

# Teacher's Guide to Bridge NSW Lessons for Beginners/Improvers

If you are reading this, we hope it's because you are a bridge teacher who has become aware of the set of lesson notes that Bridge NSW has released to help you in teaching your beginners/improvers. These notes are intended as a resource for you; how you use them is of course entirely up to you.

The full set is comprised of 16 lessons, of which the first half make up the beginners course and the second half the improvers course.

## *Acknowledgements*

The lesson sequence and the notes are in large part derived from the online lesson materials generously made available by New Zealand Bridge and the Scottish Bridge Union. However, as the bidding system taught in both of those sets of lessons is Acol, the notes had to be extensively re-written for a 5-card major "Standard" system. That re-writing has been done by Rakesh Kumar, who has also written additional material for the lessons, as well as this guide.

## **Choices**

Since no two bridge players will agree on exactly what makes up a modern "Standard" system and no two teachers will agree on exactly what is easiest/best for beginners to take on board, choices had to be made for the lessons on bidding. The system described in the lessons is based on 5-card major and 3+ minor suit openings, a 1NT opening promising 15-17 HCP, and three weak two-bids. A few conventions are taught, notably simple Stayman and major suit transfers over 1NT. In addition to takeout doubles, negative doubles have been included. Many of the choices are based on what is taught in the Scottish Bridge Union lessons.

## **Lesson Structure**

If you are an experienced teacher, you already know how you would like to structure your lessons. However, if you are just starting out, the ideas below may be of some use.

When teaching beginners, it's worth remembering these two key principles about effective education at any level:

- it must be fun – a bit of humour goes a long way
- less is more – too much information guarantees you will lose your audience

So when you start your course, it's worth emphasising that you are only going to teach the basics and that there is much more fun ahead!

In the first lesson, you will undoubtedly want to have a "getting to know you" component, to help with group dynamics. After that, a useful sequence for each lesson might be:

1. Objectives and scope of this lesson (what you will learn)
2. Reminder of previous lesson and how this lesson is related to the previous one
3. Lesson content
  - a. Theory
  - b. Practice hands
4. Review of lesson and/or summary
5. Next steps/homework

It's also worth reminding your students what they need to do if they miss a lesson.

At the end of the last lesson of the course, you will hopefully be helping your students transition to supervised play. This would be a good time to point them toward club membership and also to introduce them to the Bridge NSW website and newsletter.

### **List of Lessons + Some Suggestions**

In principle, each of the lessons is a self-contained module, so you could change the order of presentation if you preferred. It may be that your students find the content of one or more of the lessons more than they can handle in a single session – if time permits, there is no reason why a lesson cannot be spread over a couple of sessions.

#### **Lesson 1: Introduction to Bridge**

In this lesson you will cover the basics: what is a trick-taking game, the concept of the auction and the play as separate phases of each deal, how suits and cards are ranked, trumps vs notrumps, counting high card points, part-score vs game vs slam. It's quite possible that some of your students have already played another trick-taking game in the past, but by the end of this lesson you need to be confident that everyone is "on the same page" about how it all works.

To engage your students, it helps to keep the theory brief and to get students playing cards from the outset. To achieve that, you may find it useful to try MiniBridge in this lesson – a single sheet with the rules is provided for your students, plus there is a detailed guide from the EBU website. Your students can also experiment with MiniBridge by themselves, even if at this stage they lack any understanding of what might be a good line of card play. Although MiniBridge obviously isn't "proper" bridge, it can help you to introduce concepts to be developed in the next 2 lessons.

Teaching bridge etiquette early on is a good idea and this very first lesson provides an opportunity to talk about what dummy may and may not do. MiniBridge scoring is highly simplified but you can make the point that you will in due course return to a discussion of scoring – when you do so is your choice.

## Lesson 2: Declarer Play in a Notrump Contract

This lesson is an opportunity to introduce several important concepts relating to how tricks are won, including forcing out higher cards, taking advantage of combined suit length and taking advantage of the position of the opponents' cards. Discussing these concepts in this lesson, without the complication of a trump suit, is useful.

You should emphasise the importance of counting the high card points and top tricks between the two hands. Importantly, this is the first of several opportunities to hammer home the idea that as declarer, success depends on making a plan at the very beginning of the play of the hand.

Obviously at this stage the defender on lead is unlikely to choose what's best for her/his side. If you are teaching a beginners course followed by an improvers course, you can mention that opening leads will be discussed later.

## Lesson 3: Declarer Play in a Suit Contract

After reinforcing the concept of how trumps work and when declarer/a defender can ruff, you can introduce ideas about counting winners and losers, as well as ruffing losers. Then you can discuss how this relates to whether/when to draw the opponents' trumps.

There is a lot to cover here so it's best to take it slowly and work through the example deals step by step.

It might be a good idea to add an extra session to reinforce what has been covered in lessons 2 and 3 before moving on to the lessons on bidding. Across the 16 lessons, you will note that there are many more lessons on bidding than on card play and defence – that certainly doesn't mean that bidding is much more important than the other two!

