

One of a minor opening bids and responses

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Minor suits are a nuisance. When you and your partner are bidding, you hope to find a contract in a major suit or in no trump. If you end up in a minor suit contract, it's usually because you haven't been able to find a better option. To make game in a minor suit, you need to take 11 tricks, and you typically need more than the 25/26 HCP that will usually be enough for game in NT or a major.

But sometimes you have to bid minors anyway. Let's start with some basics. (M = major; m = minor).

Opening bids: Opening 1M guarantees 5+ cards in that suit, and opening 1NT guarantees 15-17 HCP. These are informative bids for your partner. But opening 1m doesn't guarantee a long suit or even a short suit with good cards. It's just a way to get things started.

If you don't have a 5 card major, you will always have at least a 3-card minor – most players bid 1C or 1D as appropriate. There's one hand that causes difficulty – the 4-4-3-2 distribution with 3 diamonds and 2 clubs. This happens in about 1.8% of hands (and not all of those hands will have opening values).¹ Some players prefer to say that a 1D bid guarantees 4 cards, but then you have to bid 1C on two cards for this particular hand. If you play this system, partner has to announce "could be short." I don't know of any strong arguments for or against this choice – something to **discuss with partner**. And you should mark it on your convention card.

If you bid in the standard way, your card should show that bids of 1C and 1D have an expected minimum length of three. However, most of the time, a bid of 1D will show four cards – the only exception is the 4-4-3-2 hand.

What if you are 4-4 in the minors? Most people choose to bid 1D, but if you have terrible diamonds and nice clubs, you might choose to bid 1C. **Discuss with partner**. Important point: if you open such a hand with a 1C bid, you have to be wary of bidding your diamonds later, because it might look like a reverse, implying a strong hand.

Responding to 1m opening bid: Assuming you have enough points to respond, your priorities are:

1. Do you have at least a 4-card major? Bid it! If you have equal length hearts and spades bid "up the line" – that is, hearts first, then spades.
2. No 4 card major? With a reasonably balanced hand, bid some number of NT. A good system is that 1NT says you have 6-10 HCP; 2NT says you have 11 or 12; 3NT says 13-15.

But of course there are some complications:

- There's a box on the convention card labeled "Frequently bypass 4+ D." Most players, responding to a 1C opening bid, choose to bid a 4-card or better major rather than mention a 4-card or better minor. The opening bidder will rarely have a 4-card diamond suit, or they would have bid that instead. So for responder to tell opener about a decent diamond suit is not that

¹ 21.6% of hands, according to several sources, have a 4-4-3-2 distribution with any suit pattern. Of those, one quarter will have two clubs; and of those, one third will have 3 diamonds.

helpful. But this is a style issue – **discuss with partner** so you know what your bids mean.

Suppose you have something like: xx, AJxx, KQxx, xxx:

- If you bid 1H, partner can support with at four hearts, and you would pass; bid 1S to show four cards and deny four hearts, and you would bid 1NT; or bid 1NT to deny hearts or spades, and you would pass.
- If you bid 1D, and partner responds 1H, you can happily raise to two; if opener bids 1S, you have an easy 1NT rebid. There's not much to choose between these two sequences, except in who might end up playing a 1NT contract.
- There are hands where you should bid 1D. You might have xx, Jxxx, AKJxxx, Q – this merits a response of 1D. Keep in mind that if you normally bypass a 4+ diamond suit, then a response of 1D implies an unusually good diamond holding. If you bid “up the line,” then opener has a less clear idea of what a 1D response means.
- Partner opens 1D, and you hold Qxx, x, xxx, KQxxxx. You have 7 HCP so you'd like to respond – but how? Even if you're not playing 2/1, do you really want to raise to 2C? Opener will take that as an encouraging bid – and if you're an unpassed hand, it's forcing. If partner comes back with 2H, do you really want to raise to 2NT? Would taking a preference to 3D be any better? Thinking about what you have and what your partner most likely has, it's very likely that you don't have a good fit anywhere. Even with the singleton heart I would bid 1NT and hope for the best. It's the most honest bid: you have 6-10 HCP, you don't have a 4-card major, and you don't want to bid clubs. Especially if you're vulnerable, there's a case to be made for passing and seeing if the opponents jump in. Maybe you're better off on defense this time.

