

Minor Suit Openings

Opening the Bidding

Suppose you have a good enough hand to open the bidding. Opening bids of 1NT and 1 of a major are very descriptive and give us a good start in the auction, so if you can open 1NT or 1 of a major, you should certainly do that. If you do not have a balanced hand with 15-17 HCP, and you do not have a 5-card major, then you will have to open 1 of a minor. (Sometimes it is correct to open above the 1 level, but these bids have not been covered in class yet, so I will ignore them for now. Also, there is one situation in which you can open 1 of a minor despite having a 5 card major; if you have a longer minor – i.e. 5 spades and 6 diamonds – then you should start with the minor.) But in short, with an opening hand, you should open 1 of a minor if and only if 1NT and 1 of a major are not options.

How do you know whether to open 1♣ or 1♦? When we were discussing major suit openings, this was an easy decision: opening 1 of a major promises 5 cards in that major, and you probably don't have two 5 card majors. (If you do have two 5 card majors, you should open 1♠. As a general rule, whenever you have two 5 card suits, you bid the higher ranking one first. This will allow you to safely bid the lower-ranking suit twice. If you start with the lower-ranking suit and then bid the higher-ranking suit later, your partner will have to bid a level higher if he chooses to return to your original suit, which may get your side too high. This principle will come up again later.) When you're opening 1 of a minor, the decision may not be so obvious. The bidding system has a set of rules to make the choice automatic:

1. If one of your minors is longer than the other, open in the longer minor.
2. If both of your minors have 3 cards, open 1♣.
3. If both minors have the same length with 4 (or more) cards, open 1♦.

These rules ensure that a 1 of a minor opening promises at least 3 cards in the suit. The 1♦ opening is almost always a “real” suit (at least 4 cards), but a 1♣ opening is more likely to be based on a 3 card club suit. Specifically, you will only open 1♦ on a 3 card diamond suit if your shape is exactly 4432. (Note: When giving a distribution, the order is always ♠♥♦♣. A 4432 distribution means a hand with 4 spades, 4 hearts, 3 diamonds, and 2 clubs.)

Responder's First Bid

As we saw in the lesson on responding to 1 of a major, responder's hands are divided into three (four) categories:

0. 0-5 points: Pass. Don't bid at all.
1. 6-10 points: Minimum responding bid
2. 11-12 points: Invitational.
3. 13+ points: Game forcing. Once partner opens, your side must bid a game.

With a minimum hand

With a minimum hand, responder may not (with one exception) bid above the 1 level. If you have a 4 card or longer suit, you may bid it on the 1 level. If you have more than one suit that you can bid on the 1 level, you should:

- Bid your longest suit.
- With two 5 card suits, bid the higher-ranking.
- With two 4 card suits, bid the lower-ranking.

Some experts recommend that, if partner opens $1\clubsuit$ and you hold 4 diamonds and 4 cards in a major, you should bypass diamonds and bid the major immediately, since we are trying to find a major-suit fit. You may follow this advice if you want, but it is a good idea to make sure you and your partner are bidding the same way.

The one case in which a minimum responder may bid above the 1 level is to raise partner. If you hold 5 card support for partner's suit, then you may bid 2 of partner's minor. You should usually have 5 card support to raise, because partner has only promised 3; you may occasionally raise with only 4, especially if partner's suit is diamonds, because the $1\diamondsuit$ opening is unlikely to be based on a 3 card suit. However, given the choice between raising partner's minor and showing your own 4 card major, you should always show the major (no matter how bad it is). Remember that a primary goal of the auction is to find a playable major-suit fit.

If you cannot bid a new suit on the 1 level and you cannot raise partner's suit, then you must bid 1NT.

With an invitational hand

When you have an invitational hand, you have a new option available to you: if partner opened $1\diamondsuit$, you may bid $2\clubsuit$ if you have a 5 card suit. Nonetheless, you will frequently start by bidding a new suit on the 1 level, following the same guidelines as for a minimum hand. A new suit bid by responder is *forcing*, meaning that opener is not allowed to pass. Thus you can bid 1 of a suit with a wide range of hands, knowing that you will get a chance to clarify your strength later.

