

Introduction

Contract bridge consists of a number of deals, each progressing through four phases. The cards are dealt to the players, and then the players “call” (or “bid”) in an auction seeking to take the contract, specifying how many tricks the partnership receiving the contract (the declaring side) needs to take to receive points for the deal. During the auction, partners endeavor to exchange information about their hands, including overall strength and distribution of the suits. The cards are then played, the declaring side trying to fulfill the contract, and the defenders trying to stop the declaring side from achieving its goal. The deal is scored based on the number of tricks taken, the contract, and various other factors which depend to some extent on the variation of the game being played.

Rubber bridge is the most popular variation for casual play, but most club and tournament play involves some variant of duplicate bridge, in which the cards are not re-dealt on each occasion, but the same deal is played by two or more sets of players (or „tables“) to enable comparative scoring.

Rules

Each player is dealt thirteen cards from a standard 52-card deck. A trick starts when a player leads, i.e. plays the first card. The leader to the first trick is determined by the auction; the leader to each subsequent trick is the player who won the preceding trick. Each player, in a clockwise order, plays one card on the trick. Players must play a card of the same suit as the original card led, unless they have none (said to be „void“), in which case they may play any card.

The player who played the highest-ranked card wins the trick. Within a suit, the ace is ranked highest followed by the king, queen, and jack, and then the ten through to the two. In a deal where the auction has determined that there is no trump suit, the trick must be won by a card of the suit led. However, in a deal where there is a trump suit, cards of that suit are superior in rank to any of the cards of any other suit. If one or more players plays a trump to a trick when void in the suit led, the highest trump wins. For example, if the trump suit is spades and a player is void in the suit led and plays a spade card, they win the trick if no other player plays a higher spade. If a trump suit is led, the usual rule for trick-taking applies.

Unlike its predecessor whist, the goal of bridge is not simply to take the most tricks in a deal. Instead, the goal is to successfully estimate how many tricks one’s partnership can take. To illustrate this, the simpler partnership trick-taking game of spades has a similar mechanism:



the usual trick-taking rules apply with the trump suit being spades, but in the beginning of the game, players bid or estimate how many tricks they can win, and the number of tricks bid by both players in a partnership are added. If a partnership takes at least that many number of tricks, they receive points for the round; otherwise, they receive penalty points.

Setup and dealing

The four players sit in two partnerships with players sitting opposite their partners. A cardinal direction is assigned to each seat, so that one partnership sits in North and South, while the other sits in West and East. The cards may be freshly dealt or, in duplicate bridge games, pre-dealt.

In rubber bridge, each player draws a card at the start of the game with the player who drew the highest cards dealing first. The second highest card becomes the dealer's partner and takes the chair on the opposite side of the table. They play against the other two. The deck is shuffled and cut, usually by the player to the left of the dealer, before dealing. Players take turns to deal, in a clockwise order. The dealer deals the cards clockwise, one card at a time. Rubber bridge may be played with two packs of cards and whilst one pack is being dealt, the dealer's partner shuffles the other pack. After shuffling the pack is placed on the right ready for the next dealer. Before dealing, the next dealer passes the cards to the previous dealer who cuts them.

In duplicate bridge, the cards are pre-dealt, either by hand or by a computerized dealing machine, in order to allow for competitive scoring. Once dealt, the cards are placed in a device called a „board“, having slots designated for each player's cardinal direction seating position. After a deal has been played, players return their cards to the appropriate slot in the board, ready to be played by the next table.

Auction

The dealer opens the auction and can make the first call, and the auction proceeds clockwise. When it is their turn to call, a player may pass – but can enter into the bidding later – or bid a contract, specifying the level of their contract and either the trump suit or no trump (the denomination), provided that it is higher than the last bid by any player, including their partner. All bids promise to take a number of tricks in excess of six, so a bid must be between one (seven tricks) and seven (thirteen tricks). A bid is higher than another bid if either the level is greater (e.g., 2♣ over 1NT) or the denomination is higher, with the order being in ascending order: ♣, ♦, ♥, ♠, and NT (no trump). Calls may be made orally, or with a bidding box.

If the last bid was by the opposing partnership, one may also double the opponents' bid, increasing the penalties for undertricks, but also increasing the reward for making the contract. Doubling does not carry to future bids by the opponents unless future bids are doubled again. A player on the opposing partnership being doubled may also redouble, which increases the penalties and rewards further. Players may not see their partner's hand during the auction, only their own. There exist many bidding conventions that assign agreed meanings to various calls to assist players in reaching an optimal contract (or obstruct the opponents).

