

Mike's Competitive Bidding Guide

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1 Introduction

1.1 The scope of this document

This document is intended for those who:

- Have learned the rules of bridge and want to take the next step towards playing
- Have played bridge socially and want to improve
- Played many years ago and want to start again
- Are beginner-intermediate level and want to refresh the basics of bidding in competition
- Are more advanced but want to learn a (possibly) different style of bidding competitively

As with the non-competitive bidding guide, if you do not fit any of these conditions, this may be of limited or no value to you.

1.2 The style I favor

As with almost all parts of bridge bidding, there are many styles that may lead to success. I personally believe that, as in poker, aggressiveness is a necessary component to success in bridge. Your opponents will bid too well if you leave them room to explore their best contract. However, I do believe that discipline is also important at times. Hopefully, after reading this document, you will become comfortable with recognizing which situations call for aggression and which call for conservatism, as this will be a big part of whether or not you are a successful competitive bidder.

1.3 Definitions and Terms

Here are some terms you might not know that I'll throw around during the rest of this document:

- LHO and RHO are your left-hand opponent and your right-hand opponent
- Opener the player who opened the bidding. Responder is opener's partner. Overcaller is the person who first bids on the side that didn't open, and advancer is overcaller's partner.
- X is the abbreviated symbol for "double" and XX is the abbreviated symbol for "redouble."

2 Basic Concepts

I'm going to spend some time up front here going over some of the basic ideas you'll be using for competitive bidding. If you're fairly new to the game, this may not entirely make sense to you. If it doesn't, don't worry. Just read and try to remember the 3 rules to see how they fit into the bids we'll be talking about later. Eventually, you'll want to fully understand, but don't worry about it right now.

2.1 3 rules to follow in competitive bidding

One of the things that will make you an effective bidder is knowing how high to compete on hands where it's not clear whose hand it is (hands where the HCP are relatively evenly divided). On some of these hands, nobody can really make anything - whichever side ends up declaring gets a negative score. On most others both sides can make a part-score, and rarely both sides can make game or even slam. One pattern pervades all of these hands - on the hands where neither side can really make anything, neither side has a good trump fit, and on the hands where both sides can make contracts, each side has an 8, 9, or 10-card trump fit. In fact, it has been discovered that the total number of tricks we can make in our best trump suit added to the number of tricks they can make in their best trump suit is, on average, equal to the total number of trumps in both of those suits added together. This is called the Law of Total Tricks. This leads to

RULE #1: You should usually compete to the trick-level of your side's # of trumps

For example, if your partner opens 2H (showing 6), and you have 4 hearts, you should usually compete to the $6+4 = 10$ trick-level ($4\heartsuit$). You might not make this, but if you aren't making it, then it's extremely likely that they can make at least a part-score and if you're going down multiple tricks, game.

Why does this work? There are two primary reasons. Firstly, the more total cards we have in our trump suit, the more tricks we can take with them - each long trump is a winner, and each trump in the short trump hand can possibly be used to trump a loser. At the same time, we have fewer defensive tricks in our trump suit because they have fewer cards there and will use their trumps to ruff. The second reason is that, in many situations, if a high card is well-placed for our side, it's poorly placed for their side, and vice versa. Thus, at least to some degree, the number of tricks available to both sides total doesn't depend on where the high cards are. For example, if I have AQJ in a suit and my partner has 3 small cards, the K is either in front of the AQJ or behind it. If it is onside for me, I have no losers in the suit, but the opponents probably have 3 because it's offside for them; if it's behind the AQJ, I now have a loser, but the opponents have one fewer loser in the suit, so the total number of tricks available is roughly constant.

Keep in mind that this is intended to be used as a guide only - it won't be right every time, but it is a good baseline because it's right on average over many deals. It is especially useful for below-game competition, and does tend to break down at higher levels. For now, you should generally use it and later worry about modifying it (see Sec. 7.2).

In addition, if the opponents have 8 cards in a suit between them, then we have only 5. Thus, we have 21 ($13 + 13 - 5$) in the other 3 suits, and unless they are divided exactly 7-7-7 (which is unlikely), then we have (at least) an 8-card fit too. If they have a 9-card fit, then we are guaranteed at least an 8-card fit, ...etc. This leads us to

RULE #2: Bid more aggressively when the opponents have shown an 8-card or longer fit.

This is both because it is much more likely that we have a fit and because it is much more likely that they can make the contract that they are in. If we bid over them and go down a trick (or even two if not doubled) it's not a big deal as long as they were going to make their contract. For example, say they are in $2\spadesuit$ and we bid $3\diamondsuit$ over them and go down. Making two spades is worth 110 points to them, and setting us one trick is worth 50 or 100 to them, depending on the vulnerability; down two would be 100 or 200 to

them. Thus it's essentially a break-even proposition if we go down - if we make, though we turn a score of -110 into a score of +110, which is a sizable gain. We only really lose if both $3\heartsuit$ and $2\spadesuit$ were going down, but the Law of Total Tricks says that is an unlikely outcome.

So far, we've covered two situations - one where you have an idea how many trumps your side has in its fit, and another where the opponents have or have not revealed a fit. What about when you have to make a decision about whether or not to bid before either of these things happen? Well, we want to bid more when it's likely that they have a fit. What makes it likely that they have a fit? When we don't have many cards in the suit they have bid. This leads us to

RULE #3: Bid more aggressively when you are short in their suit (2 or fewer cards) than when long in their suit (3 or more cards). The shorter you are, the more aggressive you should be and vice versa.

YOU: "But Mike, it's just one card difference between having 3 and 2 cards in their suit - that can't be THAT important, can it?"

ME: "Yes, it can and is."

What this means is that you'll sometimes have to pass with a good hand. This may seem frustrating to pick up good cards then have to sit back and keep your mouth shut, but sometimes you have no choice (especially when they keep bidding your long suit(s)). Minimum opening hands will frequently have to pass at their first call in a competitive auction. When your hand gets better than that it becomes much more unlikely that you should pass. If you make a hand strong enough, you will have to do -something-.

Keep these rules in mind as we move forward.

3 The Simple Overcall

3.1 Should I overcall and what does it show?

You're disappointed - they've opened the bidding in a suit. You always want to get in the first shot, but sometimes it just doesn't work out that way. Still, you will frequently be able to bid something if you have a decent enough hand. An **overcall** is any bid made when the opponents have bid (or bid and responded). There are many reasons to overcall. Here are a few of them:

1. To compete for the hand - it might be your side's hand and it's important to get your nose in early. The longer you wait the more dangerous it becomes to bid
2. To indicate a favorable lead to your partner and/or help him during the defense
3. To take up the opponents' bidding space and make them bid their cards in an unfamiliar way
4. To suggest a profitable **sacrifice** against the opponents' contract (make a bid intending to go down, but for less than the value of their contract, usually a game or slam).

