

THE PRE-EMPTIVE OPENING BID

- It's a weak opening bid at the two level or higher.
- It is intended to obstruct the opponents.
- We don't (necessarily) expect to make our contract.

AVOIDING DISASTER

Vulnerability is an important consideration when making a pre-emptive opening bid: not just our vulnerability, but also the vulnerability of the opponents.

In duplicate bridge each board is a 'competition' in its own right and it is therefore important that we don't risk a disastrous result when we pre-empt. We need to be aware of the possibility of being doubled by the opponents.

Assuming that our pre-empt is going to prevent the opponents from bidding game we must avoid a result that is worse than them bidding game.

Consider the following scenarios:

We	They	Game for them	Affordable Doubled Penalty	Too costly (by 1 trick) Doubled Penalty
VUL	NON-VUL	400	200 (1 down)	500 (2 down)
VUL	VUL	600	500 (2 down)	800 (3 down)
NON-VUL	NON-VUL	400	300 (2 down)	500 (3 down)
NON-VUL	VUL	600	500 (3 down)	800 (4 down)

To be sure of losing fewer points than the opponents' game, we would require a hand that could deliver the results in the 4th column, even without help from partner.

However we can make the reasonable assumption that partner will contribute at least one trick, in which case our hand alone need only deliver the results in the 5th (rightmost) column. This leads us to the following rule for pre-empts:

- At Vulnerable vs Non Vulnerable we should be within 2 tricks of our bid.
- At Equal Vulnerability we should be within 3 tricks of our bid.
- At Non-Vulnerable vs Vulnerable we should be within 4 tricks of our bid.

This is referred to as the 'Rule of 2, 3 and 4'. It can be applied to pre-empts at the three level or higher. We can use this rule to work out the number of tricks required for a three- or four- level pre-empt at the various vulnerabilities:

We	They	Playing Tricks needed in our hand for a pre-empt at:	
		Three Level	Four Level
VUL	NON-VUL	7	8
VUL	VUL	6	7
NON-VUL	NON-VUL	6	7
NON-VUL	VUL	5	6

COUNTING PLAYING TRICKS

How do we count our 'Playing Tricks'?

Playing Tricks are the number of tricks we expect to make from our own hand assuming partner has nothing and assuming reasonable splits of the cards. For a good source of Playing Tricks we need a long suit of our own as trumps.

There is no exact formula for counting Playing Tricks, but here is a guide:

When considering a pre-empt, most of the playing tricks will come from the trump suit. Assume that partner has a small singleton and that the remaining trumps are evenly split. Also assume that the first trump lead can come from partner and work out how many trump tricks you expect to make. Be prepared to count fractions of a trick if necessary.

Here are some examples of long trump suits:

Trump suit	Comments	Playing tricks
K Q J 10 6 4 3	By playing trumps from the top we're likely to lose only one trick, even if partner is void.	6
K Q J 7 6 4 3	By playing trumps from the top we're likely to lose only one trick opposite a singleton. We'll sometimes achieve the same result if partner is void (i.e. if opponents' trumps split 3-3).	6 or 6-
A K 9 8 7 4 3 2	If partner has a small singleton and the opponents' trumps are splitting 2-2, then we'll make all the tricks. But we should bear in mind that this won't always happen.	8-
Q J 10 9 4 3 2	By playing trumps from the top we're likely to lose only two tricks, even if partner is void.	5
A Q 7 5 4 3 2	Here we're heavily dependent on the lie of the cards in this suit. If partner has a small singleton we might make 6 tricks by finessing, but sometimes we'll finish with only 5, or even 4. It's reasonable to assume (on average) that we'll lose 2 tricks here.	5
K J 10 9 8 4 3	Opposite a small singleton, we would need some luck to make 6 tricks from this suit.	5+

For playing tricks, also consider the side suits. Add one trick for an ace (or king-queen combination) and half a trick for an unsupported king. Add half a trick for a 4 card suit. Queens and jacks may sometimes be counted as "plus values".

Here are some examples of complete hands:

Hand	Comments	Opening bid		
		V vs NV	equal	NV vs V
♠ Q J 10 8 7 6 2 ♥ A 8 7 ♦ 3 ♣ J 2	Although we might occasionally lose 3 tricks, we should count 5 tricks in spades. With ♥A we can count a total of 6 playing tricks. Our ♣J is unlikely to be worth anything.	pass	3♣	4♣
♠ K 2 ♥ 9 8 ♦ 7 ♣ K J 9 8 7 6 4 2	We could lose 1, 2 or 3 tricks in clubs, but on average we'll win slightly more than 6 tricks in the suit. Adding half a trick for ♠K gives us nearly 7 tricks.	3♣	4♣	5♣
♠ Q 10 2 ♥ K 10 9 8 7 3 2 ♦ 3 ♣ 4 2	If partner has a small singleton we should win 4 or 5 tricks in hearts. Our spade holding will sometimes be worth a trick. Count 5 playing tricks altogether.	pass	pass	3♥
♠ 6 2 ♥ none ♦ A 10 9 7 6 3 2 ♣ Q 9 4 2	If partner has a small singleton diamond and the suit splits 3-2, then we'll make 5 trump tricks. Our club length and club honour are together worth about 1 trick.	pass	3♦	4♦

