

How to play Spades

Spades is a trick-taking card game for four players in two teams of partners. Each player gets 13 cards and bids how many tricks they will win. Spades are always trump. A team that wins at least its combined bid scores 10 points per bid trick; one that falls short loses them. The first team to 500 wins.

Goal

Win at least as many tricks as your team bid, hand after hand, and be the first team to reach 500 points.

Setup

- Four players: you and the partner sitting opposite form one team, the other two form the other.
- A standard 52-card deck. Each player is dealt 13 cards.
- Cards rank from Ace (high) down to 2 in every suit. Spades beat every other suit.

How to play

1. Look at your hand and count your likely winners: high spades, aces and kings.
2. Bid how many of the 13 tricks you expect to win, from 0 (Nil) to 13.
3. Your bid and your partner's bid add up to your team's contract.
4. The first lead is open. Each player plays one card, clockwise.
5. Follow the suit that was led if you can. If you cannot, play any card, including a spade.
6. The highest spade wins the trick; with no spade played, the highest card of the suit led wins.
7. The trick's winner leads the next trick. Play all 13 tricks, then score the hand.

Key rules

How many cards does each player get in Spades?

Each of the four players gets 13 cards, so the whole 52-card deck is dealt every hand. That means there are 13 tricks to win in every hand, and the bids of the two teams are compared against those 13 tricks.

How does bidding work in Spades?

Each player bids the number of tricks they expect to win. Partners add their bids into one team contract. If you hold the ace and king of spades and an ace in another suit, a bid of three is a reasonable start. Deal Circle suggests a bid if you are unsure.

When can you lead a spade?

You cannot lead a spade until spades are broken, which means someone has already played a spade on an earlier trick because they could not follow suit. The only exception is a player who holds nothing but spades: they may lead one.

How is Spades scored?

A team that makes its contract scores 10 points for each trick bid, plus 1 point for each extra trick. A team that wins fewer tricks than it bid is set and loses 10 points for each trick bid. The first team to 500 points wins the game.

What are bags in Spades?

Bags, or sandbags, are tricks won above your team's bid. Each one adds a point, but every 10 bags cost the team 100 points. Bags stop teams from bidding low on purpose, so try to bid close to what you can really win.

What does bidding Nil mean?

Nil is a bid of zero tricks. If the Nil bidder takes no tricks at all, the team scores 100 points. If they take even one, the team loses 100. The partner's bid is scored on its own, and tricks taken by a failed Nil count as bags.

Winning and scoring

Made contract: 10 points per trick bid plus 1 per extra trick (a bag). Set: minus 10 per trick bid. Nil: plus or minus 100. Every 10 bags: minus 100. In the Classic rules of Deal Circle the game goes to 500 points, and a team that falls to minus 200 loses. Casual rules play to 250 with no bag penalty.

Tips

- Count your spades: a long spade suit wins tricks late in the hand even with small cards.
- Aces are near-sure tricks; kings are usually worth about half a trick.
- Watch your partner's bid and help them make it before chasing extra tricks.
- Short in a suit? You can trump it with a spade once you run out.
- When your team is close to 10 bags, aim to make the contract exactly.
- Protect a partner's Nil by winning tricks they might otherwise be forced to take.

Avoid these mistakes

- Bidding every king and queen as a sure trick.
- Leading a spade before spades are broken.
- Ignoring bags until a 100-point penalty arrives.
- Winning a trick your partner was already winning.
- Bidding Nil with the ace of spades or many high cards.

Words to know

Trick: One round in which each player plays one card.

Trump: The suit that beats every other suit; in Spades it is always spades.

Contract: The two partners' bids added together.

Set: Failing to win the number of tricks your team bid.

Bag: A trick won above the team's bid.

Nil: A bid to win no tricks at all.