

Counting Distribution Points in Evaluating your Hand

All Bridge systems, including Acol, use point count as the basis for natural bids (1NT= 12-14, simple raise of partner's suit = 6-9, responder bidding a new suit at the 2 level = 10+ etc..)

When a player has evaluated his/her hand on point count, the next step is to exercise judgment – “How good is my 13 point balanced hand? Should I upgrade it or downgrade it? Have I any aces? Are my high cards mainly in my short suits, etc..

Everyone will be familiar with the standard method of counting High Card Points (HCPs) ;

Ace = 4, King = 3 etc..

Counting ‘distribution’ points is more complicated, but just as important as counting honour points. For example, in Acol a jump raise of partner's suit can be made with a hand of 10 points. You may have a hand with 9 HCP and 3 distribution points. If you don't count your distribution points you would only make a simple raise, and this would mislead partner as to the strength of your hand. If partner has 15 points they would probably pass, when game might well be on.

So, how are distribution points counted?

There are two methods, and the one you choose depends on whether you have in mind a suit contract or a No Trump contract.

No Trump Contracts

Until a ‘fit’ has been found, you should assume that you will end up in a No Trump contract, so you should only count ‘length’ points. Add one point for card above four in any suit. So, with a 5-4-3-1 hand, you can add one distribution point. This is because in a No Trump contract you may be able to establish a long suit and your small cards can win tricks.

If the fit has been found in a minor, you should still only count ‘length’ points, as you will be hoping to settle in a No Trump game rather than in the minor.

Having counted your HCPs and length points (let's say 10 points), you then consider whether you have an average, good or bad 10 points. If your 6 card suit has only spot cards, and you have an Ace/King /Queen tripleton in a side suit, you might knock off your two length points. On the other hand, if the Ace/King/Queen are all in the long suit, you might add an extra length point as you may well have six tricks off the top.

The Rule of 20 and the Rule of 14

In your first beginner bridge lessons you are taught to use only High Card Points (aka HCP or ‘honour points’) to evaluate your hand. You learn that you need 12 HCP to open at the 1-level, and that you need 6 HCP to respond in a new suit at the 1 level, and 10 HCP to respond at the 2-level. The Rule of 20 is a gadget that helps you to refine your valuation of your hand when considering whether to open the bidding. Obviously you won't know whether a ‘fit’ exists because partner has not bid yet, so it is reasonable to take suit length into account. The Rule of 20 is an alternative ‘gadget’ that helps you do this. **If your total HCP added to the number of cards in your two longest suits equals 20 or more, you can open the bidding.** In the following example either method evaluates the hand as good enough to open 1 Diamond.

	<p>Traditional Method 11 High card Points (HCP) 1 length point for the fifth diamond. $11+1 = 12$</p>
	<p>'Rule of 20' Method $11 + 5 + 4 = 20$</p>

The 'Rule of 14' is a similar gadget to the 'Rule of 20' for evaluating your hand when you are considering responding to partner's 1-level opening suit bid with a **new suit at the 2 level**. To do so you need 10 points.

Using the Rule of 14 you add your HCP to the number of cards you hold in your longest suit. If the total comes to 14 or more you can respond at the 2-level.

♠ K 9 2	<p>Traditional Method</p> <p>9 High card Points (HCP)</p> <p>1 length point for the fifth diamond:</p> $9 + 1 = 10$
♥ 6	
♦ K Q 8 6 2	<p>'Rule of 14' Method</p> $9 + 5 = 14$
♣ J 9 8 2	

Trump contracts

When counting distribution points with a suit contract in mind, you count 'shortage' rather than 'length'. Nowadays the guideline is as follows:

Void = 5 points; Singleton = 3 points; doubleton = 1 point.

A void is considered to be more valuable than an Ace because it can produce 2 or more ruffing tricks, especially if the void is in the hand with fewer trumps, usually responder's hand.

In this next example partner has opened 1 spade. You need 6 points to respond at the 1 level. If partner had opened in any suit other than spades your hand would be worth only five points (no length points), but because you have found a spade fit (so want to play in a spade contract) you can count one shortage point in hearts. That brings your total points to 6 so you are strong enough to respond 2S.

♠ K 9 5 2	<p>Partner has opened 1♠</p> <p>5 High Card Points (HCP)</p> <p>+ 1 shortage point for the heart doubleton</p> $5 + 1 = 6$
♥ 6 5	
♦ Q 10 3	
♣ 10 9 8 2	

However, you should only count 'shortage' points when you have found a fit and are fairly sure you are going to end up in a suit contract. If you are raising partner's opening minor then you should bear in mind that partner may well rebid No Trumps, so only count your 'length' points.