

The Laws of Duplicate Bridge

A Simple Guide

This guide covers what actually comes up at the table, in plain language. It follows the substance of the official 93 Laws of Duplicate Bridge, but condenses the rare, highly technical procedural cascades into short practical summaries — ‘here’s generally what happens; call the Director for the exact ruling.’ It isn’t a substitute for the official Laws, or for our full plain-language companion, when precision matters — a contested ruling, an appeal. It’s what most players need to know most of the time.

Part 1 — How Duplicate Bridge Works

The Basics

Bridge is played by four people, sitting in two partnerships — North and South against East and West. The pack is a standard 52 cards: four suits (spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs, in that ranking order), each with 13 cards from Ace down to 2.

In duplicate bridge, each hand — called a board — is dealt once, then played at several tables so the results can be compared. That’s the whole point of “duplicate”: you’re not just playing the cards, you’re being measured against everyone else who held your cards that session.

The Auction

Before anyone plays a card, there’s an auction. Starting with the dealer, each player in turn does one of four things:

- Passes — declines to bid.
- Bids — names a number of tricks (1 to 7, meaning 7 to 13 total) and a suit or no-trump.
- Doubles an opponent’s last bid, raising the stakes.
- Redoubles, raising them again.

A bid has to outrank the last one — more tricks, or the same number of tricks in a higher-ranking denomination. From highest to lowest: no-trump, spades, hearts, diamonds, clubs.

The auction ends when a bid is followed by three passes in a row — or, if nobody ever bids, when all four players pass and the board is thrown in unplayed. The final bid becomes the contract: what the declaring side has promised to make.

The Play

The player to declarer’s left makes the first play — the opening lead — face down, then turns it face up. At that point declarer’s partner becomes dummy: their hand is spread face up on the table, and declarer plays it for them, in addition to their own.

From there, players take turns adding one card each to build a trick — four cards, one per player, starting with the lead. Whoever plays the highest card of the suit led wins the trick, unless someone trumps it (plays a card of the trump suit, set by the contract) — then the highest trump wins instead. The winner of one trick leads to the next.

You must follow suit if you can. If you can’t, you may play anything, including a trump.

Scoring

Making your contract scores points based on what you bid; missing it gives points to the other side instead. There are bonuses for bidding and making game or a slam, and for winning more tricks than you needed. A partnership that’s already won a game is “vulnerable” — bigger bonuses for success, steeper penalties for failure. (Full scoring figures are in Part 3.)

Part 2 — The Practical Rules

Setting Up the Table

Each board holds one deal: a numbered set of four hands, with a fixed dealer and vulnerability that repeats in a set 16-board pattern. Cards are dealt face down, one at a time, into four 13-card hands. When it's time to play, each player takes their hand from the board, counts it to make sure there are exactly thirteen, and checks the faces before making a call.

Handle only your own cards during play — declarer is the one exception, since they play dummy's hand too. Whoever stays at a table for the whole session is generally responsible for keeping things running properly there.

Bidding Rules

Bid in turn, clockwise from the dealer. Every bid must outrank the last one. You can only double the last bid, and only if it was made by an opponent; the same goes for redoubling a double — no other calls can have come in between. When you double or redouble, just say the word: don't restate the suit or level.

A player may ask, at their own turn, for the previous calls to be restated, or for an explanation of what an opponent's call means (partner usually answers, based on the partnership's actual agreement — not what you personally hoped they meant).

When Bidding Goes Wrong

Mistakes happen — a call out of turn, a bid too low to be legal (an insufficient bid), a bid of more than seven, a call made after the auction's already ended. The Laws set out a specific fix for each situation, but they share a common shape:

- If the next player in line is happy to just call normally over the mistake, that usually settles it — no further penalty.
- Otherwise, the mistaken call is generally cancelled. The offender either substitutes a legal call, or must pass instead — sometimes for the rest of the auction.
- The offender's partner is often required to pass at their next turn or two, so the offending side doesn't gain an advantage from the mistake.
- If the opponents still end up worse off despite the fix, the Director can adjust the score afterward.

The precise mechanics depend on exactly what went wrong, when, and who's spoken since — that's the part worth calling the Director for, rather than working out yourselves at the table. Don't try to fix it on your own initiative; summon the Director and let them apply the right rule.

Playing the Cards

Whoever leads may play any card, and everyone else follows in turn. Declarer plays a dummy card by naming it; dummy then places it. A card generally counts as “played” once it's held face up, touching or nearly touching the table — after that point, taking it back isn't simple.

Dummy has some rights (keeping count of tricks, asking if declarer failed to follow suit, pointing out an irregularity once play ends) but real limits: dummy can't call the Director unprompted during play, can't join in the play or advise declarer, and can't look at either defender's cards.

