A HOUSE RULEBOOK · SETTLED

Spades

The rules, written in our own words.

Spades belongs to nobody, so these rules are ours to write. They are the standard rules for four players in two teams, with the games for two and three as variations.

Written by Nine Fathoms for Settled, 2026. Free to print for your own table.

The cards and the table

Spades is played by four players in two teams of two. Partners sit opposite each other, so that play passes from one team to the other around the table.

The game uses a standard deck of fifty-two cards, without jokers. In each suit the ace is highest, followed by the king, queen and jack, and then the ten down to the two.

Spades are trumps

Spades are the trump suit in every hand of the game. Any spade beats any card of the other three suits, and a higher spade beats a lower one.

Dealing

Any fair method may choose the first dealer, such as each player drawing a card from the shuffled deck and the highest card dealing. The dealer shuffles, and the player on the dealer's right cuts. The dealer then deals the whole deck face down, one card at a time, clockwise, starting with the player on the dealer's left, so that each player has thirteen cards.

If a card is turned face up during the deal, or a player ends up with the wrong number of cards, the same dealer shuffles and deals again.

After each hand, the deal passes to the left. Bidding and play also go clockwise, to the left.

Bidding

After the deal, each player looks at their cards and makes one bid. A bid is the number of tricks the player expects to win in the hand, from one to thirteen, or nil for none.

The player on the dealer's left bids first, and the bidding goes once around the table, ending with the dealer. A bid cannot be changed once it has been made.

The team's bid

The two partners' bids are added together to make the team's bid for the hand. Unless one partner has bid nil, the team then needs to win at least that many tricks, and it does not matter which partner wins them.

Bidding nil

A player who bids nil undertakes to win no tricks at all in the hand. A nil bid is scored for that player alone, apart from the partner's bid, and the partner must then make their own bid with their own tricks.

What a partner may do

The partner of a nil bidder plays as normal, and may try to protect the nil by winning tricks that the nil bidder might otherwise be forced to take.

No player may tell their partner anything about their cards, by word or sign, during the bidding or the play. Partners learn about each other's hands only from the bids and the cards played.

Playing the tricks

The player on the dealer's left leads to the first trick. Each player in turn, clockwise, then plays one card face up to the trick.

Following suit

A player must play a card of the suit that was led if they hold one. A player who has no card of the suit led may play any card. No player is ever required to play a spade, or to try to win the trick.

Winning a trick

A trick that holds any spade is won by the highest spade in it. A trick with no spade is won by the highest card of the suit that was led. The winner of each trick gathers it face down and leads to the next trick. Any player may ask to see the last trick gathered, until a card is led to the next one, but no earlier trick.

Breaking spades

A spade may not be led to a trick until spades have been broken. Spades are broken the first time in the hand that a player who cannot follow suit plays a spade. From then on, any player may lead a spade.

A player who has nothing left in hand but spades may lead one even before spades are broken, and doing so breaks them. So a spade can be led to the first trick only by a leader who holds nothing else.

Scoring a hand

Making the bid

A team that wins at least as many tricks as it bid scores 10 points for each trick it bid. Each trick it wins beyond its bid scores 1 more point and is called a bag. A team that bids five and wins seven scores 52 points and takes two bags.

Falling short

A team that wins fewer tricks than it bid is set, and loses 10 points for each trick it bid. A team that bids six and wins five loses 60 points.

Bags

Each team keeps a running count of its bags from hand to hand. When a team's count reaches ten, the team loses 100 points and ten bags are taken off the count. Any bags beyond the tenth stay on the count.

Scoring nil

A player who bids nil and wins no tricks scores 100 points for the team. A player who bids nil and wins even one trick costs the team 100 points. The partner's bid is scored on its own, counting only the partner's tricks. Tricks won by a nil bidder never help the partner make their bid. Each of those tricks counts as a bag for the team, scoring 1 point and adding one to the bag count like any other bag.

Winning the game

The first team to reach 500 points wins the game. Scores are added up only at the end of a hand, never during one. If both teams reach 500 in the same hand, the team with the higher score wins. If the two scores are exactly level, another full hand is played to decide it.

A renege

A player who fails to follow suit while holding a card of the suit led has reneged. Either opponent may claim a renege at any time until the cards are shuffled for the next deal. The tricks already played may be turned up to check the claim.

When a renege is proved, the hand is played to its end as usual. The team that reneged then gives three of its tricks to the other team. If it won fewer than three tricks, it gives all of them. The tricks handed over count for the other team exactly as if it had won them, toward its bid and as bags.

> Tables differ on the penalty. Some set the side that reneged, as if it had missed its bid, and some add three tricks to its bid instead. Agree before you begin which your table plays, and whether a player may take back a wrong card before the trick is gathered.

Common variations

Each of these is a variation, not the standard rule. A table that plays one should agree on it before the first deal.

