

DOUBLE TROUBLE

Does your partnership ever have misunderstandings as to the meaning of a double?

If you said no, I don't believe you. Experts have such misunderstandings all too often. No single lesson can cover nearly all the situations which might occur (otherwise the experts would get them all right!). This lesson will cover many auctions on which you and your partner *SHOULD* agree.

In old-fashioned bidding, back when takeout doubles had recently been invented (and, I believe, for many years afterwards) the rule was something like this "If partner has bid, the double is penalty. If partner has *not* bid, and the opponents are below game, the double is takeout."

Modern bidding has changed all that. Most modern experts lean toward the opposite default agreement, more like "below game doubles are usually NOT penalty, even if partner has already bid." However, there are exceptions where double is clearly penalty.

Here are some guidelines which I consider standard:

DOUBLES CLEARLY DEFINED AS TAKEOUT

- 1) Double at your first turn to bid, of any natural suit bid through 4♥, when partner has not acted (double of 4♠ discussed later)
- 2) If the bidding starts with 1 of a Suit - P - 1NT - X, this double is takeout of the suit opened. It is not penalty! The same is true after a Weak Two, e.g., 2♥ - P - 2NT - X. This double is takeout of hearts, exactly as if it had been 2♥ - X.
- 3) *Reopening* doubles by the opening bidder
- 4) A double when you have overcalled and partner has not bid. For example:

1♦	1♠	3♦	P
P	<u>X</u>	= Takeout	
- 5) Repeat takeout (or negative) double.

If a player makes a takeout double, then doubles the same suit later, this double is **STILL TAKEOUT**, even if partner has already bid. The logic behind this is that you can't be short in a suit in the beginning of an auction, then suddenly have a trump stack later. For example:

1♥	X	P	1♠
3♥	<u>X</u>		

The second double is still "takeout", showing substantial extra values, but almost certainly with only 3-card spade support (with 4-card support, a bid of 3♠ or 4♠ would make more sense).

DOUBLES CLEARLY DEFINED AS PENALTY

- 1) If partner opens, or overcalls, with a preemptive bid (Weak Two or higher), any double you make is PENALTY. For example:

2♠ - 3♣ - X

This is not a Negative Double. It is strictly penalty; i.e. opener must pass.

- 2) If partner opens with One-of-a-Suit, and RHO overcalls 1NT, Double is PENALTY. For example:

1♥ - 1NT - X

Again, this is not to be confused with a negative double. Responder feels that with what they have and partner's opening bid, 1NT will be set. Usually this means at least 9 HCP, though if your partnership has a lighter opening bid style you might want to have 10 HCP.

It is okay to make penalty doubles of NT based on HCP, while low level penalty doubles of suit contracts need trumps!

- 3) After responder's strength showing redouble any subsequent double by either the responder or opener is for PENALTY. For example:

1♦ - X - XX - P
P - 1♠ - X

The underlined double is penalty. Even at the 1-level, it can be profitable to double for penalty. A redouble is often made with this purpose in mind.

- 4) If your side has made one penalty double, all subsequent doubles by your side are also penalty
- 5) If your side is in a "forcing pass" situation, and therefore a pass would be forcing, double is penalty.
For example:

2♣ - 2♥ - X
OR
1♥ - P - 2♦(GF) - 2♠
X

There is no need for a takeout double when one can pass, knowing partner will bid again. The pass effectively serves as a takeout double.

In the first example, a 2♣ opener will surely bid again.

In the second example, a 2/1 establishes a game force, meaning all passes are forcing until game is reached or the opponents are doubled.

Note: Advanced players use penalty doubles in more situations than above. Some may be "obvious" to experienced players, while others are a matter of partnership agreement.

LEAD DIRECTING DOUBLES

In general, I recommend that doubles of artificial bids are asking partner to lead that suit. The logic is that the opponents are not about to play in this contract, so neither penalty nor takeout really makes sense.

More specifics on Lead-directing doubles are covered in a separate lesson.

“VALUE SHOWING” DOUBLES

When partner opens, and the opponents make an artificial bid (usually Michaels or Unusual NT), a double simply shows VALUES. This is similar in principle to a redouble after the opponents make a takeout double, saying “this is our hand”. It is now expected that your side will either bid on OR double the opponents for penalty.

After a value-showing double any subsequent double by either player is for penalty.

A couple of examples:

	<u>Opener</u>		<u>Responder</u>	
A)	1 ♠	2NT (minors)	<u>X</u>	3 ♦
	<u>X</u>			

Responder’s double of 2NT is “card-showing”, with a minimum of about 10 HCP. Opener’s double of 3 ♦ is Penalty.

If responder had passed over 2NT, opener could not make a penalty double of 3 ♦. In that case, with partner not having acted, double of 3 ♦ would be takeout. Double of 3 ♦ becomes penalty because of the value-showing double of 2NT.

	<u>Opener</u>		<u>Responder</u>	
B)	1 ♣	2 ♣ (Michaels)	<u>X</u>	2 ♠
	P	P	<u>X</u>	

Responder’s first double is card-showing, and her second double is penalty.

Note that the double of the artificial bid in (B) is not lead-directional. This is an exception to the general principle that doubles of artificial bids are lead directing.

NEGATIVE AND RESPONSIVE DOUBLES

The term “negative double” applies when partner opens with ONE-OF-A SUIT, and the next player overcalls with a SUIT bid.

