

What's Standard?

by David Lindop

This series is based on Grant Standard, a set of conventions and agreements that are in popular use today, such a 15-17 1NT openings, five-card majors, and weak two-bids. A summary chart of Grant Standard and the corresponding convention card can be found at www.AudreyGrant.com. The site also has Grant Basic, a simpler set of agreements.

Earlier articles in this series appeared in the Bridge Bulletin and can also be found under 'Articles' at www.AudreyGrant.com.

When the opponents have opened the bidding, we have two ways to come into the auction: an overcall or a double. Each of these comes in a variety of forms, so let's start with one of the most straightforward, the *simple overcall*. By 'simple' we mean a natural, non jump overcall.

The Grant Standard guideline for overcalls is quite brief:

SIMPLE OVERCALL
7-17 (usually)

That gives us quite a bit of leeway, so let's take a deeper look.

Reasons for Overcalling

There are several reasons for getting into the auction whenever possible.

- 1) **The contract may belong to our side.** Even though the opponents have opened, we may still hold the majority of the strength or better distribution.
- 2) **We may push the opponents to an uncomfortable level.** If the opponents are resting in 2♥ and we bid 2♠, they now have to choose between defending 2♠ and bidding on to 3♥. 3♥ may prove more challenging to make.
- 3) **We take bidding room away from the opponents.** Interfering

The Simple Overcall

with the opponents' auction may cause them to bid too much or too little or to reach the wrong contract. The more room we take away the better. If the opening bid is 1♦, an overcall of 1♥ doesn't take away much room, but an overcall of 2♣ takes away responder's opportunity to bid 1♥, 1♠, or 1NT.

- 4) **We may help our side defend.** If we don't win the auction, the more partner knows about our hand, the easier it will be to defend. Our overcall might get partner off to the best opening lead.

Reasons Not to Overcall

There's also a downside to entering the auction.

- 1) **We may get penalized.** When we overcall, responder is well-placed to decide what to do, having heard partner's opening bid. We may become trapped between the two opponents and be doubled for penalty. Even undoubled, we may simply go down instead of letting the opponents go down.
- 2) **We give the opponents more options.** If we overcall, responder can now pass, double, or cuebid. This may allow responder to better describe the hand than if we had passed and let responder bid.
- 3) **We give away information.** If we don't win the auction, declarer may have a better idea how to play the contract.

On balance, the advantages tend to outweigh the disadvantages. It's difficult for the opponents to double for penalty at low levels, for example. Most doubles are for takeout. So today's players tend to be aggressive.

Good Suit or Good Hand?

At one time, the main criteria for overcalling was a 'good' five-card or longer suit. The longer and stronger the suit, the less likely the opponents will double for penalty. The better the suit, the more 'lead directing' value if the opponents win the auction.

The modern style, however, is to **overcall with either a good suit or a good hand, or both**. For example, suppose we are South and East opens the bidding 1♦.

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦			?

This hand has only 7 high-card points but a good suit. Most players would overcall 1♠. It's only a one-level overcall and we would certainly like to suggest that partner lead a spade if partner ends up as the opening leader. Our overcall may prevent the opponents from bidding and making a 3NT contract.

With this hand, we don't have a good suit but we do have a good hand. Most players would overcall 1♠ to get the partnership into the auction. There's more to gain than to lose.

Here we have both a good hand and a good suit. We'd still make a simple overcall of 1♠. The range for a one-level overcall is quite large, about 7-17 points.

This hand has 7 high-card points and a five-card suit, but the suit is poor. Most players would not risk an overcall with this hand. With such a poor suit, the opponents may double us for penalty. If we don't buy the contract, we don't really want to suggest that partner lead a heart. If we pass, the auction isn't over.

♠	A Q J 9 5
♥	8 3
♦	9 2
♣	7 6 5 4

♠	J 9 6 5 3
♥	8 3
♦	A Q
♣	A Q 5 4

♠	A Q J 7 6 3
♥	8 3
♦	K Q
♣	K 10 4

♠	10 4
♥	Q 8 7 6 3
♦	Q 9 5
♣	K 8 3

Five-Card Suit?

If we overcall, partner will expect a five-card or longer suit. We are suggesting a trump suit. If we wanted partner to choose the suit, we would probably make a takeout double.

