

Fourth Suit Forcing (to Game)

Fourth Suit Forcing should be an essential part of any player's arsenal. Consider the following auctions:

OPENER	RESPONDER	OPENER	RESPONDER	OPENER	RESPONDER
1♦	1♥	1♣	1♥	1♣	1♥
1♠	3♥	1♠	3♣	1♠	3♣

In each case responder's second bid is a limit bid, i.e. a repeat of a suit that has already been bid by one or other partner, so can be passed by opener. For example, in the first case responder's 3♥ rebid is an invitational bid showing six hearts and 10-12 points, which opener can pass with (say) an 11 point hand opened on the Rule of 20. But what if responder has 14+ points and four diamonds. The right contract might be in hearts, diamonds or No Trumps, depending on opener's holding, but responder has no natural bid that keeps the dialogue with partner going without the risk that partner will pass, enough for game.

Fourth Suit Forcing is used by the responder to establish a game force. So, after, say, 1♦-1♥-1♠, a bid of 2♣, the 4th suit, is an artificial bid that says nothing about clubs. It is a game force. It says "Partner, we are going to game. Tell me more about your hand"

To make a Fourth Suit Forcing Bid, responder needs at least a good 12 point hand, With a weaker hand responder must make a preference bid in either of opener's suits or bid 2NT.

(Note that there is a more traditional style of Fourth Suit Forcing that is only forcing for one round, so responder can bid the fourth suit with just 11 points. The downside is that with 14+ HCP opener must make jump bid to make sure that partner does not pass. This consumes valuable bidding space and results in a loss of the ability to differentiate 16+HCP hands from weaker (12+ HCP) hands. The game forcing version described here is played by practically all tournament players worldwide.)

When Spades are the fourth Suit

It is rare indeed for responder to want to bid the fourth suit naturally, but it does happen and we need to cater for it. Take the following auction:

West	East
1♣	1♦
1♥	1♠

Opener may have an awkward 4441 hand with 4 clubs and 4 hearts, and responder may have a weakish unbalanced hand with 4 diamonds and 4 spades and no fit for opener. The bid of 1♠ is in this auction is natural showing 4 spades. Fourth Suit Forcing needs to be a jump to 2♠.

When to Use Fourth Suit Forcing

Responder uses Fourth Suit Forcing when:

1. He has a game forcing hand and the best contract is not clear.
2. He has a possible slam going hand and knows the denomination (suit or No Trumps) of the final contract. Responder needs more information about partner's strength and has no natural bid that forces partner to keep bidding. Because Fourth suit Forcing is GAME forcing, opener will only make a jump reply when strong (16+ points), since there is no danger that partner will pass a non-jump reply. This enables a strong responder to make a much better assessment of whether a slam may be 'on the cards'.

Sometimes responder will use Fourth Suit Forcing rather than bid No Trumps when he has just a single stopper. Perhaps a major suit contract may be better or No Trumps could be right if there is a second stopper.

West	East	West	East
1♥	1♠	♠ K 6 5	♠ Q J 9 8 4 3
2♦	3♣	♥ K 8 7 4 3	♥ A 5
3♠	4♣	♦ A Q 9 8	♦ K 2
		♣ 7	♣ K 9 5

With only one club stopper East is unsure of the best game, so uses Fourth Suit Forcing. When West shows spade support, East simply continues to game in spades.

Opener's Priorities when replying to Fourth Suit Forcing

After Fourth Suit Forcing, opener describes his hand according to the following six priorities.

1. Raise responder's suit with 3 cards (partner may have a 5 card suit)
2. Show extra length in own second suit (partner may have 3 card support)
3. Show extra length (6 cards) in own first suit (partner may have 2 card support)
4. Bid No Trumps with a stopper in the 4th suit.
5. Raise responder's suit with a doubleton with honour card.
6. Rebid own suit with 5 good cards if no other bid possible.

Summary

- Since this style of Fourth Suit Forcing is *game forcing*, opener usually replies at the lowest level. Opener only jumps with a strong hand, 16+ points.
- Responder uses the above list of priorities to determine which features opener has shown or denied. If there is more than one possible game contract, responder makes a descriptive bid below game level to continue the conversation to find the best contract.
- When responder rebids his own suit after partner's reply to Fourth Suit Forcing it implies six cards.
- A bid of 1♠ as the fourth suit is natural showing 4 spades. Fourth Suit Forcing requires a jump to 2♠.
- A jump in the fourth suit (other than spades) is natural and shows as least 5-5 shape. It is game forcing.

Exercise 1: The uncontested auction goes 1♦ - 1♥ - 1♠ - 2♣ - ? How should opener reply?

A	B	C	D
♠ K9842	♠ AJ75	♠ AQ82	♠ AK42
♥ -	♥ 2	♥ Q2	♥ 3
♦ AK8432	♦ A9764	♦ KJ872	♦ KQ983
♣ 32	♣ KJ3	♣ 72	♣ 732

- With A, bid 2♠. By showing their fifth spade, they must have six diamonds (with five-five, they'd have opened 1♣).
- With B, bid 2NT. This shows no extra shape but a stopper in the fourth suit.
- With C, go back to 2♥. While this may be priority No.1 (4♠ 3♥ 5♦ 1♣), it is often priority No.5 (4♠ 2♥ 5♦ 2♣).
- With D, all opener can do is go back to 2♦, the last priority.

Exercise 2:

Say the auction has begun 1♥ from opener, 1♠ from you as responder, 2♣ from opener (you assume they are 5♥-4♣). Consider these three responding hands:

A	B	C
♠ AQ10832	♠ A963	♠ A9842
♥ 2	♥ J3	♥ AQ3
♦ Q72	♦ A104	♦ AQ2
♣ AQ2	♣ AQ72	♣ J6

With A, you want to repeat your spades, thereby showing six cards. However, 2♠ and 3♠ are non-forcing bids, showing 6-9 and 10-12 points respectively. And jumping to 4♠ is precipitate when partner could be void. The solution is to bid 2♦ Fourth Suit Forcing. Whatever partner replies, you can bid your spades at the lowest level, showing your six-card suit and forcing the bidding to game.

With B, you have a club fit but it is precipitate to jump to 5♣ (and you can't merely raise to 3♣ or 4♣, as partner may pass). You may belong in 3NT or 4♥ or perhaps 6♣. Bid 2♦ and then, having set up a game-force, follow with (a now forcing) 3♣.

With C, you have a heart fit but are too strong to jump to 4♥. Bid 2♦ to set up a game-force, then bid hearts at the lowest level. Partner will realise you have slam intent (or you'd have jumped straight to 4♥).

Alternative Version of Fourth Suit Forcing

Many club players in the UK still play a traditional version of Fourth Suit Forcing, where responder may have an invitational hand with 11 points or a poor 12 points. This version is only forcing for one round, and a weak opener can pass on the fourth round of bidding. To distinguish between the two versions, the game forcing version described here is sometimes annotated as **4SFG**, and the more traditional version is annotated as **4SF1**.

The responses are quite different, so when playing with a new partner you should discuss which version you will play.

Here is a link to a BBO discussion forum where the two versions are discussed in depth. The 4SF1 version gets a poor write up. The 4SFG version is the choice of practically all tournament players worldwide.

<https://www.bridgebase.com/forums/topic/81532-fourth-suit-forcing/>