



Play & Learn

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The negative double: responder's tool

The guidelines for bidding allow opener's partner, the responder, to bid a new four-card suit on the one level with 6 or more points. When the auction requires responder to go to the two level in a new suit, responder must have a medium hand (a good 10-plus points), and when responder's suit is a major, five cards are required instead of four.

As we saw last month, responder is sometimes unable to find a good bid after an opponent overcalls partner's opening bid. The negative double, a convention used by partnership agreement, lets responder show a major suit when his hand fails to meet one or both of the above requirements.

The basic negative double is quite simple. Following a one-level suit opening bid and a suit overcall, responder's double shows four cards in any unbid major suit. South's negative double in the following auction shows four hearts, the only unbid major.

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1♦	1♠	Dbl

Do not confuse negative doubles with takeout doubles:

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	Pass	1♠	Dbl

Here, South's takeout double is your side's entry into an auction in which neither of you has taken any action other than pass. Takeout doubles show three things: **S**hortness in the opponent's suit, **O**pening strength and

Support for all unbid suits (memory tool: SOS).

Like a takeout double, a negative double is intended to be taken out if it's followed by a pass.

There are differences, too. While either player of a pair can make a takeout double over the opening bid, negative doubles are a tool only for the responder. SOS does not apply. Responder can double without being short in overcaller's suit. Because partner has already opened, responder can afford to make a negative double with substantially less than opening strength – as few as 6 points in the first auction above.

While a takeout double shows support for all unbid suits, a negative double usually shows only the unbid majors. In the first auction above, responder might have clubs as well as hearts, but has not guaranteed them. Responder should have a relatively comfortable resting place in mind should opener be unable to support the major(s) shown by the negative double.

In the first auction, North opens 1♦ and East overcalls 1♠. Why does each of these South hands need to make a negative double to show hearts?

- ① ♠A92 ♥AQJ6 ♦752 ♣Q65
- ② ♠92 ♥AJ62 ♦752 ♣K652
- ③ ♠A92 ♥KJ62 ♦752 ♣K65
- ④ ♠75 ♥AJ874 ♦52 ♣K865
- ⑤ ♠75 ♥AQJ74 ♦KJ85 ♣65

1. Responder has enough strength for game but not the five hearts re-

quired to bid 2♥. Negative doubles have no upper limit, so responder can double to show four hearts. If a heart fit is found, North–South can reach 4♥, which is likely their best game. South's spade stopper makes 3NT a good option if North doesn't have four hearts.

- 2. Here, South doesn't have enough hearts or enough points to bid 2♥. South does, however, have enough to make a negative double. South would have bid 1♥, if possible. To make a negative double after a one-level overcall, responder needs only the same 6 points needed to respond on the one level. If North–South didn't use negative doubles, South would have to pass.
- 3. South has enough points – but not enough hearts – to bid 2♥. If opener can't support hearts, South can rebid 2NT to invite game.
- 4. Now South has enough hearts – but not enough points – to bid 2♥. The negative double lets South compete with a hand that would have to pass 1♠ otherwise.
- 5. Trick question! South doesn't need a negative double here and should not use it. South has enough hearts and enough points to bid 2♥ directly over East's 1♠ overcall.

The negative double gives responder a chance to bid on hands that would otherwise have to pass. We'll give this valuable competitive tool the time it deserves as this series continues. ■