

# Mastering Bridge Through Combinatorics: Card Distributions and Strategic Probabilities

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**Abstract**— Bridge, a game of strategy and probabilities, demands players to make informed decisions under uncertainty. From card distributions to play strategies, combinatorics and probability theory play a critical role in optimizing outcomes. This paper explores the mathematical foundations of bridge, focusing on play strategies such as finesses and safety plays, and the probabilistic principles that guide them. By analyzing advanced techniques and heuristic rules, we demonstrate how mathematical concepts are distilled into practical strategies, enabling players to navigate the complexities of the game effectively. The paper concludes by reflecting on how probability-driven strategies can enhance decision-making while maintaining the cognitive balance required during prolonged play.

**Keywords**—Bridge, Combinatorics, Probability, Strategies

## I. INTRODUCTION

Bridge, often referred to as the "ultimate partnership game," is a card game that masterfully blends skill, strategy, and probability. It is more than just a pastime; it's a game of social interaction, requiring players to communicate subtly and work together with a partner to achieve common goals. Unlike purely luck-based games, bridge challenges players to analyze incomplete information, predict opponents' moves, and optimize their strategies, making each game unique and full of surprises.

At the heart of this decision-making lies a rich interplay of mathematics, particularly combinatorics and probability theory. The complexity of bridge arises from the sheer number of possible card distributions and the need to calculate probabilities quickly and accurately during gameplay. While such calculations form the theoretical backbone of strategic decisions, practical application requires simplification. Players rely on heuristics, rules of thumb, and experience to navigate the game effectively.

Beyond its intellectual stimulation, bridge is also an incredibly fun and rewarding game. It brings people together in friendly competition, with every hand offering new challenges and opportunities. The satisfaction of outwitting opponents with clever strategies or executing a perfectly timed play makes bridge a deeply engaging experience.

Moreover, bridge has significant cognitive benefits. It sharpens the brain by exercising memory, concentration, and problem-solving skills. Studies have shown that regular bridge players demonstrate improved cognitive function, including

enhanced reasoning abilities and better decision-making skills. The need to process complex information, work under time pressure, and anticipate multiple outcomes makes bridge an excellent way to maintain mental agility.

This paper delves into the probabilistic underpinnings of bridge, emphasizing play strategies that maximize success. We explore key techniques such as finesses and safety plays, and introduce advanced strategies that combine multiple probabilistic decisions. Additionally, we highlight the development of heuristic rules, which simplify complex calculations and enable players to maintain focus during extended gameplay.

By bridging the gap between theory and practice, this paper aims to provide a deeper understanding of how mathematical concepts enhance decision-making in bridge, offering insights for both enthusiasts and competitive players.

## II. THE GAME OF BRIDGE

### A. Rules

Bridge is a card game played with a standard 52-card deck and involves four players who form two opposing partnerships: North-South and East-West. Each player is dealt with 13 cards, so the entire deck is evenly distributed. The game consists of two main phases: the bidding phase and the play phase.

In the bidding phase, players take turns making bids. A bid specifies how many "tricks" (rounds of play) their partnership aims to win and designates a "trump" suit, which is a special suit that can override others during play. The bidding continues until three consecutive players pass, and the highest bid determines the final contract. The player from the winning partnership who first mentioned the trump suit becomes the "declarer", and their partnership is tasked with fulfilling the contract.



Fig 2.1 Bidding box. Source:

<https://www.simonlucasbridgesupplies.co.uk/product/luxury-walnut-wooden-bridge-bidding-boxes/>

The play phase begins with the player to the left of the declarer leading a card, meaning they place a card face-up on the table. The declarer's partner, known as the “dummy”, lays all their card face-up on the table as well. The dummy does not actively play but instead allows the declarer to make decisions for both hands.

After the first player chooses which card to play from all those present in his hand, all the other players then cover in turn (in a clockwise direction) with a card from their own hand, following the suit of the card lead, if they have a card in that suit. Each round of play, called a "trick", consists of all four players contributing one card in turn. The trick is won by the player who plays the highest card in the lead suit (ranked by A > K > Q > J > 10 > ... > 2), and the winner of one trick becomes the first person to play a card on the succeeding round. If a player cannot follow suit, they may play a card from another suit. If the contract specifies a trump suit, a card from the trump suit beats any card from the led suit.



