

Overcalls

What happens when we overcall?

The good:

- We show some points, so we let partner know it still might be “our” hand; they can help us bid to the right part score or game.
- We show a suit, so partner knows what to lead if we end up on defense, or so they can raise us with a fit, which eats up room for the opponents or allows us to find a good sacrifice if it isn’t “our” hand.
- We eat up some bidding room ourselves, so the opponents sometimes can’t convey all the information they wanted to in the bidding, or have to commit to a higher level in order to do so.

The bad:

- We stick our necks out by bidding. The opponents might choose to defend rather than bid onward—and sometimes they’ll double us first! These are options they don’t have if we stay quiet.
- Even as we eat up bidding room for the opponents when we overcall, we also give them extra options they don’t have when we don’t bid—they now have a double available, and they can pass and know their partner will still get another turn.
- The information we give to our partner is also information the opponents can use against us. They can both make better bidding judgments if they choose to bid on, since they have a good idea about what finesses are working and what high cards are useless, and punish us in the play of the hand by making use of the information about our shape and strength.

1-level Overcalls:

Have a good suit...With two of the top three honors and some reasonable spot cards (10s, 9s, 8s) in a five card suit, it's okay to bid on the one level with as few as 8 points.

...or, have a good hand. It's okay to bid on a crummy five card suit (such as a suit with only one top honor) if your hand is so good that you really think you need to compete and might get shut out otherwise (14 or so points or more). Sometimes you can get partner to speak up this way where they might not have otherwise and get to a reasonable part score.

DON'T overcall or double just because you got dealt a 12 count. If you don't have a reasonable suit and you don't have a good shape to make a double, pass quietly.

Good reasons for this include:

--If you are on lead, you get to lead your longest suit anyway. Telling the opponents what it is during the auction is probably more helpful to them than to you, and if they get to a game and you have shown most of the outstanding points, expect them to be "guessing" where the high cards are remarkably well!

--If your partner is on lead, and your suit stinks, bad things are often going to happen. If you partner has Kx or Ax and blows a trick or two by leading your suit, they might not lead it next time when you need them to!

--When you have scattered values, it's often just as well that partner leads the suit they like the best, and then you can help set that suit up. Partner can hear the auction too; they are not going to lead one of the opponent's suits without a good reason. Don't insist that they lead your suit instead of theirs when your suit isn't that likely to run!

--Remember you have a partner in the auction, too. If your left hand opponent passes, your partner will make a balancing bid with a lot of hands (and certainly any hand where you really want to compete). If not, you will have a lot more information about how the points and suits are distributed; then, you can choose to keep passing or make a balancing bid yourself.

--Remember that values in your suit are better for you than values outside your suit when competing, and partner can do the wrong thing if you overcall all the time with cruddy suits and values outside. You will both be sad if partner takes a sacrifice with extreme length in the suit you overcall, only to find that you had enough tricks to defeat the opponents because of all your side suit values!

2-level Overcalls (not jumps):

If there is one thing in all of bidding which virtually all experts seem to agree on that is substantially different from how many beginner/intermediate players behave, THIS IS IT!!! (In my opinion)

2-Level Overcalls require VERY GOOD hands and VERY GOOD suits. Only the best five card suits even begin to qualify; you should usually have 6. You should have a sound opener at the very least. Just because you would have opened it at the one level does not make it good enough to overcall at the two level!

If someone in your bridge life once told you that you need only ten points to overcall at the two level, they are wrong. :-)

Again, obviously anything can happen in the short run, but just about all experts agree that in the long run being fairly conservative with 2-level non jump overcalls will pay off better for you. Even players who are very aggressive in other aspects of their bidding (such as yours truly) still behave much more cautiously in this area.

Why is the 2-level so different?

First and foremost in my mind, it's just much easier for the opponents to double you off at the two level than it is at the one level. If one of the opponents has length in your suit, one concern they may have about allowing you to play doubled when you overcall is that even if you go down, the score they receive may not be high enough (for example, they may only get 300 instead of a game or 500 instead of a vulnerable game). Thus, while each higher overcall level is just one more trick you're going to have to take, the decision impact can be sizable. It turns out it's much easier than you might think for the opponents to get a good score defending at the two level than at the one level.

Secondly, remember that your partner doesn't have a whole lot of room to correct things when you've bid at the two level; even if the distribution is not so wacky for the opponents to double you, if you have around 12 points and your right hand opponent has opened, often you will find both sides have about half the high card points, and neither side may have a fit. When this happens, you will definitely have wished you stayed quiet rather than competing to the two level! No matter how the cards lie, you will usually have gotten a better score defending against the opponent's one or two level contract than committing your side to take 8 tricks. Once again, if the opponents do have a fit, then you will often still have time to compete later in the auction (more on this later). Also, your partner may not have room to ask for more details about your range without getting your side too high.

And, of course, all the caveats of the one level also apply: maybe you ate up some space, but the opponents can usually get just as much information across with the extra options they have (pass and double); you are going to tell your opponents where the missing high cards are; and if you overcall with bad suits, partner may compete too high and take a

"phantom sacrifice" when you had enough defense to beat the opponents in the contract they bid to.

Jump Overcalls

Most pairs play weak jump overcalls. A good place to start with these bids is to have a strength and shape similar to that which your partnership requires for an opening bid of the same amount.