Usually it's a good idea to keep in mind why you are making a particular bid - if you can't think of a reason, maybe you shouldn't be bidding. As with anything in life, it's not all good news - the opponents will have an opportunity to let you play your contract (possibly doubled), particularly if you're forced to act at a high level. Because of this, it's important to have a good enough hand and/or suit to be reasonably safe at the level at which you're overcalling. What this means is that you always need at least 5 cards in the suit you're bidding. The strength for an overcall is as follows:

- At the 1-level, an overcall shows ~10-18 total points and a (usually decent) 5-card or better suit.
- At the 2-level, an overcall shows 12-18 total points and a GOOD 5-card suit (or preferably, better). Because you're an extra level higher, you need to be more careful, particularly when vulnerable.

- At higher levels, an overcall shows more than a minimum opening hand and usually extra shape or length in the suit overcalled. Balanced hands need significant extra values to overcall at a high level. It is sort of hard to quantify exactly what you need - to some extent you just need to develop the judgment by playing. Just remember to follow rule #3 - overcall aggressively with shortness (particularly with 1 or 0 cards) in the opponents' bid suit.

A few examples:

Your RHO opens 1♣

1. ♠Q75 ♥A4 ♦J7653 ♣KT4 - Pass. You have a bad suit, length in clubs, and barely enough values to be thinking about bidding in the first place. Your bid doesn't take up any of their bidding room, and you don't even want partner to lead a diamond.
2. ♠AKT84 ♥T94 ♦JT43 ♣4 - Bid 1♠. This may seem counterintuitive, since this hand is 2 HCP worse than the previous one. But this bid has a number of things working for it - you want a spade lead against any contract they end up in, you are taking up the entire 1-level, you have the highest-ranking suit and it pays to bid spades aggressively, and finally, you have short clubs and good internals in your suit, making the bid much safer.
3. ♠AQ4 ♥K4 ♦J5432 ♣K43 - Bid 1♦. Here your suit sucks, but you have a strong enough hand to think it might be your hand, so you should bid.
4. ♠AK874 ♥KQ875 ♦3 ♣T7 - Bid 1♠. With two 5-card suits, bid the higher-ranking one, just like as in non-competitive bidding.
5. ♠AK4 ♥AQT94 ♦A43 ♣32 - Bid 1♥. This is about a maximum one-level overcall - with slightly more you would start by doubling - this will be explained later.

Your RHO opens 1♠

1. ♠874 ♥KJ843 ♦AQ ♣Q43 - Pass, although this is right on the border. Sometimes this will be wrong, but I think there are too many warning signs against bidding. You have a terrible holding in spades, poor intermediate cards in your own suit, a balanced hand, and a bare minimum in terms of high cards. Bidding is more reasonable if you are not vulnerable, since a 2♥ overcall has good preemptive value (it takes up all the bids between 1♠ and 2♥). Over a major suit, making bids to tell partner what to lead is less important, since the opponents are likely to play in the major, in which case you will be on lead. Change the heart suit to KJT98 and I would bid because of the greatly increased safety.
2. ♠54 ♥K4 ♦KT4 ♣AJ9843 - Overcall 2♣. This is a normal minimum overcall. Even though you have fewer HCP than before, the suit is much better and longer, so the level of safety is much, much higher. Finally, you are short in their suit rather than long.

3.2 Responding to a 1-level Overcall (Take 1)

Responding to a 1-level overcall is a lot like responding to an opening bid. There are few differences - firstly, partner's range is shifted down about 3 total points from 13-21 to 10-18. Because of this you need a little more to be bidding voluntarily. Here are your basic responding options:

- Raise your partner exactly the same as if he had opened the bidding. This may seem counterintuitive, but the fact that you have a fit will improve partner's hand and give you safety. Also remember that when you have a fit, it's likely that they have a fit as well, so it's important to compete.

- Bid NT with their suit stopped. 1NT shows about 8 to a bad 11, 2NT shows around 11 to a bad 13. With a really good 13 or more, you can bid 3NT (yes, this might be a little too high, but it's a risk you have to take). If you're bidding 2NT or 3NT, you should have at least a stopper and a half in their suit.
- Bid a new suit with 8+ points at the 1-level or 12+ points at the 2-level. If this is at 2♥ or higher, it shows 5+ cards, just as in non-competitive bidding. If you bid at the 3-level in a new suit, this shows a game-force.
- Bidding after this proceeds very similarly to standard bidding. If you have a strong hand that doesn't know which game to bid (usually because it lacks a sufficient stopper in the opponents' bid suit), you can always bid their suit - we don't want to play in suits where they have announced length, so this isn't a natural bid. This is called a **cuebid** and it's always a forcing bid. It asks your partner to further describe his hand, and he will bid NT if he can stop their suit.

One thing I should mention - don't rescue your partner if he hasn't been doubled for penalty just because you have 0 or 1 cards in his suit. You have to count on your partner to look after his own safety. Now, if he has been doubled for penalties, you can run if you are very short and have good prospects of finding a safe(r) landing spot.

3.3 Responding to a 1-level Overcall (Take 2) (Optional)

Many modern players play different agreements from what I gave you above - in competitive bidding there is a premium on not only competing, but competing quickly as high as you can compete safely with weak hands and good trump support. This deprives the opponents of bidding room, lessening the accuracy of their bidding. As such, you and your partner can, if you want, adopt the following set of agreements:

- All direct raises of partner's suit show about 6-10 total points and show a trump fit equal to the trick-level of the bid (e.g. a raise to the 2-level shows the partnership has at least 8 total trumps). These bids allow you to preempt the opponents as much as is safe.
- An immediate bid in the opponents' suit by advancer shows 11+ total points and at least 3-card support. This is still called a **cuebid**. It doesn't say anything about their suit - remember we don't really want to play in suits they've shown length in anyway. Over this, overcaller can signoff below game in his suit, bid game in his suit, or bid some new suit to show some stuff there and make a try for game (because our trump suit is known, new suit bids are forcing). If overcaller signs off, advancer can just bid game if he has a game-forcing hand.
- Other bids are as described above.

3.4 Responding to a 2-level overcall

When partner overcalls at the 2-level he will have an opening hand. Bidding proceeds much the way you might reason it should. New suits are forcing and, like in Standard, show 11+ total points (you are at the 2-level after all). You and your partner can once again agree that the cuebid promises trump support and 11+ points - it's up to you. I recommend that you do if you are playing the above optional agreements just to keep things simple.

3.5 Overcalling in NT

A 1NT overcall shows almost exactly what a 1NT opening shows - with the addition that you need to have at least a sure stopper in the suit. You can be a touch stronger than a normal 1NT opener - the range is

something like 15-18. Advancer should treat this exactly as if overcaller had opened 1NT - just play the same systems that you would be playing over a 1NT opening.

