

chapter

1

The Game of Poker

Poker is a game of luck, skill, and money played with cards. The more skill a player develops, the better the “luck” and the higher the winnings. Even if poker is played for matchsticks, winning is fun. This first chapter introduces you to the basic rules and terminology of all poker games, whether played at home, in a casino or card club, with a hand-held game machine, or online. Once you understand the game of poker, you can increase your odds of winning—and increase your fun!



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The Basics

Poker is a game—an activity engaged in for diversion or amusement. Like all games, the goal is to win. Unlike many other games, you keep score using money or its equivalent (chips). Players win money from other players by holding the best-ranking hand or by pretending to (which is called *bluffing*), and forcing other players to relinquish their right to the money everyone has bet, which is called the *pot*.



A *hand* is the cards dealt to a player. The *ranking* of a hand simply means the probability of being dealt the cards randomly from the deck. “Poker Ranks,” later in this chapter, explains ranking further.

Most versions of poker end with active players comparing the best five cards they have. In many versions, each player is dealt only five; however, in games such as Texas Hold’em and Omaha, players are dealt more cards, although they can use only five of them.

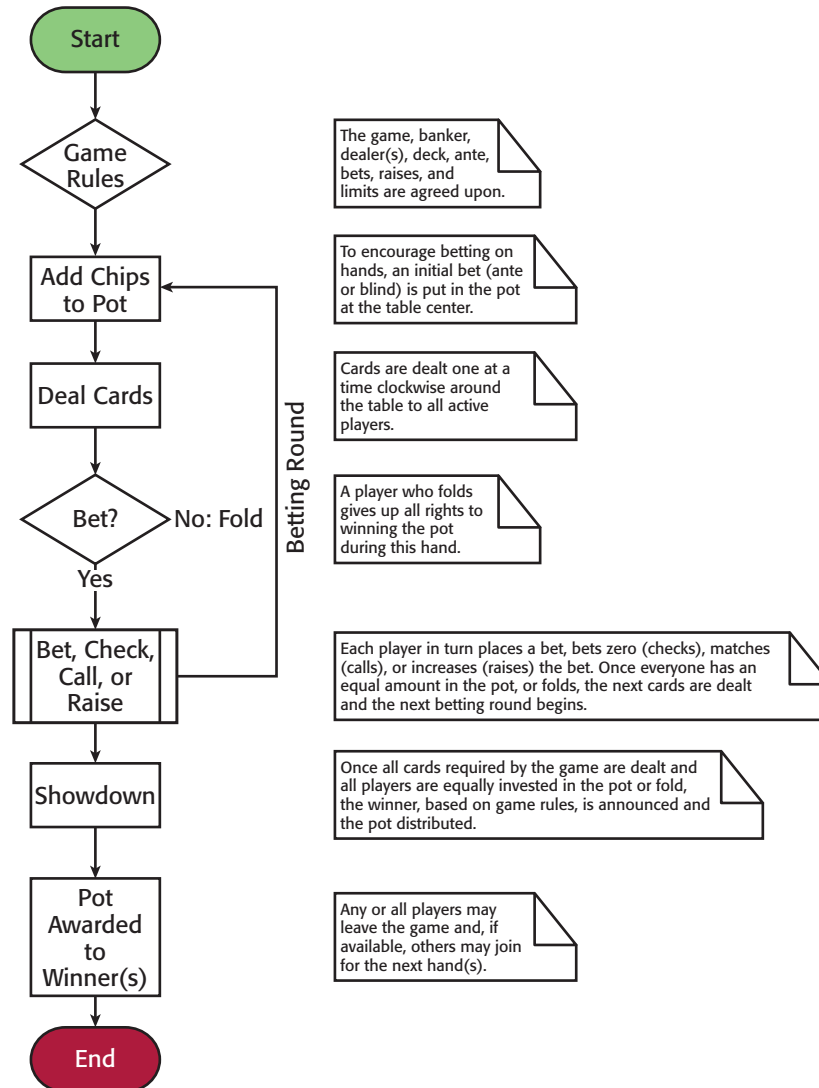
“The Game of Poker” flowchart on the facing page summarizes how most poker games are played. Follow it from Start to End and read its explanatory notes for an overview of the structure of poker.

