

Ask Jerry



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Dear Jerry,
Several years ago, you had a column that discussed the various conventions a player could learn in order to improve their game. These were in three divisions: beginner, intermediate and advanced. It was very helpful because it explained the ones you consider most important, especially for newer players. Can you please send me a copy of this list?

Thank you,
Nell

Hi Nell,
Let's start with a quote from many years ago that reflects an ultimate truth about the game.

"Keep your bidding simple ... never feel compelled to use a convention, where it cannot help you, merely because you happen to be playing it. ... You will lose many fewer points during the year if you stop trying to be 'scientific' all the time."

— S.J. Simon, *"Why You Lose at Bridge,"* 1946

Far from opposed to conventions, in several of my expert partnerships we have in excess of 100 pages of system notes which include a vast number of conventional agreements. With another favorite partner, I play a limited number of conventions, but since he takes almost all of his tricks all of the time, we do quite well with a more basic approach.

I enjoy the scientific approach, but also appreciate what S.J. Simon was trying to say. The essence of bridge is judgment and taking tricks. Many times, new players try to "play hockey before they learn to skate."

Read what others say you need to know, but adopt conventions only when they make sense to both of you. Dabble with new ideas, but do not add them permanently until you have fully mastered your current ones.

Some agreements I consider nearly Standard American because they are in such widespread use. For my students, I break conventions into four levels, ranging from the ones I think all duplicate players should learn, moving on to the ones they should aspire someday to master.

In 1990, Amalya Kearse published a 1121-page book titled "Bridge Conventions Complete." Based on this, for some players, the following subjective list would be considered incomplete. Some conventions were omitted because I didn't think of them, and others because I don't think much of them. Anything on my Level 2 could easily be your idea of a Level 1 or Level 3!

Level 1: Stayman, Jacoby transfers, limit raises, weak two-bids, negative doubles, Michaels cuebid, unusual 2NT, weak jump overcalls, Blackwood, Gerber.

Level 2: 2/1 game force, 1NT forcing, minor-suit transfers, Texas transfers, preemptive raises/cuebid as limit raise, Jordan 2NT, Jacoby 2NT, splinter raises, Drury, new minor forcing, responsive doubles, maximal doubles, conventional defense to 1NT openings (HELLO is my favorite!), Roman key card Blackwood, lebensohl advances after doubles of weak two-bids.

Level 3: Adjust to 1NT semi-forcing, lebensohl advances after notrump interference and reverse sequences, leaping Michaels, Smolen, inverted minors, McCabe adjunct over weak two-bids, fourth suit forcing to game, support doubles, unusual vs. unusual, puppet

Stayman over 1NT, spiral, DOPI, DEPO, upside down count and attitude.

Level 4: Exclusion Blackwood, redwood, two-way checkback, good/bad 2NT, Kokish two-way game tries, Kokish relays over strong 2♣, transfers after 2NT rebids, 2♠ "size ask over 1NT," and many more, I'm sure!

As you and a partner progress through the levels above, be aware that confusion and mistakes almost certainly await you! Conventional agreements are important; however, I totally agree with this over-90-year-old advice:

"For those players ambitious to improve I should proffer the following advice: study card valuation, develop your imagination, rely on your common sense, and adopt as few conventions as possible." — Lelia Hattersley, *"Contract Developments,"* 1928 ♣