

Bridge Demystified Bridge Explained... Sort of... A How to Guide by Crazy George

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this is part of my
Broken Stories Unfinished Dreams
series

George never finished it.
And neither shall I.

(Truthfully, I'm not even going to reread it before I post it.)

Feel free to enjoy it for what it is or turn the page at your own discretion.

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(Everybody thinks I'm crazy because I delved too deeply into the arcane arts. It's not true. I woke up one morning and decided to write a simple and easy to understand guide on how to play Bridge. I was thinking a page or two, maybe three. Twenty years later, I'm still at it. The real problem, of course, is rather than explaining how to play Bridge, I was trying to explain how to win at the game. 'Cause if you don't mind losing, it's not that hard of a game to play.)

Introduction

I like playing bridge. The game poses a remarkable challenge, elegantly juxtaposing the elements of luck and skill along side the opposing elements of confrontation and cooperation. Over time, a good player will outperform an inferior player, while a newcomer to the game will undoubtedly draw the winning hand at least once an evening allowing them the joy of at least a partial victory. And although a showboat will have his moment to shine and even the meekest of players will be forced to go it alone, in the end Bridge is a team game with cooperation and communication between the participants a key element of its mastery.

Unfortunately, learning the game is difficult. I have wasted many an evening trying to teach a newcomer how to play. And at this stage of my life, I have come to the conclusion the best way to teach someone how to play bridge is with the game Bridge was derived from: Whist.

Whist

Whist is a four player card game, which uses a standard 52 card deck. All the cards are dealt out, 13 to each player, and the final card is played face up before the dealer. The suit revealed is trump and after all have seen the card is placed into the dealer's hand. The player to the left of the dealer leads any card from their hand. All players must follow suit if they are able. If not, they may play any other suit, including the trump suit. After each player has played a single card the winner of the trick is determined. The highest trump played takes a trick, or if no trump has been played, the highest card of the suit led. The winner of the trick takes the cards, puts them face down in front of them, and leads any card. This process is repeated until no cards are left. A person scores one point for every trick they took. The deal rotates to the left, and the play is repeated.

This is an easy game to learn. Note how short the rules are. A newcomer to the game can be playing within minutes. There is

no bid and there is no dummy. And although the game is typically played in teams (partners sitting opposite), this is far from mandatory.

It is this seemingly easy game from which Bridge evolved.

Evolution in Action

No doubt, somewhere along the line someone had a straight flush in hearts and trump was revealed to be clubs. After the hand they griped about what a great hand they had, but how they couldn't take any tricks because nobody ever led hearts and they didn't have anything else. It's not difficult to see a group of people sitting around a Whist table and at some point somebody offering to bet ten quid (or whatever would be appropriate) that they and their partner could take could take ten tricks if the trump suit was heart, or clubs, or whatever.

This, then, would be the birth of bidding.

Along a similar vein, after a hand was over, some wisenheimer was no doubt explaining how the opponents could have taken more tricks if only they had played so and such, or probably much more likely, someone had simply said, "I would have made my ten hearts if my partner had played better."

To which he would have responded, "Oh, yeah!."

"Yeah!" and then he proceeded to layout the cards, and show how he would have played it. After a little further refinement, a little tweaking of the system, and it was decided the winner of the bid would play both hands, and the dummy was born.

Now, all we need to do is make the scoring ungodly complicated and we have turned Whist into the modern game of bridge. To see how this took place is not complicated at all. Someone made a slam -- got all 13 tricks.

"It should be worth something extra," he might have said. Or more than likely it was talked of for days to come. Can't you just see some shyster bidding 13 Hearts offering asking for odds of 100 to 1, and then pulling it off and walking away with a mint. Now

that would be talked about, and folks would be motivated to bid extravagantly.

These then are the three elements that make Bridge different from Whist.

In Bridge, the trump is bid for.

In Bridge, whoever wins the bid plays both hands of the partnership. His partner simply lays his cards face up on the table after the opponents lead and from their the declarer chooses which cards to play.

