

Bridge teachers are so good at telling us what we should have bid on a particular deal that is easy to believe that there is a system bid for every hand. But it's not true – sometimes you have to use your imagination and guess what is the best thing to do. Our bidding system is only a guide to understanding the language of bidding – sometimes you can invent your own vocabulary.

Look at these hands. Your right hand opponent opens One Club, what do you bid?

♠ 6 2
♥ 10 9 8 7
♦ A K Q J
♣ K 9 3

It would be easy if you were the dealer, you would open 1NT. Unfortunately, dealer has already opened 1♣, now you need 16-18 HCP to bid 1NT and you only have 13 HCP.

You know that you need a 5-card or longer suit to overcall, but it seems an awful shame to pass with those four lovely diamond honours. If nobody is looking, you could overcall 1♦. Even if partner has nothing you should make five tricks. And if partner is on lead against an opponent's contract, whether in a major or in no trumps, you want partner to lead a diamond. Of course partner will think you have a 5-card suit and may well raise you with only 3-card support, but it really shouldn't be a disaster.

We very rarely overcall with a 4-card suit and if we do it's only at the one level. The suit needs to have at least three of the top four honours, for example AKQ9, KQJ8, AQJ7, AKJ10. You should have 12+ HCP to compensate for the shorter suit length.

♠ 6 2
♥ 10 9 8
♦ A K Q J 6 5 2
♣ 3

Now there is no problem in overcalling on this hand, you have a very good 7-card suit. But 1♦ hardly does it justice, so perhaps you should bid more. The last article looked at jump overcalls and you could bid 2♦. But this shows a hand with more points and usually a diamond less. The answer is to bid 3♦. A double jump overcall shows a hand that would have made a pre-emptive opening bid, seven tricks in diamonds but not much defence to any other suit contract.

A double jump overcall is pre-emptive and based on a good long suit. You would not expect to go more than three down if not vulnerable or two down if vulnerable.

♠ A 2
♥ 10 9
♦ A K Q J 6 5 2
♣ K 9

Now this hand has the same diamond suit as the last example, but it is a much stronger hand. As well as the diamonds you should make two more tricks with ♠A and ♣K – nine tricks in total. To bid just 3♦ now would risk missing game. You could try 4♦ or 5♦ but much better is to bid 3NT. It's not the bid you first think of but it makes sense. After a club lead your hand should be able to cash its nine tricks. It's true you don't have a heart stopper but remember, the defence may not lead hearts and if they do partner may have sufficient length to stop opponents cashing too many tricks. And if they can cash lots of heart tricks, it's quite likely that opponents could have bid and made 4♥. Your 3NT overcall makes it very hard for opponents to bid to 4♥. So going down may be a very good score for your side.

A jump overcall to 3NT tells partner to pass. You do not want your partner to take you out into their miserable long suit, since your hand should have a long, solid suit, a stopper in opener's suit plus something else as well.

♠ 6 2
♥ 10 9
♦ A K Q J 8 6 5 2
♣ 9

When your suit becomes eight or nine cards, you will normally want it to be the trump suit. With a very good 8-card suit, 4♦ is best. Add one useful high card or a ninth diamond and you would bid 5♦.

The higher you bid your suit, the more pre-emptive your bid. If you go straight to 5♦, opponents cannot bid 4♥ or 4♠ and you may give them a very difficult bidding problem.

Here are some examples I gave my students for practice:

♠ 2	♠ J 10 8 6 3
♥ 10 9	♥ A 6 3
♦ A K Q 9 7 4 3	♦ J 2
♣ 8 6 5	♣ A 3 2

Margaret overcalled 3♦ expecting Peter to pass. But he thought if she had seven tricks, he had another two, plus a stopper in every suit, so he bid 3NT. Peter is a bit inclined to take a gamble but in this case he was absolutely right.

♠ –	♠ 8 6 3
♥ 10 9	♥ A 7 5 4 2
♦ 7 4 3	♦ 9 8
♣ K Q J 10 9 8 3 2	♣ A 7 4

and 4♠ is an easy make. Pre-emptive jump overcalls may not always lead to making contracts, but they can help you get the best score possible.

♠ 9 7	♠ 10 8 6 3
♥ K 5	♥ A 7 6 2
♦ A 4	♦ 5 3 2
♣ A K Q J 10 8 2	♣ 9 4

so Doreen made ten tricks.

♠ A K Q 9	♠ J 10 8
♥ 9 5	♥ A K 6 2
♦ J 9 4	♦ 8 6 5 3 2
♣ A 9 6 2	♣ 3

with ♠J and still had the ♠A K in hand as winners. Ten tricks, +170, and the best score possible for E/W.

Trixie opened 1♠ and Barbara wanted to bid her 8-card club suit. She couldn't bid 3♣ as that would be a much stronger hand, so she had to say 4♣. Fizz went 4♠ and John looked at his two aces. In the end he went 5♣ and Trixie who had a good opening hand doubled for penalties. But despite Trixie's good hand, 5♣ only went one down

Marion opened 1♥ and Doreen, who is normally quite a careful bidder, went 3NT. Everybody passed and Janice, remembering that Doreen might not have all the suits well stopped led ♠4 from ♠Q J 5 4 2. She found Marion with ♠A K alone. Unfortunately Janice did not have an entry to get in and cash her spade winners,

Jan opened 1♣. Liz didn't like to make a takeout double with only two little hearts, but with 14 HCP she wanted to bid. Noting that her spades had the three top honours, she tried 1♠. After a 2♣ raise, Joe bid 2♠ and everybody passed. A club was led. Liz won and ruffed a club. She cashed ♥A K and ruffed a heart, she ruffed another club and another heart. She could ruff her last club

If you have enjoyed reading the last five Standard English articles on overcalling, you will enjoy reading our latest book *Really Easy Competitive Bidding*. It not only covers how to overcall but what to do when opponents interfere with your auction.

It is available by mail order from the EBU for £10.76 including postage and packing. Ring 01296 317200 to order.