

Bridge Etiquette

By Ron Kral

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Every sport has its little niceties. In golf, it's considered rude to talk while someone's addressing the ball, and poor form to step on someone's line on the putting green. Unfortunately, new golfers only learn these things when they embarrass themselves by making a mistake. Bridge is no different — there are unwritten etiquette rules that "everyone" knows, but are passed around by word of mouth. Several of my students asked me about incidents where they were admonished for a "sin" they didn't even know they were committing! So I hope this article saves some newer players some embarrassment. There are the rules, and there are the niceties. This article covers the niceties — the things that AREN'T in the rulebook.

◆ North "owns" the table

North has responsibility for everything that goes on at the table. North should ask the incoming people their pair number to verify they're at the right table. North should check to make sure the correct boards are on the table, in the correct order, and pointed north. North is responsible for scoring the round. Technically, North is the only one who can turn the boards. North can delegate any of these functions at his discretion. Most Norths are not that particular, but SOME Norths take offense if East or West even touch the boards. Unless you know the North player, it's best to leave the boards alone. Finally, North is responsible for the pace of play. You're typically allowed about 7 minutes a board. If East/West came to the table late, or one of the early boards takes a very long time, North should say something like, "We only have 4 minutes to play the last board." It doesn't matter whose "fault" it is — don't take offense when North says this — he's only doing his job.

◆ Passing the boards

If you finish the round early and your new opponents arrive, chill out. It's considered rude to ask for the boards before the round has been called. How do YOU like it when someone interrupts YOUR train of thought? DO NOT get up and go get boards yourself! You may see a hand that you're about to play. The director normally calls the round with two minutes left on the clock. That's your cue to ask for a board or two if they're still playing. However, if you're still playing and you hear the round called, it's polite to pass the boards you've already played without being asked. Hand the boards to the person behind you, or get up and lay them on their table, or lean them against a table leg. Don't throw them under any circumstances. If you're standing there waiting to sit down, help out by taking the played boards and move them.

◆ The Bidding Box

Don't touch or get near your bidding box until you've decided what bid you're going to make. Train yourself to THINK, then SELECT. Touching the bidding cards then changing your mind transmits unauthorized information to your partner. Hovering over the box is almost as bad. Pulling a card out then putting it back is really bad form. Place the bidding cards facing the other players, not facing you.

◆ The Auction

Don't pointedly look at an opponent's convention card in the middle of an auction. Your clear interest in a particular bid transmits unauthorized information to partner. The same holds true for asking questions during the auction when the answer will have no impact on your bidding. Don't ask questions for your partner's sake if you already know the answer and suspect he doesn't. It's HIS problem to ask if he wants to know. You may not ask questions until it's your turn to bid. If you're the final pass, wait until partner has selected his lead before asking questions to avoid the appearance of suggesting a suit to lead.

◆ Leading

Make your opening lead face down. If you've led out of turn, someone will say so and you can pick it back up without penalty. Give your partner a chance to ask questions about the bidding before facing your lead: "Any questions partner?" Don't ask questions until your partner has selected his opening lead and placed it face down. This is so there's no insinuation that you're subtly suggesting a lead to partner.

◆ Kibitzing

Watching an expert play is an entertaining and educational experience. However, kibitzing is a privilege, not a right. Walk up to the table between hands. Ask if it's OK before sitting down. If someone at the table objects, go find another table to kibitz. Sit quietly, don't stand. Don't comment or ask questions even between hands. NEVER make faces, gestures, or outbursts. Only watch one player and hand at a time. Leave quietly only between hands.

◆ The Convention Card

Your convention card is for the OPPONENTS, not YOU. You must not look at your convention card while a hand is in progress. It's OK to look between hands before you've picked up your next hand. Memory aids are illegal (there are exceptions, but they're rare). You and your partner's convention cards should be identical and completely and legibly filled out so either opponent can easily understand your methods. It's a particular pet peeve of mine when the opponents' defensive carding section is left blank. Your convention cards should be within easy reach and sight of the opponents on the table, not on your lap. You must be very careful about keeping your private scorecard folded closed and out of view. You're obligated to keep your results private from the opponents on hands they haven't played yet. Do not discuss any results.

◆ Conventions

Conventions are a lot of fun. However, your responsibility is to know your conventions, alert the opponents whenever a conventional call is made, and explain it completely only if asked. Do not explain a convention unless asked. When asked, don't use the convention's name — give a description. Don't say "Michaels," say, "Partner has 5/5 or better in the majors." You must not listen to your partner's explanation of your bids and then use that information to alter your bidding. Like the convention card, the alert and explanation are for the opponents, not you. Your opponents are entitled to your convention card agreement, not what you hold in your hand. If your side makes a mistake, call the director.

