

Dealing with Slow Play

Clubs and TDs need to be aware of their members' capacity for an evening's bridge. If the sessions are too long and finish too late, players will be unhappy and stop coming. Local custom and usage will vary, but most clubs find an evening of 24 boards played in around three hours is about right – a little longer if there is a break. It is good practice for the club to have a recommended set of movements for different numbers of tables to allow the TD to choose a movement that will result in the required number of boards. See also the section on [Club Duplicate Pairs and Suggested Movements](#).

Some clubs play at a faster pace while others take things more slowly but, normally, a board should be played in about 7-7½ minutes. So two-board rounds should take 15 minutes, which means that the usual club duplicate of 24 boards can be played in about three hours. For rounds of three boards 22 minutes per round should suffice since less time is taken up with moving. For rounds of four or more boards it is usual to allow seven minutes per board at a club duplicate, although some clubs may find that this can be shortened slightly. Of course, the move can be called earlier if all or nearly all tables have finished play. Sessions for novices need to allow considerably longer – perhaps 10 minutes per board or even more.

Slow play can be an intractable problem. Often it is the same players who are holding everyone else up time and time again even though it has been explained to them that they are not being fair to those they are keeping waiting. If a table is behind all the others, the TD can, of course, remove a board and award an average - adjusted if appropriate – but a board should not be removed once it has been started. Sometimes it may be necessary to remove a board in the next round from a table that has been held up by a previous delay. If there is time, it might be possible to play an unplayed board during a tea break or at the end of the evening.

There are a number of other measures which can help, but if all else fails, the only real solution is to use some kind of timer which sounds at appropriate fixed intervals to call the move. This has been shown to work at a number of clubs that have introduced it. Strangely, players often respond better to a machine telling them to move.

A purpose-built bridge timer is a box with an electronic display showing the remaining minutes (and sometimes seconds) to the end of the round. The display should be large enough to be visible across the playing room. Whichever member of a pair can see the timer should keep half an eye on it and ask the other players at the table to speed up if necessary.

The timer is set to sound a signal to tell everyone when it is time to move, and by-and-large they do so. It saves the TD from having to keep an eye on the time and signals the end of the round even if the TD is slightly behind on his own table. If the TD deems it necessary, e.g. if he has to make an announcement or has been held up by calls, he can always pause the timer.

The timer can also be set to give a different signal as a warning, e.g. four buzzes to signify four minutes before the end of the round. This tells people to hurry up if they have only just started the board. If a bid has not yet been put on the table, members can be instructed not to play the board but to call the TD, who will award an average, unless one of the pairs is obviously at fault when he may give a warning or award an average minus to that pair.

Such timers can be purchased online but tend to be rather expensive. If you know anyone who likes dabbling in electronics, you might be able to persuade them to build one for you.

For clubs which have a computer, or a member who can bring along a laptop, there is an even better solution - a computer program. The computer screen acts as a bridge timer face and an attached small speaker will broadcast the signals.

The EBU recommend Mike Rothwell's timer which takes much of the pressure off the TD by not only announcing the end of the round, but also by informing players of arrowswitches, etc. Further information about this program can be found at <http://rothwells.weebly.com/timer.html> Rich Waugh's free round timer software is available for download from the Bridge Ace website. Takis Pournaras provides one called Bridge Chronograph. Other bridge timers, both real and virtual, can be found by simply googling on "bridge timer" or "round timer". Include the inverted commas to reduce the number of irrelevant results.

Of course, you could always equip the TD with a small kitchen timer, but this is usually only loud enough to act as a prompt for him, rather than the whole room, and the number of minutes to the end of the round is not visible to anyone else. Some clubs manage in this way, but it is often unsatisfactory and a purpose-built timer proves necessary.

If your club has not yet reached the point where it feels the need for a bridge timer, you could try giving out some guidelines to your members. The following are just an example and can be amended to suit your club's playing conditions.

Timing and Play Guidelines

Please arrive in good time, i.e. by 7.15, so that we are all sitting at the tables at 7.25 and ready to start play at 7.30. Apart from being able to begin the evening's bridge promptly, this is important because the director has to decide on the movement and the number of boards on each table before play starts, and this depends on the number of tables in play. If you arrive after 7.25, please do not necessarily expect still to be accommodated, since the movement will probably already have been set up. After 7.30 is definitely too late, unless there happens to be a half table which can be made into a full table without changing the movement. And of course, if you are on your own, by then the host will have either sat down to play with someone else, or gone home!

Do not shuffle and deal the cards unless told to do so by the Director. We are now normally using pre-dealt boards randomly generated by computer. Apart from helping us to get going more quickly, the advantage of this is that there will be printouts of the hands at the end of the evening – but of course, none of this is any use if you still try to shuffle the cards!

Please try to have the correct table money for both pairs ready on the table as soon as possible for the treasurer to collect.

Please fill in the table slips with the table number and names of all the players legibly at the beginning of the evening. Add the pair numbers when the TD has announced what those are. Have the slips ready for collection before you begin play.

When you're simply not sure what to do, please try not to take too long over making a call or when playing a card. You have to make a decision at some point!

Please keep conversation to a minimum until you have finished playing all the hands for each round. Don't analyse each hand as it finishes. If there is still time at the end of the round, when all the scoring has been done, then by all means have a post-mortem, but in a low voice so that neighbouring tables can't hear. If the TD calls the move, please move promptly, even if you haven't had time for a discussion.

When you're on lead, please make your lead before putting your bidding cards away or writing the contract on your score card. Similarly, when you're dummy, put your hand down first, then put away the bidding cards and write down the contract. If you see someone beginning to write down the contract before making the opening lead, remind them politely that they should lead first so that everyone else can be getting on with the hand.

Please don't leave the room between rounds. The time to make coffee, wash hands, or go outside for a nicotine fix is when you are sitting out or dummy. Don't keep your next opponents waiting. It isn't fair to them. Going out to make a cup of coffee while you are waiting for the next opponents to arrive when they are late is definitely not a good thing. It will make a bad situation worse.

If, as declarer, you can see that you will definitely win all the remaining tricks, or a definite number of the remaining tricks, please claim, but in doing so remember that you must make a statement as to how you will play the rest of the hand, and this must include a reference to how you will handle any trumps still held by the defenders (otherwise they can argue that you had forgotten they were still out). Equally, as defender, if it's totally obvious that your side will win (or lose) the last, say, two or three tricks, please make a claim (or concession).

If you can see that the TD is still engrossed in playing a difficult hand but everyone else has finished, then by all means give him/her a gentle reminder to move the room on. Please, however, bear in mind that the TD has a difficult job and may have been held up by being called on to make a decision.

(For more experienced players only!) To play more quickly you don't need to play fast; you just need to play slowly less often. Thinking ahead can help you do this. E.g. suppose the auction goes 1NT (12-14) on your right, you pass on ten points, and LHO makes a transfer bid. You should see that there is every likelihood that you will be on opening lead eventually, so you can already start figuring out what your best lead might be, either against no trumps, or against the suit about to be bid by RHO. Once the auction is over, you can then immediately place a card on the table.