

SAVE YOUR BRAIN AT THE BRIDGE TABLE by Maritha Pottenger

Most people do not realize how much work it is to concentrate for three hours playing bridge. It takes a great deal of mental energy to stay focused for that long. Studies demonstrate that people's brains do get fatigued with thinking (although you can build up your stamina with practice), so one of your goals at the bridge table should be to save your brain as much effort as possible. Here are some ways to do just that.

1. **Remember that the brain finds small numbers easier than larger numbers.** Do not count to 13 when you can be counting to only one or two! Rather than adding up all of the cards in a suit, think in terms of the cards held by your opponents. In your trump suit, the opponents will usually only hold 4 or 5 cards. If they hold 5 cards, simply count to TWO when pulling trumps. They both follow to round 1; they both follow to round 2. There is only one trump remaining. If the opponents start with 4 trumps and both follow to two rounds, all their trumps are gone!
2. Similarly, **when you are developing a long suit, count the cards held by the opposition.** So, if dummy has a six-card suit to the Ace, and you have a singleton, the opponents hold six cards. They are likely to be 4-2 or 3-3. If the opponents follow to 3 rounds of the suit (while you are trumping the 2nd and 3rd rounds), the last 3 cards in the suit are now winners. If both opponents follow for two rounds, and then one opponent show out on the 3rd round, there is one more card in dummy's long suit. If you ruff a 4th round, the last two cards in the suit will be good.
3. **On some hands, Declarer ONLY needs to count tricks.** If you count your tricks and decide the best way to take maximum tricks is on a cross-ruff, don't bother to count anything! Simply cash your side suit (non-trump) winners early and then ruff one suit in dummy and another in your hand, etc. If you count your tricks, and the game going trick can only come from a finesse, don't worry about counting anything else. Either the finesse works or it does not.
4. **On some hands, Declarer only needs to count tricks and ONE suit.** (a) If you are in a no trump contract and you need a 3-3 break in one of two suits, all you have to do is count ONE of the suits. If that suit does not break 3-3 (both opponents follow to 3 rounds), you simply play the other suit and hope! (b) If you count your tricks and the game-going trick requires that you **ruff a loser in the short-trump hand BEFORE pulling trump**, do so. After that, count trump when you do pull them—again only counting to TWO because you are counting the trumps outstanding in the opponent's hands. (c) If you count your tricks and see that **making your contract will require an end play**, you have to count trumps (in order to eliminate them from opponents' hands while retaining at least one trump in your hand and in dummy), but do not have to count other suits. Simply do your elimination homework to eliminate one side suit from your hand and dummy; throw the opponents into the lead in a 2nd side suit which is evenly-divided between your hand and dummy. Opponents will have to do something good for you by leading the 4th suit or giving you a ruff-and-sluff.
5. On some hands, **Declarer needs to count high card points** (and remember the bidding!). This is usually because you have a guess—most commonly the dreaded KJx opposite xx. Counting what high card points have already shown up BEFORE you play the suit, and what each opponent might have promised (or denied) in terms of bidding can help you make a more educated “guess.” Remember someone who fails to open the bidding will not have 13 HCP and usually won't even have 12 HCP. Someone who passes their partner's opening suit bid will not have 6 HCP. If an opponent opens a no trump, and your side gets the contract, you know their high cards within a very narrow range.
6. **On some hands, you may need to count suit distributions throughout the hand.** (Perhaps you have a suit that is KQ10x opposite Axx and you need 4 tricks, but must decide between playing the suit from the top versus finessing for the Jack.) Knowing ahead of time (by counting tricks), that you will need to count distributions helps you with that. **If there is one opponent who is known to have a long suit,**

count that opponent's hand. (It will be easier to count with 5 or 6 or 7 cards already known from the bidding). Once you know one opponent's distribution, you can figure out the other opponent's shape.