The auction ends when, after a player bids, doubles, or redoubles, every other player has passed, in which case the action proceeds to the play; or every player has passed and no bid has been made, in which case the round is considered to be „passed out“ and not played.

Play

The player from the declaring side who first bid the denomination named in the final contract becomes declarer. The player left to the declarer leads to the first trick. Dummy then lays his or her cards face up on the table, organized in columns by suit. Play proceeds clockwise, with each player required to follow suit if possible. Tricks are won by the highest trump, or if there were none played, the highest card of the led suit. The player who won the previous trick leads to the next trick. The declarer has control of the dummy's cards and tells his partner which card to play at dummy's turn. There also exist conventions that communicate further information between defenders about their hands during the play.

At any time, a player may claim, stating that their side will win a specific number of the remaining tricks. The claiming player lays his cards down on the table and explains the order in which he intends to play the remaining cards. The opponents can either accept the claim and the round is scored accordingly, or dispute the claim. If the claim is disputed, play continues with the claiming player's cards face up in rubber games, or in duplicate games, play ceases and the tournament director is called to adjudicate the hand.

Scoring

At the end of the hand, points are awarded to the declaring side if they make the contract, or else to the defenders. Partnerships can be vulnerable, increasing the rewards for making the contract, but also increasing the penalties for undertricks. In rubber bridge, if a side has won 100 contract points, they have won a game and are vulnerable for the remaining rounds, but in duplicate bridge, vulnerability is predetermined based on the number of each board.

If the declaring side makes their contract, they receive points for odd tricks, or tricks bid and made in excess of six. In both rubber and duplicate bridge, the declaring side is awarded 20 points per odd trick for a contract in clubs or diamonds, and 30 points per odd trick for a contract in hearts or spades. For a contract in notrump, the declaring side is awarded 40 points for the first odd trick and 30 points for the remaining odd tricks. Contract points are doubled or quadrupled if the contract is respectively doubled or redoubled.

In rubber bridge, a partnership wins one game once it has accumulated 100 contract points; excess contract points do not carry over to the next game. A partnership that wins two games wins the rubber, receiving a bonus of 500 points if the opponents have won a game, and 700 points if they have not.

Overtricks score the same number of points per odd trick, although their doubled and redoubled values differ. Bonuses vary between the two bridge variations both in score and in type (for example, rubber bridge awards a bonus for holding a certain combination of high cards), although some are common between the two.

A larger bonus is awarded if the declaring side makes a small slam or grand slam, a contract of 12 or 13 tricks respectively. If the declaring side is not vulnerable, a small slam gets 500 points, and a grand slam 1000 points. If the declaring side is vulnerable, a small slam is 750 points and a grand slam is 1,500.

In rubber bridge, the rubber finishes when a partnership has won two games, but the partnership receiving the most overall points wins the rubber. Duplicate bridge is scored comparatively, meaning that the score for the hand is compared to other tables playing the same cards and match points are scored according to the comparative results: usually either „matchpoint scoring“, where each partnership receives 2 points (or 1 point) for each pair that

they beat, and 1 point (or 1/2 point) for each tie; or IMPs (international matchpoint) scoring, where the number of IMPs varies (but less than proportionately) with the points difference between the teams.

Undertricks are scored in both variations as follows:

Undertricks	Points per undertrick					
	Vulnerable			Not vulnerable		
	Undoubled	Doubled	Redoubled	Undoubled	Doubled	Redoubled
1st undertrick	100	200	400	50	100	200
2nd and 3rd, each		300	600		200	400
4th and each subsequent		300	600		300	600

Laws of bridge

Duplicate bridge: The official rules of duplicate bridge are promulgated by the World Bridge Federation (WBF) as „The Laws of Duplicate Bridge 2017“. The Laws Committee of the WBF, composed of world experts, updates the Laws every 10 years; it also issues a Laws Commentary advising on interpretations it has rendered.

In addition to the basic rules of play, there are many additional rules covering playing conditions and the rectification of irregularities, which are primarily for use by tournament directors who act as referees and have overall control of procedures during competitions. But various details of procedure are left to the discretion of the zonal bridge organisation for tournaments under their aegis and some (for example, the choice of movement) to the sponsoring organisation (for example, the club).

Some zonal organisations of the WBF also publish editions of the Laws. For example, the American Contract Bridge League (ACBL) publishes the Laws of Duplicate Bridge and additional documentation for club and tournament directors.

Rubber bridge: There are no universally accepted rules for rubber bridge, but some zonal organisations have published their own. An example for those wishing to abide by a published standard is The Laws of Rubber Bridge as published by the American Contract Bridge League.

The majority of rules mirror those of duplicate bridge in the bidding and play and differ primarily in procedures for dealing and scoring.