



Learning the Rules

Poker is almost always played for cash.. Before the game begins, the players should collectively decide on a betting limit . A betting limit keeps the game friendly, and prevents people from gambling mortgages, cars, or spouses away.

Now on to the action! Here are the basic rules, step by step:

First, each player places an ante or “token bet” into the pot before the cards are even dealt. The ante can be anything from a nickel (if you’re a poor college student) to thousands of dollars (if you’re a Vegas high roller). You need an ante because it guarantees that someone will always win something on each hand. You also need an ante because without one, your uncle would be lonely. We’ll wait ...

Once everyone has coughed up his or her ante, the dealer deals the cards face down around the table, starting at the player to his left and continuing clockwise. The dealer (if he’s playing) always deals to himself last. The dealer deals everyone their first card, then goes back around the circle to deal the second, and so on. As soon as everyone has five cards, the remainder of the deck is placed in the middle of the table, and play begins.

Each player looks at his or her cards, and then the first player places a bet. While there are several ways of deciding who bets first, poker novices are best off letting the player directly to the left of the dealer make the first bet. Then on the next hand, the person to his left will bet first, and so on around the table for each new hand.

Players have several options as far as the first round of betting goes. If no one has made a bet yet, you have two choices:

Open : If no betting has begun when your turn comes, you may “open” the pot (an attractive option for you Grateful Dead fans out there). This simply means that you make the first bet (any amount up to the betting limit).

Check : The opportunity to “check” only occurs if no one has yet opened the betting when it comes time for you to decide what to do. When a player checks, it means that he or she doesn’t want to open the betting, but doesn’t want to quit either. It basically means “I’m not going to open the betting, but I’ll stick around and see what happens.”

Now let’s say that someone opens the betting (at some point, it will occur). You now have three choices:

See : When you “see” another player, it means that you match their bet. So if someone bets \$1 and you want to stay in the game, you have to “see” their \$1 by putting \$1 of your own into the pot.

Raise : When you “raise,” it requires you to first “see” the previous bet, and then increase the bet. For example, if the previous person bet a nickel and you want to bet more than that, you would say “I see (match) your nickel, and raise you (increase the bet) another nickel.”

Fold : When someone else opens, you can always jump ship and cut your losses. In other words, you “fold.” The act of folding is to “give up,” place your cards face down on the table, lose whatever you’ve bet so far, and grab a beer. In other words, you give up early and lose your dough. This option is used when you think your hand is too weak to compete. At this point, all the players who haven’t folded are allowed to get rid of the cards they don’t want and take some new cards. A player is permitted to get rid of up to 3 unwanted cards and receive up to 3 new ones from the deck (as long as the player always has 5 cards total). No one sees what anyone else discarded (threw away) or drew (got as a new card). It’s all done face down.

After every player draws 0 to 3 new cards, the betting begins again. You have the option of opening or checking , and once someone opens, you can see , raise , or fold . The game ends when there are no more raises (everyone saw everyone else’s bet), or everybody folds (except for the winner, of course).

Now it’s time for everyone to turn their cards over and see how they fared. The player with the highest hand wins the pot. Some people in this position have been known to laugh maniacally as they scoop up everyone else’s dough. If you do that, your friends will hate you. Thus, we highly recommend it. They’ll get over it.

The only way to stay in the game is to not fold. If you have a bad hand and want out quick, then you’d seriously consider

folding. If you have what you think could be a good hand (if you could take a few new cards and get good ones), then you would seriously consider staying in. If you have an outstanding hand, then you'll definitely want to stay in. BUT you don't want everyone to know you have a great hand, or else they'll all fold, letting you win the tiny ante pot. The trick is to make everyone else bet a lot, and win even more money. It's all about being a good liar and a good actor .

Bluff

"Bluffing" - or pretending to have better cards than you actually do - is a fundamental strategy of the game. A player who bluffs usually bets higher than his/her cards warrant. The desire of the bluffer is to scare the other players out of the hand by making them think he/she is holding phenomenal cards.

Aggressive play

An "aggressive" player is one who bets high early and forces others to abandon their comfort zone. He or she frequently bets the maximum limit and stays "in" until the end. Depending on your skill level, aggressive play can be a quick way to cough up a lot of cash.

Conservative play

A "conservative" player usually bets the minimum and is quick to fold if the cards are not in his or her favor. Conservative play can be a good way to keep more money in your pocket, but many times will not win you big pots. Why? Because if people know that you're a conservative player, they'll bail any time that you bet more than the minimum. A conservative player is often susceptible to the trickery of the bluffer.