Although there are hundreds of poker games, they fit into just a couple of types with many variations. If the cards are dealt face down so that other players cannot see them, the game is from the *draw* family (see Chapter 2). If some of the cards are dealt face up, the game is from the *stud* family (see Chapter 3). Two variations of stud poker have become very popular and have earned their own chapters: Texas Hold’em (Chapter 4) and Omaha (Chapter 5).

Where you play poker also dictates how you play it. A friendly poker game at home is played with very different strategies than a “free” online game or a “real money” no-limit casino game. Chapters 6 through 11 present popular games and winning strategies for each venue.

The bottom line to poker is this: The greater your knowledge and skill, the more you can profit from luck.

The Game of Poker



History

Poker is based on an ancient game that traces its origins back to Persia, through Russia, France, and other countries. The game played today as “poker” is very American, loosely developed from a French game called “poqué” meaning “tired.”

The Origins of Today's Poker

Game experts agree that poker as played today originated with the riverboat gamblers who plied the Mississippi River from New Orleans north. The earliest games dealt each player five cards on which the players, in turn, bet and raised. No additional cards were dealt.

Now played worldwide (and even online, as shown in this figure), poker retains American geographical names such as “Texas Hold'em,” “Omaha,” “Cincinnati,” and “Chicago”—even when played in Berlin, Bangkok, and Baghdad.



Poker's Popularity

There are now hundreds of games that follow the basic rules of poker, with numerous variations to make it more interesting to players of all types and interests. Over the past 30 years, Texas Hold'em has become the most popular of all poker games worldwide, primarily due to its selection as the deciding game for the World Series of Poker (WSOP), the ultimate showdown for poker players.

Poker continues to grow and evolve, with versions played differently at home, in casinos, at card clubs, online, and in other locations. Even casinos have variations or favorite games depending on local tastes. Video poker (see Chapter 8) is increasingly popular at casinos, though it isn't the same game as played at casino card tables.



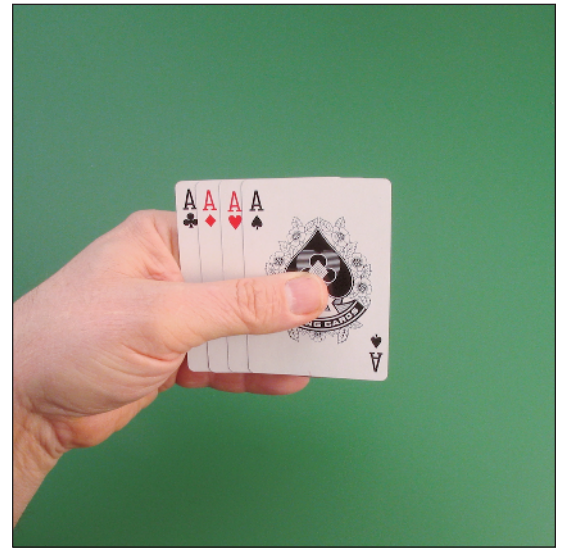
Cards

Poker cards are approximately $2\frac{1}{2}$ inches wide by $3\frac{1}{2}$ inches tall. The backs in a deck of cards have a common design and color, whereas the fronts (or *faces*) are individual. A standard deck of poker playing cards includes 52 cards. Many decks also include two additional cards, called *Jokers*, which are used in some poker games. In addition, some decks include a printed instruction card or a list of hand rankings for reference.