Fig 2.2 Four players playing bridge; the bottom-right position is the 'dummy' with cards laid face-up on the table. Source:

<https://www.nzherald.co.nz/rotorua-daily-post/news/bridging-the-gap-why-playing-bridge-is-good-for-you-and-fun/4D2O7Z7YCOFGI4CNTOOR66HYU/>

### B. Objectives

The goal of the declarer and their partner is to score points by winning at least as many tricks as declared in the contract, while the opposing partnership, known as “defenders,” tries to prevent them from doing so. Points are awarded based on the success or failure of the contract. Bonus points are given for overtricks (extra tricks won beyond the contract) and penalties for undertricks (fewer tricks won than the contract).

In bridge, the scoring system is categorized into several

categories: **partscore**, **game**, **slam**, and **grand slam**. Each of these represents different levels of accomplishment and comes with significant variations in point rewards. **Partscore** contracts (e.g., 2♣ or 1♥) score modestly, while a **game** (e.g., 4♠ or 3NT) earns significantly higher points due to a game bonus. **Slam** (12 tricks) and **grand slam** (13 tricks) yield massive rewards.

SIMPLE SCORING READY RECKONER (Non Vul)												
CONTRACT DEFEATED :- 50 pts per trick short (regardless of denomination).												
Contract Made			Contract Made			Contract Made			Contract Made			
BID	TRKS	SCORE	BID	TRKS	SCORE	BID	TRKS	SCORE	BID	TRKS	SCORE	
1♣	7	70	2♣	8	90	3♥	9	140	5♣	11	400	
	8	90		9	110		10	170		12	420	
	9	110		10	130		11	200		13	440	
	10	130		11	150		12	230		14	460	
	11	150		12	170		13	260		15	480	
	12	170		13	190		9	400		16	510	
	13	190		8	110		10	430		17	540	
1♦	7	80	2♥	9	140	3	11	460	5	11	460	
	8	110		10	170		12	490		12	490	
	9	140		11	200		13	520		13	520	
	10	170		12	230		4	10	130		14	920
	11	200		13	260		4	11	150		15	940
	12	230		8	120		4	12	170		16	980
	13	260		9	150		4	13	190		17	1010
1♥	7	90	2♠	10	180	4♥	10	420	6	12	990	
	8	120		11	210		11	450		13	1020	
	9	150		12	240		12	480		14	1040	
	10	180		13	270		13	510		15	1060	
	11	210		9	110		10	430		16	1080	
	12	240		10	130		11	460		17	1100	
	13	270		11	150		12	490		18	1120	
1NT	7	70	3♣	12	170	4	13	520	7♠7	13	1440	
	8	90		13	190		13	520	7♥7	13	1510	
	9	110							7NT	13	1520	
	10	130										
	11	150										
	12	170										
	13	190										

Fig 2.3 Bridge scoring chart detailing contract points: green indicates game, blue for slam, and yellow for grand slam.

Source: <https://id.pinterest.com/pin/228417012342637866/>

For example, consider a contract of 3♠+1 (three spades bid, but additional trick is won) versus 4♠== (four spades bid and exactly made). In the first case, 3♠+1 scores 170 points: 140 for the completed 3♠ contract and an additional 30 points for the overtrick. However, 4♠== scores 420 points, as it fulfills a game-level contract and receives a game bonus. This huge difference highlights the importance of bidding accurately to maximize points.

The scoring system in bridge makes strategic bidding critical. Players must balance ambition and realism in their bids, aiming to achieve higher-scoring thresholds like game or slam while considering the risk of penalties for failing to meet their contracts. A sound understanding of the scoring system not only influences bidding but also drives the overall strategy of play.

## III. THE ROLE OF COMBINATORICS

### A. Basic Concepts

Combinatorial is a branch of mathematics that deals with counting (calculating) the number of possible arrangements of objects without having to enumerate all possible arrangements.