However, we might occasionally overcall at the one level with a strong four-card suit. If the bidding is opened 1♣ ♠ 7 4 on our right, we might choose to overcall 1♥ with this hand. It's unsuitable for a takeout double but we would like to get into the bidding, perhaps before the opponents find a spade fit.

Overcalling a four-card suit is similar to occasionally opening with a four-card major in third or fourth position. Partner and the opponents won't expect it, but it's good to mix things up a little.

The Two Level or Higher

Although we can be fairly free with our one-level overcalls, partner will expect both a good suit and a good hand for an overcall at the two level or higher—the values for an opening bid or better. The danger is increased because the opponents will be more willing to defend, perhaps doubled, at a higher level, especially if we've backed them into a corner by taking away their bidding room.

Also, since an overcall covers a wide range, our partner may have to act with some values. That's okay after a one-level overcall since we may be able to escape at the two level. If partner bids after our two-level overcall, we are likely headed for the three level or higher.

Suppose we are South and East opens 1♠.

WEST NORTH EAST SOUTH
1♠ ?

This hand is a sound overcall of ♠ 9 3 2♥. We have a ♥ K Q 10 9 7 3 good suit and ♦ A Q 5 would have opened ♣ 7 2 the bidding 1♥ if East had passed. We're unlikely to get into trouble and the deal may belong to our side.

With this hand, an overcall of 2♣ would be very risky. Our suit isn't so great and we have a borderline opening bid at best. Better to pass for now and await developments.

After Both Opponents Bid

There's nothing to stop us from overcalling after both opponents have bid, but we should consider the level, listen to the bidding, and consider the vulnerability. It's safer to overcall if the opponents have found a fit than if they have not. If they have found a fit, they are more likely to bid higher than to double us for penalty. If they don't have a fit, we may have just given them the option of doubling for penalty.

Suppose we have this hand as South. We'd certainly want to overcall at the one level with 1♠ if we have the opportunity, but what if the auction starts this way:

WEST NORTH EAST SOUTH
1♥ Pass 2♣ ?

An overcall of 2♣ would be risky, especially if our side is vulnerable. The opponents likely have the majority of strength, given West's opening bid and East's new suit response at the two level. They don't necessarily have a fit, so they might be quite happy to double us for penalty.

Now suppose the auction begins like this:

WEST NORTH EAST SOUTH
1♥ Pass 2♥ ?

Overcalling 2♣ carries less risk. Although West could still have a strong hand, East's strength is limited to about 6-10 points and the opponents have found a fit. The hand could belong to our side and, even if we are in a poor contract, the opponents are more likely to bid on to 3♥ than to double us for penalty at the two level.

We need a lot less to overcall at the two level or higher when we are in the balancing position.

Suppose the auction begins:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♥			Pass
2♥	Pass	Pass	?

We hold this hand. We didn't overcall 1♠ with such a poor suit and not a very good hand. It's relatively safe to bid 2♠ now, however. We are in the *balancing position*—if we pass, the auction is over.

The strength of both opponents is limited since they have stopped in partscore. We can assume partner has some of the missing strength. If we bid 2♠, we might make it or we might push the opponents higher.

Too Strong to Overcall

At one time, we could make a jump overcall with a hand too good for a simple overcall. The modern style, however, is to use jump overcalls to show weak hands with a long suit. Instead, with a hand too strong for a simple overcall—about 18 or more points—start with a takeout double.

Partner will assume we are making a normal takeout double, but when we then bid our suit, we will be showing this type of hand. Suppose we are South and East opens 1♦.

WEST NORTH EAST SOUTH
1♦ ?

This hand has 18 high-card points plus 2 length points for the six-card heart suit. That's too much for a simple overcall of 1♥. So, we start with a double. Partner will likely bid 1♠ or 2♣. We then bid 2♥ to show a hand too strong to overcall 1♥. Our 2♥ bid is not forcing, but it is highly invitational.

7-17 points for an overcall and 18+ points for a double is only a guideline. This hand has 17 high-card points plus 1 length point for each five-card suit. The hearts aren't that great, so some players would settle for an overcall of 1♥ rather than starting with a double. ♦