

Pre-emptive bidding: Lecture 1

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Pre-emptive bids are **aggressive** bids – designed to make trouble for your opponents.

Two questions to ask yourself when you are thinking of making a pre-empt:

- How bad could it be? If I end up playing the contract, especially doubled, what's the worst that could happen? Vulnerability matters: Minus 50 or minus 100 may be a good score in duplicate bridge. Minus 200 rarely is.
- What am I telling my partner? Will my partner have a reasonable picture of the sort of hand I have?

A preempt is meant to make life difficult for the opponents but it can also cause your partner trouble if he or she hasn't bid yet. So talk about preempts with partner and be consistent in your style.

If partner has passed, you have more freedom, since your main concern now is to get in the opponents' way.

Convention card:

- First page: 6-10 HCP is reasonable for two-level bids with 6-card suits
 - If you have 11 HCP and a 6-card suit, give yourself an extra length point and open!
 - When vulnerable keep to the upper end of the point range
- Second page: I recommend that 3- and 4- level preempts should be sound when vulnerable, light when not vulnerable
- But these are guidelines not absolute rules

What do these principles mean in practice?

A two-level preempt shouldn't be just any 6 card suit and any collection of HCP. Here are some examples.

Easy case: you hold

S: xxx

H: AKJxxx

D: Qx

C: xx

10 HCP, nice hearts, maybe a useful diamond, boring distribution – easy preempt, vul or not.

Take away the diamond Q: now you have only 8 points, but it's a still pretty good hand – even vul this is a reasonable pre-empt because you have a solid heart suit that can take tricks

Put back the diamond Q, take away the heart A:

S: xxx

H: KJxxxx

D: Qx

C: xx

Now you're down to 6 HCP and the hearts are not nearly as solid. A reasonable preempt if not vulnerable, much less so if vul. There are 7 other hearts out there, a good partner will have one of the missing honors – but you can't count on it!

Cautionary note on this one: suppose you make the 2H bid, the opponents get the contract, and your partner ends up on lead – puts down a H – bad news if the AQ are on your left! If you're making a pre-empt with the expectation that it might guide your partner's lead on defense, you'd like to have a suit with touching honors, at a minimum.

A seemingly small change:

S: xxx

H: KQTxxx

D: Jx

C: xx

Still only 6HCP but this is a MUCH better heart suit – the KQ are together and I've snuck the ten in.

A good pre-empt is based on a suit that has trick taking power! Important for minimizing risk and important for telling partner what kind of hand you have.

Bigger change:

S: xxx

H: QJxxxx

D: Kx

C: xx

Again, this is 6 HCP – but the heart suit is much less impressive and the diamond K may or may not be worth anything – half a trick, let's say. What about the hearts? There was an old rule that for a two-level pre-empt you should have two of top of three honors. Most players today don't abide by that, but it's worth thinking about. In this case, it depends a lot on what the rest

of the heart suit is: QJT987 is much stronger than QJ5432 – first can take 4 tricks, 5 if you partner has the A or K; second might struggle to take two tricks

You'll find this referred to as TEXTURE: the first suit has good texture – a run of adjacent cards. The second has poor texture – a big fat hole in the middle!

Realistically, suppose you have an intermediate case -- QJ9743 – this is where judgment is important (aka guessing!)

What about J high suit, eg J9xxxx?

I pretty much never preempt on a suit like this – it's a poor suit (trick-taking power) and also think where the other HCP must be (you're not preempting on a J with no other points!) You might have something like this:

S: Qxx
H: J9xxxx
D: Qx
C: Kx

This is 9 HCP, but scattered across all suits. This hand could be good support for your partner and also valuable on defense. **Your preempt should send a message to partner:** I have a decent quality suit that can take some tricks, and I don't have anything else very exciting – this hand fails on both counts

A more extreme example:

S: Kxxx
H: QJTxxx
D: Qx
C: x

Don't preempt with this hand. One hard and fast rule: never preempt if doing so hides a *good* second suit, especially a major. (Some people will not preempt with any 4-card major – but 7532 is not much – T873 is better – where's the line? Judgment again! Talk about this with partner)

Certainly never preempt on a clearly two-suited hand:

S: xx
H:
D: AKxxxx
C: Qxxxx

Either open at the one level or pass – this one just about qualifies for a 1D open, rule of 20*

(*rule of 20: add your high card points to the combined length of your two longest suits – if it comes to 20 or more, you can open. Important caveat: almost all your HCP should be in your two long suits)

Your decision to preempt or not depends which seat you are in:

First seat: define this as a “standard” preempt – a decent suit, good point count if vulnerable, nothing noteworthy in the other suits. Discuss this with your partner.

Second seat after a pass: a pre-empt should be based on a somewhat better hand than in first seat. You know someone has points and it might be your partner – don’t jam the auction with a poor preempt, and if you do preempt give your partner a hand he or she can trust.

Third seat after two passes: go to town! Fourth seat may well have a big hand – get in the way! Especially preempt if you can do so in a major – for example:

S: QJxxxx

H: xxx

D: Jx

C: xx

This is only 4 HCP but is worth a preempt in third seat, especially not vulnerable. Add another point or two and you can preempt vulnerable.

Why is this not usually dangerous? If 4th seat has a big hand, they are going to bid anyway. If they don’t, and you go down, you still may get a better score than if the opponents had bid. It may be that 4th seat doesn’t have big hand; the HCP pattern could be something like 10, 10, 8, 12. But in this case your partner must have *something* – so again, a weak preempt in 3rd seat is not too risky.

Fourth seat: Another hard rule – **never preempt after three passes** – just put the hand back and move on to the next one – don’t let the opponents back into the auction. Special rule: a bid of 2D, 2H, 2S in fourth seat is usually taken to mean an opening hand with 6 of the suit.