3.6 Jump Overcalls

Modern style is (and has been for years now) to play these bids as preempts, showing almost exactly what a preempt to that level would have shown. You should actually be more conservative than if you were opening a preempt because the opponents have already exchanged some information - thus, the value of your preempt is less. See Section 6 for more details about preempting, and responding to preempts.

3.7 What to do when they open in NT

When the opponents open 1NT, the situation is very different from acting over a 1-level suit opener or preempt. Because of the quality of hand that the opener is showing, it is very unlikely that you will have a game. It does happen, but it's rare enough that I recommend you not worry about it. Does this mean you shouldn't bid at all? Of course not. In fact, it means you should bid MORE aggressively rather than less - however, your bidding should be based primarily on SHAPE, not high cards - your goal is to disrupt and to compete for a part-score. Bidding a suit shows usually a 6-card suit (maybe a very good 5-card suit), enough values to compete with some degree of safety, and an unbalanced hand. I recommend you generally just pass with balanced hands - defending NT will usually work out just fine. If they open 2NT, you wouldn't be far from wrong to pass without looking at your hand! You should pass unless you have extreme shape, meaning at least a good 7-card suit or 6-5 shape, especially if you are vulnerable.

4 The Takeout Double

Consider two different hands you could hold over your RHO's 1♠ opening.

1. ♠AQJ94 ♥A83 ♦K3 ♣A43
2. ♠3 ♥AQ43 ♦AJ84 ♣KT92

With the first hand, you'd like to make a penalty double of 1♠. It is very likely that it's going down, possibly multiple tricks. The problem is that this type of hand is very rare - if an opponent has a good hand and 5+ spades, it's unlikely that you will have a good hand with 5+ spades also. With hand 2, you can't overcall, but you'd really like to compete because you're short in their suit. The solution to this is to use the double to show hands like hand 2, rather than its traditionally intended meaning. You'll see this trend pervading nearly all of modern competitive bidding - most low-level doubles today are for takeout (asking partner to bid one of the suits that has not been bid by the opponents). So what do you do if you happen to hold a hand that wants to double for penalty? You pass and hope that your partner can double at his call (since if you and your RHO have length in a suit, your partner is likely to be short and thus be able to make a takeout double). Yes, sometimes partner will not have either the strength or the right shape to make a double, but this is a small price to pay to be able to compete accurately. Besides, you aren't usually going to get rich defending at low levels when partner has nothing.

4.1 What you need to double

A one-level takeout double shows:

- At least 3 cards in each unbid suit. It is ok to occasionally have only 2 cards in an unbid minor. However, you should really, really, never have fewer than 3 cards in an unbid major. Find some other bid.
- Shortness in the enemy suit (2 cards or fewer)

- At least 12+ total points in support of all of the unbid suits over a minor or 13+ over a major. Remember to count shortness points - this means you need about 10+ HCP with a singleton in their suit and 9+ if you're void.
- A normal takeout double denies a 5-card major - if you had one you could simply bid it. It's ok to have a 5-card minor - majors are more important so it is frequently better to double if you shape is good for it.

— OR —

- A hand with 19+ points that's too strong for a direct overcall in a suit or NT. This is called a power double.

Some examples:

RHO opens 1♦

1. ♠AQ3 ♥KT43 ♦Q ♣AKT94 - Double. Sure you have a perfectly safe club overcall, but majors are much more important than minors.
2. ♠AT93 ♥AT86 ♦- ♣98763 - Double. I know, I know it's maybe a little less than I said you need, but you have plenty of defense (two aces) and your shape is perfect. Be aggressive when you have a void in their suit - your partner likely has length and will be conservative. It's likely that you need to get into the auction and partner's isn't going to be the one to do it.
3. ♠AJT ♥KQJ ♦43 ♣J7642 - Double - it doesn't promise a 4-card major, and overcalling 2♣ on that suit is just sick.
4. ♠AJT976 ♥AQJ ♦KQ ♣A5 - Double - you're too strong to just bid 1♠ - your partner might pass and you could miss game. You will correct whatever partner bids to spades.

Now, suppose RHO opens 1♠

1. ♠K4 ♥AQ43 ♦K543 ♣AT9 - Double. You have 16 balanced with a spade stopper, but you should still double, not overcall 1NT. Your short spades means that NT will not play all that well unless partner has a stopper too, in which case he may well bid NT himself. Move one card from any suit to spades and now it's definitely a 1NT bid.
2. ♠65 ♥AQ4 ♦K943 ♣Q973 - Pass. Maybe double if non-vul if you're feeling aggressive. There has to be a line, and this is a hair below it. It's possible you'll miss a game if you pass, but you could also get doubled for a large number if you bid and it's a misfit hand. Move one of your spades to any suit and it's a completely clear double.
3. ♠9 ♥KT543 ♦KQJ4 ♣AT4 - Overcall 2♥. While you have fairly weak hearts and otherwise correct shape for a double, you should definitely just bid the hearts. Your most likely game by far is in a 5-3 or better heart fit. Yes, you might still get to hearts but partner isn't going to bid them with 3, and you can't bid 2♥ at your next call - that would show a power double in hearts. This will be explained in more detail in Section 4.3.

4.2 Responding to a takeout double

Partner has come into the auction with a double and your RHO has passed - now it's up to you. Partner will almost always have shortness in their suit and a decent hand. Here is what you should do based on the strength of your hand.

- With 0-8 points, pick your favorite of partner's suits - bid a major if you have a choice of equal length suits. **IMPORTANT:** you cannot pass partner's double simply because you don't like any of his suits - you need to have a good hand with a good holding in their suit to pass. Yes, this means you might have to bid a 3-card suit.
- With 9-11 points, make a single jump bid in one of partner's suits. Your bid isn't forcing - remember from non-competitive bidding, bids in previously bid suits or NT aren't forcing and here you should think of partner's double as him having bid the other three suits.
- With lots of shape and a weak hand, you can make a double jump or jump to game in one of partner's suits. A jump to game could also be based on a fairly minimum game-forcing hand with at least 5 cards in the suit (remember, partner only promised 3+). If you're just starting out you can just do this on all game-forcing hands and not worry about slam.
- With 12+ points, bid their suit (once again, called a **cuebid**). It's your only forcing bid, and you should do it when you have a game-forcing hand that isn't sure of the strain. In response to this, partner will just bid his cheapest 4+ card major, or find another descriptive bid if he doesn't have one.
- With their suit well-stopped and no real support for any of partner's majors, you can bid NT. The ranges are just like those from Section 3.2 - bid 1NT with 8-11ish, 2NT with 11-12ish and 3NT with 13+. Once again, partner's bidding can be based on shape as well as high cards, so you need to have some extra high cards for NT bids (when compared to non-competitive bidding).
- With a GOOD 5-card holding in their suit (or preferably, better, especially if their suit is a major), and a good hand (probably at least 10 total points) you can pass the double, thus converting it into a penalty double. This is called a **penalty pass**. Your intermediate cards in their trump suit are really important for this bid - you should be intending to draw their trumps and beat them multiple tricks opposite a normal takeout double. For example: ♠QJT98 ♥A65 ♦T ♣Q765 is a bare minimum penalty pass if partner doubles 1♠.

