

What's Standard?

Grant Basic — by David Lindop



This is the second article in this series discussing what is meant by “standard” in reference to modern bidding methods. The first can be found at www.audreygrant.com.

In the previous article I suggested there really is no such thing as “Standard American” today. Having said that, most players want some guidelines on the methods to adopt when playing with their peers.

In this article, I’m putting forward what I consider to be the basic methods that most players should be using. I’m calling this Grant Basic since it follows the approach in Audrey Grant’s (latest) series on bridge basics. These methods have been reviewed by an advisory panel of experts and represent what the majority of teachers are likely to be presenting to students.

The Basic Principles

Many players do not want to spend too much time on bidding. The focus is on play and defense. The auction is only a means to an end ... to try to reach a reasonable contract. Whether the contract will actually be made depends on the lie of the cards and the skill of the declarer and the defenders. So, we only need to be in the right ballpark, not the “perfect” spot on each deal.

The conclusion from this is that we should keep the bidding as simple as possible — no exotic memory-intensive conventions for those who just want to “play cards.”

In the end, it’s only through the play of the cards that bidding concepts begin to make sense. Terms such as ‘playing tricks’ and ‘hand valuation’ are much easier to understand once we have actually played for a while.

The 80/20 Principle, sometimes known as Pareto’s Law, argues for keeping things simple. Applied to bridge, it can be interpreted as

getting to a reasonable contract 80% of the time using only 20% of the bidding methods available to us. The other 80% of the methods we might learn will be useful on only 20% of the deals we encounter. So, let’s focus on that basic 20%!

We want to keep bids as natural as possible. Whether an opening bid of 2♦ is weak or strong is not as important as the fact that it shows diamonds. So, we don’t want to start off with multi-2♦ or Flannery.

On the other side, we don’t want to have to “unlearn” too many familiar concepts. So, if we’re going to adopt weak two-bids — and it’s difficult to be ‘modern’ if we don’t — we have to introduce some artificiality right away, namely the strong 2♣ opening.

When forming the basic methods, we want to leave things open-ended so that more advanced concepts will fit in nicely at a later point. It is also important to build flexibility by emphasizing that all the bidding methods are guidelines, not rules.

An Overview

With the preamble out of the way, what are we left with as our basic approach. The chart on the opposite page provides a more detailed summary, but here is a quick outline of the main features:

- Strong (15-17) 1NT
- Five-card majors
- Weak two-bids
- Limit raises
- Preemptive bids in competition

The only ‘conventions’ are:

- Strong artificial 2♣ opening
- Stayman
- Blackwood
- Negative doubles

Some Comments

Since much of this will also be part of Grant Standard, a discussion of most features can wait until then, but here are some observations.

1) Notrump range

- 15-17 is by far the most popular range in North America and on the Internet. A range of 14⁺ to 17 is used to avoid nitpickers who complain about 1NT openings that don’t fall into the 15-17 high-card point range. Many players add a point for a five-card suit (which I recommend) and upgrade hands with lots of 10’s and 9’s. Hand #2 in this month’s *Point of View* shows a similar opinion from our expert panel.
- 20-21 for 2NT is common when using weak two-bids and a strong artificial 2♣ opening.
- There’s no need to open 3NT since 22+ hands can be opened 2♣. Leaving a 3NT opening undefined is an example of the ‘open-ended’ concept.

2) Five-card majors

- Five-card majors are about as standard as we can get today. For the basic system, we can ignore occasional four-card openings in third or fourth seat.

3) Weak two-bids

- These are also a staple in today’s game. Even for new players, they are easy to learn since they go hand-in-hand with three-level preempts.

4) Limit raises

- Limit (11-12) raises overtook forcing jump raises (13+) many years ago.
- There is no forcing raise shown for major suits. Essentially, we simply ‘avoid’ a 2NT response to a major suit for now.
- Players learn to ‘get to game’ with a fit for opener’s major and 13 or more points. So, a jump to game is reasonable, or the more classic approach of bidding a new suit followed by a jump to game.
- There is also no forcing raise over a minor (nor is there one in the Standard American Yellow Card).

- The structure for 1NT, 2NT, and 3NT responses to a minor suit is the most straightforward one, even if it is a bit of a compromise.

5) **Preemptive bids in competition**

- The modern style is very preemptive, so weak jump overcalls and weak jump raises in competition might as well be part of the basic approach. After all, weak jump raises after a takeout double have been ‘standard’ for a long time.

