

Bridging the Gap

Getting from a rank beginner to a beginner and still enjoying the game. A quick-start on one of the world's most popular card games. This work is not a substitute for regular playing and lessons. Playing often and using a professional teacher are the most productive ways to learn this fascinating game ...

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BRIDGING THE GAP

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PREAMBLE

Many of the players that I have met in my torrid (ya right, 30 months) bridge career have been playing for decades. That much experience yields light years of knowledge ahead of mine. On a scale of 1-10, I am still traveling through level 1 (of 10) at a snail's pace but I am making progress. Sometimes I am disappointed by not being as far along the learning curve as I would like to be. With that said, I am making progress.

The more you know about bridge, the more you have in your memory to forget. Sometimes we are so busy learning nuances of games we play that we forget the basics. This short work is all about the basics. No matter what you study, the basics are just that – become fluent with them before considering anything else.

Two words that I hear all the time from my bridge buddies are *card sense*. It's like seeing Roberta, a bubbly 4-year old navigating through the iPad as if she were a developer. She just gets it and her learning is accelerated. That's part of what card sense is all about. One re-architects a deep understanding of playing cards to suit (pun intended?) another game. Comcast defines card sense as having an *aptitude for card games*. Along the same lines, learning bridge reminds me of a familiar saying - ... *born not bred*. Bridge players have always played bridge from conception. They just haven't realized it yet.

I see the game as a combination of a memory exercise, some simple math, some logic, and oh ya ... good cards. A 13-card bridge hand made up of 3 aces, a king, 4 queens, 3 jacks, a 4-card, and a 2-card is called *good*. A 13-card bridge hand made up of 1 king, 3 9's, 3 8's, 4 6's, and 2 3's, in the hands of an experienced player, could be a good hand. A striking difference between an experienced bridge player and one not so lucky ... the experienced player does not always need good cards to do well.

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WHAT THIS IS AND WHAT THIS IS NOT

Often when considering new pastimes, we thirst for a heads-up on what we are getting ourselves into. This *heads-up* is what this book is all about. It provides a foundation for what the game of bridge is all about, a place where every player is or once was. You will go nowhere in the game without two assignments; the first one is mandatory and the second optional. Suffice to say, the second could assist development of your skills in a shorter time:

1. Play as much as you can. Every hand is a learning experience and the recollection of who played what when may stay with you as you learn. Preferably play with people who are better than you to enhance the opportunity to learn from others.
2. Take lessons. There is so much to learn about the game. As with anything new, the basics are just that. Start there and move forward at your own pace armed with the invaluable experience of somewhat *formal* training.

When a card is highlighted like this, it indicates the lead card played in each trick.

WHAT'S THE BIG DEAL?

The secret about learning anything new? If you spoke to 100 people you'd probably get back 101 different answers. My two cents—the secret about learning something new is *take it slowly*. The game of bridge never interested me until a close friend took up the game. She encouraged me to give it a try. Am I glad she did! I am now about 30 months into my bridge career and loving every minute of it. It is right up my alley and strays into some of my strongest skills including mathematics, memory work, and simple logic. When I graduated from high school in 1966, I should have gone directly into math at university, but alas was a product of the 60's school system in

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Ontario. I had been rushed through 13 grades since I was deemed to be bright.

Getting my senior matric at the ripe age of 16 turned out to be a disaster. I had no study habits, was not an avid reader, and had done little or no homework all my life to date. In the context of my early education, it would have better been called *schoolwork* as I used to do the work during class and walk out free of commitments until next time that subject rolled around on my schedule.

For the past 30 months, I have been devouring the game of bridge, consuming hours at a time on topics that are intoxicating at the outset and interesting as I become more familiar. I started with the first two books by Audrey Grant with three friends and enjoyed the learning and the playing. My duplicate life began in November 2014 and it's been a roller coaster ride since. As I begin the journey of writing this work, I am waiting to head out to the district 1 unit 192 sectionals for day two of four of Pass, Double, 3 hearts, and 2 notrump.

Bridge is very simple. 52 cards, 13 tricks, 4 suits. What could be easier? So, what's the big deal. The secret is to take tricks, where a trick consists of one card played by each person at the table, with the *highest card* played capturing the trick. You may have to experience the game to figure out what the big deal is and on the way to that realization, you'll have one rewarding experience.