Blind nil

In this variation, a player may bid blind nil before looking at their cards. A blind nil scores 200 points if the player wins no tricks, and loses 200 if they win any. Most tables allow it only to a team that is behind by 100 points or more. After the bid, the blind nil bidder and their partner usually exchange two cards face down.

Other variations

- At some tables, whoever holds the two of clubs leads it to the first trick, instead of the player on the dealer's left.
- At some tables, two jokers are added as the highest trumps, above the ace of spades, and the two of hearts and the two of diamonds are taken out to keep the deck at fifty-two cards. One joker is marked as the higher of the two.
- At some tables, a team whose score falls to minus 200 or lower loses the game at once.
- At some tables, the tricks won by a nil bidder count toward the partner's bid.

Two and three players

Both of these are variations of the four-player game. In each, every player plays alone, with no partner, and bids, wins tricks and scores only for themselves.

Two players

In the game for two, the cards are not dealt. The dealer shuffles and places the deck face down, and the other player draws first. On each turn a player looks at the top card and decides whether to keep it. A player who keeps it looks at the next card and discards it face down. A player who does not keep it discards it face down and must keep the next card instead. Discarded cards take no further part in the hand.

The players take turns in this way until the deck is gone and each holds thirteen cards. The player who did not deal bids first and leads to the first trick, and the hand is then played and scored as in the main game.

Three players

In the game for three, the two of diamonds is taken out, leaving fifty-one cards, so that each player is dealt seventeen. Bidding, play and scoring follow the main game, with each player scoring alone.

Questions tables ask

These are the questions tables ask most, answered in advance. When one of them is the question asked, its answer here is this book's answer. An answer that begins At our table is this book's own ruling, where the standard rules leave the question open. A table that has agreed a house rule of its own plays that instead.

The deal

How many cards does each player get? Thirteen each. The dealer deals the whole deck, one card at a time, clockwise from the dealer's left. See page 2.

How many cards are in the deck? Do we use the jokers? Fifty-two cards, with the jokers left out. Jokers come in only as a variation the table agrees on first. See page 2.

Where does my partner sit? Opposite you, so the turn passes from one team to the other around the table. See page 2.

Is the ace high or low? High. The ace is the top card of every suit, and the two is the lowest. See page 2.

Are spades trumps every hand, or does trumps change? Spades are trumps in every hand. Trumps never change. See page 2.

Who cuts the deck? The player on the dealer's right. See page 2.

A card flipped face up while it was being dealt. What now? The same dealer shuffles and deals again. The same goes if anyone ends up with the wrong number of cards. See page 2.

Who deals the next hand? The player on the last dealer's left. The deal moves one seat to the left each hand. See page 2.

We found out halfway through that the deck is missing a card. What happens to the hand? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: the hand is thrown in and not scored, and the same dealer deals it again with a full deck. Hands already scored stand.

Questions tables ask

Bidding

Who bids first? The player on the dealer's left. The bidding goes once around the table, and the dealer bids last. See page 3.

I said three but meant four. Can I change my bid? No, a bid stands once it is made. See page 3.

What can I bid? Is there a minimum? Any number of tricks from one to thirteen, or nil for none. Everyone bids; there is no pass and no team minimum. See page 3.

Our two bids add up to fourteen. Is that allowed? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: the bids stand. A team that bids more than thirteen cannot make it and is set.

Can I tell my partner I have a weak hand? No, partners may say nothing about their cards, by word or sign, during the bidding or the play. Your bid is how you tell them. See page 3.

Can I ask to hear everyone's bids again during the play? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: yes, any player may ask at any time, and the bids are said again exactly as made, with nothing added.

Nil

What does a nil score if I take no tricks? 100 points for your team. If you take even one trick, your team loses 100 instead. See page 5.

Can my partner help me make my nil? Yes, your partner plays as normal and may win tricks you would otherwise be stuck with. See page 3.

My nil failed and I took two tricks. My partner bid three and won one. Do my two tricks make up the bid? No, a nil bidder's tricks never count toward the partner's bid, so your partner is set. See page 5.

Do the tricks I took on a failed nil count as bags? Yes, each one scores 1 point and adds one to your team's bag count, on top of the 100 lost for the nil. See page 5.

Questions tables ask

I bid nil and took no tricks, but my partner bid three and won only two. What do we score? 70 points: 100 for your nil, less 30 for your partner's missed bid. The two bids are scored apart. See page 5.

Can both of us bid nil? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: yes, each nil is scored on its own: 100 for each one made, minus 100 for each one that fails.

We play blind nil. What is it worth? In that variation, 200 points if you take no tricks, and minus 200 if you take any. It is bid before you look at your cards. See page 7.

We're only 50 behind. Can I still bid blind nil? Blind nil is a variation. Most tables that play it allow it only to a team 100 or more behind; agree yours before the first deal. See page 7.

Playing a card

Who leads the first trick? The player on the dealer's left. See page 4.

Do I have to follow suit? Yes, if you hold a card of the suit led, you must play one. See page 4.