Action

What directors usually shout to actors but to poker players, it denotes the amount of betting going on at a given table. In a casino, you may hear a pro player say, "I'm leaving, there's not enough action at this table." That means that not enough money is being risked.

Tell

A "tell" is a mannerism that you inadvertently repeat that lets the other players know how good your hand is. No one EVER wants other people to know their tell, but everyone has one. When you lie, you inadvertently give little clues. A player may wipe his brow when he has a good hand, trying to contain excitement. Another player may grit her teeth when she has a low hand, a nervous reaction to the bluff she's about to make. Whatever it is, you should always try to figure out what the other players' tells are, and you should always try to hide yours. Try to play as stoically as possible, eliminating the possibility that someone will discover your tell. Practice that poker face.

Learn how to bet

Betting smart is the saying to learn there are tricks to minimizing how much you lose and maximizing how much you win at the poker table. After all, a good poker player will still win even if he has bad cards, all because he knows how to bet correctly. Here are some tips:

Don't be scared to fold . One of the more intimidating aspects of the game of poker is how much or how little one should bet. Eventually, as you develop a feel for the game, you will become more knowledgeable about when to bet and when to fold. As a general rule, if you have nothing in your hand, do not expect that later cards will remedy that situation. Feel free to fold frequently. It is better to sacrifice your small early bets than to get into a betting war with a pro.

Keep a poker face . We also can't emphasize enough the importance of keeping a poker face while betting, and not giving any clues about how good (or bad) your hand is. The whole point of the game is to make sure that the opposition haven't got a clue to how good or bad your hand is.

No alcohol . Beware of the affects of alcohol has Travis Tritt says in his famous song about drinking it makes you feel ten feet tall and bullet proof, unfortunately it usually makes you do silly things as well.

Maintain control . The best piece of advice we can give you about betting is to remember the slogan of Gamblers Anonymous 'bet with your head, not over it.' There isn't better advice. Betting within your means will allow the game to remain fun. Remember, very few people make their fortunes playing poker. A lot more lose theirs.

Variations of Poker

Once you've mastered 5-Card Draw, consider trying your hand (forgive the pun) at one of the other countless poker games that are out there. Here are four popular poker offshoots to get you started:

5- & 7-card stud
Texas Hold-em
Omaha Hi & Lo
Video Slot Machine Games

5-card stud & 7-card stud

Is played without the option of trading your cards in for new ones. 5-card stud is played with each player receiving 5 cards, and betting based on the hand in front of them. 7-card stud is played in much the same way except, as the name would indicate, each player receives 7 cards and must make the best 5-card hand possible out of the cards available. These games are usually played with some cards dealt face up so that players can base their bets based on what they perceive to be the strength of other players. More specifically, usually the first two cards will be dealt face down (so only you can see them), then the rest of the cards will be dealt face up, except for the last card. Each time a card is dealt, there's another round of betting. Stud is a popular game because betting is done between every round of the deal, meaning there is the possibility that the pot can get big very quickly.

Hold-em

In Hold-em (also known as Texas Hold-em), each player is dealt two cards face down. At this point betting opens based on the two "pocket cards" that each player holds. After betting is complete, the dealer lays out the flop. The flop consists of several cards dealt face up in the middle of the table, used as community cards. The dealer first lays three cards into the flop, so your initial poker hand will consist of the three flop cards plus your two personal cards. There is a betting round, then another card is added to the flop. More betting, and finally a fifth card is added. The goal is for each player to make the best 5-card hand possible based on his/her two pocket cards and any three cards in the flop. This game can be expensive in a casino, and because of its complexity, should only be played by skilled players.

Lowball

Lowball is a game for the perpetual loser. In this game, the goal is to have the hand of the lowest possible value. In other words, the hand with the high card becomes more valuable than the hand with a royal flush. The perfect hand in a game of 5-Card lowball becomes a 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 7 of varied suits (you would not want 2 - 3 - 4 - 5 - 6 because that is a Straight). Lowball is a great fun game to play with your mates on a Saturday night instead of having a real life.

Video Slot Machine Games

All the previous games are table games, played at either a green felt table in a casino, or at home with your loser friends while the rest of the world is out partying. Thanks to modern technology, however, you can now play poker all by your little ol' self. Casinos offer video poker slot machines, where every hand is assigned a certain payout. It's just like the real game except that instead of all your money going to a live opponent, it goes into a coin slot. Of course, there's one crucial difference: there's no betting involved at all. You put in your money, get your 5 cards, throw out the ones you want and draw some new ones, and your payout depends on what you have in your hand. Video poker is usually an inexpensive, non-threatening way to learn your way around the poker table, just to get a sense of the different hand combinations.