RESPONDING TO PARTNER'S PRE-EMPTIVE OPENING

- (1) Assess how many tricks your partner has shown –use the Rule of 2-3-4. For example if you are at favourable vulnerability partner will be 4 tricks short of his bid.
- (2) Add to this your own 'quick tricks': Count the A, K or Q of partner's suit as one trick each. In other suits, count A-K as 2, A-Q as 1 ½, A as 1, K-Q as 1, and K as ½. If you have support for opener's suit, count an outside singleton as one trick and an outside void as two tricks, as you can offer probable ruffs.
- (3) If the total is the same as or less than partner's bid, pass, or, if you are weak and think that the opponents may have enough for game, obstruct by bidding to the level of your fit, prepared to sacrifice. At adverse vulnerability bid to one less than the level of your fit – two off doubled vulnerable (-500) gives your opponents a better score than if they make a non-vulnerable game (420).
- (4) If the total is more than partner's bid, you should bid on to game (but if partner's bid is already a game, you would pass). If the total is 12 or more, bid on to a slam provided that you are not missing two aces.
- (5) Over an opening bid of 3♣ or 3♦, you may try 3NT with a strong balanced hand and at least one stopper in each of the outside suits.
- (6) Over other opening pre-empts, stick with partner's suit unless you have a strong hand and a long, powerful suit of your own. A change of suit is forcing.
- (7) Do not rescue partner from a pre-empt. With a weak hand and no support, pass.
- (8) If partner opens in third seat (you have passed) partner's pre-empts might be undisciplined. Make sure you discuss this with your partner.

MISSING CARD SPLITS

Suppose your hand has a seven card suit. This table shows the percent of times the missing six cards in the suit are distributed across the other three hands.

MISSING CARD SPLIT FOR HANDS WITH A SEVEN CARD SUIT									
PARTNERSHIP		MISSING CARDS SPLIT BETWEEN OPPONENTS							TOTAL
PART	FIT	6-0	5-n	4-n	3-n	2-n	1-n	0-0	
7+0	7	0.11 %	1.02 %	3.49 %	2.51 %				7.13 %
7+1	8		1.01 %	7.48 %	17.77 %				26.26 %
7+2	9			3.49 %	17.82 %	14.44 %			35.75 %
7+3	10				5.02 %	17.73 %			22.75 %
7+4	11					3.44 %	3.66 %		7.10 %
7+5	12						0.98 %		0.98 %
7+6	13							0.04 %	0.04 %
TOTAL		0.11 %	2.03 %	14.46 %	43.12 %	35.61 %	4.64 %	0.04 %	100.01 %

Note the following:

- There is only about a 7% (7.13) chance that your partner will be void in your suit.
- There is about a 93% chance (100 – 7.13) that your partnership will have at least an eight card fit and a 67% chance (100 – 7.13 – 26.26) that your partnership will have at least a nine card fit.
- The chance that one of your opponents is void and the other opponent holds all of the missing cards in your suit is no more than 5% (3.66 + 0.98 + 0.04).
- There is about an 83% chance (43.12 + 35.61 + 4.64 + 0.04) that **any holding** of seven cards will take four or more tricks because the worst case is one opponent holding the **AKQ** in the same suit.
- There is about a 40% chance (35.61 + 4.64 + 0.04) that **any holding** of seven cards will take five or more tricks because the worst case is one opponent holding the **AK** in the same suit.

Beware 'phantom' sacrifices when vulnerable

If a part score is your opponents' limit on the hand, a poor preempt when vulnerable can give them a plus score that they cannot get on their own, even if they do not double.

We	They	Part score for them 9 tricks	Affordable Undoubled Penalty	Too costly (by 1 trick) Undoubled Penalty
VUL	NON-VUL	130 - 140	100 (1 down)	200 (2 down)
VUL	VUL	130 - 140	100 (1 down)	200 (2 down)
NON-VUL	NON-VUL	130 - 140	100 (2 down)	150 (3 down)
NON-VUL	VUL	130 - 140	100 (2 down)	150 (3 down)

If your point count indicates that the opponents are unlikely to make game, i.e. you have a combined 18+ points, do not make a potential sacrifice bid by bidding to the level of the fit if it means bidding at the 4 level. Your opponents can double a 4 level bid for penalties and get a better score than they could have got on their own. Bid on only if you think you can make your contract.

Playing tricks

A measurement of trick-taking potential with your longest suit trumps, assuming a reasonable break of the cards held by the other three players. Common practice is to consider half-trick increments, implying that a full trick will materialize about half the time. For long suits (4+ cards) the ace, king and queen are counted together with all cards in excess of 3 in the suit*;

3 PTs: A-K-Q	2 ½ PTs: A-K-J; A-Q-J
2 PTs: A-K; A-Q-10; Q-J	1 ½ PTs: A-Q; A-J-x; K-Q-x; K-J-10
1 PT: A; K-Q; K-J; K-10-x; Q-J-x	½ PT K-x; Q-x-x; J-10-x;
0 PTs: K; Q-x; J-x-x	

For short suits (0-3) cards, only clear winner combinations are counted:

K-Q-x = 1, A-Q-x = 1 ½; K-x = ½;

* If you have 6 cards in your longest suit then the other three hands have 7 cards in the suit. It is reasonable to place partner with two of the missing cards which leaves the opponents with five cards. It is also reasonable to assume these will break 3-2 (68% probability).

♠ A K J 10 9 8
♥ A K Q 4 8 ½ playing
♦ 9 4 tricks
♣ 8

♠ K J 10 9 8 7 6 playing
♥ A Q 5 4 tricks
♦ 9 4
♣ 8