

Overcalls

Bridge is not really the friendly game that you thought it was. You and your partner are at war with the opponents. The winner on a deal is the pair who gets the best score possible and you can only tell whether you got the best score possible when you compare what you did with others who played the same deal.

When opponents open the bidding you don't have to sit back and let them bid uninterrupted to the best contract, you are allowed to interfere with their auction as much as you wish. The only reason for not going overboard in the bidding is that the opponent's can stop bidding and start doubling your contract and you won't get the best score possible if you concede a large penalty.

How do you know when to overcall? Look at this hand.

- ♠ K Q J 9 7 Your right hand opponent opens 1♣. Don't you just itch to bid 1♠?
♥ 5 3 Think of the advantages:
♦ Q 10 9 5 ➤ Partner will lead a spade should you finish up defending.
♣ 3 2 ➤ Left-hand opponent will not be able to bid 1♦ or 1♥.
 ➤ Maybe your side can win the contract; partner may have a good hand.

You might object to overcalling 1♠. The hand has only got eight points. How can it be right to enter the auction when you wouldn't open the bidding with the hand? The whole point is that opponents have already opened, you are taking defensive action to limit this advantage.

Clearly there must be some rules for overcalling so that partner will know what to expect. The Standard English definition of an overcall is:

A 5-card or longer suit that is worth bidding, which contains two or more honours.
A minimum of about 8 points for a one level bid and a maximum of around 16 points. There is usually a better bid available with stronger hands.
Overcalls at the two level are a bit stronger both in suit quality and points.
Jump overcalls show a 6-card suit and about 12 to 15 points.

Test your overcalling skills on these hands after opponents open 1♣ – cover up the answers whilst you decide what to bid

- ♠ J 8 7 6 3 A trick question to start with. This hand is a clear pass. Whilst it has eleven points, the spades are poor and you have better values in defence than attack.
♥ Q 5 You do not want partner to lead spades against the final contract should your side end up defending. Make it Q J 9 7 6 of spades and two small hearts and you would bid 1♠
♦ K 10 9 5
♣ K O
- ♠ K Q J 9 7 6 This hand is well worth a spade bid. With its good 6-card suit and 13 points, surely everybody must want to overcall. But the choice should be 2♠ rather than 1♠ to show a hand with good playing strength.
♥ Q J 10
♦ K J 10
♣ 2
- ♠ K Q 10 9 7 With two suits it's not a question of should we bid? But which one should we bid? Over 1♣ a bid of 1♠ has the added advantage of shutting out the hearts and your side may be able to compete in the highest ranking suit. So bid 1♠. Maybe you will get a chance to bid your diamonds on the next round.
♥ 3 2
♦ K Q J 10 9
♣ 2
- ♠ Q 10 9 This time the opening bid is 1♥. Should you overcall?
♥ 4 3 2 The hand is worth 2♦ because you have such a good 6-card suit. You want it led. You would be happy if partner raised diamonds. You shut out hearts at the one level. Should partner bid no trumps, your hand will provide lots of tricks. Add the ♠A instead of the ♠9 and you would bid 3♦.
♦ A K J 10 9 5
♣ 2

If an overcall of 1♣ with 1♠ is made on quite low point counts, how should overcaller's partner respond? Remember points are only a guide, fit for partner and shortages elsewhere are equally valuable.

Overcall is 1♠. You have three or more spades.	
6 to 9 points	Raise to 2♠. Raise even higher with lots of spades.
10 to 12 points	Raise to 3♠, or to 4♠ with a shapely hand
More points	Bid 4♠
Overcall is 1♠ but you have less than three spades.	
8 to 11 points	Bid 1NT with a stops in suit opened
12 to 14	Bid 2NT with a stops in suit opened
More points	Bid 3NT with a stops in suit opened
Good suit of your own	Bid it at lowest level. Jump bid it, if strong.