

Guide for School Bridge Assistants

This guide is designed to support you in the rewarding role of introducing bridge to pupils and/or schoolteachers. Whether you're helping teachers develop their skills so they can share bridge with their own classes, or working directly with young people in the classroom, the principles and approaches outlined here will help you create engaging, enjoyable learning experiences. In the guide we use 'students' to refer to the learners whether they are pupils or schoolteachers.

Our methods are based on successful programmes from various countries including Denmark, Norway and the USA. By focusing on fun and gradual learning, you'll help create an environment where everyone – whether they're a teacher learning to teach bridge, or a pupil discovering the game for the first time – feels comfortable exploring this fascinating game at their own pace.

When conducting school bridge courses, a model often involves a 2-3-hour introduction (practical demo taking tricks) which is followed by several lessons, typically 1-1.5 hours long. There is usually one person responsible for teaching and then additional assistants, ideally one per table. As students become more familiar with bridge, fewer assistants are needed, but having one per table is always optimal.

Introduction Day: The introduction day can be a stand-alone event or the start of a short or extended course. *It is essential to remember that the goal is NOT for students to learn to play bridge immediately.* Instead, they should experience what bridge is, learning that it requires a lot of thinking while having fun, staying active, and making their own decisions.

Objectives - by the end of the course:

- Students should be able to complete a game according to the rules, both with and without trumps.
- Students should understand that bridge consists of two parts: bidding (which we'll do later) and playing the cards (which we'll do now).
- Students should be familiar with basic bridge terms like "declarer," "leader," etc.
- Students should know about score comparison in bridge.
- Students should understand table etiquette.
- Students should recognise the importance of partnerships and teamwork.
- Students should grasp the concept of honour points and understand how bidding exchanges information with a partner.

Methodology

When teaching children and young people, two key principles apply:

1. Active Participation

Students learn much better when they are active and engaged. Keep lectures to a minimum and instead give them the cards to handle directly.

2. Encouraging Reasoning

Students learn better when they figure things out for themselves. Ask questions instead of providing answers. While it can be tempting to jump in with explanations, both as a teacher and an assistant, it is crucial to resist the urge and let them explore.

The focus of the bridge introduction is not about mastering the game but about giving students a taste of the game, encouraging them to think for themselves, make decisions, and gain a sense of what bridge is about.

Tips for Teaching Students

When introducing bridge to students for the first time, remember that all technical terms will be entirely new to them. In bridge, many terms can have multiple names, such as "no trump" and "trumps" or "dummy" and "the table." Decide on the terminology you will use and stick to it throughout the session. Try to ensure all students understand what each term means every time it is mentioned.

- When laying out the cards, say, "This is what we call the dummy." What experienced players take for granted might as well be in a foreign language for Students.

Avoiding Common Pitfalls

- Avoid trying to make everyone happy by answering every question. It can waste time, lead to tangents, or introduce topics too advanced for the current lesson.
 - Be prepared to say phrases like:
 - "We'll get to that later."
 - "We won't cover that today as there isn't enough time."
 - "That comes after you've learned more."
 - "I'd love to talk about that during the break—come find me."
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As an Assistant, Remember:

- Let students play themselves. They learn from their mistakes. If a student has points to bid game but doesn't, it's okay. When they see their 170 score against others' 420, they'll adjust next time.
 - Intervene only if the game stalls or if a player asks directly. Even then, don't provide the solution—guide them on how they can figure it out.
 - Never play a card for them. Provide strategic advice, but let them make the decisions.
 - Avoid labelling actions as wrong or foolish. There are no silly or unnecessary questions.
 - Repetition is okay. Students can ask the same thing multiple times.
 - Do not monitor individual hands too closely. For example, don't check who played what in each trick.
 - Don't instruct them to draw trumps. If their winners are trumped, ask if they think they could have prevented it.
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It can be challenging to resist saying too much, but as a rule, say as little as possible.

Have fun! Teaching bridge to young people is the most enjoyable job in the world.

