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## Texas Hold'em – The Basics

*This chapter explains the rules, hand rankings, and the relative value of the various hands. Also, hand elements, such as kickers, what a drawing hand is, and terms such as inside straight and flush draw.*

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**Hot tip**

Note that the blinds count towards the first bets of the players who posted them. For example, if you posted a small blind of \$2 at a \$5.00/10.00 table, the other players have to bet at least \$5. On your first bet, however, you only have to bet \$3 as you have already bet \$2. From then on, you have to bet the same minimum amount as the others.

**Hot tip**

The dealer button passes to each player in turn. The player to the left of the big blind (third from the dealer button) is the first to make a move when the betting starts.

## How to Play Texas Hold'em

Texas Hold'em is the most popular of the various poker games, the extensive television coverage it receives probably being the main reason. Another is the fact that it is one of the easier variations of poker to learn and can be picked up in a few minutes by anyone.

### Rules of Texas Hold'em

At the beginning of each hand, the two players to the left of the dealer button each place a predetermined stake into the pot. These two stakes are known as the *blinds*, and the act of placing them is known as *posting the blinds*. The player immediately to the left of the dealer posts the *small blind* and the next player on the left posts the *big blind*. The small blind is set at half (rounded down to the nearest dollar) of the table's lower limit, e.g. at a \$5.00/10.00 table, it will be \$2. The big blind is set at the lower limit and so will be \$5.

Once the blinds have been posted, two cards are dealt face-down to the players. Each player will be able to see their own cards but not those of their opponents. These cards are known as the start, hole or pocket cards.

The first round of betting now commences: this stage of the game is known as the *pre-flop*. The first player to bet is the one immediately to the left of the two players who posted the blinds. The amount of money that can be bet depends on whether the game is a fixed-limit, pot-limit, or no-limit game. As with all forms of poker, players have options to fold, check, call or raise.

When the round of betting has finished, the dealer deals three cards face-up (known as community or board cards) in the middle of the table where they can be seen by all the players. This procedure is known as *dealing the flop*, and the three flop cards are used by each player to make the best hand in conjunction with their start cards.

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While there are still two more cards to come, at this stage of the game players will have a good idea of the potential strength of their hand, and whether it's worth persevering with it. Note that a common mistake made by inexperienced players at this point is continuing with hands that have little realistic prospect of winning. Once in a while they will get lucky and hit a good card on the turn or river but, more often than not, they won't and will lose. Judging which hands have a good chance of winning is a basic and very important part of playing poker.

A second round of betting now takes place, starting with the player to the left of the dealer (the small blind). When the round of betting has finished, the dealer deals a fourth face-up communal card. This is known as the turn card.

Starting with the player to the left of the dealer button, another round of betting begins. At the end of this, a final community card is dealt, making a total of five. This is known as the river card.

Assuming you are still in the game, you now have the five community cards and your two start cards with which to make a hand. Typically, by this stage most of the players will have folded. The players remaining will have either hit their hand, or missed it.

A final round of betting takes place, after which all the players remaining in the game reveal their hands. This begins with the player to the left of the last player to call and is known as the showdown. The player with the best hand wins the pot, minus the poker room's rake.

The next game now starts with the dealer button advancing one place to the left. The player who posted the big blind in the previous game now has to post the small blind. The big blind passes to the next player on the left. In this way all the players are obliged to place money in the pot every few hands.

**Hot tip**

The player who opens a betting round determines whether the check option will be available to the other players. If the player checks then the next player can also check and so on. However, if a player bets instead of checking, the check option will not be available to the players who follow.

## Poker Hand Rankings

Having learned the rules of Texas Hold'em, the next thing you need to know is the range of hands that can be made. The following table lists them in order of ranking.

Royal Flush	Ace, king, queen, jack, and ten, all of the same suit. This is the best hand possible – in the unlikely event of you ever getting one, pray somebody else also has a good hand and is prepared to go all the way with it
Straight Flush	Five cards of consecutive rank, all of the same suit. It's very rare to see one of these
Four-of-a-Kind (known as quads)	Four cards of any one rank, and any other card. This hand pops up occasionally and is almost a guaranteed winner
Full House	Three cards of one rank, and two cards of another rank. An excellent hand with which you'd be very unlucky to lose. (It does happen occasionally, though)
Flush	Any five cards of the same suit. A very strong hand that will usually win
Straight	Five cards of consecutive rank. A strong hand that usually wins
Three-of-a-Kind (known as a set, or trips)	Three cards of the same rank and two unrelated cards. A good hand but often beaten by flushes and straights
Two Pairs	Two cards of one rank, two cards of another rank, and an unrelated fifth card. A reasonable hand that wins many pots
Pair	Two cards of the same rank, and three other unrelated cards. A weak hand that loses more often than not
High Card	Five unrelated cards – no pair, no flush, no straight – nothing. Not considered as a hand

Whichever version of poker you play, the hands in the table above are the ones you will be trying to make. In some games, such as Omaha Hi/Lo, Seven-Card Stud Hi/Lo, and Razz, there is another type of hand known as a low-hand in which players are trying to hit five cards below a nine. (We'll see more on this later.)

## Poker Hand Values

Now that you know the poker hands, we'll show you their relative values.

### Pairs

A pair is the most common hand in poker. High pairs – A-A, K-K, Q-Q and J-J – win many games; middle and low pairs usually lose.

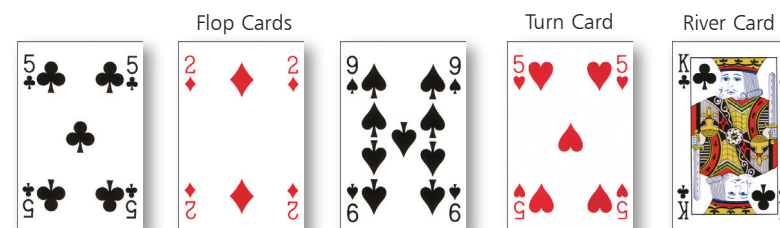
In general, pairs are dangerous hands (for you) and they are often over-played by beginners. Many players place too much reliance on top pairs, thinking the game is as good as won, and persist with middle and low pairs in the hope of making a set (a three-of-a-kind). In the case of top pairs, they forget that these are still the lowest type of hand and are easily beaten.

Over-playing pairs is dangerous in low-limit Hold'em, where many players will draw to the river if there is a chance of making a straight or flush. The more players there are staying in the game to the end, the more likely it is that a pair will be beaten. As you move up the limits, however, where the stakes are higher, players are naturally more cautious with the result that pairs have more value.

Note that, statistically, a pair of aces will win approximately one game in three. A pair of twos, on the other hand, will win only one game in twelve.

### Two Pairs

Many large pots are won with these hands, especially if one of the pairs is A-A or K-K. A two-pair hand can be particularly lethal if neither pair is on the board. (Such a pair is known as a split pair.) For example:



Beware



A pair of aces is the best starting hand you can get. Perversely, however, it can also be the worst if you don't know when to fold it. Many players get trapped by this hand because they overplay it. Unfortunately, if all you've got at the river is a pair, you are more likely than not to lose.

Beware



Low and middle pairs rarely win pots. These hands almost always need to be improved to stand a chance of winning.