

The Power of Shape

The hand devoid of shape in Bridge, is the dreaded 4333 shaped hand and often fits some sort of NT bid during the auction. There are no short suits or long suits and quite often this hand is not good enough to open the bidding, or overcall after the opposition has opened.

On the other hand, a 5431 shaped hand is far more interesting. Often you will open the bidding 1♠ with this hand using loser count (or similar methods) or overcall 1♠.

Shape is so important that it is often recommended you look at your shape before even counting your points. Since I started playing bridge – and even more quickly in recent times as the analysis technology enables people to do provides even more reason to challenge traditional beliefs about what you need to open the bidding – bidding has got more and more aggressive and the reliance on point count has reduced considerably.

Some of the more interesting shaped hands are:

5-3-3-2
5-4-2-2
5-4-3-1
6-3-2-2
6-5-1-1
6-5-2-0
7-4-1-1
7-4-2-0
8-2-2-1 or similar

The problem for all of us is that these hands do not occur very often and when they do, we may not be sure what to do with them. The basic bidding sequences is for each player to use the first rounds to show shape until one partner has enough information to make a decision.

These first rounds of bidding reveal other things too, essentially strength. Once the shape has been established, the bidding can usually focus entirely on selecting the right level. With unbalanced hands it can take 3 bids to explain the hand to your partner, and maybe 4, assuming you have enough strength to keep the bidding going.

Here are a couple of top tips:

1. **Don't be afraid to open a little light on points** (eg 10)
If opening light, you must have "shape"
2. **Use loser count as a guide.**
A typical Opening hand has 7 losers or less
There are other methods you can use instead, such as the Rule of 20 (high-card points added to number of cards in two longest suits getting to 20). They usually all come to the same thing. I find the loser count is easy to do and can be used to identify light opening hands as well as game forcing hands that maybe a little light on points.

HANDOUT 2: The Power of Shape

To count your losers, you count the missing top 3 honours in each suit in your hand
eg AQ86 - there is only one of the top 3 honours missing in this suit, so there is one loser

This method is good for evaluating hands to compete and to find a Game or Slam based on shape rather than points and only after you have found a fit

Here are some hands evaluated on loser count

Hand A ♠KJ932 = 2 losers ♥AJ86 = 2 losers ♦AK = 0 losers ♣84 = 2 losers TOTAL = 7 losers Open 1♠	Hand B ♠AK532 = 1 loser ♥A865 = 2 losers ♦AK = 0 losers ♣Q5 = 2 losers TOTAL = 5 losers Open 1♠
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Hand A is evaluated based on arriving in a suit contract. If you end up in NT you will need to be sure that partner has clubs well held as you are not going to be any help!

Hand B, despite the club suit having a top honour, it is only Q5 and therefore likely to be two losers, not one. If partner subsequently bids clubs you may be able to re-evaluate this.

Some 7 loser hands only have 10 points but are more than good enough to open at the 1 level - see **Hand C**

Hand C ♠7 = 1 loser ♥AQ10984 = 1 loser ♦A9752 = 2 losers ♣3 = 1 loser TOTAL = 5 losers Open 1♥	Hand D ♠KQ843 = 1 loser ♥AK642 = 1 losers ♦A2 = 1 loser ♣A = 0 losers TOTAL = 4 losers Open 2♣	Hand E ♠A103 = 2 losers ♥- = 0 losers ♦AKQ32 = 0 losers ♣AK1098 = 1 loser TOTAL = 3 losers Open 2♣
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Once you have mastered the art of counting losers for opening hands, you can progress to counting losers in the Responder's hand as well. This is so you can determine the level to bid to.

Here is how it works: Count the losers in both hands and take this away from 18. The answer is the level to bid to. eg Opener has 7 losers and Responder has 8 = 15 losers total.

You can bid to the 3 level (18-15 = 3)

Whilst the Law of Total Tricks is often useful to determine the level to bid to, you can only use it when you know how many cards the partnership holds in that suit.

If Responder has 7 losers and because partner opened (therefore has 7 or less losers), Responder should be searching for game. It is not always clear what the Opener has, so Responder bids to the level they know they have and if Opener has less than 7 losers they may consider going on.

