall of 1NT is identical to an opening, except it requires a stopper in the enemy suit.

Weak jump overcalls may be made by skipping one or more levels. The general rule is to count estimated tricks from a long trump suit and to overbid by 2 tricks with unfavorable vulnerability, 3 tricks with equal vulnerability, or 3–5 tricks with favorable vulnerability. These are similar to the normal preemptive openings.

A unique feature in competitive auctions is the cuebid. After an opponent has shown one suit, it is common to hold two of the other three

suits. In this case, **Michaels cuebid** may be useful. By artificially bidding the right-hand opponent's suit (1♣-2♣), it shows a two-suited (at least 5-5) hand. After ♣ or ♦, it shows both majors. After ♥ or ♠, it shows the other major and an *unspecified* minor. The responder may ask for that minor by bidding 2NT (and later 4NT if no answer is given).

Another response for two-suited hands is the **Unusual 2NT overcall**. Overcalling a 1-level opening with 2NT shows (5-5) in the two lower unbid suits (noting that an artificial opening of 2♣ does not count as bidding it, so 2♣-2NT shows ♣ and ♦). This may also be used after a strong 1NT opening, or a strong 2-bid, though it is no longer unusual after a weak 2-bid.

Both of these two-suited overcalls are peculiar in that they work best when played from a weak or a strong hand, but not an intermediate hand. Since they give almost complete information about the overcaller's suits, he rarely needs to rebid after responder chooses a suit. Thus, a pass shows a weak hand, while bidding again shows a strong (typically game-forcing) hand. Intermediate two-suiters must therefore be shown with a simple overcall of one suit, followed by a rebid of the other.

4.2 Takeout doubles

A double for takeout means just that: the partner is expected to take out the double by bidding over it. It is another way to get a foot into a competitive auction. After a suit bid of 1, a takeout double shows an openable hand (13 points or more) and decent length in all three unbid suits. Alternately, it could show 18 points or more and any shape. This is clarified by the opener's rebids.