There is one situation where your rules may need to be a little different: if your suit is a lower rank than the suit the opponent opened, you may not have a two level jump overcall available, where you would have been able to open a weak 2 in that suit. Thus, most partnerships allow for a weak jump overcall to the three level with only a 6 card suit when the hand is very suitable for a preempt (good suit quality, right point count, and any other rules your partnership has for preempting). Remember, if your hand is not good enough for the three level, don't bid it at the two level if it would not be a jump overcall! The non jump overcall shows a very good hand, not a preemptive strength hand.

Balancing Overcalls

One theme we have discussed is that a hand which is not suitable for an initial overcall may be suitable for an overcall in a later round of the bidding. One advantage of this approach is that our partner will not mistake us for having a good hand and bid too much; another is that we can wait and see how strong the opponents really are before sticking our necks out.

That doesn't necessarily mean we want to bid every time we are in the pass out seat, however. One important characteristic to think about is whether the opponents are having a "fit auction." A fit auction is an auction where it sounds like the opponents have at least an 8 card fit in the suit they are planning to play in. When they do have such a fit, the odds are much higher that we have a fit, so making some kind of balancing bid will more likely get us a good result--either because we win the contract and make it or only go down one or because the opponents are willing to bid higher and we have a shot at beating them at a higher level.

Fit Auctions

North	East	South	West
		1_	Pass
2_	Pass	Pass	?

As West, we know the opponents have at least 8 hearts between them; and, since nobody tried for game, each side probably has around half the high card strength. That means both that they are fairly likely to make 2 hearts if we let them play it, and that we are reasonably likely to have a fit of our own in some suit. In this position, we now might bid 3 of a minor with a hand and suit that wasn't quite good enough for a 2-minor bid at our first turn (but is pretty close), or we could venture 2 ♠ with a hand that was too weak to do so before. (Remember, even if our hand is pretty weak, that's okay; the opponents have told us our partner must have a reasonable quality hand if we don't.)

North	East	South	West
		1_	Pass
1NT	Pass	2♦	Pass
2_	Pass	Pass	?

Is this a fit auction? Both players have bid hearts...but North's 2_ bid is a "preference" for hearts, merely saying that he would rather play 2_ than 2♦. In fact, in most cases North *won't* have three hearts: he is showing less than invitational strength, so with 3 or more hearts he probably would have bid 2 hearts right away. We can expect north to be

fairly long in clubs and spades, so we should venture into the auction at this point with extreme caution.

North	East	South	West
		1♣	Pass
1_	Pass	2_	Pass
Pass	?		

How about this one? North's 1_ bid shows at least hearts. South will have four hearts as well most of the time. Thus, the opponents should have 8 or more hearts, so with a hand that was a little too weak to bid over 1_, we might try showing our suit now and seeing what happens.

North	East	South	West
		1_	Pass
1NT	Pass	2_	Pass
Pass	?		

Here, North's pass isn't saying she loves hearts; she just doesn't want to push the bidding any higher with her partner promising a 6 card heart suit. She could easily have 0, 1 or 2 hearts in support, giving the opponents 6, 7 or 8 total hearts. Thus, we are not sure if the opponents have a fit or not...so we should still be careful with balancing. (One extra issue here is that our partner is on lead. If we have one really great suit that we need partner to lead against a heart contract, bidding it might generate good results here. If our values are spread between multiple suits, we would be more inclined to pass and let partner lead their best suit.)

Why am I encouraging you to bid sometimes at the three level when I scared you to death about making a two level overcall?

In the balancing scenario there are two major differences. One, the opponents have told you their strength is limited--if they have a fit and don't even make an attempt for game, they probably have no more than 22 or maybe 23 combined points. (Note that if they don't have a fit, they may stop lower even with nearly game values because they are afraid of getting too high with a misfit. This is another reason to be cautious in entering the bidding when the opponents have not shown a fit!) Two, our partner is not going to confuse us with someone who has a good hand, since we had an earlier opportunity to bid and then didn't. **An important related point: Don't hang your partner for balancing!** If your partner has entered the auction late and you're staring at a balanced 13 count, resist the temptation to make a game try! Remember, she would have bid sooner if she had a better hand. You should almost never raise partner freely when she balances; if the opponents compete over your partner's balance, you should only re-

compete with extreme length in partner's suit (probably 5 cards or a good four card suit with few outside values). Similarly, don't double the opponents playing partner for values she might not have; you should still have the contract set or nearly set in your own hand to make a penalty double when partner has balanced.

Take Home Points:

- **Bid more with good suits. If your values are in your suit, you will take more tricks on offense and fewer tricks on defense relative to hands with scattered values.**
- **Don't bid just because it's your turn. Your partner will figure out much of the information you convey by bidding if they pay attention to the opponents' bidding and the first few tricks of the play, whereas declarer will have a much harder time guessing suits if you don't tell them where the missing high card points are.**
- **Adopting a conservative style with 2-level overcalls will both lead to better contracts both because you will get punished less and because partner will have a better idea what to bid in many situations.**
- **Think about what kind of situation you are in before you balance (fit auction vs. no fit).**
- **Of course, feel free to adopt everything to your partnership style and taste...as well as factors like vulnerability.**