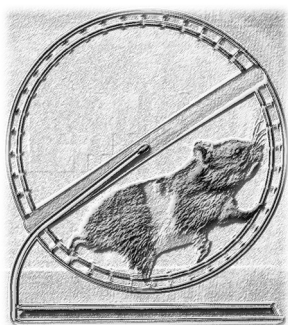


I Know I Should Be Thinking – But What Am I Supposed to be Thinking About???



The dummy is tabled and you panic. It doesn't look anything like you imagined, and you have no idea what to do. Your mind hops on the hamster wheel and starts an endless run. Sound familiar? Bridge is a problem-solving game, and problem-solving requires analytical *thinking*. Unlike conventions or suit combinations, this skill cannot be memorized, but it can be developed.

Although each discipline introduces its own variations, problem-solving is usually presented as a sequence of tasks: **Define the problem** → **Obtain relevant information** → **Identify possible solutions** → **Choose the best solution** → **Act on that solution** → **Analyze the results** → **Repeat, if necessary**.

A bridge hand's goal is two-fold: reach your side's optimum contract and take all possible tricks. To do this successfully, you need to learn the distribution of each hand and you need to identify the location of all key honor cards. The sooner you obtain this information, the more likely you are to successfully reach this goal; but in bridge, problem-solving is not straightforward. To find the information required to solve the problem, you must take action (bid or play a card). To take the *best* action, you must know the solution to the problem. It's a Catch-22. To be successful, you must *visualize* the hand, and this cannot be done if you plan bid-by-bid and card-by-card. The visualization process is independent of bidding conventions and play techniques. Some players have a talent for it; others need to work to develop it. This presentation skims the surface, but it does identify critical points in the bidding and play of the hand in which you must pause, review your current knowledge, and plan. What you should be thinking about can be defined at these points.

Visualization begins when you pick up your hand. You now know 13 of the 52 cards – only 39 more to go!

BEFORE YOU MAKE AN OPENING BID.

It's such a little thing, but before you make an opening bid, *you must think about your rebid*. Of course, your partner or the opponents might surprise you and make things a little more difficult, but you should have your response ready to make – *in tempo* – for all common situations. **Benefits:**

1. Planning your rebid forces you to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of your hand.
 - a. This is the information you need to communicate to your partner, and very few hands allow you to do this with one bid.
 - b. This is the information you will use to develop winning tricks and avoid losing tricks, if you declare the hand.
2. Planning for partner's most common responses helps you *visualize* your hand in conjunction with your partner's hand. Picturing your 13 cards with partner's allows you to see probable contracts and identify crucial information gaps.
3. Because you're planning your bids in advance, your bidding tempo will improve. You won't need to stop and think – and think again – before each bid.

- ♠ If you open 1H or 1S, you should have a rebid prepared, **and** you should be ready with your response if your partner responds 1NT or makes a single raise of your suit.

Example 1.

♠QJT875
♥A
♦AJ
♣A842

Your opening bid is easy, but what is your rebid? You must plan your second bid in advance, or your mind is likely to hop on the hamster wheel after any response by partner. The important points in this hand are: 1) two suited, six spades and four clubs; 2) extra strength; 3) first-round controls in the short suits.

- Your likely rebids are: **2C**, **2S**, or **3S**. Choose the one that is most likely to allow you to complete the description of this hand. Now, plan for partner's most common responses – and have your rebid(s) ready.
 - If partner's response is 1NT, is another rebid better?
 - If partner's response is 2S, is another rebid better?
- ♠ If you open 1C or 1D, you should have a rebid prepared, **and** you should be ready with your response if your partner responds with a major suit bid or 1NT.

Example 2.

♠A74
♥5
♦KJT3
♣KQT42

Planning your rebid helps you avoid a mistaken opening bid in this hand. The important points are: 1) two suited, four diamonds and five clubs; 2) not strong enough to reverse; 3) no four-card major, but three-card support for spades; 4) singleton heart.

- You open **1D** to allow for a **2C** rebid. Now, plan for partner's most common responses – and have your rebid(s) ready.
- If partner's response is 1NT, is another rebid better?
- If partner responds 1H, is another rebid better?
- If partner responds 1S, is another rebid better?
- If partner's response is 2D, do you know what your agreements are?

- ♠ If you open 1NT, your partner is captain of the auction and most of your rebids are constrained by your partnership agreements. You must be prepared, however, if partner's bidding sequence invites game or slam. Do you like your hand, or not?

Example 3a.

♠AQ75
♥QJT4
♦A3
♣QJ2

How much do you like this hand? Be prepared for partner's invitational bids.

