

Penalty Doubles

Knowing when to make a penalty double is a necessity if you want to play winning bridge. Many newer players are so afraid of doubling a makeable contract they don't double nearly often enough.

Some things to consider before making a penalty double are

- your holding in the opponents' suit
- the vulnerability
- whether you can defeat the contract for more than the value of any contract you could bid.
- whether you have any surprises for the opponents (length in their trump suit or trump honors over declarer, for example)
- point distribution

How do you know when you should consider making a penalty double?

- The opponents have struggled into a game contract with every appearance of having strained their resources to the limit.
- You know the hand will play badly for declarer.
- You know your side has at least 23 HCPs and the opponents have bid to the three level or above. Note: If each side has 18-22 HCPs, only double if you expect to set the contract at least 2 tricks.
- You and your partner have game values, have bid to a presumably makeable vulnerable game and your opponents have sacrificed at the 5 level.

How do you know if partner's double is intended as a penalty double? Assume partner's double is a penalty double if

- There are fewer than 2 unbid suits.
- You're in a competitive auction (both sides are bidding) and the opponents have bid game or beyond.
- You've made a preemptive bid and an opponent has overcalled.
- You know your side has the majority of the HCPs and the opponents have bid to the 3-level or above.

When should you NOT make a penalty double?

- When opponents have a suit to run to that you can't double.
- When a double would give away the location of trump length or honors that would help declarer play the hand.
- When partner will interpret the bid as something other than a penalty double. For example, in the auction 1♣ - 2♣ - ?, you can't double for penalties, no matter how many good spades you have because partner will interpret it as a negative double and bid. If you can't bid a NT game, you must pass and hope partner reopens with a double, which you can pass.
- If you're not sure whether to bid on or double in a competitive auction, and you're not in the pass-out seat, leave the decision to partner. For example, in the auction 1♠ - 2♦ - 3♦ - 4♦ - 4♠ - 5♦ - ? , if you don't have anything more than you already told partner with your 3♦ limit raise (i.e. HCPs, distribution, opponents' trump) and aren't sure whether to double or bid 5♠, pass.

Low Level Penalty Doubles

According to Larry Cohen, "When in doubt, assume a low-level double is anything but a penalty double." However, if you know you and your partner have a majority of the points and at least 6 cards between you in the opponents' suit or four good cards in the opponents' suit in your own hand, you can consider a penalty double at the two level. A double at the one level is (almost) never for penalties.

What can my partner contribute?

When considering making a penalty double, it can be important to know how many defensive tricks your partner might take. The bidding can help. If...

- partner overcalled at the one level (6-9 HCPs) = 1 defensive trick
- partner overcalled at the 2 level (10-12 HCPs) = 2 defensive tricks
- partner opened one of a suit (13-15 HCPs) = 3 defensive tricks
- partner opened 1NT, or doubled and then bid her own suit (16-18 HCPs) = 4 defensive tricks
- partner opened 2 clubs or 2NT (19-22 HCPs) = 5 defensive tricks

More "Rules" for Penalty Doubles

Mel Colchimaro's Rule of Nine

1. Take the level of the contract.
2. Add the number of the opponent's trump suit you hold.
3. Add the number of honors you have in that suit.
4. If it comes to nine, DOUBLE!

Beware of doubling with highly distributional hands, no matter how many HCPs you have. If your hand is distributional, chances are your opponents' hands are as well.

Don't double a freely bid slam unless you're sure you can set it in your own hand.

If more than 80% of your doubles work, you aren't doubling enough.