## Lesson 4: One-Level Opening Bids

This lesson on one-level bids is a gentle introduction to the convolutions of a bridge auction. Beginners often seem to struggle more with bidding – you can help by emphasising basic concepts about:

- the correct suit to open first
- the idea that minor suit openings do not guarantee length in the suit
- the HCP needed to open and to respond
- the HCP needed for a partnership to bid to game
- as responder, knowing when to pass, to support opener's suit, or to make some other bid.

This could also be a good time to help your students learn to work out trick points and bonus points for part scores, as well as for game contracts depending on vulnerability.

## Lesson 5: Responder's Limited Bids and Opener's Rebids

Things get a little more complicated in this lesson, but again there are few important concepts to emphasise:

- the idea of a limited (limit) bid by responder
- supporting partner's major suit opening if at all possible
- the value of shortage when supporting partner's major suit opening
- the idea of a limited rebid by opener
- why opener's rebid of the major suit opened promises 6+ cards after a notrump response.

Note that if you choose to teach 2/1 Game Force as your basic system, rather than "traditional" 5-card major Standard, you will have to amend your 1NT response to show 6-11(12) HCP. What you do with the 2NT response to 1M at this stage is entirely up to you!

If you would like to re-visit teaching about bridge etiquette, this is a good opportunity to point out that when puzzling over what to bid/rebid a player may not say things out loud e.g. "I don't know what to do here ..."

## Lesson 6: Responder's New Suit Bids and Opener's Rebids

This lesson builds another couple of layers of bidding structure for the beginner. New/reiterated concepts include:

- why responder's bid of a new suit is forcing for at least one further round of bidding
- why responder's bid of 1NT might sometimes be a "bid of convenience" and not necessarily balanced
- why opener's rebid of a new suit promises at least 5/4 shape after a major suit opening, but might be 4/4 (or even 3/4) after a minor suit opening
- why opener's rebid in notrumps might sometimes also be a "bid of convenience" and not necessarily balanced
- the critical concept of "the barrier" – if you succeed in getting this across you will prevent many bidding disasters from happening in the future!

Note that if you choose to teach 2/1 Game Force as your basic system, you will have to amend your 2-level responses to show that they promise (12)13+ HCP. Depending on whether you adopt Lawrence or Cohen style, you will also have to explain the priority order of opener's rebids i.e. if the "barrier" does not apply after a game-forcing two-level response then opener shows shape, with the first priority being to show the other major etc.

Once again, depending on how you feel your students are progressing, it might be worth adding a revision session to reinforce all of the above concepts before progressing to the bidding of balanced hands.

## Lesson 7: Bidding Balanced Hands

A whole new set of concepts is introduced with this lesson. The major ones to emphasise are:

- what constitutes a balanced hand
- the importance of looking for a 4-4 fit after a 1NT opening (hence Stayman)
- the benefit of playing in a weak responder's 5+ major suit but keeping the strong hand concealed (one of many reasons for playing transfers)
- how to handle balanced hands outside the range for a 1NT opening.

Courses for beginners often avoid teaching Stayman and transfers, but this lesson follows the Scottish Bridge Union example of introducing them early, even if only major suit transfers at this stage. It seems sensible to learn the right things in the first place, rather than to be forced to unlearn some things relatively soon.

This lesson makes no attempt to answer the vexed question of whether or not to teach beginners about opening 1NT with a 5-card major – that's for you to decide!

## Lesson 8: Contesting the Auction: Overcalls and Doubles

This final lesson of the beginners course introduces several new concepts. You need to help your students to understand that an overcall is not just/only about high card strength but is also about suit quality. Work your way through the suit quality test with several examples.

Another important issue is sensible bidding relative to vulnerability – this is a good time to examine scoring for undertricks and doubled undertricks, relative to what the opposition might score for a part-score or a game contract at differing vulnerabilities.

Takeout doubles are introduced without trying to complicate matters too much by covering their full scope of use. What is really important, however, is to have your students understand the need for support for the unbid major or majors, preferably with shortage in the suit bid by the opponents. If you succeed in getting this across, you will have achieved another breakthrough.

Responding to a takeout double does not have to be too complicated either – the straightforward examples provided in the lesson notes should arm your students with useful first principles.

## Lesson 9: Contesting the Auction: More Ideas

This first lesson of the improvers course introduces cue raises of overcalls, which should lead to a discussion of purely competitive vs. constructive bidding. The concept can be difficult to grasp, so might need a lot of reinforcement.

The lesson also introduces negative doubles. This term has long been a source of confusion, so in the lesson this double is also described as a "takeout double by responder". Again, introducing this type of double early follows the example set by the Scottish Bridge Union.

Two additional ideas discussed in this lesson are that after partner's major suit opening and an intervening overcall, a cue bid of the opponent's suit is a strong raise; whereas after partner's minor suit opening, a cue bid may be a stopper ask for notrumps or a strong raise of the suit. That a cue bid might have different meanings depending on the auction is another difficult-to-grasp notion that is likely to need reinforcement.