Some examples:

The bidding has begun 1♣ X P ?

1. ♠543 ♥JT3 ♦75 ♣T9873 - Bid 1♥. Partner asked you to pick, so you pick and hope to not get doubled.
2. ♠AJT83 ♥54 ♦K43 ♣987 - Bid 2♠. You have 10 total points so you make a single jump (remember your 5-card suit is worth 1 extra when partner has 3+ card support).
3. ♠KJ97 ♥AQ43 ♦K75 ♣54 - Bid 2♣. Don't try to guess which major partner has 4 of. Just cuebid - he will bid his cheapest 4-card major if he has one, then you can bid game in that suit.
4. ♠KQT9832 ♥4 ♦Q43 ♣87 - Bid 4♠. It's true you don't really have the strength for this, but your side has at least a 10-card spade fit, maybe 11. You want to compete to the 10-trick level, and it is best to do so right away. You might make this anyway, and even if you don't it seems really likely that they will be able to make game in some other suit, since you have essentially no defensive strength.

If your RHO bids something, your options are basically the same as before. The main difference is that you are no longer forced to bid something. If you have a bad hand, you can just pass happily - your partner is guaranteed another chance to act. Bidding something, even at a minimum level shows some values - something like a hand worth at least 5-8 (this is called a **freebid** because you chose to bid). You will also have a chance to double your RHO's bid for penalties. If he bids a suit your partner showed, you should usually have at least 4 cards there and enough values to think it's probably your hand. If your RHO raises LHO's bid suit, you need at least a good 4-card trump holding (sometimes called a **trump stack**) and a good hand to double (e.g. KQ97). Since partner is known to be short in that suit, they will almost certainly have a fit there and you will need to take trump tricks to be better off doubling than bidding and making something of your own. Don't double their bid and raised suit just because you have a good hand.

4.3 Further bidding by the takeout doubler

So, you've made your takeout double, and partner has bid a suit. Now what? Well, normally you just pass. You should only bid if you have significant extra values in support of the suit that partner picked, or if you have a power double. If partner has jumped, you can add your points to his 9-11 and act accordingly. If he has cuebid, you just bid your cheapest 4-card major (if you have one), bid NT if you happen to have their suit stopped, or bid a minor suit naturally. Partner has extras so you are game-forced. If partner just makes a minimum response, you have the following options:

- Pass with a minimum takeout double. I'm making this its own entry because it's commonly gotten wrong. You asked partner to pick. He picked. You don't get to pick again just because you like one of your other suits better than the one he picked. End of story.
- Bid a new suit with 19-22 points. This is a power double and shows 5+ cards in the bid suit, and it rescinds all promises about 3+ support for unbid suits. It just shows a hand too good to overcall.
- Jump in a new suit with a game-forcing hand. Yeah this basically never happens, but if it does it's game-forcing.
- Bid a minimum number of NT with 19-21 balanced, or if you happen to be dealt more, jump in NT.
- Raise partner's suit with a takeout double with extra values. Partner has shown 0-8, so to raise at all you need to be considering game opposite that range. Raising partner to the 2-level shows something like 17-19, to the 3-level shows 20-21 or so, and raising to game shows a mountain (but it does happen).
- With a very strong hand that's unsure of the strain, you too can cuebid. Usually this is a hand with only 3-card support for partner's suit.

If your RHO has bid something after partner's response, raising partner becomes a competitive action - it just shows (at least) 4-card support for partner's chosen suit and a desire to compete for the contract. For example, if the bidding has gone $1\clubsuit$ X P $1\heartsuit$ $2\clubsuit$, and you are holding \spadesuit KT9 \heartsuit AKJ4 \diamondsuit KT543 \clubsuit 3, you should raise to $2\heartsuit$. You might have only 3 hearts, in which case you don't have a fit and should not be competing to the 2-level. Pedantic readers may note that partner might have only 3 hearts himself here, but this is very rare, and you shouldn't fail to compete because you are concerned about a very rare occurrence. You will win on the balance by either making your contract or (more likely) pushing them up a level and sometimes beating them.

5 When they bid after we open

Much of the time when you bid constructively, the opponents will bid once or twice, then leave you alone when it becomes clear it's not their hand. It's important to know how the bidding of the opponents affects your auctions.

5.1 After they overcall a suit over our suit

When they overcall, we will usually try to ignore them and bid on to (hopefully) the best contract. The general principles that we learned in the non-competitive document still apply. Here are the main differences:

- Bids in NT need to have a stopper in the suit they overcalled. If you are bidding 2NT/3NT, you should have invitational/game-forcing values, and at least prospects of a second stopper.
- Bidding the opponents' suit (a **cuebid**, if you remember) is always forcing by either player. Unless you have agreed otherwise, it shows a good hand (invitational or better if at the 2-level, game-forcing if at the 3-level) that usually doesn't know which strain to play in.

- With a good 5-card or better holding in their suit (1-level) or 4-card or better at the 2-level, you can double them for penalties. If you are playing negative doubles (see next section), you will pass and hope that partner reopens with a takeout double, which you will pass. This is called a **penalty pass**. Partner should strain to double with shortness in their suit to cater for you having this hand. You should generally avoid doing either of these with a decent 3-card or better holding in partner's major suit (if he opened one).
- (Optional) You can agree as many players nowadays do, to play essentially the same thing here as when you overcall over their suit - namely that a cuebid shows an 11+ raise of partner's suit, and that jumps in partner's suit show hands with 6-10 total points and a number of total trumps equal to the trick-level of the bid. This has the advantage of being easy to remember (if you are playing the other methods especially!) and effective so I recommend that you adopt it eventually.

5.1.1 How to handle the double (optional, but highly recommended)

Similarly to over an opening bid, modern style is to not play double as penalty when they overcall our opening bid; instead people play a convention called **negative doubles**. You and your partner can agree to play it as a penalty double if you want, but hands where you want to make a penalty double are fairly rare. When you draw such a hand, you can frequently penalize them anyway if you're playing negative doubles by passing waiting for partner to reopen with a takeout double himself. A negative double is really similar to the takeout double. It generally shows a hand that wants to compete, but lacks either the strength or the length in a suit to compete. A negative double shows:

- Usually exactly 4 cards in the unbid major if there is only one. If there are multiple unbid majors, the double shows both at the 1-level, and usually at least 4-3 in the majors at higher levels.
- 6+ total points at the 1-level
- 8ish+ total points if partner is likely to bid at the 2-level.
- 11+ total points if you're forcing partner to the 3-level
- 13+ total points if you're at 3♠ or higher
- Remember to be more aggressive if you're short in their suit.

