

All you need to know about doubles

Penalty doubles

The idea of a double comes from the very earliest games of bridge, which were gambling games. Double was invented as a bid to increase the penalty when opponents overbid. It is mentioned in the 1895 rules where the value of the penalty depended on the suit being doubled. Nowadays penalty doubles are rarer and the message carried is that 'I do not think this contract will make'. Standard English as taught to our beginners has some nice simple rules to help you tell what partner means by a double. These are more straightforward than many people play but are easy to apply. A double is penalty

If a no trump bid is doubled

If opponents remove a double of no trumps into a suit contract

If we have made a strength showing redouble

Above the level of two spades (except for a double of an opening three bid)

Here are some examples of penalty doubles:

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| <p>♠ A K 6 2
♥ K 6 3
♦ A K 10 2
♣ J 9</p> | <p>The opponents open 1NT. With 18 points we know that we have more points than opener. We must double. Just at this moment we cannot say which tricks we will make but we hope for the best. If the double is removed to 2♣ and partner doubles we are happy to pass.</p> |
| <p>♠ A 2
♥ K Q J 10 6 3
♦ A J 2
♣ 10 9</p> | <p>The opponents open 1NT. Only 15 points but we would double with this hand because we expect 1NT to go down. We have an excellent lead and expect to make five hearts and two aces. If opponents removed to 2♦ and partner doubled, we would bid hearts. The hand is not nearly so strong defending against other suits.</p> |
| <p>♠ 5 4 3
♥ 7 5 4
♦ Q 9 8
♣ A K 8 2</p> | <p>We are sitting in fourth position. Partner doubles the opening 1NT and the next hand bids 2♣ or 2♦. We may only have 9 points but we must make a penalty double. Expecting partner to have at least 16 points, our side has 25 to the opponents 15. The contract should go down. All my students wanted to pass with this hand, but it is right to double.</p> |

Takeout doubles

If a double is not penalty, then it is takeout. That is partner is expected to make a bid. The only time partner can pass a takeout double is if they have a very good, long holding in the suit doubled. Takeout doubles are much more common than penalty doubles, they occur nearly every time a suit bid of 2♠ or less is doubled. This is the general rule, particularly useful when

An opening bid of one, two or three of a suit is doubled

An opponent's overcall up to and including two spades is doubled

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| <p>♠ 2
♥ K Q J 10
♦ A K 6 2
♣ J 10 9 8</p> | <p>This is a textbook double of an opponents opening 1♠ bid. You have opening bid values and shortage in the suit opened. You are asking partner to bid a suit and you have 4-card support whichever one is chosen. If your right hand opponent opened 3♠ you would double for takeout too. A bit risky but playing safe is often a losing strategy.
If the opening bid were 1♥, you would have to pass since you do not want to hear partner bid spades.</p> |
| <p>♠ A Q 5 2
♥ 6 3
♦ A 2
♣ K Q 10 9 3</p> | <p>You are sitting in fourth seat and hear left hand opponent open 1♦. Partner passes and right hand opponent bids 1♥. You would like to bid with 15 points but which suit? Make a takeout double. It asks partner to choose between the unbid suits – in this case spades and clubs.</p> |
| <p>♠ 3 2
♥ J 10 6 4
♦ A 10 9
♣ O J 10 9</p> | <p>If partner opens 1♦ and the next hand bids 1♠, you want to bid but have no good suit and not many values. You want to play in hearts if partner has four but will settle for diamonds if that is all partner has. Make a takeout double and see what partner bids.</p> |

New players may not yet have learned all these doubles. Some players use a different set of rules. Your great-auntie may never have made a takeout double. However, your bidding will be much easier if you learn to use double properly. Learn the general rules, they will help you tell the difference between a penalty and a takeout double. Learn them and you will never go wrong. Well hardly ever!