◆ The Director

If there's any irregularity at your table, call the director! He'll come and adjudicate the situation fairly. Do not make your own rulings at the table! Don't refrain from calling because "I didn't want to embarrass the opponents." Don't be upset when the opponents call the director. The director is a referee and is being paid to make rulings. It's much simpler for them to solve problems when they occur rather than trying to clear up a big mess later. While you can get the reputation of calling the director too often, you really should call any time there's any question about something that has happened. "Director, please...."

◆ Dummy's rights

Once the auction is over, dummy cannot say or ask anything about the bidding. Exception: if declarer gave the opponents an incorrect explanation of a bid made by dummy during the auction, dummy **MUST** correct it before the opening lead is made. Dummy can also stop a lead from the wrong hand. He **CANNOT** ask for a review. He **CANNOT** ask what a bid meant. During the play of the hand, dummy should **NOT** play or touch a card until called for by declarer, even if it's a singleton. Declarer has the right to take a few moments to plan the whole hand. Dummy **CANNOT** call attention to a defender's revoke until the hand is over (dummy **CAN** ask declarer if he's out of a suit, "No hearts partner?"). Dummy cannot call the director until the hand is over.

◆ Team games

Team play has its own special etiquette. Never go near the other table while the match is still in progress. It could be interpreted as trying to see a result or to signal your partners a result. You cannot kibitz your own team. It's considered rude to compare unless the whole team is present. If you need to take a break after your hands are played but while the other table is still playing, tell your partner whether it's OK to compare without you or if you prefer for them to wait. However, if the match is running late, the directors need your result. Don't hold up the show by insisting you be present. It's customary and polite for the winning captain to walk to the losing team's table to verify the final result. While you're there, thank them for the match and wish them luck on their remaining rounds.

◆ Don't be a "Bridge Lawyer"

The alert and announcement systems are there to protect all parties. Let's say someone forgets an alert. If you had known, would this have changed your bidding or play? In my experience, this is a rarity. The vast majority of the time I'd have bid and defended exactly the same way even if there had been a proper alert. Rubbing someone's face in a technicality because they failed to alert when it didn't matter at all will not endear you to your opponents. Exception: if you actually **WOULD** have done something different, you should call the director who may rule that you were damaged and give you relief. Sometimes people are using a new convention and don't realize it's alertable. Cut them some slack. You might calmly tell them after the hand is over that their bidding is alertable to save them future embarrassment.

◆ Bridge is a timed event

You're normally given about 7 minutes a board to complete a round. Everyone at the table is supposed to be aware of the time constraints and do their best to keep the game moving. When things get off track, the director takes a lot of heat. You should do everything under your control to keep pace. This includes getting to the table on time, being ready to bid when it's your turn, making your opening lead BEFORE writing in your personal scorecard, laying down dummy as soon as the opening lead is made and BEFORE writing in your personal scorecard. You'd be amazed at how much these two simple things speed up play. It's not fair to unnecessarily take more than your share of the time. The declarer on the next hand may need his full allotment. If the pair in front of you is consistently slow, notify the director. He will "hover" and will issue a verbal warning to the slow pair. Don't start another board after the round or match has been called without permission. Ask the director if there's time to play the board, or if you should take a late play.

◆ Bid and Play in tempo

Bridge isn't like poker. Sitting and "thinking" when you have nothing to think about — to intentionally fool the opponents — is considered unethical. This behavior, derisively called coffee housing, is named after the Eastern European coffeehouses where this conduct is customary and considered part of the game. While everyone must take time to think occasionally, "thinking" before playing a singleton is considered very poor form. Thinking when declarer is taking an obvious finesse, or fumbling your cards when you don't hold the key card, is unacceptable. If you inadvertently fumble a card, make a statement like "Sorry, I have no problem." Of course, you should NOT make this statement if you DO hold the finessable card. It's just as bad to bid or play too quickly. Practice bidding and playing your cards in an even and consistent tempo to avoid transmitting unauthorized information to partner.