- Partner invites game in NT. Do you go?
- After a Stayman auction finds a 4-4 major suit fit, partner invites game in that major suit. Do you go?

Example 3b.

♠KQJ
♥A52
♦KT94
♣KT2

How much do you like this hand? Be prepared for partner's invitational bids.

- Partner invites game in NT. Do you go?
- After a Stayman auction, partner invites game in NT. Do you go?
- After transferring to a major suit, partner invites game in NT. Do you go?

BEFORE PLAYING TO THE FIRST TRICK.

In an uncontested auction, each member of the declaring side should have a good picture of 26 cards. Each defender, however, should have constructed a tentative picture of the distribution of all 52 cards. He knows his own 13 cards, he has heard the opponents' 26 cards described, and the 13 cards left over belong to his partner. In a contested auction, all four players should have formed some idea of the distribution and relative strengths of each hand. The opening lead is made with more knowledge available than many players realize.

The play at trick one may be the most critical thinking point for declarer and defenders in every hand. No player should make a play until he or she takes the time to plan; and dummy – regardless of the holding in the opening lead suit – should not touch a card until prompted by declarer. From the declarer's point of view, these are the basic thinking points common to every hand.

1. Look at the opening lead. It conveys information about the defenders' hands and it functions as a memory touchstone.
2. Count the visible high card points, review the bidding – or lack thereof, and determine which defender might have key honors.
3. **No trump contract:** Count your *sure tricks*; then identify ways to generate possible extra tricks.
3. **Suit contract:** Count your *losing tricks*; then identify ways to avoid those losses.
4. Check for problems and alternate solutions by counting your *losing tricks*.
4. Check for problems and alternate solutions by counting your *winning tricks*.
5. Picture yourself playing the hand. This will help you see potential problems in your plan.

Example 4a.

	♠QJ6 ♥J6 ♦KJ74 ♣AJ87	
♠K ♥54 ♦ ♣5		♠ ♥AK9 ♦ ♣
	♠AT984 ♥Q87 ♦AT ♣QT6	

Auction (East dealer):	
1H	– 1S – Pass – 2H
Pass	– 2NT – Pass – 4S
Pass	– Pass – Pass –
The play:	
•	♥5 (West). ♥6. ♥K. ♥7
•	♥A (East). ♥8. ♥4. ♥J
•	♥9 (East). ♥Q. ♠K!. ♦4
•	♣5 (West). ♣??? (dummy)

- The opening lead is probably the top of nothing, possibly a doubleton. Since dummy has only two hearts, even if West started with a doubleton, the only outstanding trump that can beat dummy is the ♠K. You have two sure heart losers.
- You are also missing the ♠K, the ♣K, and the ♦Q. The ♦Q is not critical, since you have no diamond losers. How do you plan to locate the missing kings?
- As the play goes, the opponents take the first three tricks – and the ♠K was off-side. Do you know what to play at trick four – and why?

Occasionally, when you see dummy, you may want to say to partner, “Very funny. Now show me the hand you held during the bidding.” If dummy does not resemble the hand you expected to see, your mind is likely to escape to that hamster wheel. In this case, you may need to make an extra effort to regain your focus. Counting the high card points in my hand and dummy’s is my usual mantra.

Example 4b.

	♠ ♥ ♦8 ♣	
♠QJ63 ♥T7 ♦KQ65 ♣A32		♠KT8 ♥KQ52 ♦AJ9743 ♣--

Auction (West dealer):	
1D	– Pass – 1H – Pass
1S	– Pass – 2C! – Pass
2D	– Pass – 2S – Pass
2NT	– Pass – 3S – Pass
4S	– Pass – Pass – Pass
Don’t try this bidding at home!	

Even in the best of partnerships, the bidding may sometimes go awry. At no time in this bidding sequence did East show his six-card diamond suit. West experienced a moment of panic at finding herself in a 4-3 spade fit, when a 5D contract with a 6-4 diamond fit was a lay-down. Breathe!

- The opening lead is almost certainly a singleton. If South holds the ♠A, there is no way to avoid a ruff.
- Given the fact that one diamond trick will be ruffed, there are only six sure tricks: one club and five diamonds.
- One heart trick and three spade tricks can be generated after losing the ace in each suit, for a total of ten tricks.

- There are only three obvious losing tricks: the ♠A, the ♥A, and a diamond ruff. North will be irritated that South doesn't give him a second diamond ruff. ☺
- Trumps must be pulled before the diamond suit can be played. Although transportation might get a little tricky, if the trumps break no worse than 4-2, we may have landed in the best-scoring contract after all. Good bidding, partner!