A 1NT bid or a raise is not forcing, so you must clarify your strength immediately. Instead of bidding 1NT, bid 2NT when you have an invitational, balanced hand with no 4 card majors. If you want to raise your partner, you must bid 3 of the minor rather than 2 of the minor.

With a game-forcing hand

Bidding with a game-forcing hand is almost exactly like bidding with an invitational hand. Usually you will start by bidding a suit, which does not put any limit on the number of points you have. When you have a balanced hand with no 4 card majors, you bid 3NT instead of 2NT to show 13-15 HCP. (If you have more than 15 HCP, then you must bid a suit to stall, and attempt to let partner know how good your hand is later.) If you want to raise partner, you're out of luck. (Modern bidding systems have ways to raise a minor with a game-forcing hand, but they are beyond the scope of this class.)

With an extremely strong hand

If you have 19 or more points and a 5 card or longer suit of your own, you may show it by *jump shifting*, which means making a jump bid in a new suit. For example, the auction 1♣-2♠ is a jump shift. A jump shift is obviously game-forcing, and shows serious slam interest.

Aside: Strictly speaking, strong jump shifts are not necessary. A new suit by responder is forcing, so you do not need to jump with a strong hand. Thus, many people prefer to use a jump shift to show a weak, preemptive hand. Strong jump shifts are out of favor in modern bidding because modern systems are designed to include many ways to force to game. In a beginner bidding system, these options are not available, so it can be hard to describe strong hands. For example, suppose you have an extremely strong hand with long hearts, and you are playing weak jump shifts. When partner opens a minor, the 1♥ bid is easy, but the next bid is not so easy. Although a new suit by responder is forcing, rebidding an old suit is not forcing, so you cannot rebid hearts without risking that partner will pass. For reasons such as this, when you are playing a simple system that does not have a lot of ways to establish a game force, it is easier to play strong jump shifts. As always, you should discuss with your partner before playing to make sure you both know what your bids mean.

Rebids

Rebids by opener and responder are fairly logical, remembering a few guiding principles:

- You need 25 points to bid a game. Once you know that your side has at least 25 points, you are responsible to make sure you bid a game; you cannot pass, and you cannot make a non-forcing bid. Once you know that your side does not have 25 points, you should pass once you find a playable strain. If you're not sure whether your side has enough points, keep the bidding alive until you know.
- You are looking for an 8 card fit, especially in a major. When you know that you have an 8 card fit, you should almost always raise the suit immediately.
- Bidding a suit twice usually promises 6 cards in the suit.

Opener's Rebids

If opener has support for responder's major suit, opener should raise. With a minimum hand (12-14 points) raise to the 2 level; with an invitational hand (15-17 points), raise to the 3 level; with a game-forcing hand (18-20 points) raise to the 4 level.

With a balanced hand, opener will usually rebid NT at an appropriate level (as discussed in the lesson on 1NT opening bids). With an unbalanced hand, opener will usually rebid his second suit at the cheapest available level. There are two exceptions to this rule:

1. If opener rebids a new suit on the 2 level above his original suit (for instance, $1\heartsuit-1\spadesuit-2\heartsuit$), that is called a *reverse*. A reverse promises at least 17 points, and more cards in the first suit than the second. A reverse is forcing for one round. If your second suit outranks your first, but you don't have enough points to reverse, you'll have to improvise.
2. With the exception of a reverse, a new suit by opener is not forcing. If you have a game-forcing hand (18+ points), you need to jump shift (for instance, $1\heartsuit-1\spadesuit-3\clubsuit$) to show your strength.

If opener does not have a second suit because the opened suit is 6 cards (or longer), then he should rebid the opened suit. With 12-15 points, rebid on the 2 level; with 16-17 points, jump to the 3 level.

Responder's Rebids

At this point in the auction, you will frequently have a good idea of what the final contract should be. If not, continue bidding to describe your shape (bid whatever suit is appropriate) and your strength. (You may need to jump to show your strength. For example, after $1\clubsuit-1\heartsuit-1\spadesuit$, $2\heartsuit$ shows a minimum hand with 6+ hearts, $3\heartsuit$ shows an invitational hand with 6+ hearts, and $4\heartsuit$ shows a game-forcing hand with 6+ hearts.)