



Bidding Basics

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A tour of the bidding box for newer players

The definition of a standard 1♥ or 1♠ opening bid is: Five or more of the suit opened and about 12–20 points counting useful distribution.



How do you decide if your hand is good enough to open 1♥ or 1♠? With flat shape (5–3–3–2) and only 11 HCP, you would typically pass. You can upgrade to an opening bid if your five-card major is a good suit and/or you have aces along with lots of 10s and 9s, such as:

♠A Q J 10 9 ♥A 10 9 ♦10 9 2 ♣10 3.

With 12-plus HCP and a five-card major, open the bidding. If it's borderline, let the vulnerability dictate your decision. Open the bidding if not vulnerable, but pass if vulnerable. If you are 5–4 (or even better, 5–5) tend to open most hands with 11 HCP.

What about the opposite end? How do you know if your hand is too strong for a one-level opening? Should you open 1♠ with, say:

♠A K Q 10 9 8 7 ♥A K 3 2 ♦K 3 ♣—?

No. Open 2♣ (definitely not 4♠, which is a weak opening). Even though it has “only” 19 HCP, this hand is too strong for 1♠. There is no exact rule for what qualifies as a strong 2♣ opening, but if you practically have game in your own hand, that is an indication that you are too strong to open one of a major.

Balanced Hands in Notrump Range

What if you are 5–3–3–2 with a five-card major and 15–17 HCP? Most teachers today (myself included) recommend opening 1NT. If you open in the major, you will be stuck on the next round of bidding. There is no rebid to tell your partner you have a flat 15–17. Open all of the following hands with 1NT:

♠K Q 8 7 6 ♥K J 2 ♦K Q 3 ♣Q 4

♠A 2 ♥A Q 7 6 5 ♦K 7 6 ♣K 6 5

♠K Q J ♥10 8 7 6 5 ♦A K Q ♣J 7

Are there exceptions? Some rare ones, but until you have years of experience, I recommend to simply open all 5–3–3–2 hands in the 15–17 range 1NT. If you have a nice-looking 17 along with that five-card major, you could decide the hand is worth 18. I would open 1♥ (planning to rebid 2NT showing 18–19) with each of these “17” counts:

♠A 4 3 ♥A K Q J 10 ♦K 10 3 ♣3 2

♠K 2 ♥K Q 10 9 8 ♦A J 10 ♣A 10 8

With 5–3–3–2 (even with a five-card major) and 20–21 points, open 2NT (not one of the major).

This implies that if you are 5–3–3–2 and open 1♥ or 1♠, you will have either 12–14 HCP (and intend to rebid 1NT) or 18–19 (rebid 2NT).

What about a five-card major but not 3–3–2 in the other suits? In that case, open with the major. So each hand below (even though in the 15–17 range)

is opened 1♥:

♠8 6 ♥A Q J 6 5 ♦K J 8 2 ♣A 3

♠6 ♥A 8 7 6 3 ♦A 4 3 ♣A Q J 2

With 5–5, always open in the higher-ranking suit. Accordingly, each hand below is opened 1♠:

♠A Q 8 7 6 ♥A J 10 7 6 ♦4 3 2 ♣—

♠10 8 7 6 5 ♥A 2 ♦A K J 3 2 ♣2

♠Q 8 7 6 5 ♥4 ♦A 2 ♣A Q J 10 2

Third Seat

After two passes, especially if not vulnerable, it is okay to open on the light side. Your partner won't do too much damage, and your opening bid makes it tougher on the opponents. You could even open with an excellent four-card major in third seat. After two passes, with nobody vulnerable, open 1♥ with each hand below:

♠A 3 2 ♥K Q 10 8 7 ♦J 10 6 5 ♣2

♠4 ♥A Q 7 6 5 ♦K 8 7 6 5 ♣3 2

♠4 3 ♥K Q J 9 ♦10 8 7 6 ♣A 10 2

Fourth Seat

After three passes, open the bidding if the total of your high-card points and number of spades is 15 or greater. Open 1♠ in fourth seat with:

♠K Q 8 7 6 ♥A 7 6 5 ♦J 3 2 ♣2

(5 spades + 10 HCP = 15), but pass the deal out with:

♠6 5 ♥K J 8 5 4 ♦Q J 5 4 ♣K J

(2 spades + 11 HCP = 13).

Bidding Basics Quiz ►

BIDDING BASICS QUIZ

You deal with both sides vulnerable.
What is your call on each hand below?

1. ♠KJ765 ♥KQ2 ♦KQ3 ♣Q10
2. ♠J9765 ♥AKQ107 ♦J102 ♣—
3. ♠AQJ6 ♥KQ103 ♦J32 ♣32
4. ♠AQ654 ♥KJ ♦KQ3 ♣KQ5

You are in third seat with neither side vulnerable. After two passes, what is your call on each hand below?

5. ♠J7654 ♥AQ2 ♦6542 ♣2
6. ♠3 ♥KQJ10 ♦A54 ♣108765
7. ♠K10876 ♥3 ♦AQ654 ♣32
8. ♠KQJ10 ♥KQ ♦J765 ♣A106

ANSWERS

1. 1NT. With 15–17 balanced, don't open in the major.
2. 1♠. Always the higher-ranking suit with 5–5.
3. 1♦. Don't open in a four-card major in first or second position.
4. 2NT. With 20–21 balanced, don't open in the major.
5. Pass. Even in third seat, this hand and suit don't warrant opening light.
6. 1♥. Take advantage of third seat and show your good four-card major.
7. 1♠. Opening light in third seat is a good tactic.
8. 1NT. 15–17 balanced is a 1NT opening in any seat.