Combinations, or the number of ways to choose  $r$  objects from  $n$  total objects, without considering order is:

$$C_r^n = \binom{n}{r} = \frac{n!}{r!(n-r)!} \quad (1)$$

Permutations, or the number of ways to arrange  $r$  objects from  $n$  total objects, where order matters, calculated as:

$$P_r^n = P(n, r) = \frac{n!}{(n-r)!} \quad (1)$$

These foundational principles support probability theory,

which measures the likelihood of specific outcomes. In bridge, combinatorics is essential for understanding card distributions, hand patterns, and the chances of specific holdings during play.

### B. Card Distribution

A standard bridge deal involves distributing 52 cards evenly among 4 players, with each receiving 13 cards. The total number of possible ways to distribute these cards is:

$$\binom{52}{13} \cdot \binom{39}{13} \cdot \binom{26}{13} \cdot \binom{13}{13} = \frac{52!}{(13!)^4} \approx 5.3644 \times 10^{28}$$

where:

- $\binom{52}{13}$  = Number of different hands the first player can receive
- $\binom{39}{13}$  = Number of different hands the second player can receive
- $\binom{26}{13}$  = Number of different hands the third player can receive
- $\binom{13}{13}$  = Number of different hands the fourth player can receive

This number is so large that it's practically impossible to analyze every possible distribution during play. Instead, players rely on recognizing the *hand patterns*. A player's hand in bridge can be described by patterns representing the number of cards in each suit. For example, a 4-4-3-2 hand describes 4 cards in two suits, 3 cards in a third suit, and 2 in the last suit. There are 39 possible hand patterns, ranging from the most balanced, 4-3-3-3, to the most unbalanced, 13-0-0-0.

The most common hand pattern is 4-4-3-2, with the probability of:

$$\frac{\binom{13}{4} \cdot \binom{13}{4} \cdot \binom{13}{3} \cdot \binom{13}{2}}{\binom{52}{13}} = \frac{11,404,407,300}{635,013,559,600} \approx 1.796\%$$

For example, the chance that a given player has four spades, four hearts, three diamonds, and two clubs is 1.796%. For all the 12 possible permutations of suits in 4-4-3-2 hand pattern, the total probability is 12 x 1.796% which equals 21.55 percent. Balanced hands (4-3-3-3, 4-4-3-2, 5-3-3-2) collectively dominate the probabilities, making them the most common hand types.

### C. Outstanding Card

Once the initial hands are dealt, players know their own cards and the dummy cards, leaving 26 unknown cards distributed between the two opponents. Probabilities now shift from total distribution to analyzing the distribution of outstanding cards.

For example, if a player and the dummy card combined hold 7 cards in a suit, the possible combination of the remaining 6 cards distributed between the opponents is 3-3, 4-2, 5-1, or 6-0. With simple combinatorics calculation, the total occurrences of 3-3 distribution are  $\binom{6}{3} = 20$ , the total occurrences of 4-2 and 2-4 distribution are  $\binom{6}{4} \times 2 = 30$ , the total occurrences of 5-1 and 1-5 distribution are  $\binom{6}{5} \times 2 = 12$ , and lastly, for a 6-0 and 0-6 distribution, there are only 2 possible arrangements. Therefore, the probability of 3-3 distribution are  $\frac{20}{20+30+12+2} = \frac{20}{64} = 31.25\%$ , the probability of 4-2 and 2-4 distribution are  $\frac{30}{64} = 46.87\%$ , the probability of 5-1 and 1-5 distribution are  $\frac{12}{64} = 18.75\%$ , and the probability of 6-0 and 0-6 distribution are  $\frac{2}{64} = 3.12\%$ .

$$\frac{2}{64} = 3.12\%$$

However, in bridge, the actual probabilities differ due to the constraints imposed by the sequential dealing process. Combinatorial calculations assume uniform distributions, but in reality, the way cards are dealt creates dependencies, making some distributions more likely than others. For instance, if a player already holds many cards in a suit, they are less likely to receive additional cards in that suit.

The table below reflects these adjusted probabilities, which are derived from observed data and simulations, as detailed in *The Official ACBL Encyclopedia of Bridge*. These values provide a more realistic representation of how outstanding cards are likely to be distributed, enabling players to make informed decisions during play.