HANDOUT 2: The Power of Shape

Hand A

Hand A	Responder
♠KJ932 = 2 losers	♠Q10854 = 2 losers
♥AJ86 = 2 losers	♥K5 = 1 loser
♦AK = 0 losers	♦108 = 2 losers
♣84 = 2 losers	♣K1074 = 2 losers
TOTAL = 7 losers	TOTAL = 7 losers
Open 1♠	Bid 4♠
	$18 - (7+7) = 4$

Yes, Responder can and should bid to 4♠ with only 8 points

Shape is key to Responder's hand.

Is 4♠ making?

Hand C

Opener	Responder
♠7 = 1 loser	♠KQJ = 1 loser
♥AQ10984 = 1 loser	♥10732 = 3 loser
♦A9752 = 2 losers	♦K89 = 2 losers
♣3 = 1 loser	♣K87 = 2 losers
TOTAL = 5 losers	TOTAL = 8 losers
Open 1♥	Bid 3♥
	$18 - (7+8) = 3$

Opener can open 1♥ and Responder should only bid to 3 with 12 points.

Shape is key to Opener's hand but not Responder's.

Can they make any more than 3♥?

Knowing the shape of your partnership also offers you the opportunity to work out what the opposition hold! If you look at Hand C you know roughly what the opponents hold between them: They have a total of 3 spades, 9 hearts, 5 diamonds and 9 clubs. You can assume they are split relatively evenly, but if one of these hands overcalled, or the lead looks like it is from four of that suit, there is more information available to you.

eg the bidding goes 1♠ - (3♥) - 4♠

The overcaller could have this shape: 1-7-2-4 and their partner the rest: 2-2-3-5

If there is no overcall and the person on lead, leads a small club, you could assume they have at least 4 of that suit (and not the Ace), so the two hands may look like this:

Hand on lead 2-3-4-4 (they did not overcall so unlikely to have a 5 card suit unless weak)

Their partner the rest: 1-4-3-5 (if they hold a 5 card suit they were unable to bid it, as the bidding got too high for them).

The probability (the odds) of Card Distribution

Bridge Players should make a mental note of the distribution when bidding and playing to determine the best line of play. At the very least they should remember the more common odds.

Outstanding Cards	Possible Holding	Odds	Drop or Finesse ?
2	1-1	52.0%	Go for the drop (no finesse)
	2-0	48.0%	
3	2-1	78.0%	Finesse K but not QJ
	3-0	22.0%	
4	3-1	49.7%	Finesse K but not QJ
	2-2	40.7%	
	4-0	9.6%	
5	3-2	67.8%	Finesse KQ not J
	4-1	28.3%	
	5-0	39.0%	
6	4-2	48.5	Finesse KQ usually not J
	3-3	35.5	
	5-1	14.5	
	6-0	1.5	
7	4-3	62.2	
	5-2	30.5	
	6-1	6.8	
	7-0	0.5	
8	5-3	47.1	
	4-4	32.7	
	6-2	17.1	
	7-1	2.9	
	8-0	0.16	

NOTE:

1. The more common suit breaks are 2, 3, 4 and 5
2. Watch for shortage in opponents hands as this may change your line of play
3. For 3, 4 and 5, the "8 Ever, 9 never" rule may be easier to remember for when to finesse the Q or not

Topic 2: The Power of Shape: Bidding & Play

North East South West

4♠	Pass	6♠	Pass
Pass	Pass		
		♠ KQ987654	
		♥ 96	
		♦ T6	
		♣ 7	
♠ A			♠ T3
♥ J87			♥ KQT43
♦ J932			♦ Q874
♣ QJT43			♣ 86
		♠ J2	
		♥ A52	
		♦ AK5	
		♣ AK952	

Board: 9 Dealer: North Lead: ♥K #885

North should open 4♠ with their hand, showing either 8+♠ and a weak hand or 7♠ (which should usually include two of the top three honours) and a better, but still shapey, hand. South knows from partner's bid that they have 5 certain tricks outside spades (♣AK, ♦AK and ♥A) and can bid slam straight away.

