

The 12 Habits of Highly Effective Bidders (October 2005)

3. They have system notes. (Part 2)

In the last issue, we looked at how successful pairs use system notes to clarify their agreements, reduce misunderstandings and refresh their memories. If you're ready to develop notes for your partnership, the first step is constructing an outline.

One way to organize your document is to just follow the headings on the convention card. A more focused approach is to group agreements into "we open" and "they open" auctions. Here's a sample outline:

I. General approach. This section, discussed in the previous article, is a summary of your convention-card agreements and the general principles and tendencies that define your bidding style.

II. Default agreements. This is perhaps the most important part of your notes. No matter how many pages you generate, it's impossible to cover every situation that might come up at the table. To improve the chances that you and partner will interpret an unusual auction in the same way, it's helpful to have default agreements in place.

Default agreements are broadly phrased, "when-in-doubt" rules that cover all undiscussed sequences. Two of the simplest and most widely used defaults are:

If it could be forcing, it is.

If it could be natural, it is.

To develop your own defaults, think about misunderstandings you've had in the past, especially in competitive auctions. Three key areas for discussion are how you'll sort out the meanings of ambiguous cuebids (natural or artificial?), doubles (takeout, penalty, cooperative, lead-directing?) and redoubles (penalty, card-showing, support?).

Other problem areas that may be good candidates for default agreements are passed-hand actions, competitive 2NT bids, forcing-pass auctions and ambiguous 4NT and 5NT bids.

III. We open and they pass. Begin by describing your opening-bid requirements and what factors influence your choice of suit. Then set up headings for every opening bid, from one-of-a minor on up. Under each heading, describe the specific treatments, conventions and style issues that apply to your responses and rebids in uncontested auctions.

Add separate headings for topics that require a lot of detail. These might cover notrump bidding, 2-over-1 agreements, passed-hand auctions and forcing vs. non-forcing sequences.

IV. We open and they compete. List all your opening bids, then add subheads under each for every possible action by the opponents (direct and balancing overcalls, preempts, doubles, cuebids, etc.).

V. They open and we compete. Start with a summary of your style and general requirements for competitive actions. To organize specific agreements, list all the opponents' opening bids, then add subheads under each for all your actions – doubles, all levels of overcalls, preemptive jumps, cuebids and other conventional calls.

You may want to organize some types of competitive bidding into separate sections. Topics might be balancing auctions, conventional doubles, defenses to their conventional openings, and agreements after the opponents bid and raise a suit.

VI. Other agreements. This is a catchall for anything not covered in other sections or that you believe warrants a separate heading. Topics might be slam bidding, special doubles and other conventions.

VI. Leads and carding. Set up headings for opening leads (with subheads for suits, notrump and slams), subsequent leads, count and attitude signals, and special carding (trump echoes, etc.). Deal with style issues here, too – the types of auctions where you want to adopt aggressive or passive strategies, under what circumstances you tend to give or withhold signals, when suit-preference meanings should apply.

Addendum: A valuable addition is an idea borrowed from world champions Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell. Their system notes, which run hundreds of pages, include sections titled "Stuff Jeff forgets" and "Stuff Eric forgets". These pages summarize agreements that each partner has difficulty with or has forgotten in the past. Write up a page (or two) for your partner and have him do the same for you, then move them to the top of your notes, ready for quick and frequent review.

Formatting tips

- Be brief. Abbreviate whenever possible, and skip routine responses and rebids. Focus just on your non-standard agreements.
- Add example auctions and hands to illustrate complex sequences.
- Adopt a consistent formatting scheme. Use different fonts, point sizes and type styles (bold, italic, underline, boxes) to identify heads, subheads, style statements, examples, etc.
- Use tabs and white space to create clear visual structures for long auctions – opener's bid is flush left, each responder action is indented one tab stop, opener's rebids after each response are indented two tab stops.