When Play Goes Wrong

Cards get exposed, led out of turn, or played illegally. As with bidding mistakes, there's a consistent shape to how these get fixed:

- A single low card exposed by accident usually has no real consequence.
- An honour card, or any card exposed on purpose or out of turn, generally becomes a penalty card — it stays face up on the table and typically has to be played at the first legal chance.
- A lead out of turn can often just be accepted by the side that should have led — treated as if it were correct — or the Director can have it retracted and require the correct lead instead.
- If a card is exposed or a lead goes out of turn, declarer sometimes gets to choose how the defenders' cards are restricted for a while, as compensation.

The big one: a revoke — failing to follow suit when you could have. If it's caught before the offender's side plays to the next trick, it must be corrected. Once the offender or their partner has played on to the next trick, though, the revoke becomes established and generally can't be undone — the trick stands as played, though the Director may transfer a trick afterward and can adjust the score further if the revoke caused real damage.

In every one of these situations: stop, call the Director, and don't try to self-correct beyond what the Laws specifically allow (like immediately fixing an unintended call before partner has acted on it).

Claiming and Conceding Tricks

If you say you'll win (or lose) a specific number of the remaining tricks, or show your cards intending to end the play early, that's a claim (or concession). State clearly how you plan to play out the rest — including the order — and face your hand.

If everyone agrees, the board is scored as claimed. If anyone doubts it — dummy included — call the Director, who applies fairly strict rules against the claimer: any doubtful point is resolved against them, and lines of play that depend on guessing which opponent holds a particular card generally aren't allowed unless the evidence already points that way.

Fair Play and Information

This is one of the most important ideas in the whole rulebook: you and your partner may only communicate through your actual calls and plays — not through tone, timing, gestures, or anything else. If you pick up on something outside the calls and plays themselves (partner hesitated, looked surprised, alerted unexpectedly), you're not allowed to use that to help you decide what to do next. You still have to plough ahead as if you hadn't noticed.

It's fine — expected, even — to try to deceive your opponents through a normal call or play (a bluff bid, a deceptive card). It's not fine to do it through unusual body language, tone, or timing, or to have a private, undisclosed understanding with your partner that goes beyond the calls and plays themselves. Using illicit outside information about a board, or a statistically improbable pattern between someone's behaviour and their cards, can be treated as reprehensible conduct in its own right — this is the part of the Laws aimed squarely at cheating, including the kind that got much easier to attempt (and, fortunately, easier to statistically detect) once so much bridge moved online.

Manners at the Table

Stay courteous. Don't make remarks that could embarrass or unsettle another player, don't stall unnecessarily to unsettle an opponent, don't show your reaction to a call or play, and don't stare at another player's hand or draw. If you have nothing left to do but play out the obvious remaining tricks, do it without visibly checking out of the deal early.

Part 3 — Directors, Scoring, and Appeals

Calling the Director

The Director runs the tournament on-site, rules on irregularities, and has the final say on rectifications — that's their job, not the players'. Call them as soon as something's wrong; don't try to negotiate a fix at the table first, since acting before the Director arrives can itself forfeit your side's right to a rectification. Once called, the Director gathers the facts (going with the weight of the evidence if the players disagree), applies whichever Law fits, and — if the Laws don't specifically cover the situation, or if the non-offending side is still worse off despite the standard fix — can award an adjusted score to make things right.

Scoring Your Result

Making your contract scores trick points based on suit and level: 20 per trick in clubs or diamonds, 30 in hearts or spades, 40 for the first no-trump trick and 30 for each one after — doubled and redoubled multiply these. 100 or more trick points is a game; less is a partscore. On top of that come bonuses: for slams, for making game or partscore, and for extra tricks. Missing your contract instead gives the defenders points, on a scale that increases with each undertrick and is steeper when doubled, redoubled, or vulnerable. If everyone passes, the board scores zero for both sides.

In matchpoint play, you score against every other pair who played the same board; in IMP play, the point difference between two scores converts to International Matchpoints on a fixed scale. (Full tables are in our companion working draft, Law 77 and 78B.)

Appeals

A contestant (or, in a pairs event, both partners together; in a team event, the captain) can appeal a Director's ruling, usually within 30 minutes of the official score being posted. Appeals go through the Director first. Where there's no Appeals Committee, the Director in charge rules on the appeal directly; where there is one, it hears everything except pure points of Law, which stay with the Director. Regulating Authorities can set up further stages of appeal beyond that.

Quick Glossary

Contract — What the declaring side has committed to make — the final bid, doubled or redoubled or not.

Declarer — The player who first named the denomination of the final bid, on the side that won the auction.

Dummy — Declarer's partner, once the opening lead is faced — their hand is played face up by declarer.

Revoke — Failing to follow suit when you could have.

Penalty card — A card exposed improperly that must generally be played at the first legal chance.

Claim — Stating you'll win a specific number of the remaining tricks, before play is finished.

Vulnerable — Having already won a game in the current match or session — raises both bonuses and penalties.

Unauthorized information — Anything you pick up from partner outside their actual calls and plays — you can't use it.

Adjusted score — A score the Director assigns instead of the table result, to fix damage from an irregularity.

For the full, legally precise version of every Law — including the rare cases this guide condenses — see the companion working draft (same-meaning, plain-language rewording of all 93 Laws).