### **Lesson 10: Card Play by Defenders**

Of course counting and visualisation are essential for good defence, but these are difficult for beginners/improvers, so will be discussed in the last lesson of the course. For now you can start with a few basic guidelines about sensible card play.

Even some aspects of these are confusing for many inexperienced players, so it is important to work through the provided examples and then reinforce the principles during further practice.

In case you're wondering, too much repetition is never enough!

### **Lesson 11: Opening Leads and Signalling**

This lesson builds upon the lesson on card play by defenders, to provide a very basic skill set for defence. It's useful to work through the "pick list" of opening leads and to ask the partner of the opening leader to explain what s/he thinks the opening lead suggests. Do repeat the exercise for both a notrump contract and a suit contract, highlighting the differences in the approach to the opening lead.

While this lesson focuses on choosing which suit to lead, the notes say nothing about which card to lead from various card combinations – instruction about that is entirely in your hands.

With respect to signalling, the focus is only on attitude signals. The modern approach of "low encourage" a.k.a. "low like, high hate" is taught, following the example of the Scottish Bridge Union. If you wish, you can tell your students that once upon a time the opposite was the default, so the modern approach is still referred to as upside-down carding, though few expert players still use "high encourage" signalling.

When discussing signalling in this lesson, it might be appropriate to re-visit bridge etiquette again, to stress that showing surprise/disappointment, making faces at partner, banging cards down on the table and all such demonstrative behaviours are absolutely prohibited!

## Lesson 12: More on Hand Evaluation

This is in some respects a complex lesson, although by now it's likely that your students will have realised that not all HCP are created equal and that hands with long suits have extra playing strength.

The Rule of 20 that was introduced earlier is quite simple, but you might need to do some hand-holding to help them to grasp the Losing Trick Count and the concept of Quick Tricks. If you are successful, you will have achieved a breakthrough in helping your students to bid better.

Again, the early introduction of these concepts follows the example set by the Scottish Bridge Union.

## Lesson 13: Pre-emptive Openings

At long last, an easy lesson! Well, fairly easy anyway ... perhaps the most important point to remember while teaching your students about weak two-bids and pre-emptive three- or four-level bids is when *not* to make them.

There are conflicting points of view about the use of a 2♦ opening as a natural weak bid, but it does simplify teaching about 2-level bids. There are also disagreements about the best approach to opener's rebids after responder makes a strong inquiry. What is presented is the most popular set of agreements, which you might not necessarily regard as the best.

This lesson also introduces weak jump overcalls as the counterpart to pre-emptive openings in a contested auction.

## Lesson 14: Strong Openings

The 2NT opening is presented in the simplest possible way i.e. as a strong version of the 1NT opening. You might want to re-visit the "ladder" of notrump bids after working through this opening and before discussing the strong 2♣ opening.

Exactly what constitutes a 2♣ opening and how one might best respond is obviously controversial. No expert would contemplate employing the simple/natural approach to responses presented here, but it is easy to learn and will suffice for an inexperienced player. Just about every online source seems to agree ...

Having introduced strong suit openings it's reasonable to also introduce the topic of slam bidding. You may think that Roman Keycard Blackwood, with responses in the modern 14/30 style, is rather an advanced concept for an improvers class – but yet again this is what is taught in the Scottish Bridge Union lessons, so why not open the door to this complex subject? You can point out to your students just how much more there is for them to learn!



## Lesson 15: Thinking as Declarer

This lesson focuses on developing good habits as a declarer. Notably these include planning before playing to the first trick, analysing the opening lead, attempting to place the outstanding high cards, as well as counting winners and losers.

There is also an introduction to the probabilities of a favourable break of the outstanding cards in a suit and why this is relevant to choosing a line of play.

Much of this is abstract and perhaps relatively complex, but you can again take the opportunity to demonstrate how every bridge player always has scope for improvement.

## Lesson 16: Thinking in Defence

Continuing the theme of developing good habits, this lesson examines what the defender in third seat should be doing at trick one i.e. the basics of counting and visualisation.

There is discussion of the need for co-operation in defence, especially in terms of clear signalling, to make life easy for partner.

The lesson also includes some teasers to open the students' eyes to what lies ahead, including a hold-up play by declarer; a long suit/help suit trial bid; and suit preference signalling when giving a ruff.

## **Retention**

Once your beginners have completed their course of lessons, the greatest challenge is retention of these new bridge players. In this regard, New Zealand Bridge offers some very sound advice, paraphrased below:

*The bridge lessons and play practice comprise only 20% of the task of retaining new members. The next 80% relies on how the club handles the introduction of new players into the club scene.*

*Unfortunately many new players have their experience ruined by the unacceptable behaviour of a few club players. Clubs need to take control of rudeness at the table. They should adopt a "Zero Tolerance" policy for rude behaviour.*

*What will get the beginners through the first few weeks of club play is friendliness, kindness and encouragement. Remind other players in the session(s) where you introduce the beginners that the onus is on them to make their new players feel comfortable, welcome and – most importantly – not intimidated.*