

The Dos and Don'ts of bidding. ♠♥♦♣ George Cuppaide June 2013

Like everything else in bridge, there is no “never.” The best you can do is choose the action which will work most often. You must weigh up the upside and the down side. All these suggestions work, they have been tried and tested in both simulations and play. I am satisfied that where they conflict with “standard,” standard is wrong. Some will meet disagreement from acknowledged bridge experts, but I can mount logical arguments to support all of them. Many of the problems addressed here are absolutely basic yet they are not dealt with at all in bidding texts.

No one should follow them slavishly, but should think about what they are presently doing. Keep doing it that way, or try it this way, but every time you get a particularly good or a particularly bad result, look objectively at your contribution to it and try to weigh up for yourself what is the best way. If you are serious about bridge, that is the only way. Do not accept anything as gospel.

Everything suggested here is coherent and compatible with the standard five-card majors 15-17 point NT frame-work. Adopt and your bidding will improve dramatically. Some does not require partnership agreement but obviously will be more effective if there is one. The over-riding principle is simple, bid the hand you hold. Logically, how can you do better?

The Dos

- Open 10 point hands (and make a take-out double too). You must know when your side holds the balance of power, and you must be in the bidding when you do. To wait until you hold 12 or even 13 points, surrenders the bidding initiative. Get in, and if necessary get out, before the opponents know what has happened to them. They cannot rely on an opening bid and a response to mean that they do not have game. Playing in a fit at the two-level is safe, so strive to find that fit, not just a major-suit fit. Even the best opponents cannot, effectively, double you in a low-level fit. The first two levels of bidding are there for the taking, take them, use them but with accuracy. Constantly I am told, “You must have 12 points to open.” I do not bother to ask my advisor, “Why?” I am quite sure my advisor has never asked that question reflexively.
- Pass becomes 0-9 points, self-evidently the narrower the range the better. Open 2C with all 20+ point hands that do not qualify for 2NT. Think of 2C as the standard player's equivalent of the strong 1C. The standard range of 12 to 22 points for a one-bid is unworkable. Using the range 10-19 points means you do not have to stretch to respond on sub 6 point hands. It can be narrowed down with greater accuracy as the bidding proceeds.

- Open good four-card suits in third or fourth position. There is no need for you to rebid. See immediately below.
- Feel free, as a passed hand, to introduce a five-card suit, two over one. Your point range is limited to 6-9 points by your initial pass.
- Use 1C, not 1D, to open the balanced hands, 4432 and 4333, outside your NT range. You do not need two bids to show the same hand, and opening 1D can shut out your club fit. 1D will show 5+cards unless specifically 4441. It is a valuable a bid, do not dilute its precise meaning by including in it, the same nebulous balanced collections that 1C can be used more effectively to show and describe.
- Open good five-card or fair six-card suits with a weak-two, but a weak-two, and other preemptive openings, must deny the values to open with a one-bid.
- Upgrade cards in your partner's suits, and downgrade those in your opponents' suits. A well placed king in an opponent's suit is one trick. In partner's suit it may lead to the establishment of many.
- Listen to the bidding, your singletons and voids are not necessarily valuable.
- Treat NT as a bid of last resort. Raising partner or showing a new suit are more constructive options. Part-scores played in a good fit are nearly always better than NT part-scores whatever form of the game you are playing. Bidding is simpler and more accurate if you can raise your partner's 1D opening with four, or even three cards.
- Play 2NT as always forcing. It is one spot where your opponents are pleased to have you playing. They will try to push you there, don't do it to yourself. When the bid is played as forcing it can be used to find out all you need to know about partner's hand. It does not usurp a natural bid. See immediately below.
- Abandon 2C or 2D as check-back. It is unnecessary and a valuable bid wasted. Natural, meaningful, low-level bids are the only foundation on which high-level accuracy can be based.
- With 10-12 points, raise opener's second suit with four cards, or give jump preference. This is a much superior option to bidding NT. 2NT in its "Acol" sense, 10-11 points balanced, is rarely a helpful bid. 1NT is usually a better option.
- Play 2NT in response to an opening 1D, 1H or 1S, a simple overcall at the one-level or the two-level, whether or not there is intervention, as a balanced raise to the three or better with 4+card support. This accurate description of your type of raise can be very valuable. Four-card support with a singleton, maximum two controls, warrants a raise to four at any score. With three or four controls, and this shape, a splinter raise is best. This cannot be played opposite a 1D opening bid if you play Better Minor. See "Don'ts" below.