For example:

<u>Opener</u>		<u>Responder</u>
1 ♣	1 ♥	<u>X</u>

This is a classic negative double. In this specific case, most partnerships define the double as showing exactly four spades, as opposed to promising both unbid suits.

While Negative Doubles are “standard”, you and your partner are expected to agree on what level you will use them through. I recommend at least 4 ♦ (I prefer even higher), with an understanding that the higher the level, the less you are promising in terms of length in the other suits (and the more likely it is that partner will pass).

Specifics on what the Negative Double promises, and how to bid after it, are a separate lesson.

Responsive Doubles are made by the fourth player to bid, when LHO has opened the bidding, partner has either doubled or made a simple overcall, and RHO has raised his partner’s suit. A double in this situation is defined as takeout, rather than penalty.

For example:

1 ♥	2 ♦	3 ♥	<u>X</u>
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This double would normally show support for both spades and clubs. More specifics require a separate lesson on “Responsive Doubles”.

Negative and Responsive doubles are pretty much “standard” in modern bidding and not alertable. In general, if a double is either penalty or takeout it is not alertable. The opponents need to ask if they are not sure.

That said, if the meaning is considered unusual enough in context it *is* alertable. In fact if you do NOT use negative doubles and instead use penalty doubles by responder when partner opens 1 of a suit and the opponents overcall, you are actually expected to alert that (at the time of this writing in 2026 anyway).

The alert procedure is complicated and alas, changes every few years.

Doubles after partner opens 1NT

If partner opens 1NT, and RHO overcalls, the old “Standard” definition of Double was Penalty! For example:

1NT	-	2 ♠	-	<u>X</u>
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However, *MOST* experts do use “Negative” Doubles in the above situation. This is a recommended partnership agreement, but is not part of “standard” negative doubles

A FEW COMMON CONVENTIONAL DOUBLES

These are situations where the double is not penalty but has a more specific meaning than “takeout” or “values”

- Support Doubles - A double by the opening bidder to show 3-card support after responder bids a suit at the 1 level
- Maximal Game Try Doubles – A double to make a game try when there is no other room. This is normally after bidding and raising a major

- Snapdragon Doubles – This is a double by 4th hand after three suits have been bid. E.g.

1♦ 1♥ 1♠ X

This double typically shows a doubleton in partner’s suit and five cards in the unbid suit. It is simply a form of takeout double with a cool name.

- Doubles of a 1NT opening:

In “Standard” bridge a double of a 1N opening is Penalty, but there are various popular conventions that define the double otherwise.

Is it Alertable? Non-penalty doubles after the opponents open 1N must be alerted. None of the other conventions mentioned above is alertable.

DOUBLE OF 4♠?

Virtually all experts agree that a double of any opening bid through 4♥ should be takeout. Disagreements abound when discussing 4♠

Note: This section could go on forever – here are just a couple of common situations.

4♠ - DOUBLE?

I’m often asked the question of what a double of 4♠ shows. Truth is there is no good answer. If you define it as strictly “takeout”, what are you going to do when you’ve got a bundle of high cards, but the wrong shape for a takeout double?

On the other hand, if you define the double as strictly “penalty” you force yourself to use 4NT whenever you have takeout distribution. The problem with this is that 4NT commits you to the 5-level, when you are very likely better off defending 4♠ doubled, even with takeout distribution. 4NT is best reserved for 2-suited takeout hands, rather than 3-suited ones.

Imagine holding each of the following two hands and hearing a 4♠ opening to your right:

A) ♠ K62
 ♥ AJ
 ♦ KQ4
 ♣ AQ974

B) ♠ 2
 ♥ KQ53
 ♦ AJ63
 ♣ KQT4

The reality is that most experts would double 4♠ on both types of hands.

When the opponents take away *four* levels of bidding spade, your chance of bidding accuracy has decreased greatly. You do your best.

I recommend that partner bid over this double with a six-card suit or a good 5-card with some shape, especially if 5-5) and pass otherwise. This is oversimplified and vulnerability also matters

One way of thinking about this is to define a double of a suit opening at *any* level as takeout” with the understanding that the higher the level, the more likely partner is to pass. When the alternative is to bid at the 5-level partner will pass more often than not.

A FEW MORE AUCTIONS TO CONSIDER

This section could go on almost literally forever. When either treatment is reasonable, modern style leans toward NOT penalty. My agreement with most partners is:

Below game doubles are not penalty unless

- A) Standard – see page 2
- B) “Obvious” – I wish I could leave this out, but the reality is that there will be situations where nothing else makes sense. Experience helps here.
- C) Specifically Agreed by the partnership

Here are a few examples of auctions where traditionally double would have been penalty but now it isn’t clear. With my regular partners none of these would be penalty.

A) 1♠	P	P	<u>X</u>
2♠	<u>X</u>		
B) 1♦	P	1N	2♥
<u>X</u>			
C) 1♦	2♠	3♦	3♠
<u>X</u>			
D) 1♦	1♥	1♠	2♥
P	P	<u>X</u>	

Example (C) above is called by some a “Thrump” double, as the initial assumption is that it is an attempt to reach 3N if partner has a stopper.

Example (D) above might be better described as competitive than takeout, since the responder is showing extra values but may not be short in the opponents’ suit. As a side note, I find players often cuebid in this type of situation when a double would save space and be more flexible.

Whenever you are in a competitive auction and not sure what to do, always at least consider DOUBLE.