Outstanding Cards	Possible Holding	Percentage
2	1-1	52
	2-0	48
3	<b>2-1</b>	<b>78</b>
	3-0	22
4	<b>3-1</b>	<b>49.74</b>
	2-2	40.70
	4-0	9.57
5	<b>3-2</b>	<b>67.83</b>
	4-1	28.26
	5-0	3.91
6	<b>4-2</b>	<b>48.45</b>
	3-3	35.53
	5-1	14.53
	6-0	1.49
7	<b>4-3</b>	<b>62.17</b>
	5-2	30.52
	6-1	6.78
	7-0	0.52
8	<b>5-3</b>	<b>47.12</b>
	4-4	32.72
	6-2	17.14
	7-1	2.86
	8-0	0.16

Generally, when opponents hold an even number of cards, the cards tend to split unevenly—for instance, a 4-2 split is more likely than a 3-3 split. Conversely, when opponents hold an odd number of cards, the cards are more likely to split evenly, such as a 4-3 split for 7 outstanding cards. Extreme distributions, such as 6-0, 7-0, or 8-0, are exceedingly rare, occurring less than 2% of the time. These probabilities are vital for strategic decisions during play, helping declarers and defenders anticipate the likely card distributions and plan their moves accordingly. By analyzing these patterns, bridge players can refine their strategies and improve their performance.

## IV. COMMON STRATEGIES

In bridge, the play phase often requires making decisions based on incomplete information. While probabilities provide a mathematical foundation for evaluating possible outcomes,

strategic techniques such as finesses and safety plays allow players to maximize their chances of success. These methods rely on analyzing the distribution of outstanding cards and applying the principles of combinatorics and probability.

### A. Finesses

A finesse is a technique used to attempt to win a trick with a lower-ranking card when a higher-ranking card of the same suit is held by the opponents. The finesse assumes that the missing high card is with one specific opponent, and its success depends on that assumption being correct.

Consider a common scenario in which the declarer holds ♠A-Q in their hand, while the dummy holds ♠10-9. The goal is to win two tricks in the spade suit without losing to the opponent's ♠K. To attempt the finesse, the declarer plays a low spade from the dummy toward their ♠Q. The RHO (Right-Hand Opponent) plays next and has the first opportunity to play the ♠K if they hold it. If the RHO does not play the ♠K, the declarer's ♠Q wins the trick. If the RHO do play the ♠K, the declarer's wins the trick with using the ♠A. If, however, the ♠K is held by the LHO (Left-Hand Opponent), the finesse will fail, as the ♠K will defeat the ♠Q when it is played on a subsequent round.

The probability of the finesse succeeding depends on the likelihood of the ♠K being held by the LHO versus the RHO. In a typical situation where no additional information is available, the probability is approximately 50%.

### B. Safety Play

A safety play is a declarer technique designed to guarantee the success of a contract, even when the distribution of cards is unfavorable. Unlike a finesse, which seeks to maximize the number of tricks based on probabilities, a safety play prioritizes minimizing risk and ensures that the declarer achieves the required number of tricks to fulfill the contract. By anticipating worst-case scenarios—such as a bad split in the opponents' cards—a safety play sacrifices the potential for extra tricks in exchange for reliability. This defensive approach often becomes critical when a single lost trick could jeopardize the entire contract.

For example, imagine the declarer holds ♠A-Q-9-4-2, while the dummy holds ♠K-6-5-3, and the goal is to win four tricks in spades. If the opponents' spades are divided 3-2, the declarer can easily win all five tricks by drawing trumps normally. However, if the opponents' spades split 4-1 or worse, playing the suit aggressively could lead to losing control and possibly failing the contract. To guard against this risk, the declarer can employ a safety play. On the first round of spades, the declarer leads a low card from dummy toward their hand. If the Right-Hand Opponent (RHO) plays low, the declarer refrains from risking the ♠Q and instead plays the ♠9, keeping high cards like the ♠A and ♠Q intact. This conservative approach ensures the declarer retains control of the suit, even if the split is unfavorable. On subsequent rounds, the declarer can adapt based on how the opponents' cards are revealed, ultimately securing the four tricks needed for the contract.

Safety plays are strategies employed to ensure the declarer fulfills their contract, even at the expense of potential overtricks. These plays are particularly useful when the risk of losing

multiple tricks is significant.