But perhaps most importantly for the purposes of this guide: in Bridge, the scoring is not linear, but offers substantial rewards for making big plays.

What the Bids Mean

Feel free to skip this section if you've ever bid a game of Bridge. This is basic stuff.

In bridge the suits are ranked. This means some suits are worth more than others.

Ranking Order of the Suits

Clubs

Diamonds

Hearts

Spades

No Trump

In bidding, there is a fifth category, and that is No Trump (NT). No Trump means what it implies: there is no trump suit and the highest card of the suit led takes the trick. No Trump is higher than the other suits.

In addition to the types of bids (Clubs, Diamonds, Hearts, Spades, and No Trump), there is also the point value of the bid. A bid of one means that a player is betting that his side will take

seven tricks, a bid of two, eight, and so forth, per the following table.

If you bid this, you must take this many tricks
Bid 1 and you must take 7 tricks to make your bid
Bid 2 and you must take 8 tricks to make your bid
Bid 3 and you must take 9 tricks to make your bid
Bid 4 and you must take 10 tricks to make your bid
Bid 5 and you must take 11 tricks to make your bid
Bid 6 and you must take 12 tricks to make your bid
Bid 7 and you must take 13 tricks to make your bid

Just to belabor the point, the total sequence of bidding is:

Possible Bridge Contracts

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

A bid can be for any contract higher than the last bid (never lower or equal). In addition to the basic bids there are two special bids. The Pass is simple enough, it means one is declining to bid. Whereas a Double increases the risk to the previous bidder. You can only Double your opponents. It is hardly worth your while to ever Double. And in many ways, a Double doesn't actually double the bet.

Not that you would have any ideas when or what to bid (unless you've played bridge before), but at this point the bidding should be simple enough to comprehend. In turn starting with the dealer and going to the left, every player either states a Contract

higher than any previous player, Passes, or Doubles. When three players have Passed in sequence, the team who made the last player wins the contract and the player on that team who first bid whatever Suit (or NT) that the Contract is in is considered the Declarer and they must play the hand.

Sample Bidding

North - 1NT

East - Pass

South - 3NT

West - Pass

North - Pass

East - Pass

North bid 1NT first, so they are the declarer and get to play even though South 3NT was the winning bid.

Pretty darn complicated, huh? This is why I recommend starting by playing Whist. Because, guess what? We've just begun. We haven't even scratched the surface.

The Slam!

The biggest play in Bridge is the slam. You bid and take all 13 tricks and it's worth like a 1,000 points or so (versus something like 100 for a typical hand). Actually, I don't know how much a slam is worth offhand. I've never bid one. And, I've never been in a game where someone else has bid one.

This perhaps tells you more about my level of play than anything else. But as is pertinent to our discussion, a person can play bridge for days, weeks, months, and probably years before they will have the confidence, ability, and perhaps most importantly, the opportunity to bid a slam.

And since over half of the bidding conventions in bridge relate to the slam -- determining if the hands are strong enough and

so on -- we can vastly simplify bidding (the most complicated element in Bridge) if we simply start from the assumption that there is nothing to be gained by bidding a slam.

Like I've said, I've never done it.

I've never seen it done.

But everyone I play against is using a bidding system that is based on maximizing the slam.

It's a waste of time.

Game

Now, I'm not going to go very far into scoring. It's quite complicated, but for beginners the only thing you need to know is that you get somewhere between 300-500 bonus points for making a thing called Game. That's 25-50% of the points you'd get for making a Slam, only instead of making 13 tricks, you only have to make 9, 10, or 11 (depending upon what suit you bid). And even better than that, you can be sure the first time you sit down at the table within two or three hands, someone will be in a position to bid Game.

My Advice

Bid to game and then stop.

I assume you know how to play Whist, or will simply play for a few nights per the instructions above until you do.

