

Bridge is a partnership game for four people deriving from the much older game of whist. It uses a standard pack of 52 cards in four suits, 13 of which are randomly dealt to each player in each deal.

The objective is for each partnership to win as many **tricks** as possible, each trick comprising one card from each of the four **hands** dealt. Tricks can be won by high cards – aces are high, followed by the other honour cards: king, queen and jack and then the 10 down to the 2 – or by **trumps**, cards of a designated suit which always outrank cards in any other suit.

Each deal consists of distinct stages – the **bidding** and the **play**, followed by the **scoring**. Through the bidding, also known as the auction, the trump suit is decided by the highest bidder who simultaneously contracts to win a target number of tricks in the subsequent play. That number of tricks must be won before any points can be scored for the side winning the contract.

What makes bridge different from whist is that there is a **dummy** – one of the four hands which is placed face up for all to see during the cardplaying stage. This is always the hand which partners the **declarer** – the player who has won the auction and contracted to take a particular number of tricks – always more than half the total of 13 available. The other two players are the **defenders**, whose aim is to prevent the contract being made.

The bidding is conducted with a restricted bridge vocabulary consisting of the suit names and the numbers one to seven (plus a few special words, notrumps, double and redouble). These words are the same all over the world, but the information conveyed by the bids can vary by prior open agreement. Each bid carries a “cost” in that it commits the bidding side to contract to win a certain number of tricks in the subsequent play, with the risk of a (possibly substantial) penalty for making less tricks than one has contracted for. Much of the skill at this stage is in making sure you and your partner communicate effectively – that you make best use of the bidding space and do not over-reach – while your opponents are trying to do the same thing, and even to push you over the edge.

When a player first looks at his hand and before he bids, he needs to evaluate its potential – how likely is it to take tricks in conjunction with partner’s hand? In this context the honour cards are important, so we assign a value to each of them: four points for an ace, three for a king, two for a queen and one for a jack. The total points in a hand give one measure of its strength, though unbalanced distribution – five or six or more cards in one suit – is also an important element, especially if you can contract for that suit to be trumps.

The card play stage requires all kinds of skills – planning, counting, reasoning, working out probabilities as well as elements of psychology and the calculation of likely risk versus potential gain or loss in the scoring. Again there’s a need for teamwork – the defending side has to pull together if it is to do well.

Isn’t it just a game of chance?

Absolutely not. There is some luck in any one deal, though over a period of time this should even out. But there is a form of the game – duplicate bridge – which largely eliminates the luck element. This is because the same deals are played by different partnerships – the hands are duplicated to allow this, which sounds rather complicated to organise but actually isn’t at all. So you are just trying to outscore others holding exactly the same cards – as close as possible to pure skill, in fact.