### C. Suit Combinations

Suit combinations are a cornerstone of declarer play, offering guidance on optimizing strategies to maximize tricks. The ACBL Encyclopedia of Bridge provides numerous combinations that illustrate the interplay of probability and technique. One notable example involves holding ♥A-Q-10 in the dummy and ♥J-8-7-6-2 in the declarer's hand, with the goal of maximizing tricks in the suit.

To achieve this, the declarer can finesse depending on the number of missing cards. Suppose the declarer wishes to win four tricks in hearts. The finesse is attempted by leading low from the declarer's hand toward the dummy's ♥Q. If the King is held by the RHO, the finesse succeeds, and the declarer wins four tricks. However, if the King is held by the LHO, the finesse fails. The probability of success for the finesse in this scenario is approximately 50%, assuming no prior knowledge of the opponents' holdings.

Alternatively, the declarer may decide to play for a favorable 3-2 split of the five missing cards, which occurs about 68% of the time. Here, the declarer begins by leading a low card from the dummy and plays to capture the opponents' high cards while maintaining control of the suit. This approach sacrifices the finesse but provides a higher likelihood of achieving the contract when the split is favorable.

Consider another combination, where the declarer holds ♠A-Q-4 and the dummy holds ♠10-9-8-3. The declarer's objective is to win three tricks. The declarer could finesse for the ♠K, aiming for a 50% probability of success, or prepare for unfavorable distributions by catering to a 4-1 split, which happens around 28% of the time. By employing a safety play to minimize the impact of a poor split, the declarer ensures that they can still secure two tricks in the worst-case scenario, avoiding a catastrophic failure of the contract.

Incorporating these examples illustrates the declarer's ability to blend probabilities with strategic decision-making, balancing risk and reward to achieve the optimal outcome. Such scenarios highlight the complexity of suit combinations, where mathematical precision and strategic foresight converge.

## V. ADVANCED STRATEGIES

### A. Probability Play

In bridge, advanced strategies often require the declarer to utilize multiple tactics in tandem, such as combining a finesse with a safety play, to amplify the chances of success. The interplay between these tactics allows for a higher probability of achieving the contract compared to relying on a single approach.

For instance, consider a situation where the declarer has eight top tricks and needs to secure a ninth. A finesse in one suit might have a 50% chance of success, while a safety play in another suit offers an additional way to ensure the contract. By planning these plays in sequence, the declarer increases the overall probability of success, as success can result from either one or both tactics.

Imagine the declarer attempts the finesse first. If the finesse

succeeds, the contract is secured. If the finesse fails, the declarer can fall back on the safety play. In this case, the combined probability of success is calculated as:

$$\begin{aligned} &P(\text{Success}) \\ &= P(\text{Finesse Succeeds}) \\ &+ P(\text{Finesse fails and Safety Play Succeeds}) \\ &= 0.5 + (1 - 0.5) * 0.68 = 84\% \end{aligned}$$

Assuming the probability of the safety play succeeding is 68%, the probability of 3-2 break.

This approach highlights the importance of sequencing tactics in bridge. The declarer doesn't merely rely on isolated probabilities but instead uses them in a complementary fashion to cover more possible outcomes. By combining a finesse with a safety play, the declarer effectively creates a strategy where multiple pathways to success exist, significantly improving the odds of achieving the contract.

Advanced strategies also demand adaptability during play. As new information emerges, the declarer can adjust their plan to maximize the chances of success. This dynamic approach ensures that each tactic reinforces the other, making the overall strategy more robust.

In conclusion, combining tactics like safety plays and finesses is a cornerstone of advanced bridge strategy. By understanding how to sequence and integrate these plays effectively, declarers can amplify their chances of success, transforming challenging contracts into achievable ones.

### B. *Priori Probability*

Strategic decision-making in bridge often incorporates an understanding of priori probabilities and rules governing the unknown distribution of cards. These principles simplify complex calculations and aid players in navigating scenarios effectively.

Prior probabilities form the foundation for estimating the distribution of missing cards among opponents. With no other information, each card is equally likely to be held by any of the opponents. For instance, if there are 13 missing cards, each opponent is initially assumed to have 6.5 cards on average. However, as the play progresses, additional information—such as the cards played—refines these estimates.

