

Lesson 1 – Opening 1 Level in a Suit

In most cases, you should have at least 12 high card points (HCP) to start bidding (to open). As a beginner, it is best to adhere to this rule with some exceptions that will be covered in a future lesson. Please note that experienced players may evaluate their hands quite differently, using complicated methods. Simplicity and consistency can work well, too.

One very important phrase to remember about opening bids:

“Bid on length, not strength.” First, **count your high card points** (HCP). If you have enough points (12+) to open the bidding, then you should bid. Next, look at the **length of your suits**. That will determine the suit you will bid. You must consider the total point count in your hand, not the point count in a particular suit. Count your total points first, then consider which suit to bid **based on length**.

BRIDGE IS A PARTNERSHIP GAME! Always consider that you are bidding and communicating with a partner. You may have low cards in a suit, but your partner may have the top cards in that suit. It’s how your hands fit together, in combination with total high cards points that counts. “Fits take tricks!” You will do better at bridge if you can communicate and cooperate with your partner so that, together, you find the best contract.

If you have fewer than 12 HCP, for now, **Pass**.

If you have **12+ points, DO NOT PASS! With 12-21 points**, follow these steps. If you consistently think about these 3 logical steps when opening the bidding, you should soon become very confident at opening the bidding. It’s a system of elimination. If Step 1 does not apply, go to Step 2. If Step 2 does not apply, go to Step 3.

Step 1: With 5 cards or more in a major suit, open 1♠ or 1♥ appropriately.

With 5 cards or more in both majors, bid the major with the most cards.

With 5 cards or more in both majors, and exactly the **same number** of cards in both majors, bid the higher-ranking major (1♠) to start. Hint: When having 5 cards in both major suits, remember “High Five!” Bid the higher-ranking suit.

Step 2: Skip this step for now. It will not apply for this lesson, but will apply after the next lesson, so you should know that this step exists. Here it is:

If you do not have a 5-card major, check to see if you have a balanced hand and 15-17 HCP (open **1NT**) or 20-21 HCP (open **2NT**).

Step 3: If you do not have a 5-card major (ignore Step 2), then your last option is to open with one of your minor suits (1♦ or 1♣) even though that minor suit may or may not be strong. When you open in a minor suit, you are giving two important messages to your partner: “I have opening points. I do not have a 5-card major.” You are not bragging about your minor suit! You and your partner are putting clues together, slowly.

With more diamonds than clubs, bid 1♦. With more clubs than diamonds, bid 1♣.

If you have 4 cards exactly of both diamonds and clubs, bid 1♦.

Memory Aid: A diamond has 4 points, so when you have 4-4 in the minors, bid 1♦.

If you have 3 cards exactly of both diamonds and clubs, bid 1♣.

Memory Aid: A club has 3 petals, so when you have 3-3 in the minors, bid 1♣.

When you have more experience, you may prefer to open with your better minor, the one that has substantially more high-point cards, when you have 4-4 of both minors. Beginners generally find it easier to have a rule to follow, so for now, use the above rule. It may be less confusing to stick to the rule to bid 1♦ with 4-4 of each minor and 1♣ with 3-3 of each. In the opening bid, the minor suit has more significance for what it is denying, rather than for what it is bidding. What you are emphasizing to your partner is that you do not have a 5-card major, but you have at least 3 in the minor suit and you have opening points. With 5 cards or more in a minor, you may choose to rebid it at the 2 level if you get that chance.

When opening the bidding, with 5 cards in both minors (and no 5-card major), think: "High Five!" That means bid the higher-ranking minor suit when you have 5 of each.

Here is one hand distribution (4 spades, 4 hearts, 3 diamonds and 2 clubs) which some players prefer to open with 1♣. You should open this hand with 1♦. Follow the simple rules. When you open 1 of any suit, you are promising at least 3 cards in that suit. Most of the time, when you open 1♦, you will have 4 or more, but you are guaranteeing only 3.



When you open by bidding 1♣ or 1♦, Partner knows you do not have a 5-card major but you have enough points to open (12-21 pts). That's important information to know. Don't ever feel bad that you don't have a good minor suit. You have opening points!