♠ Trick one thinking is similar for the defenders, but there are some important differences.

1. **Look** at the opening lead. It conveys information about the defenders' hands and it functions as a memory touchstone.
1. Count the visible high card points, review the bidding, and determine partner's likely high card points. Identify possible *helpful* honors in partner's hand.
2. Count declarer's *sure* tricks and identify tricks declarer can generate
3. Count your *winning* tricks. There won't be many of them, so *make them count*.
4. If you're not sure what to do when you win a trick, it might be a good idea to wait to take that trick until you have the information you need. Identify that information before playing to trick one. An example hand appears below.

THE MOMENT A PLAYER SHOWS OUT OF A SUIT.

Alert! Red flag warning! When partner or declarer shows out of a suit, the original holding of that entire suit is known, *if* a player takes a moment to think. *You must take that moment to think!* Knowing one suit and combining this knowledge with inferences from the bidding and the opening lead, dummy and a player's hand, it's possible that the entire hand can be inferred. The player who takes the time to do this may be able to play the rest of the hand *double-dummy*, i.e., as if he or she could see all 52 cards.

Example 5.

	♠KQJT	
	♥A65	
	♦J43	
	♣875	
♠2		♠A98
♥Q2		♥987
♦2		♦K965
♣		♣J43
	♠7	
	♥K	
	♦Q7	
	♣	

Auction – Team event (South dealer):	
1D	– Pass – 1S – Pass
1NT	– Pass – 2NT – Pass
3NT	– Pass – Pass – Pass
The play:	
•	♥Q (West). ♥5. ♥7. ♥K
•	♠7 (South). ♠2. ♠K. ♠??? (you)

Before you played to trick one, you inferred the following:

- North made a light invitation and South accepted. South is likely to have 13-14 HCPs, but in a team game, might have pushed to accept the invitation. Partner is likely to hold 7-8 HCPs. The opening lead identifies three of those points, so partner has at least one honor in diamonds and/or clubs.
- Your ♦K may be badly placed, but you do have four diamonds, so this may give declarer trouble in that suit. Your ♠A is your one sure trick, but once you take it, declarer will have

- three spade tricks – and you have no way to prevent him from reaching dummy with the ♥A.
- Partner does not have a six-card heart suit, since that would give him a 2H overcall. Declarer has less than four spades. Otherwise, you have little sure information on the distribution, and you don't know enough to count declarer's sure tricks. Before you take your sure trick, you need more information on declarer's distribution *or* on partner's honor card holding.

You don't know enough about the hand to take the ♠A at trick two. Declarer is unlikely to be able to take nine tricks with only one spade trick and not enough side entries to dummy to finesse away your ♦K, so it should be safe to hold up. You play the ♠8, and the play continues:

- ♦J (Dummy). ♦6. ♦7. ♦2 (You note that declarer holds the ♦AQ.)
- ♦3 (Dummy). ♦5. ♦Q. ♥2!! **RED FLAG!** Stop and count the hand.

You can now count declarer's sure tricks: 5 diamonds, 2 hearts, and 1 spade. If declarer holds the ♣A, there's nothing you can do. Declarer now leads a spade towards dummy and partner follows suit. Do you win your ♠A? Why, or why not? If you win this trick, what card do you play – and why?

SUMMARY

Solving the problem of a bridge hand begins when you pick up your hand and begin to evaluate it in the context of the remaining 39 cards, i.e., you begin *visualizing* your hand in conjunction with what you hope partner might hold.

Critical point one: Plan your rebid *before* you make an opening bid. You are now actively picturing how the hand will play opposite a variety of hand strengths and patterns possibly held by partner; and you are planning a bidding series that will give both you and your partner the information needed to land in your side's optimum contract. You are *visualizing* 26 cards.

Critical point two: After the opening lead is made, but before making a play at trick one, *all* players now know 26 or 27 cards, and each one can check the validity of his or her intermediate visualization. *All* players should use clues from the bidding to picture the location of key honors and the probable distributions in each hidden hand. No one should play to trick one until this is done and a plan is formed. If you make a play without thinking about the entire hand, you may never be able to recover. In bridge there is no do-over.

Critical point three: When a player fails to follow suit to a trick, *stop* and *think!* When one suit is known, counting tricks and locating key honor cards in the other suits is simplified. To the player who uses this information, the entire hand may become an open book. Congratulations! You have visualized the placement of all 52 cards.

There is no bidding convention or play technique that will help you improve your bridge game more than developing your ability to visualize each hand. It takes hard work and constant practice to develop this skill, but you can't accurately solve a bridge hand's problems without it.