With ♠A as a definite loser, we can't afford to lose any other trick. Accordingly, when East knocks out dummy's ♥A at trick 1, we must hasten to play dummy's ♣AK in order to discard our losing heart. Only now do we start to draw trumps.

West wins trick 4 with ♠A and tries ♣Q. With only one remaining trump out, we can afford to play safe by ruffing high. We draw East's last trump and claim the rest.

East South West North

3♥	Pass	4♥	Pass
Pass	Pass		
		♠ K97432	
		♥	
		♦ QJ2	
		♣ KJT7	
♠ 8			♠ A65
♥ 52			♥ KJT7643
♦ AK9743			♦ 86
♣ AQ85			♣ 6
		♠ QJT	
		♥ AQ98	
		♦ T5	
		♣ 9432	

Board: 10 Dealer: East Lead: ♠Q #1392

East will open 3♥ and when South passes, West needs to evaluate their hand. They actually have only 5-losers and know that they have a 9-card heart fit. The singleton ♠ is brilliant in this situation. They have the power of shape to put partner to 4♥.

Our ♠A, ♦AK and ♣A give us four top winners outside trumps. Depending upon the distribution, we'll make between four and six tricks in hearts. While we might consider finessing in hearts or clubs, the best source of extra tricks is spade ruffs in dummy.

We win the opening lead and immediately ruff a spade. We re-enter hand by playing ♣A and a club ruff, in order to ruff another spade in dummy. We ruff a second club in hand.

The best continuation at this point is ♥K, which could give us 12 tricks if ♥Q was singleton. In practice South wins with ♥A and North shows out. Nevertheless, we're still in control.

When South gets off lead with a club there's more than one route to ten tricks and the simplest is to play off dummy's top diamonds. When South follows suit we just claim one more trick from our remaining ♥JT7. (We would still make ten tricks if South ruffed the second diamond.)

Back to Bridge: The Power of Shape

South West North East

Bidding 1

4♠	Pass	Pass	4NT
Pass	5♣	Pass	5♦
Pass	6♥	Pass	Pass
Pass			
Pass	1♥	2♦	3♦
Pass	3NT	Pass	4♣
Pass	4♦	Pass	6♥
Pass			

♠ A63		♠
♥ A7542		♥ KQT96
♦ A9		♦ Q76532
♣ AJ5		♣ Q6
	♠ QJT98752	
	♥ J3	
	♦	
	♣ 843	

West North East South

3♣	3♥	Pass	3♠
Pass	4♠	Pass	Pass
Pass			

	♠ Q7	
	♥ AQ8643	
	♦ A3	
	♣ Q87	
♠ J95		♠ 43
♥ J		♥ K975
♦ 87		♦ QJT42
♣ AK96542		♣ T3
	♠ AKT862	
	♥ T2	
	♦ K965	
	♣ J	

**Board: 11 Dealer: South Lead: ♠K *(Bidding 1)
Alternative Lead 8♥ (Bidding 2) #2128**

In a strong field, South will probably open 4♠ with their 8-card suit (despite their lack of points), and West will double. East can then bid 4NT (showing a two-suited hand, most likely 5-5 or longer- aka "two places to play"). West will bid 5♣ - to check if this is one of partner's suits. East will correct to 5♦ - which will make West very happy as they now know partner's second suit is ♥. West bids 6♥.

If South passes, West will open 1♥ and North may overcall 2♦ or depending on their system 2NT (showing both minors). If they chip in with a diamond bid East can cue bid the suit showing heart support and West may bid 3NT showing 15-17 points and holds in the other suits. If they do East should ask for Aces. The 4♦ response (showing 0 or 4 aces - from the bidding it can't be '0') enables East to bid 6♥.

We'll assume South opened 4♠... Our five trumps in hand and three outside aces give us eight top winners. In theory we might be able to take four ruffs in dummy after the spade lead, but in practice we won't be easily able to cross to hand enough times.

It's much better to play to set up dummy's diamonds. If trumps break 2-1 we'll only need one extra trick in the suit, since we'll be able to ruff three times in dummy after drawing trumps. We'll also still have chances against a 3-0 trump break.