Suits and Ranks (Cards)

Poker and other playing cards have four *suits* or emblems:

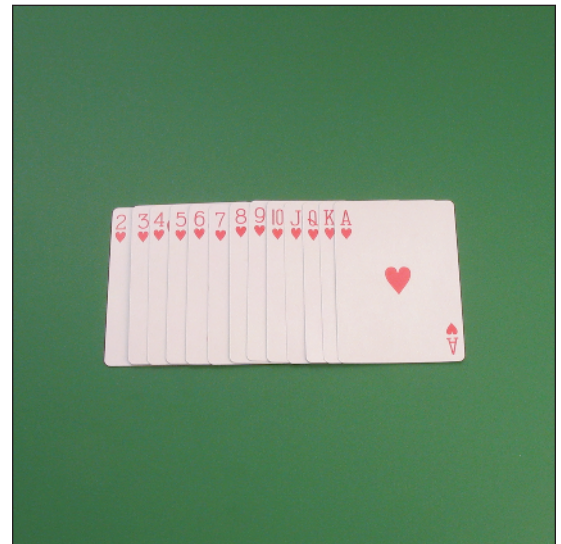
- clubs (♣)
- diamonds (♦)
- hearts (♥)
- spades (♠)



Each suit consists of 13 ranks of cards. The ranks in the suit are as follows:

- | | |
|-------------|-----------------------|
| • A = Ace | • 7 = Seven |
| • K = King | • 6 = Six |
| • Q = Queen | • 5 = Five |
| • J = Jack | • 4 = Four |
| • T = Ten | • 3 = Three (or trey) |
| • 9 = Nine | • 2 = Deuce |
| • 8 = Eight | |

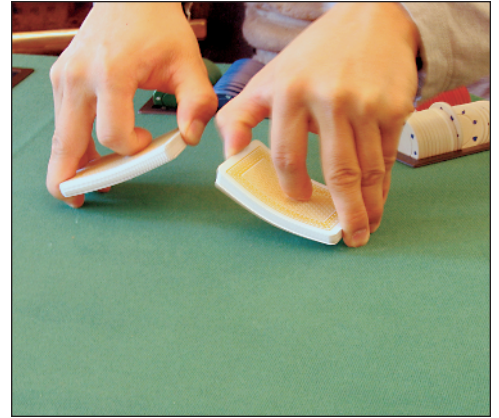
Multiply four suits by 13 ranks and you get 52 playing cards in a poker deck.



Shuffling

To make sure that the cards are randomly distributed to players, the deck is shuffled between games. Here's how to shuffle:

- 1 Separate the deck of playing cards into two approximately even stacks.
- 2 Hold one stack in each hand with your thumb under the stack and the next three fingers on top of the stack.
- 3 Move the stacks so that your thumbs are nearly touching.
- 4 Move your thumbs away from the center so that the individual card edges are released and randomly fall to the table into one new stack.
- 5 Push the shuffled cards together into a uniform stack.



Chips

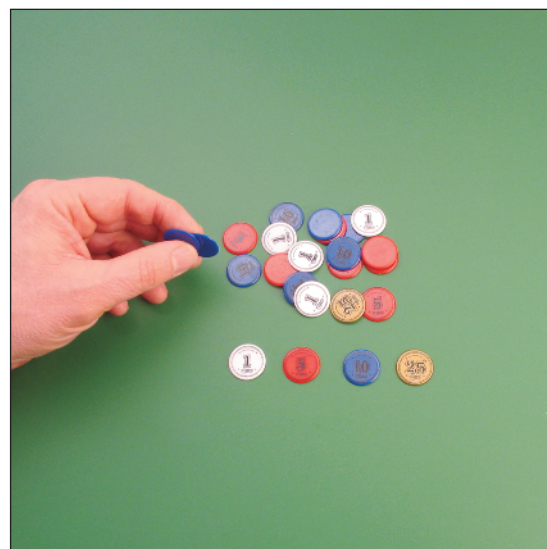
Poker is played for money; but players do not always use cash. Home games often use coins (pennies, nickels, dimes, and quarters); casino and card room poker games, however, use poker chips to represent money. In games where speed and accuracy are important, color-coded chips make counting and betting more efficient—and easier to verify.