I also assume that the concept of Dummy -- or laying down the hand -- is simple enough. If your partner is the first among your partnership to bid a suit (or No Trump -- NT), and your partnership wins the bid (no matter who places the final bid), your partner will be the declarer, you will be the dummy, and after the person to your right leads the first card, you will simply lay down your hand and not make another play for the rest of the deal. Your partner will do the rest.

Assuming someone else at the table knows how to keep score, the only other thing you need to know how to do is bid. And since you're not going to go for slam, we can make the whole bidding process easier -- not simple, just easier.

and wins the Contract at the level and the suit they last bit. Since there are only 13 tricks, the highest bid is 7 NT.

Thirteen Tricks

There are 13 tricks in Bridge. You are bidding on how many tricks over six your side will take. Thus, a minimum bid of 1 signifies that your side will take 7 tricks.

If the cards split evenly, three people at the table will take three tricks each, and the fourth will take four. Somebody will always take four or more tricks. This is a mathematical certainty. If you think that somebody is going to be you, you have an obligation to your partner to signal this by bidding.

It should be noted that the cards can split so that up to three people will take four tricks and the fourth only one (i.e. $4+4+4+1=13$). In theory, all three of these players should open or bid.

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Terminal Bids

Before we get to that, however, it is important to remember that bidding in Bridge originated as betting in Whist. And the bidding system that was eventually codified, rewards aggressive bidding... up to a point.

Luckily, those points are easily remembered. I like to call them Terminal Bids, because if you have bid up to this level, you have no incentive to go any higher, unless forced to by your opponents.

The Terminal Bids

3 No Trump (NT)

4 Spades

4 Hearts

5 Diamonds

5 Clubs

To see why, let's take a look at a possible scoring chart for the various NT bids. There are lots of variables that go into scoring, and we could make it more complicated, but the only thing I'm trying to show here is that there is a big jump in points from 2 NT to 3 NT and no real difference in points from 3 NT until you get to 6 NT.

Bid	-1	Made	+1
1 NT	-50	40	70
2 NT	-50	70	100
3 NT	-50	400	430
4 NT	-50	430	460
5 NT	-50	460	490
6 NT	-50	990	1020
7 NT	-50	1520	----

Now, let's just look at this from a betting standpoint. If you bid 3 NT and only just miss the bid, you are penalized a paltry 50 points. On the other hand, if you bid 2 NT and actually make three, you only get a 30 point bonus, whereas if you had bid 3NT you would have gotten 330 additional points. Clearly, there is a big incentive to make a 3 NT bid. But, not go any higher. If you look at the chart carefully, you will see that you get the exact same number of points for taking 10 tricks whether you bid 3 NT or 4 NT, so there is no incentive to bid 4 NT if you can win the bid at 3 NT. The only reason anyone would ever go higher is if they are in a bidding war, or they are trying to go for a slam. Bidding wars at

this level are rare, and we are never going to go for a slam, so stop bidding and 3 NT.

So, what else do I want you to take away from this? Well, if you think that you are even remotely close to being able to make a 3 NT bid, make that bid ASAP and shut out your competition. Don't dally about.

13 Tricks

Having covered Terminal Bids, let's back up a smidge and

It is to your advantage to bid as high as you are willing to go as quickly as possible. While there are only 13 tricks in the game, since each player can choose their own trump while counting their own cards, it is possible for all four players to think that they will each take four tricks. And if they each could play the game in their own choice of trump, they might all be correct. Which is another way of saying, you might have the better hand in hearts and they might have the better hand in spades, but if bidding goes:

1 Heart

Pass

4 Hearts

?

It's unlikely anyone would bid 4 Spades on the off chance their partner could support such a bid.

by the time their team gets to bid,

HERE HERE

7 out of 13

The typical bidding system in bridge is top heavy and overcomplicated. This is because they strive to take into account slams. I've never bid a slam, much less bid and made a slam.

Therefore, all bidding conventions whose goal is to probe for slam are superfluous to me.