GETTING STARTED

Why is learning bridge such a big deal? Guess what ... there is no *big* deal, there's just a deal. Every bridge hand proceeds as follows:

1. 13 cards are dealt to each of four people
2. there are North/South and East/West positions at the table

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3. the North/South and East/West players partner together to take seven or more tricks (called a *contract*)
4. suit contracts run all the way from 1♣, 1♦, 1♥, or 1♠ up to 7♣, 7♦, 7♥, or 7♠
5. notrump contracts start at 1NT and go up to 7NT

There are four phases to each bridge hand:

1. the deal
2. the bidding
3. the play
4. the post-play discussion

Let's discuss the four phases:

- The deal – like other card games you may be familiar with. One card at a time is given out, starting with the player to the dealer's left, until they are all exhausted.
- The bidding – this is like jousting where each player suggests a contract and each successive person gets to add to what has already been proposed or say nothing (called *pass*)
- The play – a person leads a card, the other players follow suit (if they can), and the *highest card* wins the trick
- The post-play discussion – ensues after the game finishes (not a *mandatory* step but often the partners exchange quick tidbits of information while the just-played hand is still at the front of their minds)

The 3rd point above mentions another fundamental of the game - if one can, one ***must*** follow suit. As stated, most of the time, the highest card played wins a trick. There are a few nuances included in that statement which will be covered in the next section.

Guess what - you are not far from playing your first bridge hand. Let's have a preliminary look at the goal of the game; first things first.

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THE GOAL OF THE GAME

The secret is to take as many tricks as possible in the game of bridge. Since each trick requires one card from the four players, there are 13 tricks per hand. The bidding phase of the game is where the teams (N/S against E/W) propose a contract and the opportunity to bid goes around the table in a clockwise order like most card games. When one makes a contract, it is assumed the partnership will take a minimum of six tricks (called the *book*) plus one or more in addition. This introduces some jargon into this game that will be the foundation of all the playing you do. Here are a few examples of contracts in bridge; remember the relationship between what the contract is called and how many tricks are required is THE BOOK+THE CONTRACT NAME:

Contract	Tricks required
1♥	7
2♠	8
5♦	11
6NT	12
5♣	11

FOR A SUIT CONTRACT

A suit contract is where one of ♣, ♦, ♥, or ♠ is designated as trump. Trump is a very powerful suit. It overrides cards from all other suits when deciding who wins a trick. Look at the following few tricks for samples to illustrate this point. The player that led to each trick is shaded. The flavour of the contract is shown in the leftmost column:

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	W	N	E	S	Winner
a-♣	♣A	♣4	♣2	♣J	W – highest ♣
b-♦	♣5	♣8	♣T	♥4	E – highest ♣
c-♦	♠A	♠3	♦4	♦5	S – highest trump
d-♦	♦8	♦9	♥5	♥3	N – highest trump
e-♠	♠3	♦9	♦8	♦J	W – played trump
f-♠	♣9	♠J	♠Q	♣6	E – highest trump
g-♥	♥5	♥6	♠T	♠5	N – highest ♦
h-♠	♦J	♥4	♣2	♦6	E – highest ♣

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We need to discuss some of the tricks above to illustrate a few points:

Trick	Won	Notes
B	E	Notice that South was unable to follow suit, having no ♣. South could have played a ♦, the trump suit, and taken the trick but decided not to. South threw away what was deemed to be a meaningless card. Deciding to throw away a meaningless card rather than playing trump to try winning the trick is part of <i>strategy</i> .
c	S	South plays from the ♦ trump suit. South could have played a ♦ trump on the previous trick but decided not to do so. It may seem odd that in one trick South decided not to play a trump card but in the next did play one. Welcome to bridge; some decisions seem odd but indeed do have a reason.
d	N	West and North were void in the ♥ suit led. West decided to play the ♦8 then North played the ♦9. Thus, North's card, being higher in trump than West's, won the trick.
h	E	The ♣2 was the highest ♣ played. The other 3 players had no ♠ to play, so their meaningless discards did nothing to assist their winning the trick.

As one's experience increases, one discovers there can be penalties for not following suit.