Once the bidding gets high enough, doubles become penalty again. You and your partner can agree to play them to whatever level you want, but doubles of 4♠ and higher should be penalty.

Examples: The auction has started 1♣ - 1♠ - ?

1. ♠43 ♥QJ53 ♦KT83 ♣Q43 - X. This is the prototypical hand for a negative double - you would like to compete but you don't have enough clubs to raise partner nor enough strength to bid a new suit at the 2-level. This hand would not be strong enough to double if your RHO bid 2♠.
2. ♠A53 ♥KQ75 ♦9 ♣KJT43 - X. You have great support for partner's clubs, but you need to find out whether partner has 4 hearts. You will force game at your next call, but majors are more important so find out about the hearts first. You can always make a forcing bid at your next turn.
3. ♠AQT ♥7532 ♦KJ98 ♣J4 - 2NT. You don't absolutely have to double just because you have 4 hearts. With probably 3 spade stoppers and terrible hearts, just bid NT. Remember you have to jump with an invitational strength hand.

Now suppose the bidding has started 1♥ - 3♦ - ?

1. ♠KJ76 ♥76 ♦Q4 ♣AQ763 - X. This is a textbook 3-level negative double. You definitely shouldn't bid 4♣, which precludes playing in 3NT.
2. ♠KJ98 ♥832 ♦5 ♣A9865 - Bid 3♥. Sure you have the right shape for a double, but you already know about an 8-card fit, so just bid hearts.
3. ♠A74 ♥4 ♦KJ982 ♣JT97 - Pass, and try not to drool on the table. When you play negative doubles you have to risk passing on hands like this. Partner will strain to double on his call with any hand with 0/1 diamonds (which we almost certainly know he has), so it's very likely you'll get to pass his double and still get your huge penalty.

5.2 If they preempt our suit opening

When the opponents are particularly annoying and take up a bunch of our bidding space, there may not be room for all of the bids we would like to be able to make, even when it just comes to raising partner. Some thoughts about these auctions:

- In general, you should play the same agreements as if they hadn't jumped whenever possible.
- There may not be room for a 6-10 raise, and 11-12 raise and a game-forcing raise of partner's suit. For example, if they bid 3♦ over our 1♠. In this case, 3♠ would show something like 9-11, bidding game would show a good invitation through a minimum opening hand, and cuebidding would show a game-forcing raise with extras (if you're playing that).
- You can bid 3NT, especially over a 3-level preempt with slightly less than game-forcing values if you have a 3-card holding with the A or K. You can use that to make sure your RHO can't run his suit and frequently you will make 3NT with less than the normal requisite number of HCP.

5.3 When they make a takeout double

This is the other way the opponents will make a nuisance of themselves in your auctions. Here's how the meanings of your bids change when the opponents double.

- You have a new bid available when they double - namely redouble. Redouble shows 10+ points and usually interest in penalizing the opponents in at least two of the three unbid suits. When they bid a suit, partner will double anything he can handle and otherwise usually pass it around to you (unless he has an extremely unbalanced hand, usually with a whole lot of cards in the suit he opened).
- You can bid a suit at the 1-level to show a decent 4-card suit or better and 6+, just like if your RHO had passed. Remember that RHO's double doesn't show 4 in each major so you could easily belong in one.
- A 2-over-1 shows a good 5-card suit (or preferably, 6) and less than 11 total points - this is not forcing and is mainly a competitive action. With a better hand and that shape, redouble then bid your suit (if you don't end up doubling them first).
- Raise partner exactly as if there was no double.
- (Optional) If you and your partner feel up to it, you can play a common treatment used by tournament players today called **Jordan 2NT**. When we open and they double, 2NT shows an invitational or better raise of partner's suit, and all other raises of that suit show 6-10 total points and enough trumps to bid to that level. If you have an invitational balanced hand, you can redouble then bid NT at the cheapest level to show your hand (assuming you don't end up doubling them first).

5.4 When they bid over our 1NT

When we open 1NT and they bid, bids mean what one would think from Standard bidding unless you have made agreements otherwise:

- Bids at the 2-level are natural and non-forcing, showing 5+ cards
- Bids at the 3-level are natural and forcing, also showing 5+ cards
- Doubling the opponents is for penalty
- 2NT is invitational and 3NT is to play

As has happened multiple times throughout this document, modern style is to play the double as a takeout double (also called a **negative double**) when they bid a suit. This is because you are far more likely to hold a hand that wants to compete but can't rather than a penalty double of the opponents. Once again, you and your partner can agree to play this if you want. I do recommend that you use a cuebid of the opponents' suit to show a game-forcing hand unsure of the strain just as in other sequences (usually because it doesn't have a stopper).

6 Preempts

I've chosen to put this section in here rather than in the non-competitive guide because, although preempts have a constructive element to them, their primary purpose is competitive.

6.1 Opening with a preempt

Why do we preempt? Well, because people have gotten too good at bidding. If you let them bid with no interference, they will get to the right spot a large percentage of the time. By gobbling up their bidding space, you force them to make uncomfortable decisions. However, it's not all good news. By preempting, you're making a statement that you think it's -their- hand. After all you are bidding to a high level with few high cards. You have to keep in mind that they might just choose to double you in your preempt, and this is a bad thing if you are going down multiple tricks and they don't have a making game (if they do have a making game, it's not a terrible thing, since they could have instead bid and gotten the points for said game). You need to strike a balance between preempting often enough to get in their way, but not so much that you're constantly leaving your nose open to large penalties.

Preempts show fewer points than an opening hand. To know what level to preempt, usually subtract 4 from the # of cards in your suit. Here are some things to think about when deciding whether or not to preempt:

- 3rd seat is the best seat for preempting - if partner failed to open and you have less than an opening hand, they are very likely to have a game (at least). This means that if they choose to double you and set you a few tricks, they probably could have made about as many points bidding game. You should preempt aggressively.
- The next best seat for preempting is 1st seat. Here you have two opponents who might have good hands, and only one partner. These are good odds.
- 2nd seat you should be most conservative about your preempts. Now if someone has a big hand at the table, it's 50/50 to be your partner. In addition, your opponents have already exchanged information (they know that the guy on your right couldn't open).