Types of Chips

HOME-GAME CHIPS

Poker-chip sets for home games can be purchased inexpensively, many with the suggested value printed on them to avoid confusion.

Players in home games may also choose to use coins, matchsticks, or another object to keep track of betting as long as all players agree on the value of the tokens.



CASINO CHIPS

Poker tournaments, casinos, and card rooms use four or more colors of playing chips. Casinos and card rooms may use their own system for color-coding chips, although most venues within a gaming location may standardize colors and values. Commonly used colors include white, red, blue, yellow, green, black, and gold. For example, many casinos use the following relative values:

- White = 1
- Red = 5
- Blue = 10
- Green = 25
- Black = 100
- Purple = 500



ONLINE CHIPS

Online poker games may use a color-coded system as well as mark chips with their values. In the online game shown in this figure, the colors and values are clearly indicated.



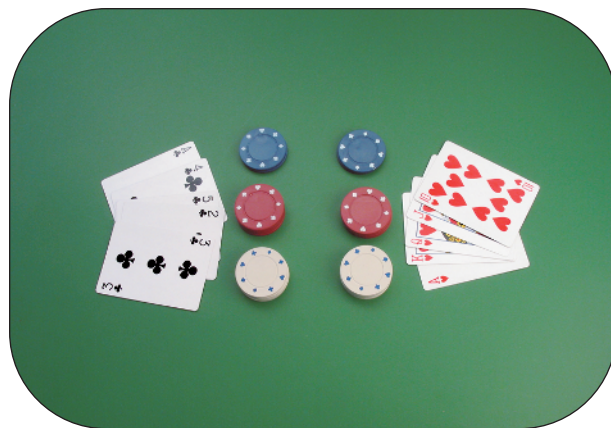
TIP

When exchanging cash for chips with the banker, make sure you understand the value of each chip. If in doubt, ask the banker or dealer.

Ranks

The cards a player holds are called a *hand*. There are nine ranks of hands in the game of poker. The player holding—or bluffing—the best hand at the end of the game wins.

In most poker games, it is the hand with the highest rank that wins the pot. In some games it is agreed that the lowest-ranking hand wins. Some games with a large number of players agree to split the pot equally between the highest and lowest hands, called *high-low* (hi-lo) or *split* games, as shown here.



Highest Ranking Hands, in Order

Following are the highest to lowest ranks among poker hands. Among hands, higher ranks beat lower ranks. For example, a king-high flush beats a queen-high flush and a pair of tens beat a pair of sixes.

STRAIGHT FLUSH

A *straight flush* consists of five cards of the same suit, in sequence. If the sequence is ace, king, queen, jack, and 10 of the same suit, as shown in this photo, it is called a Royal Flush.



FOUR-OF-A-KIND

Four-of-a-kind (*quad*) is made up of four cards of the same rank, plus a fifth unrelated or odd card. Shown here is a four-of-a-kind hand comprised of four aces and a king.

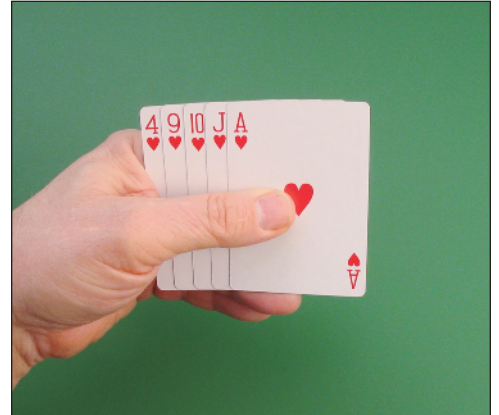


FULL HOUSE

A *full house* consists of three-of-a-kind plus a pair of another kind or rank. Shown here is a full house composed of three aces and a pair of kings, known as “aces full of kings.”