At trick 1 we discard ♣6 from dummy and win with ♠A. We play a heart to ♥K and both opponents follow. We draw the last trump and cash ♦A. When South shows out we lead towards dummy's ♦Q. North wins with ♦K and exits with a spade, which we ruff in dummy. We still have three black suit losers in hand, but we can ruff two of them and discard the other on ♦Q. If trumps had broken 3-0 we would have drawn all the trumps and again played ♦A and another. We'd make the contract against a 3-2 diamond break, or if North only held four diamonds.

Board: 12 Dealer: West Lead: ♣A #2513

Bidding will start at the 3-level and should end up with South in 4♠. West has a good 3♣ opener and North should overcall 3♥. East has nothing to say. South should bid 3♠ with their 6-card suit and 6-loser hand. North - who has 14HCP so a bit better than they needed to be for their original overcall, should bid 4♠. They know partner must have at least a six-card suit for their bid so ♠Q7 is nice support.

♥A and ♦AK are our only top winners outside trumps, but we're likely to make six trumpss in hand. Diamond ruffs in dummy or dummy's heart suit might provide us with extra tricks.

After cashing ♣A at trick 1, West switches to ♥J. It's very likely that East has ♥K and West's ♥J might well be a singleton, so we win with dummy's ♥A. The simplest continuation is a low heart from dummy. East wins with ♥K and plays a heart through, but we allow West to ruff and win the diamond switch in hand. We play a spade to ♠Q, draw the rest of the trumps and use dummy's ♦A as entry to the established hearts.

When the hand came up at the table East played low at trick 3, but having extracted a trump from West we're better placed to ruff diamonds in dummy. We'll have to lose either a diamond or a spade, but we still make the contract exactly.

Back to Bridge: The Power of Shape

North East South West

Pass	Pass	1♠	2NT
Pass	3♦	Pass	4♦
Pass	5♦	Pass	Pass
Pass			

♠ A87
♥ T9765
♦ 6
♣ QT86

♠ T
♥ 3
♦ AJT732
♣ AKJ75

♠ Q543
♥ K842
♦ KQ8
♣ 94

♠ KJ962
♥ AQJ
♦ 954
♣ 32

Board: 13 Dealer: North Lead: ♠6 #1113

West's 2NT is the Unusual No Trump, here showing length in both minors (because a Major was opened). East's 3♦ didn't show any particular strength (because at that stage they don't know how good their partner's hand is), so they're happy to accept West's game invitation.

Treating dummy as the master hand we have a loser in each major suit, so we'll need to set up clubs without loss.

North wins the first trick with ♠A and switches to ♥T. The lead marks South with ♥A, so we play low from hand. South overtakes with ♥J and switches to ♣3.

It's possible that South has ♣Q, but finessing is at best a 50% chance. We can in fact make this contract if clubs are no worse than 4-2 and diamonds no worse than 3-1. The chance that both suits are breaking reasonably well is around 75%.

We win the third trick with ♣A, cash ♣K and ruff a club with ♦K. When South shows out we enter dummy with ♦T and ruff another club with ♦Q. We re-enter dummy with a heart ruff, draw trumps and claim the rest.

East South West North

Pass	1♠	2♠	Dbl
Pass	3♦	4♥	Pass
5♣	Pass	Pass	Pass

♠ KT5
♥ QJ92
♦ QT62
♣ 32

♠ 8
♥ AKT764
♦ 8
♣ AKQ54

♠ Q943
♥ 8
♦ J543
♣ T876

♠ AJ762
♥ 53
♦ AK97
♣ J9

Board: 14 Dealer: East Lead: ♦A #1906

South opens 1♠ and West bids 2♠ showing Hearts (the other major) and a Minor. North can double showing support for spades and some values (if they had four spades they would bid). At this point East does not have to bid because partner will get another chance to show their hand if South passes. South may bid 3♦ to let partner know they have 5-spades. With their two-suited powerhouse West should bid 4♥. North should pass quietly – they may think there'll be a chance to defeat 4♥ with their solid trump holding. East now knows that their partner must have Hearts and Clubs so will correct to 5♣.