Bridge is a partnership game! Much of your success in bridge will depend on your ability to communicate accurately. You will be a better bridge player if you can convey clear messages to your partner and can understand what your partner is telling you.

Your opening bid:	This is the message you are sending to your partner. In all 1-level opening suit bids, you are promising 12-21 points and this:
1♠	I have at least 5 spades, maybe more. I may have equal number of hearts. I am promising 5 spades minimum.
1♥	I have at least 5 hearts, maybe more. I have more hearts than spades. I am promising 5 hearts minimum.
1♦	I do not have a 5-card major. I have at least 3 diamonds. [I have more diamonds than clubs or equal number of both diamonds and clubs.]
1♣	I do not have a 5-card major. I have at least 3 clubs. I have more clubs than diamonds or I could have 3-3 of each minor suit.

You cannot tell your partner everything with your first bid. As the bidding continues, both partners should be analyzing the messages and trying to find the best suit and the best level.

Examples - Opening 1 of a Major Suit (12-21 points):

When you have opening points and a 5-card major, you can stop at Step 1.

You have found your opening bid!



14 HCP + 1 for length. Open 1♥.



15 HCP + 1 for length. Open 1♠.



15 HCP + 2 for length. Open 1♠.



19 HCP + 2 for length. Open 1♠.

With exactly 5 cards in both majors, bid the higher-ranking major first. "High Five!"



12 HCP + 1 for length. Open 1♠. "Bid on length, not strength."

Focus on this: Your first goal is to find an 8-card fit in a major suit. If you think it is better to open 1♣ with the hand above, this is why you shouldn't. If you open 1♣, you are telling your partner you do not have a 5-card major. Your partner could have the Ace/King/Queen of spades! If you deny having a 5-card major and your partner has 3 spades, you will not find your 8-card fit in a major which is your first goal! If it turns out that the trump suit does not have the highest cards, the Declarer may have to use a different strategy to play the hand, or the Declarer may have to accept s/he will lose tricks in the trump suit but take more tricks in the side suits. Don't be concerned about that now. Just concentrate on learning the bidding and bidding on "length, not strength." Bidding is just the first step in the game of bridge. The next step is playing the hand and requires another set of skills.

Examples - Opening 1 of a Minor Suit (12-21 points):

Do not open 1♠ or 1♥ unless you have 5 cards in that major suit.

When you open 1♦ or 1♣, you are saying this and nothing more: "I do not have a 5-card major. I have opening pts. I have at least 3 cards in the minor suit which I bid."



14 HCP + 1 for length. No 5-card major. Open 1♦ because you have more diamonds than clubs.



12 HCP. No 5-card major. Open 1♣ because you have more clubs than diamonds.



13 HCP. No 5-card major. Open 1♦ because you have more diamonds than clubs.



13 HCP + 1 for length. No 5-card major. Open 1♣ because you have more clubs than diamonds.



13 HCP. No 5-card major. Open 1♦ because you have more diamonds than clubs.



12 HCP. No 5-card major. Open 1♦ because, with exactly 4 of each minor, open 1♦.



14 HCP. No 5-card major. Open 1♣ because, with exactly 3 of each minor, open 1♣.

Before you continue, you may wish to try Quiz #1 and check your answers to see if you have understood this lesson so far.

Please note: The following responses have been simplified to enable a beginner to continue with the bidding with minimum complexity. The next bids apply when the responder has 6-9 points. If the responder has more points, the bids may be different. These guidelines are for beginners and may change somewhat as you learn more and gain more experience.

The Pocket Guide for Beginner Bridge has a brief summary of opening bids that can be used as a quick reference, but these more detailed lessons help you understand the reasons for choosing a particular suit. If you follow the rules consistently, you and your partner can rely on each other and, eventually, you will see how it all fits together.

Responding to Partner's opening bid of 1 of a suit (1♠, 1♥, 1♦, 1♣):

If you have fewer than 6 points, **Pass**, for now.

