

DEFENCE TO PRE-EMPTS

This handout mainly covers the situation where an opponent opens with a pre-emptive bid at the 3 level. There is also some advice on how to counter a pre-emptive opening bid at the 4 level.

THE REASON FOR MAKING PRE-EMPTIVE OPENING BIDS

The purpose of a pre-emptive opening bid is to make life difficult for the opponents. They have a choice between passing and possibly missing a making game contract, or starting their bidding communication at the 3 or 4 level instead of the 1 level.

COUNTERING PRE-EMPTIVE OPENING BIDS

A pre-emptive bid generally shows a weakish hand with a long suit however the responder to the pre-empt could have a strong hand, ready to punish any intervention by making a penalty double. Even the best players in the world sometimes concede large penalties when an opponent makes a pre-emptive opening.

Although there is an element of risk intervening after a pre-empt, there's often greater risk of getting a poor score if we simply pass.

A good rule of thumb is for the overcaller to assume that the remaining strength is divided approximately equally between the other three hands. For example, overcalling with 16 points is (on this basis) reasonably safe because partner can be placed with 8 points (one third of the missing 24).

THE MEANING OF A DOUBLE OF A PRE-EMPTIVE OPENING BID

In the early days of bridge a double of a pre-empt was played for penalties but nearly all players nowadays play a double of a 3 level pre-empt for takeout.

There's less agreement over the meaning of a double of a 4 level pre-empt, with some partnerships playing it as for penalties, or "optional". In practice treating doubles of 4 level pre-empt as for takeout works reasonably well.

OVERCALLER'S OPTIONS AFTER A PRE-EMPTIVE OPENING BID

Overcaller's main options are listed below, in order of ascending level:

- pass
- takeout double
- suit overcall at the 3 level
- 3NT
- suit overcall at the 4 level
- cue bid at the 4 level

The next few sections summarise the requirements for each of the above. They also outline how the overcaller's partner should continue over each of these options.

PASSING OVER A PRE-EMPT

We shouldn't take any positive action over a pre-empt with a hand that is less than a sound one level opening bid. Even with a long suit, it's wrong to overcall with a weak hand: in short "**don't pre-empt a pre-empt**".

In addition, many minimum range opening hands (12-15 points) should just pass over a pre-empt. Often the defending side won't be able to make anything, or an overcall would lead to partner bidding too high. Collecting a small undoubled penalty or letting the opponents play in their making contract is often the best possible result.

It's OK to take action with less than 16 points with shortage in the opponent's suit or a long suit of one's own.

Overcalling in 4th Seat After Two Passes

When next hand passes over a pre-empt, the opener's partner will frequently pass too. The fourth hand may now face a dilemma, since second hand might have been forced to pass with 15 points. Equally the second hand might just have a poor hand. The problem is that the pass by opener's partner doesn't necessarily show a weak hand, so fourth hand can't assume that his partner has much of the missing strength. Even so, overcalls by fourth hand can be shaded by a point or two.

MAKING A TAKEOUT DOUBLE

A takeout double of a pre-empt usually shows support for all three unbid suits. Although the doubler is forcing his partner to respond at a higher level, it's best to have the understanding that it only promises a queen or so more than a double of a 1 level opening bid. For example, a 4-4-4-1 hand with 13 points and a singleton in the opponent's suit is about minimum for the double of a 3 level pre-empt.

A takeout double may also be made on a very strong hand, in which case support for one or two of the unbid suits may be lacking.

The partner of the takeout doubler shouldn't jump to game just because he has a few points. The takeout doubler will assume about 7-8 points opposite, so a minimum response is appropriate with most hands of less than 10 points.

It can also be correct to pass the takeout double even with a moderate trump holding such as K10xx. The opponents may occasionally make their contract, but it would often be equally expensive to make a response at the 3 or 4 level.

BIDDING A SUIT AT THE 3 LEVEL

Ideally an overcall at the 3 level shows a 6 card suit and about a king more than a minimum opening bid. With extra values bidding a strong 5 card suit is sometimes correct.

Again the partner of the overcaller should act on the basis that he's already assumed to have about 7-8 points. He may raise to game, bid 3NT or make a forcing bid in a new suit. A cue bid is a slam try showing support for the overcaller's suit.

OVERCALLING 3NT

This typically shows 17+ points with a stopper in the opponent's suit. The bid may be shaded when a long suit is held.

The partner opposite the 3NT overcall should usually pass, even with a few values and a 5 card major. He may take out to 4♥ or 4♠ with a 6+ card suit or cue bid the opponent's suit with a strong hand.

BIDDING A SUIT AT THE 4 LEVEL

This is similar to bidding a suit at the 3 level, but requires a little more strength and should very rarely be made on a 5 card suit.

CUE-BIDDING OVER A PRE-EMPT

This shows a very strong 2 suiter. Partner should generally choose one of the two most economical unbid suits, in order to allow for this being overcaller's short suit.