There are many card games out there that use this concept of trump. Each trick at bridge is won by the person with either:

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1. the highest of the four cards played in the suit requested
2. the highest card from the trump suit designated in the contract

In the previous section I mentioned that all players must follow suit if they can. If they cannot, they may discard a meaningless card or play a card from the trump suit. Suppose ♥ is the trump suit in a contract and the ♣ holding for all four players is as follows:

West	North	East	South
JT 6 2	A K 9 4	3	Q 8 7 5

The play may proceed as follows, with South on the lead:

West	Plays ♣J
North	Plays ♣K
East	Plays ♣3
South	Leads ♣7 to the trick

The trick is won by North's ♣K, having played the largest ♣. After the trick, the ♣ holdings for all four players change to:

West	North	East	South
T 6 2	A 9 4		Q85

On the next trick, suppose North leads ♣A. East cannot follow suit, being void in ♣. This where the trump suit comes into play. East has two choices now:

1. throw away a meaningless card from another suit
2. play a ♥ that can take the trick as long as it is the highest trump card played

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Let's look at the play mentioned above, but this time suppose the trick was taken by West with the ♣J. In other words, the play of the cards would have been:

West	Plays ♣T to the trick
North	Leads ♣A to the trick
East	Plays ♥3 (the trump suit) to the trick
South	Plays ♣8 to the trick

Thereafter the holdings would change to

West	North	East	South
6 2	9		Q 5

Then West leads back the ♣6. North plays the ♣9 and East decides to play a ♥ again (the trump suit). South plays the ♣5, not wanting to waste the Q♣ on a trick that has already been won by the opponents. This illustrates the power of trump when in a suit contract. As well it conjures up immediate questions like:

- if I am void in the suit led, when do I play trump and when do I simply throw away a useless card from another suit?
- if I am void in the suit led, why would I choose to throw away a useless card from another suit rather than play trump?

If you are thinking of questions along the lines of the two above, we are making progress.

FOR A NOTRUMP CONTRACT

The in effect *fifth suit* in bridge is called *notrump*. The difference between a suit and a notrump contract is simply this

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missing powerful trump suit. Outside of that, notrump contracts are made by winning tricks with the highest card played to a trick in the suit led. Let's look at a few tricks, with the card led to the trick shaded:

Trick	W	N	E	S	Winner
a-	♥7	♥4	♥A	♦4	E – highest ♥
b-	♣A	♣2	♣T	♣9	W – highest ♣
c-	♣3	♥K	♣K	♦J	E – highest ♣
d-	♠4	♠2	♠A	♣3	E – highest ♠

We need to discuss some of the tricks above to illustrate a few points:

Trick	Win	Notes
a-	E	Suppose this trick were in a suit contract where ♦ is trump. If the exact same cards were played, South would win the trick. In a notrump contract, the ♦ 4 does not have the same power and is “just another small card.”
d-	E	Notice how West deliberately plays a small card (♠4). This is one of the little nuances of playing the hand that will grow on you as you start playing more and more – do not waste big cards on tricks already won by your partner.

CHECKPOINT – WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

1. Material from previous checkpoint
2. Bridge is all about taking tricks

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3. Each player gets dealt 13 cards
4. The players are paired as North/South and East/West, playing as two-person teams
5. The teams bid for a contract of anywhere from 1♣ to 7NT
6. A trick starts when one of the players leads a card; subsequent players must follow suit if they can
7. Each trick is won by the highest card played by the four players
8. When the contract is in a suit (♣, ♦, ♥, or ♠), that suit is called *trump*; if one or more trump cards are played in a trick, the highest trump card wins the trick

TRICKS PRACTICE

Let's follow the play of five more tricks in a ♥ suit contract, with the card led to each trick shaded:

Trick#	W	N	E	S	Win
1	♠5	♠J	♠9	♠A	S
2	♥3	♥6	♠K	♠4	N
3	♣2	♦5	♦A	♦3	E
4	♥8	♣3	♥A	♥7	E
5	♣A	♦8	♣4	♣J	W

There are a few important points from trick #2 as follows:

1. West was out of ♠, the suit led, and used a trump card, trying to win the trick (♥3)
2. North, being out of ♠ as well, played a trump card (♥6), higher than the trump card played by West (♥3)
3. East was forced to follow the suit led (♠), and played the ♠K; it seems like the play of that high ♠ was a waste but

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since it was the only ♠ East had and he must follow suit, there was no other choice

In a suit contract, when more than one card is played from the trump suit, the highest trump played wins the trick. Now let's look at five tricks in a notrump contract, with the player leading to the trick shaded:

Trick#	W	N	E	S	Win
1	♠5	♠2	♠4	♠3	W
2	♥J	♣6	♥Q	♠7	E
3	♣7	♦4	♦A	♦3	E
4	♦Q	♠T	♥2	♣Q	E
5	♣A	♠9	♣T	♣J	W

Worth noting from the above is how in trick #4, East wins with the ♥2. This is a fascinating characteristic of a notrump contract – how a card as lowly as ♥2 the can win a trick. The example shows the ♥2 beating the much higher cards played by the other players since they had no ♥.