One of the guiding principles for handling the unknown distribution is the Rule of Symmetry, which assumes that, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, an even split of missing cards is more probable than an uneven one. For example, if five cards are missing in a suit, a 3-2 split is the most likely, occurring approximately 68% of the time.

While detailed probability tables can appear daunting, mastering a core set of principles suffices for most scenarios. These principles can be adapted dynamically as new information unfolds during play, enabling a more effective strategy. This section outlines essential techniques for integrating probabilities into decision-making, assuming the declarer's perspective in imp scoring.

Probability tables derived from hypergeometric distribution provide a baseline for estimating card distributions. For example, the likelihood of a 3-3 split in a six-card suit is initially 35.53%. Such probabilities are symmetrical; if one defender holds four cards, the other is equally likely to hold two.

However, bridge is a game of incomplete information, and probabilities evolve as cards are revealed. For instance, after the declarer wins the first trick with an ace, the probability of a 3-3 split increases to 35.96%. As defenders claim tricks and the number of unknown cards decreases, the likelihood of a balanced split, such as 3-3, can rise further—to approximately 40% in certain cases.

In scenarios where the defenders' card distribution becomes highly imbalanced, probability adjustments become critical. For example, if East discards on the first spade lead, leaving West with six cards and East with twelve, the probability of West holding four cards in a side suit decreases dramatically—from 24.2% initially to only 5.3%. In such instances, adjusting strategy, such as finessing against East's holding, can improve outcomes significantly.

### C. *Rules Guide and Principles*

Bridge is a game deeply rooted in mathematical probabilities, and several well-established rules guide strategic decision-making based on these calculations. These known rules, documented in resources like the Encyclopedia of Bridge, offer practical frameworks to enhance decision-making.

1. The Rule of 11: This rule helps determine how many cards higher than the lead card are held by other players. Subtracting the lead card's value from 11 reveals how many higher cards remain in the hands of the three other players combined. Declarers and defenders use this rule to infer potential distributions.
2. The Rule of 7: Often used for managing entries in notrump contracts, this rule helps determine how many times the declarer should duck an opponent's lead to maintain control. Subtracting the total number of cards in the suit from 7 provides the optimal number of ducks.
3. The Rule of 20: Used in hand evaluation, this rule advises opening the bidding when the combined total of high card points (HCP) and the number of cards in the two longest suits equals or exceeds 20. This heuristic ensures a reasonable balance of strength and distribution.
4. The Rule of Symmetry in Suit Splits: This principle acknowledges that, in the absence of information, even splits are more probable than uneven ones. For instance, a 3-2 split in a five-card suit is more likely (68%) than a 4-1 split.

These rules are derived from probability analyses and practical experience, simplifying complex scenarios into actionable strategies. By internalizing and applying these guidelines, players can make informed decisions that align with the underlying mathematical structure of the game. While it's not always feasible to calculate probabilities during play, these rules serve as powerful shortcuts, enabling players to focus on the broader strategy without exhausting themselves with computations.

## V. CONCLUSION

Bridge is a game that masterfully combines mathematical precision with human intuition, offering both intellectual

challenge and sheer enjoyment. From foundational techniques such as finesses and safety plays to sophisticated multi-step strategies, the interplay of probability and combinatorics informs every decision at the table. Simplified heuristics, like the Rule of 7, showcase how complexity can be distilled into actionable insights, enabling players to maintain consistency and focus even during extended gameplay.

By mastering these strategies and appreciating their mathematical underpinnings, players not only enhance their own performance but also deepen their understanding of the game's elegance and depth. Beyond its entertainment value, bridge exemplifies the practical application of mathematical principles in dynamic, real-world scenarios. As the game continues to challenge, engage, and inspire players of all levels, its enduring reliance on probability and combinatorics highlights the profound synergy between mathematics and strategic thinking, a partnership that ensures bridge's timeless appeal.

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## STATEMENT

I hereby declare that the paper I wrote is my own writing, not an adaptation or translation of someone else's paper, and is not plagiarized.

Bandung, 8 January 2025



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