- In 4th seat, if you are dealt a bad hand, pass! Somebody screwed up. A 4th seat preempt shows a minimum opening hand (something like a bad 13 HCP is a reasonable max) with a good suit of the right length for a preempt at that level.
- You should preempt more conservatively when vulnerable than when not vulnerable. When you are vulnerable, the penalties they collect if they double you are considerably higher. Similarly, you should preempt more conservatively when they're not vulnerable - they are more likely to just double you and take their profit, because the bonus they get for bidding a making game is less than it would be if they were vulnerable.
- Having good intermediates in your suit is important for safety - if the opponents double you and cash a bunch of aces and kings, that's ok - they would have used those aces and kings to make a contract of their own. However, if they take tricks with J, T, and 9s in your suit and ruffs, those probably weren't much value to them on offense. For this reason, you should avoid preempting on suits with the ace or king at the top and no fillers. The ideal suit is something like KQJT98 or QJT865. Definitely avoid suits like A976532 or K85432, except when the other conditions make preempting ideal.
- You shouldn't have a 5-card side suit when you preempt below the game-level. You should really try to avoid having a 4-card major on the side, particularly spades. If you have 4 bad hearts and 6 good diamonds, it's ok to preempt in diamonds because hearts can't outbid spades anyway. If you have 6 diamonds and 4 spades, you might need to outbid their hearts with spades and, well, partner won't play you for 4 of them.
- You want to avoid having too much defense when you preempt. If they double you for 300 or 500, that's ok as long as they could make game. But if your extra defense prevents them from making game, then it's bad news. Stray Qs and Js on the side as well as the ace of the suit in which you preempt are negative assets. It doesn't mean you should never have them it just means it's something to consider. Too many things wrong with the preempt and you probably shouldn't do it.

Examples:

1. ♠QJ9874 ♥A7 ♦32 ♣T75 - This is a normal 2♠ preempt in all seats and colors. Many years ago nobody would dream of preempting with an outside ace. Nowadays, people have realized that you don't preempt enough if you adhere to strict rules like that.
2. ♠A98743 ♥Q7 ♦32 ♣T75 - Pass. Now we've added a number of flaws to the hand - it still has the worst possible shape (no singleton), bad intermediates, and lots of defense (the A of the trump suit and a side Q). Most of the time I would pass this hand. First and third seat favorable, I would still preempt because there is so much to be gained at that vulnerability.
3. ♠4 ♥AKQT874 ♦954 ♣T9 - Open 1♥, or maybe 4♥ at favorable vulnerability 1st or 3rd. Don't preempt with 7 running tricks - partner won't be able to judge at all what to do. This is worth more than most minimum opening hands anyway.
4. ♠KQT9432 ♥7632 ♦8 ♣4 - Open 3♠, or maybe 4♠ at favorable vulnerability. Sure you have a 4-card heart suit, but that shouldn't stop you from making a normal preempt in the boss suit. In fact, the extra offense from being 7-4 means that you should consider bumping it up at favorable.
5. ♠7 ♥AQJT7642 ♦T8 ♣J3 - Open 4♥. This is a normal 4♥ preempt at all seats and colors.
6. ♠AKJT7632 ♥A43 ♦T ♣2 - Normally open 1♠ - this hand is too good for a preempt. However, in 3rd or 4th seat, or if the opponents open at the 1-level in front of you, it's probably right to bid 4♠, as the chance of slam becomes essentially nil after that.

6.2 Competitive bidding after partner preempts

Partner has preempted and you're looking at your hand and don't think it's enough for game. Does that mean you should pass sullenly? Not at all. You may still be able to inflict further damage by raising the preempt further. To do this means you need to have trump support for partner. As per the Law of Total Tricks, the more trumps your side has, the higher you should bid. General principles:

- In general, use the Law to guide how far you compete (meaning you should bid to the contract whose trick-requirement is equal to your number of combined trumps). Partner has told his story and is not going to bid again, so it's your show. You should almost always decide what level you're going to bid to and do it immediately. This puts maximum pressure on your opponents by taking up their bidding space.
- Be careful about raising partner to 4♠ without having some shape to go along with your trumps, especially when you are vulnerable. Because the opponents have to go to the 5-level to bid over you they are more likely to just double and take whatever they can get. Make sure it's not going to be too much!
- Keep in mind how much defense you have against their likely contract - partner will contribute maybe one defensive trick on average unless you have a whole bunch of cards in his suit - don't bid over a contract you think you're likely to set unless you think you have a good chance of making your bid. When in doubt, bidding is usually better - there is always a chance they will misjudge and bid over you when they shouldn't.
- Much of the time here, you'll be deciding whether or not to take a **sacrifice** against their contract (or a contract that they haven't bid yet but probably will). You have to assess how many tricks you are likely to be set. As with preempting, favorable vulnerability is the best for this by far (when you are not vulnerable and they are). When you are vulnerable and they are not (unfavorable vulnerability), you need to be almost making your bid.
- After partner has preempted, doubles and/or redoubles are for blood. There is no need for takeout doubles when partner has announced a whole bunch of cards in one suit and very few cards in the others.

Examples: It has gone 2♠ - X - ?

1. ♠AJ8 ♥AQ4 ♦JT43 ♣987 - Bid 3♠. This is a normal competitive raise. Even at favorable vulnerability, you shouldn't bid 4♠ because of your terrible shape and defense against 4♥. Put one of your clubs in spades and now you should probably bid 4♠. Despite your defense against 4♥, you still might not beat it, and 4♠ might even make on a good day, and you just can't take the chance. Besides, they don't always double you when it's right - they might bid when it's wrong or fail to double thinking you've bid to make. Change it to ♠AJ84 ♥AQ4 ♦JT432 ♣7 and you should definitely always bid 4♠ at any colors because it's likely to make.
2. ♠AT874 ♥432 ♦4 ♣T873 - Bid 4♠ or maybe 5♠ at favorable vulnerability. Partner has preempted and your side may have no defense tricks at all if one of them is void in spades. It's time to jack it up. Sure 4♠ will go down a bundle if doubled, but they certainly have game and are odds on to have a slam too.
3. ♠42 ♥AQT4 ♦AJ3 ♣KJ98 - Redouble. Sure you -might- be able to make game, but you also can probably double them, and a sure penalty is better than a dubious game. On a good day, partner can double 3♦ if that's where they land, and you can certainly double 3♣ or 3♥.