- Upgrade hands with good controls which are at the outer limits of the NT range. Many 17 pointers are too strong for a 1NT opening.
- Stick to the standard hand shapes for your 1NT opening bid, 4432 or 4333. Open a 5332 only when the suit is a minor. Other hands are much more effectively described by opening in the long suit. Your partner is trying to visualise. The fewer possible shapes, the easier it is to do. By playing that the cheapest bid over a Stayman reply as a further shape-ask, the exact hand-shape can be found below 3NT. Bidding is easier and more accurate if there is a clear dividing line between the meaning of each of your bids.
- Respond to 1C in a five-card diamond suit, even a four-carder, ahead of a four-card major. Failing in 1NT with ten tricks available in a nine-card diamond fit is not a good outcome. For really good bidding, shape is all-important. A mis-description at the lowly level of 1C or 1D can render your decision making, from a contested part-score to a grand slam, impossible.
- Be disciplined in response to 1C, 1NT shows 3334 shape with 6-9 points. The 2C reply can be used to show the same shape with 10-12 points. With a suit, bid it, with five clubs, raise.
- Bid long before short always. When not strong enough to bid two over one, respond 1NT to 1D or 1H with four cards in a major and a long minor lower-ranking than the suit opened. If bidding one suit, then another shows 5+4+ in the suits, partner gets a good picture of the whole hand. Focusing on major-suit holdings gives a myopic view. To show a short suit ahead of a longer one distorts the picture. A clear one aids bidding judgment from contested part-score auctions right through to finding the perfect grand slam.
- Play two over one as an unconditional game force. Life is so much simpler if you do not have to worry about which sequences are forcing and which are not. You do not need any of the gadgetry traditionally associated with "Two over One," the system, forcing 1NT for example. Once a game-force has been established, slam-tries can be made below game level.
- Show your shape after two over one. You are going to play in game, at least, so play in the right one. If you do not introduce a higher-ranking suit, you do not have one. The suit will be a four-carder. See next paragraph.
- Whether as opener or responder, bid the higher-ranking of two five-card or longer suits first. Bidding-space economy will pay dividends. This means that a higher-ranking second suit will always be a four-carder. Having shown a 5+5+ two suiter it is usually the three or fewer cards in the residual suits that is of next most importance.
- Rebid in a new suit at the three-level, in an uncontested auction, only when 5+5+ in your two suits, whether or not the rebid is a jump.

Rebid 2NT holding a five-card suit, no lower-ranking five-card suit or no four-card suit biddable at the two-level.

- Make a take-out double, only, with the right shape. Even though it is called a “take-out double” it is best played purely as a descriptive bid. It describes a hand which does not qualify for a suit bid. The shapes are, balanced, but rarely with four cards and never with five cards in the suit bid, and three-suiters short in the bid suit. Three-suiters include 1345 shapes when the five-card suit is a minor. With a good, even a very good, shapely hand, bid first and double later, given the chance. Auctions following double become simple and accurate.
- Consider carefully before making a 1NT overcall, double is very often the superior action. That it is usually better to put the opening bidder on lead is just one reason.
- Re-open even with a minimum hand when partner passes an overcall, and you have 0-2 cards in the opponent’s suit. If double is a reasonable option, use it. When you do not play penalty doubles of overcalls, and no one does, partner must be free to pass very strong penalty-double hands in tempo.
- Respond to a double, if there is room below game, in your longest suit. There are many good balanced hands where double is the only bid. Double cannot promise major holdings.
- With two four-card suits, and some values, prepare to show them both economically when responding to a double. Bid the higher-ranking of two touching suits. With few values bid the better one.
- Stretch to show good support for partner’s bid suit if you reasonably can. If the opponents have “stolen” your bidding space, the last thing they want to hear from you is a raise.
- Pass a flat 8 or a poor 9 points opposite 1NT, but do add an extra point for a five-card suit headed by an ace or a king. Game is quite long odds against.
- Keep it simple when your 1NT is overcalled. Play double as a general game force, new suits natural and not forcing.
- When your 1NT is doubled, which it often is, conventionally, don’t abandon your usual methods. Be sure to attach a specific meaning to pass and redouble, however.
- Keep the same meaning for your bids in the balancing seat, especially the 15-17 point 1NT range and the 10 point minimum requirement to bid at all. One change is needed, a jump-overcall will not be weak. Again, life is made easier, if you have a partner who strains to get into the bidding with 10+points.
- Play the “Don” convention over all opponents’ NT bids, it is the simplest and the best. Double shows both majors, minimum club or diamond bids show that suit and a major. Major suit bids deny a

second suit. Over a gambling 3NT, for example, 4C shows clubs and a major, identifying opener's solid suit.