THE BIDDING

So, the cards are dealt. Each player sorts them so each suit is together and they lie in one's hand in numeric order. A common way to organize the cards is separating them by colour and suit resembling:

♠A K T 4 ♥T 7 3 2 ♣9 7 3 ♦8 3

There is no magic with the bidding; as a matter of fact, it is the artful application of a science. Seasoned experienced players would have something to say about that statement. At the

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outset, it is very simple. There is a suit hierarchy where a *major suit* is one of \spadesuit/\heartsuit and a *minor suit* is one of \diamondsuit/\clubsuit . The bidding starts with the dealer ...

OPENING THE BIDDING

One needs 13 points in one's hand to start the bidding. "Points" you say, immediately wondering how one assigns points. Again, it's very simple as per

Ace	4	King	3	Queen	2	Jack	1
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Suppose your hand is made up of the following:

#1 $\spadesuit 8 7 6$ $\heartsuit A K J 2$ $\diamondsuit A Q$ $\clubsuit K Q T 9$

The first thing to do after cards are sorted by number within suit, is to figure out how many points you have. Let's do that for the hand just presented, showing A/K/Q/J as they are worth HCP:

#1	\spadesuit	\heartsuit	\diamondsuit	\clubsuit
		A=4	A=4	K=3
		K=3	Q=2	Q=2
		J=1		
HCP	0	8	6	5 = 19

This hand, having 19 points (referred at as **High Card Points** or HCP for short), is strong enough to open the bidding. In reality, HCP are only part of the calculation that determines whether a hand can open the bidding. Counting HCP is enough to get you started. Let's try this same exercise for a few more hands:

#2 $\spadesuit A 4$ $\heartsuit T 8 4$ $\diamondsuit A K 5$ $\clubsuit A J 8 7 6$

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#2	♠	♥	♦	♣	
	A=4		A=4 K=3	A=4 J=1	
HCP	4	0	7	5	= 16

#3 ♠A 4 ♥J 8 4 3 2 ♦J 8 3 ♣K 8 3

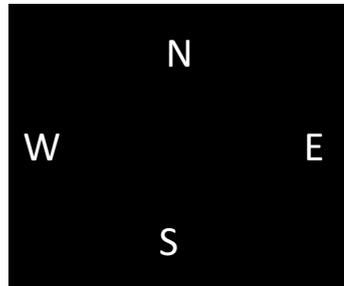
#3	♠	♥	♦	♣	
	A=4	J=1	J=1	K=3	
HCP	4	1	1	3	= 9

Let's have a look at a full hand as shown next (thanks to playbridge.com), and figure out the point value for all players.

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♠ 7 5 2
♥ A K 4 3
♦ A 7 4
♣ T 8 7

♠ K Q 9
♥ Q 7
♦ K J T 5 3 2
♣ K 9



♠ A 8 6 4
♥ J T 8 5
♦ -
♣ A J 6 4 2

♠ J T 3
♥ 9 6 2
♦ Q 9 8 6
♣ Q 5 3

Player	A	K	Q	J	Hand value
North	2	1	0	0	8+3+0+0 = 11
East	2	0	0	2	8+0+0+2 = 10
South	0	0	2	1	0+0+4+1 = 5
West	0	3	2	1	0+9+4+1 = 14

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Let's try one more ...