EXAMPLES OF POSSIBLE ACTIONS OVER A PRE-EMPT

S 3♦	W ?	West ♠ A Q 8 3 ♥ K J 8 5 2 ♦ 7 ♣ K 9 7	This hand is about minimum for a takeout double. It will occasionally go badly wrong, but it will much more often lead to a successful major suit game.
S 3♠	W ?	West ♠ A Q 3 ♥ Q 8 2 ♦ 10 7 ♣ A K J 9 7	This hand is just about worth a 3NT overcall. After the likely spade lead partner only needs to provide a little help for us to make nine tricks. The only sensible alternative is to pass, which could sometimes be right, although a game could easily be missed.
S 3♥	W ?	West ♠ K J 9 7 4 3 ♥ 2 ♦ 10 7 ♣ A K J 9	This hand is about minimum for a 3♠ overcall. The shortage in hearts makes an overcall much more attractive than a pass with a borderline hand.
S 3♣	W ?	West ♠ A K J 9 7 ♥ A Q 10 8 4 2 ♦ A 7 ♣ none	Here a cue bid of 4♣ is the best option. If partner bids diamonds, it's possible to bid the hearts next and partner can then choose between the majors. The problem with a takeout double is that it might be passed, in which case the penalty could be insufficient to compensate for a game or slam.

MORE EXAMPLES OF POSSIBLE ACTIONS OVER A PRE-EMPT

S 3♠	W ?	West ♠ J 9 7 ♥ Q 10 8 4 2 ♦ A 7 ♣ A K J	There's no sensible bid on this hand. It's quite possible that EW can't make anything, even if East has a reasonable hand.
S 4♦	W ?	West ♠ A K 7 ♥ A Q 10 2 ♦ A 7 ♣ Q 9 6 5	This is a good hand for a takeout double, even though it could turn out badly if partner has nothing.

EXAMPLES OF RESPONDING TO A TAKEOUT DOUBLE

S 3♦	W dbl	N pass	E ?	East ♠ J 7 4 ♥ Q 10 8 2 ♦ K 9 4 ♣ Q 6 3	Despite the 8 points, a simple 3♥ is best. Partner is assuming about this much strength opposite and will often proceed further if he has extra values. It would be wrong to bid 3NT or to pass the double.
S 3♠	W dbl	N pass	E ?	East ♠ A 5 3 ♥ 9 2 ♦ A K 8 7 4 ♣ 10 7 6	With a reasonable hand and a definite spade stopper East should bid 3NT. This is better than either 4♦ or 5♦, even though 5♦ would occasionally make while 3NT goes down.
S 3♦	W dbl	N pass	E ?	East ♠ Q 5 3 ♥ K 9 4 2 ♦ J 7 4 ♣ 10 7 6	East should just hope for the best and pass. If the contract makes it's possible that North was waiting to double 3NT or any suit bid for an even better score. Note that this situation is different from that after a double of a 1♦ opening, when East would bid 1NT or (with a weaker hand) 1♠.
S 3♣	W dbl	N pass	E ?	East ♠ Q J 5 3 ♥ K 9 4 2 ♦ A 10 ♣ Q 7 6	Rather than guess which major to bid East should cue bid 4♣. If West rebids 4♦ East bids 4♥ to offer a choice between the majors.

DEFENCE TO PRE-EMPTS SUMMARY

A pre-empt makes it hard for our side to find our best contract. With a good hand, we bid on the assumption that partner has about 8 high card points.

The point counts shown below are just a guide and judgment should always be used depending on length, shape, suit quality, vulnerability etc.

Takeout Double	Without a very strong hand, we should have tolerance for all the unbid suits (3+ cards) For Takeout Double only (not suit overcall), add points for shortage in their suit : Void = 3, Singleton = 2, Doubleton = 1. Don't count points for unsupported honours in their suit (singleton King etc.) In 2 nd seat double with 15+ In 4 th seat double with 13+
Suit at the 3 level	14+ points, very good 5 card suit, 6 losers 11+ points, good 6+ card suit, 6-7 losers
Suit at the 4 level	16+ points, good suit 6+ cards, 5 losers
3NT	17+ balanced with at least one stopper in their suit or 16+ with length in a minor and a stopper in their suit
Cue Bid their suit	Shows a very strong 2 suiter. Partner should generally choose one of the two most economical unbid suits, in order to allow for this being overcaller's short suit

Our action after a pre-empt may not always be successful but it is often important not to let the pre-empt keep our side out of the bidding.

RESPONDING TO THE TAKEOUT DOUBLE

0-8 points, bid a suit at the lowest level

9+ points, bid game in a major or bid 3NT with stopper in their suit.

With a two suited hand cue bid the enemy suit to ask partner to choose the contract e.g. 3♦ dbl pass 4♦.

REBIDS BY THE DOUBLER

After a minimum response to the double, doubler should pass unless holding 20+ points or 5 or less losers.

RESPONDING TO A THREE LEVEL SUIT OVERCALL

Only bid with 9+ points. Partner has already bid on the assumption that we have 8 points!