Hearts

The rules, written in our own words.

Hearts belongs to nobody, so these rules are ours to write. They are the standard rules for four players, with the common variations on the last page. Written by Nine Fathoms for Settled, 2026. Free to print for your own table.

The cards and the deal

Hearts is played by four players, each playing alone, with an ordinary pack of fifty-two cards and no jokers. In each suit the ace is the highest card, followed by the king, queen and jack, and then the ten down to the two. There are no trumps in Hearts, so no suit ever beats another.

The aim

Some cards carry penalty points: every heart, and the queen of spades. Points count against the player who takes them, so each player tries not to win the tricks that hold them. The game is played over several hands, and when it ends the player with the fewest points wins.

Dealing

Any player may deal the first hand, and the deal passes one place to the left after each hand. The dealer shuffles and deals the whole pack face down, one card at a time, clockwise, starting with the player on their left. Each player receives thirteen cards. A player may look at their own cards but keeps them hidden from the others.

Passing

After the deal and before any card is played, each player chooses three cards from their hand and passes them face down to another player. A player may pass any three cards they like, including hearts and the queen of spades.

Which way the cards go

The pass changes direction from hand to hand in a fixed pattern. The pass goes to the left on the first hand, to the right on the second, across the table on the third, and nowhere on the fourth. On a hand with no pass, everyone plays the cards they were dealt. The pattern then begins again, with a pass to the left on the fifth hand.

This pattern of four hands is the most common way to pass, and the one this book follows. Other patterns are given among the variations.

Passing in order

Each player must choose and lay down the three cards they are passing before picking up the cards passed to them. A pass may not be taken back once it has been laid down. Every player gives three cards and receives three, so each still holds thirteen when play begins.

Playing the tricks

The cards are played in tricks. In each trick, every player in turn plays one card face up to the centre of the table, going clockwise.

The first lead

The player who holds the two of clubs leads it to begin the first trick. This is so on every hand, whoever dealt.

Following suit

Each player in turn must play a card of the suit that was led, if they have one. A player who has no card of that suit may play any card they choose, apart from the limits on the first trick. The trick is won by the highest card of the suit that was led. A card of any other suit can never win a trick, however high it is. The player who wins a trick turns its four cards face down in front of them and leads to the next trick.

The first trick

Neither a heart nor the queen of spades may be played on the first trick. A player with no clubs must play a diamond or a spade other than the queen. Only a player whose hand holds nothing but hearts, or nothing but hearts and the queen of spades, may play one of those cards on the first trick, and may choose which.

Leading hearts

A player may not lead a heart until hearts have been broken. Hearts are broken the first time a player who cannot follow suit plays a heart to a trick. From that trick on, any player may lead a heart for the rest of the hand.

Playing the queen of spades does not break hearts. Only a heart can do that.

When a player holds only hearts

A player who is on lead and holds nothing but hearts, or nothing but hearts and the queen of spades, may lead a heart even if hearts have not been broken. That lead breaks hearts for the rest of the hand.

The queen of spades

The queen of spades is a spade, and it may be led on any trick after the first, whether or not hearts have been broken. A player who holds the queen and another spade may choose which of them to play when spades are led. A player who cannot follow suit may play the queen of spades on any trick except the first.

Whoever wins the trick that holds the queen of spades takes her thirteen points.

Scoring

The hand ends when all thirteen tricks have been played. Each player then counts the points in the tricks they have won. Each heart counts one point against the player who took it, and the queen of spades counts thirteen. Every other card counts nothing. There are twenty-six points in every hand, and each player's points are added to their running score.

Shooting the moon

A player who wins all thirteen hearts and the queen of spades in a single hand has shot the moon. That player scores nothing for the hand, and each of the other three players scores twenty-six points instead.

Tables divide on this. This book gives the points to the others; at least as many tables let the shooter choose instead, as the variations describe.

The end of the game

The game ends at the end of the hand in which any player's score reaches or passes one hundred points. The player with the lowest score at that moment wins. If two or more players tie for the lowest, another hand is played, and more if need be, until one of them stands alone. A game is never stopped in the middle of a hand.

Keep the scores on paper, one column for each player, and add each hand's points as soon as they are counted.

Common variations

The earlier pages give the standard game. Each rule below is a variation, which a table should agree on before the first deal.

Scoring

In a common variation, a player who shoots the moon chooses either to add twenty-six points to each other player's score or to take twenty-six points off their own. In another variation, the player who wins the jack of diamonds takes ten points off their score for that hand.

Passing and play

Some tables pass to the left on every hand, and some leave out the hand with no pass. In an older variation, a player with no clubs may play a heart or the queen of spades on the first trick. Some tables count the queen of spades as breaking hearts once she has been played.

Three or five players

For three players, take the two of diamonds out of the pack and deal seventeen cards to each player. For five players, take out the two of diamonds and the two of spades and deal ten cards to each. With no single player across the table, the pass goes left, then right, then not at all. The two of clubs still leads the first trick.