6.3 What to do when they've preempted us

Now for the tough one. You pick up a nice hand and they preempt in front of you. One thing you must learn is that you are no longer going to be able to reach the optimal contract every time. There frequently isn't enough room for you to investigate as much as you'd like, so you end up having to make a reasonable description of your hand and stick with it. Here are the basic bidding agreements you'll need:

- You should play takeout doubles up through 4♥ - unless your opponents are completely mad, you will hold a hand short in their suit that wants to compete far more often than you will hold a penalty double. The higher you are doubling, the better a hand you need and/or the shorter in their suit you must be.
- Starting with a double then pulling partner's response is still a power double - it still shows a hand that's worried that partner will pass if it just overcalls.
- Doubles of 4♠ and higher can be based on a strong balanced hand with some stuff in their suit, but should still have significant values outside their suit. Partner should pull your double with a shapely hand and some high cards (for example ♠8 ♥AJT4 ♦KT9654 ♣43 if you've doubled 4♠). If you happen to be dealt the AQT9 of spades and not much else and your RHO opens 4♠, you shouldn't double even though you can beat them in your hand - your partner is almost certainly void and will pull your double thinking you have a bunch of high cards. You should pass and take your plus score (maybe a big plus score - remember partner is still there and he may double for you).
- The cheapest NT bid up to 3NT shows at least a 1 NT opener in value, at least one stopper, and usually (but not always) a balanced hand. Over a 2-level preempt you should bid 3NT with something like a good 19 or more and a stopper, since partner will pass 2NT with enough for game. Over a 3-level preempt, 3NT is very wide-ranging because there isn't any room - it could also be based on a running suit and a stopper.
- Overcalls are natural and show extra values and/or better suit quality at higher levels.
- Don't preempt the preempt - if your RHO opens 2♦ and you are staring at a beautiful 3♥ preempt, resist the urge! Jumping over a preempt shows a good hand, not a bad one. If you have a bad hand either overcall at the minimum level if it's reasonable or pass - your partner will bid if it's your hand.

Some example hands: Suppose your RHO opens 2♥

1. ♠AQT97 ♥- ♦KT965 ♣432 - Bid 2♠. Yes you only have 9 HCP, but you have the short hearts, and you have a very nice spade suit and extra shape. In fact, you should bid spades if they had opened 3♥ or 4♥, too - you need to get in there with a void and 5-5 shape. If you take away some of your Ts and 9s in your suits, now maybe pass is in order over 3♥, but I would still bid over 4♥ (see Sec. 7.4, since this probably seems weird).
2. ♠43 ♥KJ873 ♦AQ43 ♣K3 - This is a perfect hand to pass and wait for partner to double. If he passes, you might've missed a penalty but you'll still be going plus against 2♥, and it's not as if you were likely to be making anything your way, so a plus score is fine. Here you would just as happily pass over any number of hearts your RHO bid.
3. ♠AQ4 ♥KQT4 ♦AJ ♣AJ94 - Bid 3NT. Yes, if partner reopens with a double, you will massacre 2♥. But, there are two reasons why you shouldn't do that here. Firstly, you only have 4 hearts, which lessens the odds that partner has 1 or 0 and will double with less than the normal number of HCP. Secondly, you have so many high cards that partner probably has very few, and he might pass even if he does have 1 or 0 hearts, and you will very likely miss game. If RHO had opened 3♥, you would also bid 3NT. If you happened to hold this over 4♥, which is extremely unlikely, you have a nasty decision

to make. You probably have to suck it up and pass and take whatever plus score you're getting. If you double, partner is almost certain to pull with his heart shortness and you have no guarantees of making anything.

4. ♠AQ ♥J43 ♦KJ43 ♣K542 - Pass. Sometimes there's just no good bid - sure, if partner has a decent hand with 3 hearts you might miss game, but no action makes any sense. Sometimes they get you, but sometimes that game wasn't making anyway. You would also pass over 3♥ or 4♥, of course.
5. ♠AQT9874 ♥- ♦KQJ4 ♣A2 - Bid 4♠. This hand is clearly too strong to just bid 2♠, since partner might pass. You shouldn't start with double here, though, because partner might pass with heart length and some scattered high cards. You know where you want to play, so bid it. You aren't likely to find out if partner has the right cards for slam anyway. With the same hand minus the spade A, you would bid 3♠ - this isn't a preempt, but rather a hand with lots of playing strength that's not quite good enough to bid game on its own. You would also bid 4♠ over 3♥ or 4♥.
6. ♠A2 ♥K32 ♦AKJT43 ♣65 - Overcall 3♦. This is a normal overcall, although this is about a max because of the playing strength. Over 3♥, you have to bid 3NT (not 4♦!). Yes, you might not make it - you might even go down quite a few tricks. You just can't bypass the most likely game though. Overcalling 4 of a minor should be a hand shapely enough to think that 3NT is very unlikely to be right, and this ain't it. Over 4♥, I think you simply have to pass. It could be right to bid 5♦, but you have heart length - if partner is short he will strain to act. If he ain't short then you don't want to be bidding. Don't even think of doubling - that's a takeout double and partner will almost certainly bid 4♠.

7 Odds and Ends

7.1 What to do in balancing seat

The term **balancing seat** means that the opponents have bid at least once, and there have been two passes to you (usually at a reasonably low level). If you bid in this position it is frequently called **reopening the bidding** or just **reopening**. The main example of this is when your LHO opens a suited bid and there are two passes to you (it could be a preempt or a 1-level opening). You should play the same agreements in balancing seat as in **direct seat** with a few exceptions:

- If you normally play jump overcalls are weak over their bids, don't do so in balancing seat! This is for the same reason that you pass normal preempts in 4th chair. Usually it means somebody screwed up if your partner couldn't bid and you have a bad hand. In balancing seat over a 1-level bid, jump overcalls show an intermediate hand (something like a good 10-14 HCP) and 6 cards in the suit bid.
- You should strain to double with shortness in their suit (especially 1 or 0 cards), even with less than traditional values for the bid. Remember that partner could have a hand that wants to double them for penalties but couldn't. You do need to have "something," though. Certainly it is reasonable to double with down to 8 or 9 HCP, especially if they are aces and kings so that you have defense. This is also true when you open, your LHO bids something and there are two passes to you. Really try to double with shortness if it's at all reasonable, at least if you are playing negative doubles.
- Balancing with 1NT doesn't show the same as a direct 1NT overcall. Most pairs play it shows something like 11-15, because it's frequently right to declare when the opening bidder's partner is known to be broke. I think you should be a little more conservative (12-16) if they've bid a major, but you can decide that with your partner.

- With shortness in an unbid major, be conservative about bidding, particularly if they've opened 1 of a minor. If your partner couldn't overcall, the opponents likely have a fit there and if you bid they may end up in a better spot than if you'd passed!

7.2 Modifications to the Law of Total Tricks (Optional)

I talked earlier about how the Law of Total Tricks should be used as a guide for competitive bidding, but that it was not infallible. However, by knowing some small modifications you can improve the accuracy greatly:

- The Law works best on “pure” deals - hands where both sides have the high cards in their long suit(s). In particular, when one side has **minor honors** (Qs, Js, and Ts) in the opponents' long suit, they are likely to be of value on defense but not on offense. This lowers the total number of tricks available to both sides. Lesson: When you have minor honors in their long suit(s), and/or are missing the minor honors in your long suit(s), be more conservative about competing, and vice versa.
- Sometimes if we have an 8-card or longer side-suit fit in addition to our trump fit, we can set that suit up and take tricks in it. Meanwhile, because we are long, we won't have very many defensive tricks in that suit because one of the opponents must be short. This means there will be more total tricks available to both sides. Lesson: When you have a double-fit (two 8-card or longer fits), compete higher than you think you should by about 1 level.
- The Law breaks down at high levels. It's best for competition at the 2-3 level. It works reasonably at the 4-level, but higher than that judgment becomes paramount. You shouldn't automatically bid to the 5-level just because you know your side has 11 trumps, for example, especially if you have a balanced or semi-balanced hand.
- Be careful about competing on just trump length at unfavorable vulnerability, especially when your bid might end up being a sacrifice bid. Say partner has opened 1♠ and RHO has overcalled 2♥. Hands with 5 spades shouldn't automatically bid 4♠, as the opponents may be able to double and get 500 or 800 when they were only making a game worth about 400-450.
- Finally, keep in mind that the Law comes with no guarantees. If properly modified, it's right on average over many hands, but on any individual hand it could be wrong by a trick or even two, rarely.