**FLUSH**

A *flush* is made up of five cards of the same suit, but not in sequence. Shown here is a heart flush.

**STRAIGHT**

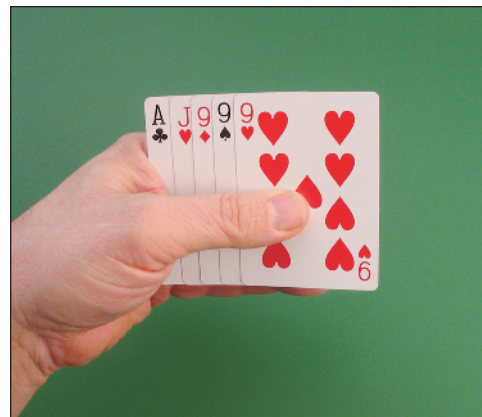
A *straight* consists of five cards in sequence, but not of the same suit. Shown here is a queen-high straight.

**CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE**

Ranks *(continued)*

THREE-OF-A-KIND

Three-of-a-kind consists of three cards ("trips" or a "set") of the same rank, with two odd cards. Pictured are three 9s, an ace, and a jack.



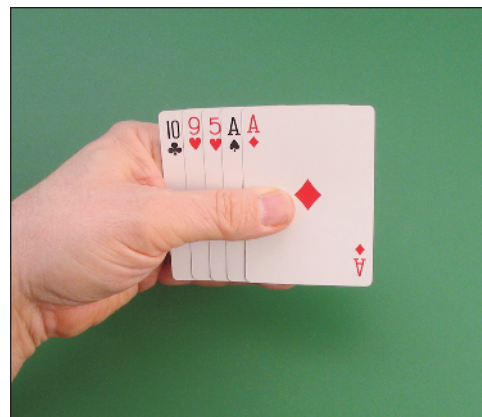
TWO PAIR

A *two-pair* hand is made up of two sets of cards of matching rank, with a fifth unrelated card. Here are two pair: queens and 9s.



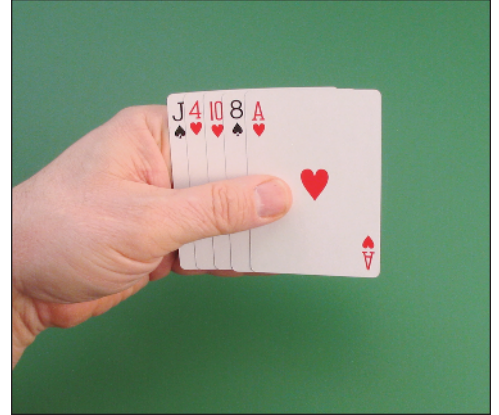
ONE PAIR

A *one-pair* hand consists of two cards of matching rank, with three unrelated cards. Shown in the photo are a pair of aces, a 10♣, a 9♥, and a 5♥.



HIGH CARD

The value of a high-card hand is determined by the rank of the highest card, depending on the rules of the game. In this case, it would be the ace in an ace-high hand, sometimes called “no pair.”



LOWEST HAND

Following is the lowest rank among poker hands, an ace-low straight flush. Other low rankings depend on the specific game rules.



TIP

Many poker players prefer playing games that follow high-low or low hand rankings. The most popular high-low games are Stud/8 (see Chapter 3) and Omaha/8 (see Chapter 5). The most popular low-only game is Razz, a form of Seven-Card Stud (see Chapter 3)

Poker is a game of probabilities, or the odds of something occurring or not occurring. For example, if you are dealt three cards, the odds are about 5 to 1 that two of the cards will be of the same rank, a pair. Because poker is a game of chance, the more you know the odds of something occurring, the better your betting decisions will be and the more you will win.