♠ J 9 8 5 4
 ♥ A
 ♦ T 6
 ♣ J T 7 5 4

♠ K 6 3 ♥ K 7 6 3 ♦ K 5 4 2 ♣ K 6	<div style="background-color: black; color: white; padding: 10px; display: inline-block;"> N W E S </div>	♠ A Q T 7 2 ♥ Q T 4 ♦ 9 8 7 ♣ A 3
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♠ -
 ♥ J 9 8 5 2
 ♦ A Q J 3
 ♣ Q 9 8 2

Player	A	K	Q	J	Hand value
North	1	0	0	2	$4+0+0+2 = 6$
East	2	0	2	0	$8+0+4+0 = 12$
South	1	0	2	2	$4+0+4+2 = 10$
West	0	4	0	0	$0+12+0+0 = 12$

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Then there's that "old" saying, *good things come in threes.*

	♠ K 8 5		
	♥ K J 9 2		
	♦ A Q 6 4		
	♣ J 8		
♠ T 4 ♥ Q 5 4 3 ♦ K J 5 3 2 ♣ 9 2	<div style="background-color: black; color: white; padding: 10px; display: inline-block;"> N W E S </div>	♠ Q J 6 3 2 ♥ 6 ♦ 9 7 ♣ K Q 7 5 4	
	♠ A 9 7		
	♥ A T 7		
	♦ T 8		
	♣ A T 6 3		

Player	A	K	Q	J	Hand value
North	1	2	1	2	$4+6+2+2 = 14$
East	0	1	2	1	$0+3+4+1 = 8$
South	3	0	0	0	$12+0+0+0 = 12$
West	0	1	1	1	$0+3+2+1 = 6$

THE ORDER OF PLAY

Let's look at the way the cards are played for a round of play, each round made up of 13 tricks. The fundamental rules for how this proceeds are:

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- The opening lead is made by the person to the left of the declarer – declarer being the person who first mentioned the strain of the contract
- The player who wins the first trick, leads a card for the 2nd trick
- Tricks 3 through 13 are started by the player who won the previous track

The following illustrates this concept, with South in a 2♥ contract. Each trick is won by the player indicated with X:

Trick	W	N	E	S
1		X		
2				X
3				X
4			X	
5				X
6	X			
7				X
8				X
9				X
10			X	
11		X		
12				X
13				X

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Now for the big news ... remember South was the declarer of the 2♥ contract:

Player	Won
West	1
North	2
East	2
South	8

So, let's do the math ... the contract was at the 2-level, meaning South needed to take $BOOK+2$ for a total of eight tricks, remembering the *book* is the first six tricks. Mission accomplished!

CHECKPOINT – WHAT WE KNOW SO FAR

1. Everything mentioned in the previous checkpoint ...
2. Players compute a point value for their hands using Ace through Jack and their respective values
3. The bidding process starts with the dealer
4. Each player in turn suggests a contract
5. The players (N/S and E/W) work together (remember they are partners) to arrive at a contract that they believe they can make
6. The opening lead (trick #1) is done by the person to the left of the player that declared the contract
7. Each subsequent trick (#2 through #13) is led by the player winning the most recent trick

SO, WHAT'S NEXT

However, brief this journey into bridge land has been, the car is decelerating as it arrives at the end of the line called "The

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Start.” Yes, this may be the start of your bridge career and we have barely scratched the surface. There are some very important topics that have not been covered as I cannot do them justice. An intro to bridge - I can and have just done that. I recommend the Audrey Grant approach, starting with her first of three books that are available at Amazon amongst many other places.

As you get started playing, you will be tempted to scold yourself if you end up doing something “wrong” based on what you have learned. Let me leave you with three observations/suggestions that govern my path to becoming a better player and may do the same for you ...

1. Often the best way to learn something is to do it wrong a few times, as the errors one makes can help cement the *correct way* to do it in one’s mind.
2. As you learn, be proud and enjoy the stuff you do know and do not spend time worrying about what you do not know.
3. Use the golden rule at the bridge table; we were all beginner’s once albeit some decades before us ... *do unto others as you would have them do unto you*. Be pleasant with people at the table, greet them before play commences, and be nice. Being nice is a lot easier than being not nice.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my bridge buddy of which I am the fondest – Patt Duncan. She was also kind enough to be the first person to read this short book and offer me some feedback and suggestions for improvement. I would also like to thank Barbara McLellan, my first professional instructor and, in the context of how much I learned and her passion for teaching, that word *professional* should have a capital **P**. I have had many adhoc mentors since the start of my duplicate bridge life. Colin Brodie and Dave Willis have offered me ongoing advice, as well as many more.

*Learning bridge is such fun
Almost for everyone
Do not hesitate
No longer should wait
A better pastime there is none ... ©*

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