With the very powerful dummy we can plan the play of this hand by counting losers. We must clearly lose a spade and a diamond, so must avoid losing a heart trick. We may be able to achieve this by ruffing hearts in hand, although we must beware a possible overruff.

We ruff the third trick and cash ♣A followed by ♥A. We ruff a heart in hand and return to dummy with ♣K. When both opponents follow suit we ruff another heart in hand and can now claim the rest with dummy's winners.

Back to Bridge: The Power of Shape

South	West	North	East
1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass
2♣	Pass	2♥	Pass
3♦	Pass	4♣	Pass
5♣	Pass	6♣	Pass
Pass	Pass		
	♠ AKT43		
	♥ AKJT		
	♦		
	♣ A652		
♠ J2		♠ Q8765	
♥ 84		♥ 76532	
♦ QJ873		♦ K4	
♣ JT98		♣ 3	
	♠ 9		
	♥ Q9		
	♦ AT9652		
	♣ KQ74		

West	North	East	South
1♣	2♠	Pass	Pass
Pass			
	♠ KQJ832		
	♥ K32		
	♦ 43		
	♣ 62		
♠ AT		♠ 954	
♥ Q96		♥ J85	
♦ K6		♦ QJ985	
♣ KJ9743		♣ A5	
	♠ 76		
	♥ AT74		
	♦ AT72		
	♣ QT8		

Board: 15 Dealer: South Lead: ♣J #2039

An interesting hand where the bidding provides all the information needed for South and North to know the shape of partner's hand and bid on accordingly. Even though South only has 11HCP it is a 6-loser hand, they will open 1♦. North responds 1♠ (knowing, with their 19HCP that they will be heading to game or higher after partner opens the bidding). South bids 2♣ to start showing their shape. North bids 2♥ - which is 4th sort forcing and not necessarily natural at this stage. South will repeat their ♦, indicating a very distributional hand with no interest in NT or either major. North now bids 4♣, which *in this auction* is natural and shows their 5-4-0-4 shape exactly. South can now happily bid game with North converting to 6♣ because of their extra values.

Outside trumps we have seven top winners: ♠AK, ♥AKQJ and ♦A. We can easily make this contract if trumps are breaking 3-2, since we could draw them all and make four trump tricks in one hand and a ruff in the other. If trumps are breaking 4-1 we could still make the contract by taking two ruffs in one hand. The entry situation means that it's easier to ruff spades in hand than ruff diamonds in dummy. We therefore win the first two tricks with ♣KQ. When East shows out we play a spade to ♠A, ruff a spade in hand, play ♥9 to re-enter dummy and ruff another spade in hand. West overruffs and exits with their last trump, but we play a heart to ♥Q, discard dummy's ♠T on ♦A and claim the rest with dummy's winners.

This hand illustrates the importance of forming a plan at trick 1. If you win the first trick with dummy's ♠A the contract can no longer be made.

Board: 16 Dealer: West Lead: ♣A #1725

West opens 1♣ and North overcalls 2♠, showing a 6-card suit and 6-10HCP. That should be the end of the auction. Jump overcalls are a good bid that immediately conveys the shape of your hand to partner. I prefer to play variable so 6-10 HCP non-vulnerable and 11-15HCP when vulnerable.

Outside trumps we have ♥AK and ♦A as top winners, but we're unlikely to be able to set up an extra trick in a side suit. To make this contract, therefore, we need to make five trump tricks. This should be possible if the suit is splitting 3-2, but we have to be careful about a potential overruff.

West wins the second trick in clubs and leads a third round. If we ruff with the ♠8 East overruffs with ♠9 and we'll still have to lose a trick in each red suit as well as ♠A. We would then go one down. We can avoid this fate by discarding a red suit loser (it doesn't matter which) on the third round of clubs. If West now plays a fourth club we could discard from the other red suit and just lose subsequently to ♠A. In practice West switches to a diamond. We win in dummy and play a spade to ♠K, which holds.

After winning ♠K, the safe play is to re-enter dummy with ♥A for another trump lead. West wins with ♠A and plays a club, but now we can afford to ruff high. We draw the last trump and claim all but one of the remaining tricks with our winners in hand (or the rest if West has cashed ♦K). Eight tricks made.