

Opening Bids — Forcing or Non-Forcing?

Essentially, there is only one standard opening bid that is forcing — 2♣, but that's not entirely true. There are two other exceptions that I have encountered. Some players may have their own forcing opening bids, depending on their bidding methods. Except for the opening bid of 2♣, all the other opening bids covered in these beginner lessons are non-forcing. If you have 6+ points, the expectation is that you will usually respond to your partner, but the opening bid itself is non-forcing.

Also, be aware that an intervening bid by an opponent can change your partner's forcing bid into a non-forcing bid. If your opponent's bid would be forcing you to bid too high based on your points and other factors, then you can pass.

The two other opening bids to be aware of are — 1♣ and 4NT (Blackwood).

Some players consider 1♣ to be semi-forcing, but that is partnership agreement. Of course, if you have 6+ pts, you should respond to a 1♣ opening bid, but what should your response be if you don't have 6 points?

This is the agreement some players use. If you have a 4-card major, you should respond with the major, even with few points. If you do not have a 4-card major, then you may pass if you have at least 4-5 clubs to support. If not, then some players agree that the response should be 1♦ which indicates you do not have a 4-card major. You should use judgment and consider that the opener could have anywhere from 12-21 pts. If you have only 1 card in clubs, for example, it could be very dangerous to pass and take the chance that your partner is left in a 1♣ contract. The opponents may have lots of clubs and good ones, too, and if your side is vulnerable, they may decide to pass and leave the contract at 1♣. If both opponents pass and you pass also, your partner is stuck in 1♣.

*See an example of how this can happen on the next page.

One opening bid that I have not covered in these lessons is 4NT (Blackwood), immediately asking for Aces. Here's a hand with 24 HCPs that would be advantageous for a 4NT opening bid:



Why might a player prefer to open 4NT and not 2♣? It's easy to see, in a spade contract, there are 2 losers, one in hearts and 1 in diamonds. You could be in a contract of 5♠ yourself, all on your own, and almost certainly, you can make 11 tricks. All you need to know is how many Aces your partner has.

Since you have 2 Aces, your partner has three possible responses to a forcing 4NT opening bid: 5♣ meaning no Aces, 5♦ meaning 1 Ace or 5♥ meaning 2 Aces. So you have an "out" by bidding 5♠, no matter what s/he bids. Unfortunately, this will not tell you if your partner has any voids. If partner has a void in either diamonds or hearts, there is a possibility that you can make a slam even if s/he has 0 points and no Aces. That requires a special way of bidding not covered in these beginner lessons. However, it's unlikely that your partner has a void in diamonds or hearts. That would be very rare!

From your partner's response, you can decide whether to bid 5♠, 6♠ or 7♠. I have had, on rare occasions, some hands similar to this where opening 4NT is logical. The point count is not always the most important factor. Consider if you were ever dealt all 13 cards in one suit (10 HCPs) — you do not have the points, but you have a grand slam! Sometimes you have to "think outside the box" and not just simply base your decisions on adding up points. Common sense and judgment are helpful!

*Consider this scenario which actually happened to me on my very first time ever that I played duplicate bridge. I was at a table with two very well-respected and very skilled bridge players as our opponents, so I was somewhat apprehensive.

I had a wonderful hand, with 6 clubs, including Ace, King and Queen, and 16 HCPs, one of the best hands I had that evening so far. With 6 good clubs, my opening bid would be 1♣. But I was sitting in 4th seat with the dealer on my left. To my dismay, the dealer opened 1♣. Now what am I going to do?

My partner passed. My right-hand opponent passed also. Reluctantly, I decided to pass and the opener was left in a 1♣ contract. Had I bid anything, even an improper take-out double, the opener would have had a chance to bid again, and she certainly would have, since she had 19 HCPs! They were vulnerable and went down 3 tricks giving us 300 points — we got top board for that game. The opener had 3 clubs, but her partner had only 5 pts, so following the rules, he decided to pass. He had a 4-card major — as it turns out, it would have been a fit with his partner. The discussion between the two of them after the game was quite interesting and somewhat amusing from my point of view. Needless to say, the opener was not pleased with the outcome of this game. It was their first time playing together and it seems they didn't have their partnership agreements sorted out.

This is the reason why some players consider 1♣ to be a demand bid and forcing for one round, regardless of how many points the responder has.