With this in mind I consider the following bids to be terminal. They are listed in order of preference.

There is absolutely no reason to raise your partners bid from any of these terminal bids unless one is overbidding an opponent. For instance if your partner bid 3 NT, and then your opponent bid 4 hearts, it might make sense to rebid NT at the 4 level. But if no one else overbids his 3NT, there is no reason to even look at your cards. You can safely pass.

The reasoning behind the terminal bids is simple enough. These hands make game. And in bridge, the real points are in making game, not in extra or overtricks, and certainly not by making slams. Thus, if one already has 40 points towards game, the terminal bids become:

- 2 NT
- 2 spades
- 2 hearts
- 3 diamonds
- 3 clubs

Unless you are in a bidding war, the terminal bid is your maximum bid. Your minimum bid, or opening bid, is harder to evaluate, but the first thing you'll need to do is count your points.

Traditional Bridge Point Counting

Look at your hand and give yourself the following

Card Points

- 4 points for each Ace
- 3 points for each King
- 2 points for each Queen
- 1 point for each Jack

Distribution Points

3 points for every suite that is void (e.g. if you don't have any spades, you get 3 points; if you don't have any spades or diamonds, you get 6 points)

in any suit

2 points for every singleton suit

1 point for every doubleton suit

Count up your points.

If you have 8 or more, you might want to open.

If you have 13 or more, you must open.

If you have 3 or more, you might want to respond to your partner.

If you have 6 or more, you must respond to your partner.

Counting Tricks

The other much less well known method is to count tricks.

Classic Distribution

If you are going to bid a trump, do not include trump cards in this count. For all other cards, give yourself:

1 trick for every Ace

1 trick for every King backed by the Ace or two or more other cards

.5 tricks for a King backed by any card that is not the Ace

.5 tricks for a Queen backed by two or more cards

The following are not worth any tricks, a King without backing, a Queen with one or less cards backing it, a Jack or lower. Backing simply refers to additional cards in the suit. The backing cards are what you play when someone else leads the Ace to your King. If you don't have anything backing it. You'll likely lose your King to the Ace.

When counting tricks, you also get to count trumps. This is done from the top down and the bottom up, but each trump card can only be used for one or the other. And most importantly,

points gained from counting trump only count if you win the bid in the suit you counted trump in.

Counting Trumps from the Top Down

Form the longest straight that you can starting at the Ace and working your way down. If you don't have the next card in sequence, use any trump card as a wild card. For instance, you could have:

A, K, X, J, 10 (4)

X, K, X, J, 10 (3)

X, X, Q, J (2)

X, K (1)

Every card in the straight that is not wild, counts as one trick (as noted in apprentices).

Thus, in many hands, one will run out of high cards, before they run out of trump, which is to say:

A, X, X, X, X, X, X (1) counts the same as A (1)

A, X, K, X, X (2) counts the same as A, X, K (2),

A, X, X, J, X (2) counts the same as A, X, X, J (2), but it might be better to count it as A (1) and use the other four cards to count from the bottom up. It can be difficult for some whether to do this or not, so when in doubt, simply count from the top down until you no longer get a higher trick value and then use any left over cards to count from the bottom up.

Counting from the Bottom Up

For every void in a suit you can assign two trumps (not assigned elsewhere), and for every singleton you can assign one trump.

If you don't have enough voids or singletons, your extra trumps count for nothing. And by the same token, if you don't have enough trumps, your voids and singletons count for nothing.

Count up your trick points

If you have 4 or more, you must open.

If you have 3 or more, you might want to open.
If you have 3 or more, you must answer your partners bid.
If you have 2 or more, you might want to answer your partners bid.