◆ Mistakes

Bridge is a game of mistakes. We all accept the fact that when we make a mistake in the bidding, play, or defense we'll get a below-average result. However, some people try to weasel out of mechanical errors such as playing a wrong card and want to take it back. "A card laid is a card played." When you make this kind of mistake, own up to it, accept your result graciously and promise yourself to be more careful in the future. I liken it to a quarterback throwing an interception. He'd sure like to have that throw back, but the rules don't allow do-overs. Exception: when you inadvertently pull the wrong bidding card out of the box and you realize it before your partner makes his next bid, the director can back up the bidding to you and you'll be allowed to correct your call without penalty. Since the bid was accidental, there's no unauthorized information. However, you're NOT allowed to change your bid simply because you changed your mind.

◆ Zero Tolerance

Many clubs have a "Zero Tolerance" rule. This essentially means that all players must remain courteous to their opponents and their partner, and avoid all offensive behavior at all times. Adhere to the ZT rules — be kind and gracious to all. Don't argue with your partner. Don't raise your voice. Don't give unsolicited bridge lessons to your partner or your opponents. Don't argue with the director at the table. Report ZT misconduct to the director in private.

◆ Gloating

In the same vein as ZT is gloating. It's always exciting to get a great result. You bid and make an iffy game or slam. They double you and you make it. You double them and they go for a telephone number. They have a serious bidding misunderstanding. High-fiving is inappropriate. The opponents feel terrible already and gleeful behavior just rubs it in. If you must say something, a low-key "Well done partner" is sufficient. Save your celebration for when you're away from the table. On the other hand, if the opponents make a really good bid, defensive move, or declarer play, it's polite to congratulate them.

◆ Claiming

Claiming is part of the game. You should claim as soon as you realize how the hand is going to play out. It's considered rude to make your opponents agonize over discard after discard only to find out that you knew you had the last eight tricks and didn't claim. In addition to saving time, you can't revoke during a claim! You should state a line of play when claiming, something like, "I'll pull the last trump, and then I have 3 club tricks and 4 diamond tricks and will give you the last spade." Even if declarer doesn't state a line of play, accept the claim if it's reasonable. Don't expect or ask declarer to play like a complete idiot. Occasionally someone does make a bad claim. In that case, calmly call the director.

◆ Cheating

Of course, you should strenuously avoid any action that could be construed as cheating. If you suspect a player of questionable conduct, it's considered totally out of bounds to confront them or make any accusatory statements to them or anyone else. Notify a director IN PRIVATE of your suspicions and the behavior that led you to that conclusion. The director will take it from there.

◆ Double check your score

Do your best to avoid scoring corrections at the end of the game. They're a bother to the directors who have to reprint and repost the results, and, if they affect the overall results, they're a disappointment to the people who thought they won or placed. Do your part by carefully examining the pickup slip and actually check the scores to make sure they match your private score BEFORE signing and leaving the table. This includes the electronic scoring devices too.

◆ Your Space

Everyone "owns" the corner of the table near their right hand. This is where you should put your convention card, your pencil, your drink, et al. Avoid invading someone else's little corner of the world. Another pet peeve of mine is when my RHO puts all their "stuff" in my corner. I'm crowded out and only have a tiny little spot to play my cards. In general, keep everything but your convention card off the table. Drinks in particular always seem to fall over creating a disaster. I put my drink on the floor.

◆ Play your cards right

Don't detach a card from your hand until 1) it's your turn to play, and 2) you've decided which card you're going to play. Detaching a card prematurely is uncalled for, unethical, and rude. Detaching a card, then putting it back and selecting another one tells your partner you had more than one choice and is unauthorized information. Some people unconsciously "snap" the corner of their card on the table as they play it. Many people find this habit very annoying — try to avoid doing it. Make sure your played card is completely visible to all parties and that everyone had a chance to get a good look at it before you turn it over. Once all four cards are face down the trick is quitted and you no longer have a right to see the cards.

◆ Clean up after yourself

Have you ever noticed how messy bridge players are? Look around the room after a game — there are cups and napkins and trash everywhere. Pick up after yourself. Make the small effort to take your leftovers to a trashcan. On the way, if you see someone else's trash on a table, pick it up and throw it away too. Pitch in after the game is over. Pick up trash, fold up bidding boxes (don't forget to snap the bottom lid shut!), and take the boards and tablemats to the front table. Being a director is often a thankless job and any help you can offer is very much appreciated.

◆ Keep Quiet

If you finish early during either team or pair play, remember other people are still playing. Keep your voice down. At pairs, Board-A-Match, and barometer events, you must be especially careful so others don't hear your conversation and get a "wire" on a board. Go out into the hallway for your discussions, or go into a corner and keep your voices low. At the start of the game, stop talking and let the director give his instructions so everyone can hear. And, of course, TURN OFF YOUR CELL PHONE!