The Don'ts

- Play Better Minor. If you cannot establish with certainty that partner holds four cards in the suit opened there is something very wrong. Certainty is crucial in bidding. There is room to find out opener's exact shape when the opening bid is 1C. By not using 1D for the flat hands, it becomes much easier to work out exactly what the 1D bidder holds. See example.
- Play any convention unless you feel you simply cannot do without it, Stayman and Blackwood should suffice.
- Invite a limited hand to bid game. With invitational values simply pass and take the sure plus. Do not let your opponents know the game you bid is marginal. Close games often fail and often fail doubled when you have telegraphed the fact. It is good to have something up your sleeve for the inveterate balancer. A plus score is rarely a bad score, but a minus score, when you hold the balance of power rarely is not. You can comfortably explore for a better game contract even after suit agreement, and make your slam tries below game-level.
- Respond 1D to 1C in a non-existent suit. Partner must be able to rely on everything you say. If your only suit is clubs and you are too strong for 1NT (or 2C, see above in the "Dos"), there is always 2NT.
- Make very weak simple overcalls. Make a weak jump-overcall, at the two-level even with just five cards, if the suit is worth showing. There is no way to tell partner that you don't have your bid. It defies logic to deem a hand worthy of an overcall but not an opening bid. If you can overcall you can open and vice versa. Ten working points including accretions is the minimum.
- Come back in having passed. Nearly always this helps only your opponents. If your hand is worth bidding, open it.
- Bid when you hold five cards or more in the opponent's suit. This applies in the overcalling and the responding position. Nothing good can happen. Partner will always be short and will find a bid. The penalty double then becomes a valuable option. When a misfit looms, sit back and let the opponents commit *hari kiri*.
- Rebid a five-card suit. To rebid a suit, any suit, by either partner shows 6+cards. Partner will show three-card support as first priority at his next turn. With, say, 1345 shape, and a minimum hand, open 1C and raise a 1H bid or rebid 1NT after 1S. You need 15+ points to introduce the diamond suit. Don't even think about opening 1D with

this shape, nothing good can happen if you do, your best outcome is survival.

- Raise partner's second suit without four-card support. Partner must be able to rely upon you holding four cards. A four-four fit and a good side suit is the basis for many great games and slams. Four-three fits are contracts of last resort and not played when the four-card holding may be forced to ruff.
- Pass an opposing opening bid with a good balanced hand. Don't be nervous about doubling with 3-2 in the majors. The problems created by passing good hands are greater. With 10+points, all outside the bid suit and an approved shape, double.
- Bid one more just for the sake of it. Partner will expect you to have a reason, an extra trump, a shortage in the opponents' suit, extra shape or extra values. If you get pushed into the three-level, or the five-level, it must be with a real expectation of making.
- Make point count based penalty doubles. This is a hard one because you cannot allow yourself to be robbed blind either. Think very carefully before you double. Where are your defensive tricks going to come from?
- Change your system just because the opponents bid. There will be times when you have to, but as far as possible keep you usual methods. Treat, and respond to, an overcall as an opening bid.
- Make a futile bid, the out and out sacrifice. You cannot see your partner's hand. If you are quite sure your contemplated bid will not make, pin your hopes on two possible upsides, partner has unexpected defence or they have missed a slam. Minus five hundred or more is rarely a triumph. Even when it is, you should not be proud of it.
- Redouble when partner's opening bid is doubled without good values. A scrappy 10 points is not enough. Remember, your redouble sets up a situation where passes are forcing and doubles for penalty. Your side plays the hand or the opponents play doubled. My suggestion, redouble shows game-going values or a 10-12 point three-card raise. New suits are natural and not forcing, limited by the failure to redouble. It follows that when your partner does bid a new suit, you need a reason to rebid.
- Rebid if you open in third or fourth seat without extra values, 14+points, or extreme shape. See immediately above.
- Over-value your four-fit. When both hands are balanced you still need 33 points for a small slam. Remember the law of total tricks when opponents save over a contract in a four-four fit. You are defensive.
- Make a negative double if you can avoid it. If you can bid a four-card major at the one-level or raise partner, do it. Your partner will re-open for you when it matters. Despite its almost universal use, the logic

behind the negative double is fallacious. My reasons are too extensive to set out here. A negative double must deny five cards in an unbid major and it must be game forcing if it requires partner to bid at the three-level to be playable at all. As it is played it is a lottery. My preference is to use double exactly like re-double, above, announcing a good hand, with free-bids non-forcing. There will be some balanced hands in the 6-11 point range where you don't have a bid, so pass.

Example.

This single example encapsulates everything, bid and show your shape.

♠KQ103	♠AJ62
♥A653	♥K7
♦J753	♦A
♣6	♣AKJ754

1D	2C
2H (1)	2S (2)
3S	4NT (3)
5S/5NT (4)	6S/7S (5)

1. 2NT would deny four cards in hearts or spades. In fact it shows precisely 3352 shape, a bonus from dropping Better Minor.
2. Natural. This is a game-going auction, there is no need for artificial bids. If East is looking for a spade stop he simply bids 3C. If two over one is not a game force, these auctions can get messy.
3. East knows he is facing 4441 or 4450. Would expect, and prefer, the former.
4. 5NT is the "Jorj" reply to Blackwood showing two key cards and the key queen. (5C shows 0 or 4, 5D 1, 5H 2 without and 5S 3.)
5. What a position of power to be in. East should bid the grand-slam, knowing that even if West has nothing more than he has shown, the contract will be odds on. The field will probably bash the small slam. That ♠10 is a lucky bonus.