If I can't follow suit, do I have to play a spade? No, with none of the suit led you may play any card, and nobody is ever made to trump or to try to win. See page 4.

Diamonds were led. One player played the ace of clubs and another the two of spades. Who wins the trick? The two of spades. Any spade beats every card of the other suits, and the highest spade in a trick wins it. See page 4.

Can I lead a spade before spades are broken? No, unless spades are all you hold. See page 4.

What breaks spades? A spade played by someone who can't follow the suit led. After that, anyone may lead spades. See page 4.

Hearts were led and I have none. Can I play a spade if spades haven't been broken yet? Yes, breaking only limits what may be led. With no heart you may play any card, and your spade breaks spades. See page 4.

Questions tables ask

It's my lead, spades haven't been broken, and I only have spades left. What can I lead? A spade. You may lead one when you hold nothing else, and that breaks spades. See page 4.

Tricks, claims and take-backs

Can I look back at the last trick after it has been gathered? Yes, until a card is led to the next trick. Earlier tricks stay face down. See page 4.

I hold every trick that's left. Can I show my hand and claim the rest? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: yes, show your cards and say how they win. If anyone doubts it, the rest is played out with your cards face up.

Someone played a card before it was their turn. Does it stand? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: until the trick is gathered, the card goes back into the player's hand, play goes on in the right order, and anyone who played after it may change their card. Once the trick is gathered, it stands.

A player dropped a card face up in the middle of the hand. Do they have to play it? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: no, the card goes back into the hand with no penalty, unless it fell onto the trick in that player's turn, where it counts as played. Strict tables leave a dropped card face up to be played at the first legal chance; a table that plays it that way should keep it as its house rule.

I played the wrong card by mistake. Can I take it back? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: yes, until the trick is gathered, and anyone who played after you may change their card. Once the trick is gathered, it stands.

I've just seen I had a heart after all, and the trick isn't gathered yet. Can I fix it? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: yes, until the trick is gathered, take the card back and follow suit, with no penalty, and anyone who played after you may change their card. Once the trick is gathered, it is a renege.

Questions tables ask

Reneges

What's the penalty for a renege? Once the hand is over, the team that reneged gives three of its tricks to the other team. See page 6.

The other team reneged, but they only won two tricks all hand. How many do we get? Both of them. A team with fewer than three tricks hands over all it has. See page 6.

How long do we have to call a renege? Until the cards are shuffled for the next deal. Either opponent may claim it, and the played tricks may be turned up to check. See page 6.

At our old table a renege just set you. Is that wrong? Not wrong. Tables differ: some set the team that reneged, some add three tricks to its bid. Agree yours before you begin. See page 6.

They claimed a renege and the tricks show there wasn't one. Is there a penalty? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: no, the hand is scored as it was played.

I bid nil and reneged. Does the penalty save my nil? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: no, the nil fails and costs 100, whatever tricks it took, and the team that reneged hands over three tricks as usual. A renege can never save a nil.

Scoring and bags

What's a bag? A trick won beyond your team's bid. It scores 1 point. See page 5.

We bid four and won six tricks. What do we score? 42 points: 40 for the four you bid, and 1 for each of two bags. See page 5.

We bid seven between us and only won six. Do we get anything for the six? No, you are set and lose 70 points: 10 for every trick you bid. See page 5.

What happens when we get to ten bags? You lose 100 points, and ten bags come off your count. See page 5.

We had eight bags and took three more this hand. What happens? You lose 100 points, and one bag stays on your count. See page 5.

Questions tables ask

Is a bid of ten or more worth double? No, every bid scores 10 points a trick, however big. Doubling for ten or more is not part of these rules. See page 5.

We wrote down the wrong score two hands ago. Can we still fix it? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: yes, whenever it's found before the game ends, if everyone agrees what happened. Once the game is over, the result stands.

Winning

How many points do we need to win? 500. The first team to reach it wins. See page 6.

We finished the hand on 510 and they finished on 530. Who won? They did. When both teams reach 500 in one hand, the higher score wins. See page 6.

We both ended the hand on 520. Who wins? Nobody yet. Play one more full hand to decide it. See page 6.

If a team bids all thirteen tricks and wins them, do they win the game outright? No, thirteen scores like any other bid, 130 points, and the game still goes to 500. See page 6.

Other games and variations

There are three of us. How many cards does each get? Seventeen each, with the two of diamonds taken out of the deck. See page 8.

In the two-player game I don't want the top card. What do I do? Discard it face down, and keep the next card. See page 8.

We play with jokers. Which is highest? In that variation, the two jokers are the highest trumps, above the ace of spades, with the marked one on top. The twos of hearts and diamonds come out. See page 7.

My friends always lead the two of clubs first. Is that a rule? It's a variation. In the standard game the player on the dealer's left leads first; some tables lead the two of clubs instead. See page 7.

Questions tables ask

Between games

Can we swap partners between games? *The rules don't settle this.* At our table: yes, between games, by any fair method such as drawing cards. Never during a game.