6) **Strong 2♣ opening**

- With the popularity of weak two-bids, this has become an integral part of the modern approach.

7) **Stayman**

- Stayman is both useful and something that comes up quite frequently.
- It is typically the first convention most players learn.

8) **Blackwood**

- Blackwood is misused more often than not, but is still considered a convention ‘everyone’ should know.

9) **Negative doubles**

- The modern trend is to treat doubles for takeout unless they are specifically defined as penalty. So, we might as well go with the flow.
- The trend is also to use negative doubles through at least 3♠, rather than 2♠.

10) **Leads**

- Leading ace from ace-king is popular enough that we can always lead the top of touching cards.

Does It Work?

My experience indicates basic methods can be very effective. It’s more important for partners to be comfortable with their agreements than to have a lot of gadgets.

One of the first times I played with Audrey was in a World Mixed Pairs championship. The only convention we played was Stayman; no Blackwood, no transfers, no negative doubles! I remember one

deal we played against world champion Benito Garozzo, playing with Lea Dupont. I opened 1♥ and Audrey raised to 5♥. “What’s that?” asked Benito. “Too much for game; not enough for slam,” I replied. I passed and we got a good result. Many pairs, using more exotic methods, had a challenging time and got to a poor slam.

Another time, I was at the North American Championships having just been eliminated from a major event. I ran across New York expert Henry Bethe, who had obviously suffered a similar fate. We decided to play in a side event and agreed to play no conventions ... not even Stayman this time. We had an enjoyable and relaxing game ... and won handily.

Basic methods are fine. Put the focus on play and defense.

Convention Card

Although the chart covers the essentials of Grant Basic, completion of the standard convention card is required at some clubs and at all tournaments. A copy of a completed card can be found at www.audreygrant.com, along with a copy of this chart. They can be downloaded and printed.

Next issue, we’ll move on to “Grant Standard.”

GENERAL APPROACH: GRANT BASIC	
OPENING BIDS	RESPONSES
1NT: 14+ to 17 (can include 5-card major)	2♣: Stayman 3♥/3♠: 5+ cards, forcing 3♣: Stayman
2NT: 20 to 21 (with 22-24 open 2♣ and rebid 2NT; with 25-27 open 2♣ and rebid 3NT)	
1♥/1♠: 5+ cards	jump raise (3♥/3♠): invitational
1♣/1♦: 3+ cards	jump raise (3♣/3♦): invitational 1NT: 6-10; 2NT: 11-12; 3NT: 13-15
2♣: 22+ if balanced; 9+ tricks if unbalanced	2♦: waiting
2♦/2♥/2♠: 5-11 points; good 6-card suit (usually)	2NT or new suit: forcing raise: signoff
3♣/3♦/3♥/3♠: preemptive; good 7-card suit (usually)	new suit: forcing
SLAM CONVENTIONS	
4NT: Blackwood (after suit agreed)	5♣: 0/4 aces; 5♦: 1; 5♥: 2; 5♠: 3
4♣: Gerber (after natural 1NT/2NT)	4♦: 0/4 aces; 4♥: 1; 4♠: 2; 4N: 3
COMPETITIVE BIDDING	
Simple Overcall: 7-17 (usually)	jump raise: weak new suit: non forcing (constructive) cuebid: forcing (one round)
Jump Overcall: preemptive	
Notrump Overcall: 15+ to 18	2♣: Stayman
Double: Takeout of opponent’s suit opening through 4♥	
RESPONDER’S ACTIONS AFTER INTERFERENCE OVER 1♣/♦/♥/♠	
After an overcall:	Jump raise: weak Negative (takeout) doubles through 3♠
After a double:	Jump raise: weak New suit at one level: forcing New suit at two level: non forcing Redouble: 10+ points
LEADS	
VERSUS SUIT CONTRACTS	VERSUS NOTRUMP CONTRACTS
Top of touching high cards (A-K-x)	Top of solid sequence (K-Q-J-x)
Top of a doubleton (Z-x)	Top of broken sequence (Q-J-9-x)
Otherwise low (fourth highest)	Top of interior sequence (K-J-10-x)
(Avoid leading low from an ace)	Otherwise low (fourth highest)
SIGNALS	
Attitude: high cards are encouraging; low cards are discouraging.	
Count: high-low shows even number; low-high shows odd number.	
Suit Preference: high card is preference for higher-ranking suit; low card is preference for lower-ranking suit.	