

Which suit to respond?

When you and partner are searching for a trump suit, your first goal is to find an 8-card or longer fit in a major. In some auctions, you'll discover this fit immediately, such as when partner opens 1H or 1S and you hold 3+ cards in his suit. In other auctions -- usually those that start with an opening bid of 1C or 1D -- it may take two rounds of bidding before you determine whether or not you have a major-suit fit. In these auctions, it's important that you and partner have a logical, controlled way to exchange information about your suit lengths. Here are the standard ways to discover your 8+-card major-suit fits. When you're 4-4 or 4-4-4

If partner opens and you have two or three 4-card suits you could bid at the one-level, you should respond your cheapest suit (or, with a weak hand, your *cheaper major*). This practice is called "up-the-line", and opener also follows it with his rebids. After you respond, if opener has a 4-card suit he can show at the one-level, he'll always bid it. If he has two 4-card suits, he'll bid the cheaper one. This practice conserves space and assures that you'll always find a 4-4 major-suit fit if you have one. Here's an example:

Partner	You
♠Q7	♠AK86
♥KQ65	♥J973
♦J102	♦65
♣KQJ4	♣865

Partner opens 1C. Even though your spades are stronger, the correct response with your hand is 1H (the cheaper of your 4-card suits). With the hand above, partner will raise to 2H, you'll pass, and you'll probably make an overtrick.

Look what happens if you violate the "up-the-line" practice and respond 1S with the hand above. Opener will assume that since you bypassed a 1H bid, you don't hold 4 hearts, so he'll rebid 1NT to show his minimum opener and keep the bidding low. Your hand isn't strong enough to risk going to the 2-level in a new suit, so you'll have to pass, and you've missed your 8-card heart fit. Your 1NT contract will go down if an opponent has 5 or more diamonds.

Now change partner's hand by moving two of the small hearts to spades, giving him ♠Q765 ♥KQ ♦J102 ♣KQJ4.

With this hand, he won't raise hearts, but he has room to bid 1S to show a 4-card suit, which you'll raise to 2S. By responding your cheaper major, you've left room to find a possible fit in *either* major.

Note that there are three more basic tenets of bridge bidding that opener and responder are following here:

1) New suits at the one-level are forcing. With rare exceptions, after an opening and a response, neither of you should pass until you've reached a contract of 1NT or 2 of a suit.

2) If you hold a balanced minimum, don't bid past 1NT unless you know you have a trump fit. This rule applies to opener (whose minimum is 13-15 pts.) *and* responder (6-9 pts.). In general, when you have a weak hand with only 4-card suits, the only time you should go to the 2-level is when you're raising partner's suit to confirm an 8+-card fit.

3) If partner bypasses a suit he could have bid at the one-level, you should assume he does *not* have 4-card length in it. The only time you should ever bid a suit partner has denied is when you have significant extra values and want to force the auction higher (see the lesson on The Reverse).

Bypassing diamonds

Many pairs apply the "up-the-line" principle only to majors, and they will bypass a 4-card diamond suit -- or even a 5-carder -- to show their cheaper major. The weaker your hand, the more anxious you should be to follow this guideline.

For example, suppose partner opens 1C and you hold ♠J42 ♥Q1076 ♦KJ93 ♣74. You're weak and may have only one chance to describe your hand, so show your major right away with a 1H response. If you follow the "up-the-line" principle religiously and instead bid 1D, you can still find a possible 4-4 heart fit, but only if partner gets the chance to bid 1H. The risk is that your left-hand-opponent will overcall 1S, and partner won't have a strong enough hand to bid a new suit at the 2-level.

When you're 5-4

The up-the-line rule applies only when you have *4-card* suits of equal length. If you have suits of unequal length, you should still show your longer one first.

If your 5-card suit is lower in rank than your 4-carder, you won't have to bid both of them. If partner opens 1C, respond 1H with ♠K1092 ♥QJ983 ♦8 ♣Q64. If partner now rebids 1NT, you won't have to worry about showing your spades because you know you don't have a fit there -- since partner bypassed a 1S bid, you should assume that he does *not* hold 4 spades. Over 1NT, you would bid 2H and partner will pass.

If your 5-card suit is *higher* in rank than your 4-card suit, there will be many auctions where you'll want to bid both suits. If partner opens 1D, you would respond 1S with ♠J10942 ♥KJ86 ♦K7 ♣54. This will imply that you don't have 4 hearts, but if partner rebids 1NT, you plan to show your heart suit by bidding 2H. Partner will know you had a good reason for skipping hearts with your first response, and that reason has to be that your spades are longer. This specific auction is not forcing and asks partner to choose between your two suits, either by passing (if he prefers hearts) or by bidding 2S. Going to the 2-level is safe here because partner's 1NT rebid promises at least 2-3 cards in every suit, so you know you have a fair fit.

The meaning of a 2H rebid is different, though, if partner does *not* rebid 1NT. Suppose partner opens 1D, you bid 1S, and he rebids 2C or 2D. In these cases, partner hasn't promised any length in either of your suits, so you have no guarantee of a fit. In non-fitting auctions like this, a new-suit bid by you would therefore be forcing. If partner rebids 2D, he has a minimum opener with 6+ diamonds, and you should pass with the hand above. If his rebid is 2C, he's asking you to choose between his two suits, and you should just retreat to 2D. Since partner is showing at least 9 cards in the minors, it's very unlikely that you're missing a good major-suit fit.

When you're 5-5

A different principle operates when you have two *5-card* suits. In this case, you should **respond the higher-ranking suit first**, then bid the lower-ranking one. With two long suits, you'll often want to force partner to choose one, so it's important to plan your bids so you can leave partner with maximum bidding space on the *second* round of the auction.

If partner opens 1D and you hold ♠K8742 ♥KJ952 ♦J ♣43, you should respond 1S (the higher-ranking suit). If partner rebids 1NT, you'll bid 2H, which is non-forcing and lets him choose between your suits at the 2-level. If you instead responded 1H on the first round, you would have to bid 2S at your next turn. If partner preferred hearts, he'd have to go up to the 3-level to take you back to that suit.

If you have a weak hand and partner does *not* rebid 1NT, you'll have to give up on showing both of your suits. With the hand above, after 1D by partner--1S by you--2D by partner, you should pass. A 2H rebid by you would be forcing here, and your hand is too weak to risk taking this non-fitting auction any higher.

This approach works well with stronger hands, too. For example, if partner opens 1C, you would bid 1S with ♠AK1084 ♥KJ872 ♦J3 ♣4. Over partner's 1NT rebid, you would now *jump* to 3H (because, as noted above, 2H would *not* be forcing here). If partner has 3-card spade support, he'll bid 3S over your 3H. If he has 4 hearts, he'll raise to 4H. If he has neither of these holdings, he'll rebid 3NT and you can now complete the picture of your hand by bidding 4H.

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