Practical tips for assistants on a short course in bridge

- Ideally: One assistant per 3-4 participants. Actively participate in the game. The assistant may also play at the table whilst helping to make up four players for each table, so ideally no-one is left to watch. If there is a player left over to watch, they could sit next to another player so they play together rather than more passively watching.
- You have 3 tasks – make sure the rules of bridge are being (loosely) followed, ensuring students are having fun, and (least important of all) that you correct 1-2 errors they make at the end of each play of the deal.
- Learn the names of the students
- Don't point out glaring errors (overruffing your partner's trick, for example), unless that is the point of the lesson
- Make sure they are having fun!
- Ask questions instead of telling the answer.
- Fix only the most necessary (one or two errors **maximum**). You learn most from your own mistakes.
- Once the play is finished, comment on one or two things the students can improve. Show with the cards.
- Speak English (i.e., avoid bridge jargon). Use only terms that have been reviewed. Phrases such as "jack fourth" or "the top of a sequence" makes no sense to them!
- If there are 3 students at a table, you can play as the 4th. Always switch places in each game so that you become dummy yourself.

Practicalities

Tips for Card Handling at the Table

The card-handling exercises are generally numbered; they are designed across the four suits to minimise the number of decks needed per session for preparation.

We recommend preparing the cards for each session's diagrams in soft plastic wallets, on which you should stick blank labels on all four flaps. For each lesson, you can then write the handling number in pencil. This will save you time.

The First Contact with Students is Crucial

This initial discovery session is not, as one might think, the easiest of the year. Moreover, you may feel somewhat unsettled by the content we propose. To help you prepare, we invite you to read these few lines carefully.

It is important that all members of the team are present; this is the day when students need the most guidance.

Note: 16 students in a room should be the maximum. If there are more, you should request a second room, even for the first session.

- **Prepare the Room in Advance**
To avoid unnecessary agitation, set up the room before the students arrive: pair tables together and place four chairs around each. Some of you may have the privilege of being in a common room, but in most cases, you'll be using a standard classroom. It's essential that students feel, as soon as they enter, that this is not just another lesson!

- **Skip the Long Speech**
Don't prepare a grand speech; children haven't come to listen to you talk; they've come to play, and to start playing right away. Keep your speeches to 5-10 mins to maximise play time!
- **Focus on Action**
Remember, don't explain what you're going to do—have them do it, explaining step by step as you go.

Teacher/Volunteer exercises (to practice teaching style)

Exercise 1 – take a trick

Individual Exercise

Purpose: Resolve tensions. Learn about tricks. Learn to mark the tricks correctly. Speed up the game. Look at what takes tricks (high cards (honours), long suit tricks). How many cards does each player get? What is the maximum number of tricks you can get?

Terms: contract, trick, player, lead, long suit (declarer, dummy, leader)

NB: Don't get your partner involved. Don't mix dummy. This is an individual exercise without dummy. They have enough to keep track of, the rest will come later.

The exercise is played without trump. The dealer deals and the player to the left of the dealer plays out to the first trick. When the game is over, turn over the "winning tricks" and see which cards won.

Exercise 2 – take a trick

Exercise in pairs

Purpose: Bridge is a game for pairs. Collaborate with partner - my trick is also your trick. Cooperate. Start to imagine partner's cards together with their own.

Terms: Partner, cooperate, North-South, East-West

Exercise 3 – Finesse (for much later)

Show at the table. Use only one suit, e.g., hearts. Deal the cards, let them play the suit, trial & error.

Try different variations. (a) AQ – xx, (b) Kx – xx, (c) AKJ – xxx, (d) AQJ – xxx, (e) AQT – xxx, (f) KJx–xxx

How does a finesse work? What is the chance of a finesse working?

AND FINALLY...

Thank you for your contribution to youth bridge! We would love any feedback about this guide or the project from you, your volunteers, and the school teachers; we intend to update this guide periodically.

Please send any feedback comments to bamsa@stir.ac.uk

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