7.3 I think I want to double but I'm not sure what it means!

With all of the different meanings for doubles that are floating around in this document, you might be wondering how you can ever be sure what it means when you double. After all, double is just supposed to mean that you think you can beat them by the rules of the game. So, I'm going to provide you with some rules about when double has various different meanings and examples of each. There are really 3 different meanings for double, and nearly all doubles fall into one of these three categories:

- Takeout doubles - they ask partner to bid an unbid suit unless he has a very unusual hand. Most doubles you will make on your first or second turn will be takeout/value oriented.
- Penalty doubles - they ask partner to pass unless he has a very unusual hand
- Value-showing doubles - these are sort of a hybrid. You should be reasonably happy with whatever partner decides to do, but they lean towards takeout at lower levels and towards penalty at higher levels.

Doubles are generally takeout-oriented or value-showing unless that makes no sense or they are described below. Penalty doubles are actually fairly rare in modern bridge. Here are some times when double is penalty (unless you and your partner have agreed otherwise, of course):

- Doubles are penalty if there is only 1 unbid suit (e.g. 1♠ P 2♥ 3♦ X)
- Doubles are penalty if partner has opened or overcalled with a preempt
- Doubles are penalty at 4♠ or higher
- Doubles are penalty when we've agreed a suit (bid and raised)
- Doubles are penalty if we've redoubled to show a good hand (e.g. 1♥ X XX)
- Doubles of **artificial** bids (like Stayman or 2♣ openers) are "penalty" - they show the suit doubled and/or ask partner to lead that suit - this isn't really a penalty double since the opponents weren't really offering to play in that suit
- Doubles are penalty if either you or partner has shown length in the bid suit
- Doubles are penalty if either your or partner has made a game-forcing bid
- Doubles are penalty when the opponents have monopolized the bidding for several rounds, and it's clear that both you and partner have had a chance to bid. For example, if they bid 1♣ P 1♥ P 2♥ P 4♥, and you're staring at ♠A43 ♥KQJT ♦32 ♣987, you're allowed (even encouraged!) to double. You don't have to worry about partner because he's already had two opportunities to stick his nose in. If it went 1♥ P 4♥ to you, now you can't double because you haven't had a chance to bid yet, and your double is takeout. Partner, who is staring at 1 or 0 hearts, will pull the double and your hand will be a great disappointment as dummy in whatever partner bids.
- Doubles are penalty when they've bid NT naturally. Usually these will be based on hand strength, so they are somewhat value-showing too. They assert that you think, based on your hand (and possibly partner's bidding), that the hand belongs to your side. Or, if they're in game, that you think they're going down.

This is not to say that partner will never pull any of these doubles - it's just that he's expected to pass on any reasonably normal hand. If he has very extreme shape that's unshown, he's always allowed to pull if he thinks it's right.

Ok, so we've seen lots of takeout doubles and I just listed a bunch of penalty doubles, what about this third kind? When your hand is relatively unlimited and you have made one (or more) descriptive bids, further doubles are almost always value-showing, not pure penalty. For example, lets say you hold ♠6 ♥AK43 ♦AQ65 ♣AJT4 and your RHO opens 1♠. You have an easy takeout X, but now your LHO bids 4♠. When this passes back to you what can you do but double again? Your hand is far too strong to pass and bidding any suit on your own is crazy - this is a value-showing X. You didn't suddenly grow a bunch of spades during the last round of the auction. You're still saying you have a takeout double, you just have extra values. Partner is not commanded to pass - he can pass if he has a balanced hand. He can bid if he has offensively-oriented values and some shape. Sure they might make it, but you won't get rich sitting and passing with all those aces and kings. Here are some other auctions on which double would be value-showing:

1. 1♥ 2♠ P 3♠
X = something like ♠3 ♥AQJ43 ♦KQ43 ♣AK3
2. 1♦ 1♥ X 2♥
2♠ 4♥ P P
X = something like ♠AJT8 ♥A2 ♦AKT943 ♣3

3. 1♠ 2♣ 3♠ P

P X = something like ♠5 ♥AK3 ♦AQ3 ♣KJT975

There are, of course many more situations like these where X will be value-showing. As will be discussed in the advanced guide (whenever I get around to making it), modern expert standard includes quite a few other situations where double becomes value-showing, but for now don't worry about them.

7.4 Other general guidelines to follow

There are a few famous saying that correspond to situations which haven't been discussed yet. I'm just going to list them here so you get to hear them:

- “The 5-level belongs to the opponents.” This is a common saying and it has a lot of merit to it. When the opponents bid over your game at the 5-level as a sacrifice, you should tend to double them and take your plus rather than bidding on. You need to have a whole lot of extra shape to bid on, because you will frequently be going down at the 5-level when you could have beaten their contract. If you think they've bid to make, well, see the 4th rule.
- “Hamman's Law.” Hamman's Law states that, in a competitive auction where you have to guess what to do, and 3NT is a reasonable bid, then it's probably the right bid. This is particularly true after the opponents have preempted.
- “Bid 4♠ over 4♥.” You should bid 4♠ over 4♥ very aggressively - because these are both game contracts, if either one is making it's at best ok for you not to have bid, and if both are making it's a disaster if you don't bid.
- “When in doubt bid one more.” You'll sometimes find yourself in a situation where you have a super fit for partner, and lots of shape, but those pesky opponents seem to have a super fit too and they just keep bidding over you. Most of the time (hopefully), you'll have a good idea what to do. When in doubt though, the price for being wrong is much lower if you bid on. Bidding on is only wrong if both the contract they are in and the contract you're about to bid are BOTH going down, and it's only really wrong if one or the other is down multiple tricks. However, if you could have bid one more and make a game (or even slam) and they are making game (or even slam) the loss is HUGE. Hence the rule.
- “6-5 come alive.” When you have 6-5 shape or better (at least 6 cards in one suit and 5 in another), you almost always need to find a way to get your nose into the auction, even with very modest high cards. Your hand has a lot of playing strength because you can set up long cards in both suits for tricks. Of course, if one of the opponents bids one of your suits naturally first, well then you should be more careful.