

Poker Guide

So you've seen Rounders, and the idea of taking Matt Damon for everything he's worth seems appealing to you. Or maybe you haven't seen the movie and still find that appealing. Whatever your motivation, you want to learn how to play poker, a time-tested card game that has the distinction of being one of the most ancient forms of gambling. Good for you. But before you strap on the green visor and throw down your life's savings, you're going to have to know when to hold 'em and know when to fold 'em.

Poker, at its very essence, is a simple game, but its countless versions can be quite complex. Texas hold'em is the most popular version but not the easiest one, which is why we're going to focus on 5-Card Draw (a.k.a. "regular" poker), the easiest one for beginners to learn. Later on we'll tell you about some of the other variations of the game, but for now, it's gonna be 5-Card Draw, so you're just going to have to deal. Get it? "Deal?" Sorry.

There are other games that don't require specific skills or knowledge, such as bingo. Nowadays, you can play bingo games online, either for free or for real money, if you'd rather not invest a lot of time in learning different rules and principles.

1. Understand the Cards and their Values

Poker is played with a standard deck of 52 playing cards (except for Ross Perot Poker, which is played with less than a full deck). The cards are ranked from high to low in the following order: Ace, King, Queen, Jack, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2. Aces are ALWAYS high. Aces are worth more than Kings which are worth more than Queens which are worth more than Jack, and so on. The cards are also separated into four suits. The suits are:

- Clubs:
- Spades:
- Hearts:
- Diamonds:

But you already knew that from playing Go Fish, right? The suits are all of equal value, meaning that no suit is more valuable than another. It's a very democratic game.

Each player is dealt five cards. The object of the game is to end up with the highest-valued hand. From best to worst, hands are ranked in the following order:

Royal Flush

Straight Flush

Four of a Kind

Full House

Flush

Straight

Three of a Kind

Two Pair

One Pair

High Card

Royal Flush

This is the most valuable hand in all of poker. A Royal Flush is composed of 10, Jack, Queen, King and Ace, all of the same suit. It's the toughest hand to get.

Examples:

HAND 1:10 J Q K A HAND 2:10 J Q K A

Straight Flush

A Straight Flush is comprised of five cards in numerical order, all of the same suit. It's not allowed to "wrap around," such as Q-K-A-2-3. This is also very rare. If you get two of these in a row, you are cheating. If there are two Straight Flushes at the table, then whichever hand's Straight Flush reaches the highest card value wins. So in the examples below, Hand 2 (which has a King) would beat Hand 1 (which only goes up to 8).

Examples:

HAND 1:4 5 6 7 8 HAND 2:9 10 J Q K

Four of a Kind

Four cards of the same numerical rank and another random card. If there are two or more hands that qualify, the hand with the highest-ranking Four of a Kind wins. In the examples below, Hand 2 would beat Hand 1.

Examples:

HAND 1:6 6 6 6 J HAND 2:Q Q Q Q 3

Full House

Of the five cards in your hand, three have the same numerical rank, and the two remaining card also have the same numerical rank. Ties are broken first by the Three of a Kind, then the Pair. So K-K-K-3-3 beats Q-Q-Q-A-A, which beats Q-Q-Q-7-7.

Examples:

HAND 1:J J J 4 4 HAND 2:5 5 5 A A

Flush

A Flush is comprised of five cards of the same suit, regardless of their numerical rank. In a tie, whoever has the highest ranking card wins. In the example below, Hand 1 (with a King) beats Hand 2 (with a Queen).

Examples:

HAND 1: 2 4 7 J K HAND 2: 5 6 7 8 Q

Straight

Five cards in numerical order, regardless of their suits. Just like with the Straight Flush, a Straight cannot "wrap around." In a tie, whoever's Straight goes to a higher ranking card wins (so in the examples below, Hand 1 beats Hand 2).

Examples:

HAND 1: 7 8 9 10 J HAND 2: 3 4 5 6 7

Three of a Kind

Three cards of the same numerical rank, and two random cards that are not a pair.

Examples:

HAND 1: 10 10 10 3 Q HAND 2: 2 2 2 8 9

Two Pair

Two sets of pairs, and another random card.

Examples:

HAND 1: 7 7 J J 5 HAND 2: Q Q K K A

One Pair

One pair and three random cards. If more than one person has a One Pair, then the person with the highest ranking pair wins.

Examples:

HAND 1: 8 8 5 K 3 HAND 2: 2 2 3 4 5

High Card

If none of the players have anything of value, the player holding the highest-valued card wins, with the 2 as the lowest card, and the Ace as the highest. In the case of a tie, you move to the next highest card, and continue.

Examples:

HAND 1: 2 4 5 10 Q HAND 2: 2 8 9 10 J

{mospagebreak title=Learn the Basic Rules of the Game}

2. Learn the Basic Rules of the Game

Now that you know what it takes to win, we can clue you in on how the game itself is played. Unlike bridge, poker is almost always played for a lofty goal: 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.

{mospagebreak title=Know the Lingo}

3. Know the Lingo

By reading this SYW, your poker vocabulary has already increased tremendously. Still, we don't feel comfortable releasing you to the card sharks without further stepping up your savvy. To avoid getting taken to the cleaners - or having your knees broken over a bad bet - be sure to study up on the following terms:

Bluff

Aggressive Play

Conservative Play

Action

Tell

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

To those in the dating game, this word refers to gettin' busy. To poker players, it denotes the amount of betting going on at a given table. In a casino, you may hear a professional 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.

{mospagebreak title=Bet Smart}

4. Bet Smart

Betting smart may sound like an oxymoron, but there are some 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 rope yourself into a betting war with a seasoned 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 they have NO clues, other than the bets you make.

- No alcohol. When it comes to betting, alcohol can be your enemy. While beer and cigars tend to go hand in hand with poker night, alcohol is not recommended if you're going to play in a casino, especially if the stakes are a little higher. Newsflash: Alcohol makes you lose your inhibitions. If you suddenly find yourself betting the limit on a pair of twos, you've had too much to drink. Stick to Fresca.

- Maintain control. The best piece of advice we can give you about betting is to bet with your head, not over it. This is the slogan for Gamblers Anonymous, and it couldn't be more true. 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. We don't mean to get preachy here, but we don't want you to pawn your high school ring to pay the phone bill. We've seen it happen, and it ain't pretty.

{mospagebreak title=Some Variations of the Game}

5. Some Variations of the Game

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

5-card stud & 7-card stud

Hold-em

Lowball

Video Slot Machine Games

5-card stud & 7-card stud

Despite the name, stud is not played with singer Tom Jones. Instead, it 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 fun game to play around the kitchen table with some buddies. If you like that sort of thing.

Video Slot Machine Games

The above versions are all 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 (and eventually reaches Donald Trump). 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. Or you can just rent Rounders over and over again. Look out, Matt Damon.

One last word: before you hit it rich, keep in mind that while poker is great fun, many people get completely out of control while playing. Many people bet way more than they can afford. So if you feel that you are developing a gambling problem, then contact Gamblers Anonymous.