Supporting a minor suit opening: Keeping in mind that an opening bid of 1C or 1D doesn't promise a good suit, there are times you should raise the minor.

- Partner opens 1C and you hold: xx, xxx, Axx, AJxxx – 8 HCP and no 4-card major, but a raise to 1NT doesn't look right. You can count on partner having 3 clubs (even if you're playing 'short club' partner will still have 3 cards most of the time) so a raise to 2 clubs is legit.
- When partner opens 1D they will have four cards most of the time, so you can be a bit more flexible raising diamonds. Say you have: xx, xxx, AQxx, KJxx. 10 HCP, so you have to respond, but again, 1NT looks dodgy. A raise to 2D is safer. In fact, with this good a hand, you can think about raising to 3D – an invitational strength bid in partner's suit. If you change one of the small clubs to a small diamond, a 3D bid looks better still.
- But a problem arises. When partner opens a major and you support it, you've decided on a trump suit and can explore further. But when you support partner's minor, it doesn't mean that's where you want to play. Playing 5m typically needs more HCP than 4M, and maybe 3NT is where you want to be. But if the bidding goes 1m-3m, you don't have much bidding space left to see if 3NT is a possibility. I'll talk about a system to deal with this situation – inverted minors – next week.

Opener's rebids of minor suits: In general, rebidding an opening minor suit shows 6+ cards (just as rebidding a major shows 6+). Bidding proceeds naturally after that. Sometimes you might have to lie a

little. Suppose you open 1D with Qxx, xx, AKQxx, Qxx and partner responds 1S, showing at least 4 cards. 1NT looks bad, because you know partner has at most 3 hearts. The diamonds are excellent so I would rebid 2D. If partner has 5 spades and a good hand, they may come back with 2S, in which case you can think about game in spades.

What if I have both minors? If you hold Ax, xx, AQxxx, KJxx, you would obviously open 1D. What are your rebid options? If partner responds with 1H, a bid of 1NT is the best bet – keeps the bidding level low and you have all the suits covered (you hope!). But if partner bids 1S, denying four hearts, 1NT looks dangerous. Now you should bid 2C, showing a decent second suit with at least four cards. With a weak hand (less than 10 HCP), responder should give **suit preference** – assuming that opener is 5-4 in the minors, pass if you think clubs will play better or correct to 2D if that suit looks better. If responder has a 10+ HCP and values in both majors, they can try 2NT, or 3NT with a 13-15 hand.

A problem hand: switch around the minor suits so that you have Ax, xx, KJxx, AQxxx. Typically you would open with your longer suit – 1C. But now suppose partner bids 1S. If you now 2D, showing 4 diamonds and by implication at least 5 clubs (otherwise you would have opened 1D), you are asking responder for suit preference. But if responder has better clubs, they now have to go 3C on what could be as little as 6 HCP. This is not a good idea unless opener has a very strong hand. This situation is a **reverse** – bidding suits in the opposite of the normal order – and it should show 18-19 HCP by opener, because opener is saying they can handle a response of 3C even with a poor dummy.

So how should you deal with this hand?

- You can open 1C then be prepared to bid 1NT over a 1S response; or
- You can open 1D and rebid 2C, although it misstates the shape of your hand and your partner might put you in the wrong 2m contract.

The first option is better, IMO. If the opponents are not bidding, maybe neither of them has a long heart suit – that's a hopeful sign if you are playing 1NT. Or maybe one of them will decide to enter the auction with a 2H after 1NT, and you can breathe a sigh of relief.