The two different point counting systems are to be used in conjunction with one another and as guidance. The trick system can be conceptually easier to understand, because there are only 13 tricks in a the deal, and before anyone bids, one is making the assumption that all tricks not held by oneself are split evenly around the table. Thus,

If you have 4 tricks, your partner likely has 3
If you have 5 tricks, your partner likely has 3
If you have 6 tricks, your partner likely has 2
If you have 7 tricks, your partner likely has 2

And therefore, if you have 6 or more tricks, open at the 2 level, and if you have 8 or more, think about bidding game directly. You could be wrong, and you will be (some of the time), but overall you will shut out the opponents bid. This is important because if 6 of your 8 points are coming from your long hearts, it's likely your opponent has a spade suit every bit as long. Where there is one freak hand, there is always another. The cards you would have gotten, have to have gone somewhere.

Terminal Bidding to Game

Remember, the bid preference (in order) is:

3 NT

4 spades

4 hearts

5 diamonds

5 clubs

The goal is to get to these levels as fast (and safely) as possible.

No Trump

If you have 13 Card Points and have a trick point in each suit from Classic Distribution, bid 1 NT.

If you have 17 Card Points and have a trick point in each suit from Classic Distribution, bid 2 NT.

If you have 20 Card Points and have a trick point in each suit from Classic Distribution, bid 3 NT.

If you would have opened 1 NT, and your partner bids ANYTHING, jump to 3 NT.

If you would have opened anything and your partner bids 1NT, jump to 3 NT.

3 NT is a Terminal Bid, do not increase bid unless you are forced to win bid (an extremely unlikely case). If opponents double, try not to laugh.

Trump Bids

Do not bid any suit, which you would not be happy playing the game in.

If you have 10 or more Traditional Points, and 4 or more tricks, open 1 X in the suit in which you would take the most tricks (typically your longest, but not always).

If you have 16 or more traditional points, and 6 or more tricks, open 2 X in the suit in which you would take the most tricks.

If you have 20 or more traditional points, and 8 or more tricks, open 4 X in the suit in which you would take the most tricks.

If your partner opens, his suit is ranked over yours (spades over hearts, for instance), you have three cards in his suit (any value), and you would have opened, go to game in his suit unless your suit is clearly better (you would have opened at a higher level, and your trick count is twice as high in that suit, in which case respond in your suit at the 3 level).

If your partner opens, your suit is ranked over his, and you would have opened at his level or higher, bid your suit overcalling by one level if you would have opened at 2 and so on.

If you open and partner counters with another suit, if you have three or more cards in that suit, go to game in that suit, unless you have a third suit that is substantially better (4 cards with some strength), if so bid the third suit at the next level, or you have a stopper in the two suits thus far unnamed, bid 3 NT.

If you open, your partner responds, and opponents are passing, do not stop bidding until you are at game.

If partner opens, you are responding, and opponents are passing, do not stop bidding until you are at game.

If you have an opening hand, you should make a minimum of two bids (whether you opened or are responding), unless of course, you are already at game, or the bid is already past the two level and your partner is passing.

Without going into all the possibilities, at some point bidding reverts to gut instinct and feel. If you have a good hand and your opponent has a good hand, you should be taking the chance and going to game.

You will overbid at least 25% of the time using this method, but since the points in Bridge reward overbidding and punish meekness, this is not important.

Remember, half the time your opponents will have better hands (you will lose the bid), and more often than not, you will not have an opening hand (you will spend much time passing). These rules are for the rest of the time. Forget about slam, go for the game and win.

If you go for the slam and miss, you'll likely lose the game. If you go for game and miss, you'll make it up on the very next hand, when you think you're overextending yourself, but manage to make game handily.

5-11-14

Brett Paufler

Like I said somewhere near the top, I haven't read this recently. But George is good at cards. Sure it has something to do with magic, spells, and sleight of hand... But then, like I said, I haven't read this recently. From glancing at it, though, it seems like a straight walkthrough, so perhaps someone was accusing him of cheating and he thought this would prove he was not. Or maybe he just likes the game. I suppose I'd have to read it to be sure, but don't feel like it at the moment. I mean, if I waited until I felt like reading it, might take me another five years to post...