With 6-9 points, you should respond, as follows:

- Partner opens **1♠**:
With 3 or more spades to support, you have found an 8-card fit for trump (5+3=8).
-- Bid **2♠** to show Partner that you have support for spades.
With fewer than 3 spades, bid **1NT**.
- Partner opens **1♥**:
With 3 or more hearts to support, you have found an 8-card fit for trump.
-- Bid **2♥** to show Partner that you have support.
With fewer than 3 hearts, but having 4 spades or more, bid **1♠** to tell Partner you have 6+ points and 4+ spades. Otherwise, bid **1NT**.
- Partner opens **1♦ or 1♣**:
Important: First priority is to investigate whether you have an 8-card fit in a major. Be aware that your partner could have 4 of a major when opening with 1 of a minor.
With 4 spades or 4 hearts (or more), respond by bidding your major suit at the 1 Level. A bid by you (Responder) of **1♠** or **1♥** promises 4 cards minimum (possibly more than 4) in that suit and 6+ points.
If you do not have a 4-card major, but you have 5 cards in the same minor suit your partner bid, respond **2♦ or 2♣** to support.
Otherwise, bid **1NT**.
- Partner opens **1♣** and you do not have 4 cards in either spades or hearts, nor do you have 5 cards in clubs to support, but you have 4+ cards in diamonds, bid **1♦**.
Otherwise, bid **1NT**.

Summary: With 6-9 points, as responder, your first goal is to support your partner's major suit if you have 3+ cards in his/her suit. Your next goal is to bid your 4-card major suit, whenever you can do so at the 1 level. If partner opened in a minor suit and you do not have a 4-card major, but you have 5 cards to support the minor, bid the minor suit at the 2 level. With no other options, bid 1NT.

Warning: If you bid a new suit at the 2 level, you are promising 10+ pts.

Here are some important points to remember:

Please be careful to understand this terminology: One player opens the bidding and is the Opener. The partner of the Opener is the Responder.

#1: A change in suit by Responder in the first round of bidding is considered forcing! Opener must bid again. That means Responder also gets a chance to bid again.

#2: When you have support for your partner's opening bid in a major, you can re-evaluate your hand and count Dummy Points. (More info on this in another lesson.) If you take more tricks than expected, this could be why.

#3: If you have fewer than 10 points, you should not raise the bidding above the 1 Level unless you have support for Partner's suit. Support means 3 cards in partner's major or 5-card support for a minor. Your fall-back bid is 1NT.

#4: If this is your first lesson ever, you may not figure out how to reach Game level yet, but you will start to learn the steps to find the best suit or NT contract — that is the main goal for now. It's difficult to learn everything at once! It takes time.

#5: When you have opening points with two suits, exactly 5 cards in each, bid the higher-ranking suit. Remember: "High Five!" (This also applies with 6-6 in two suits.)

#6: When responding with exactly 4 cards in two suits, bid the lower-ranking suit.

Example: Your partner opens 1♦ or 1♣. You have 6+ points and exactly 4 cards in each major. Bid the lower-ranking one first, 1♥. If you respond with 1♥, you are telling your partner that you may also have 4 spades. If you respond with 1♠, you are denying having 4 hearts because you skipped hearts.

For now, you may not find the best level of your final contract. If you can identify an 8-card fit in a major suit and end up in that major suit contract, that's a good start!

In a future lesson, you will learn more about how high to bid. If you have found your 8-card fit in a major suit, you can use the following guidelines to bid higher for now.

You should have 25+ points together to bid to Game level (4♥ or 4♠) in a major suit. When you or your partner play the hand, you will need to take 10 tricks. This is a reasonable guideline and will help you assess how high to bid so you can make your contract.

As Responder, apply the following guidelines when your partner opens the bidding with 1 of a major (1♥ or 1♠) and you have found an 8-card fit (you have 3 or more cards in your partner's major suit to support):

With 6-9 points, bid 2♥ or 2♠.

With 10-12 points, bid 3♥ or 3♠.

With 13+ points, you know you have game level together. However, bid another 4+-card suit first (forcing to partner), then jump to game level, 4♥ or 4♠, in the next round. This shows that you have 13+ pts. (You will learn more about this later.)

If you have not yet done so, try Quiz #1 and check your answers. Next, you should try the Practice Games for Lesson 1 which explain in more detail the strategies for bidding and playing the hand.