CARD ODDS

The number of different five-card poker hands possible in a deck of 52 cards is 2,598,960. The odds of being dealt a royal flush (ace-high straight flush) are 1 in 649,740 hands, and many players never get one. (If you played 60 hands an hour for 40 hours a week, odds are that you would be dealt a royal flush every 5.2 years.)

Possible Poker Hands (52-Card Deck)	
Ranking Order	Chance of Being Dealt in Original Five Cards
Royal Flush	1 in 649,740
Straight Flush	1 in 72,193
Four-of-a-kind	1 in 4,165
Full house	1 in 694
Flush	1 in 509
Straight	1 in 255
Three-of-a-kind	1 in 47
Two pair	1 in 21
One pair	1 in 2.4
No-pair hand	1 in 2

Each type of poker game has supplementary odds depending on how many cards are dealt to players (five, seven, or nine) and how many active players are in the game (2 to 12). Odds charts are also available to determine the chance of getting a better hand when a specific number of cards are discarded, such as in draw poker.

POT ODDS

Sometimes it's worth making an extra bet into the pot even though the odds of winning it are not high. If the chances of winning the pot are 10 to 1 and your \$5 bet might win a \$100 pot, the pot odds are good and may be worth the extra investment.

PEOPLE ODDS

With experience, you'll become skilled at reading other poker players, predicting what types of hands they have by the way they play (see the section "People"). You'll also be able to accurately tell whether they are bluffing. These are called *edge odds*. The laws of probability work in regard to players as well as cards and pots.

STRATEGY CARDS

Appendix A has some charts of probability. In addition, you can purchase pocket-sized odds and strategy cards at gaming bookstores, the game section of new bookstores, casinos, and online. Most casinos and many card clubs allow players to keep strategy cards in plain view when playing, especially at games aimed at beginners. Professional gamblers have them memorized.



Rules

“The Game of Poker” flowchart (see page 5) shows that the first decision in poker is agreeing on the rules. At casinos, game rules are typically posted at the table, although they are written in the cryptic shorthand of poker (see Chapter 5 for more on poker shorthand).

Some poker games change at a table as selected by the dealer, a practice that is called *dealer's choice*. If you are not clear on the rules of a new game or variation, ask the dealer. Every poker player is a beginner at some time.

Limits

Many poker games have limits on the size of bets that can be made; a few are announced as *no-limit* games. Some limit is preferred, however, so that the player with the most money doesn't force others out of the game.

In a *fixed-limit* game, no player may bet or raise by more than a stipulated number of chips. In most fixed-limit games, the limit changes during the game, such as one limit before the draw or for the first two betting intervals and a higher limit afterwards, such as a \$5/\$10 Hold'em game that limits bets to \$5 for the first two betting intervals and \$10 thereafter.

A *pot-limit* game limits any bet or raise to the number of chips in the pot. If the pot and any bets before yours add up to 32 chips, the raise is limited to an additional 32 chips.

Table-stake games limit players to betting only the chips they have in front of them. They can't buy more from the banker. No-limit games are actually table-stake games as no additional chips can be purchased during the game.

In some games, a player puts all of his or her chips in the pot. This is called *all-in*. Betting continues with other players contributing to a second or side pot. Winners may be awarded one or both of the pots depending on the showdown, when all betting is over and players show their cards to determine the winner(s).

TIP

A poker showdown is educational. Players can determine whether other players hold a good hand or are bluffing. Smart players may show their cards, even if they know they won't win, in order to make other players know they were bluffing.

Banker

One of the first steps in setting up a poker game is establishing the *banker*. Casinos and card clubs have their own bankers. Home games require that a banker be selected.

The banker in a poker game is someone who sells and redeems chips for players. In home games, the banker may be a player; or, if coins are used instead of chips, no banker is needed. In card-room games, the banker often is also the dealer. In casinos, the banker may be a dealer, or there may be a separate person at the table or a nearby window where chips are sold and bought.

Bankers do not charge a fee or a premium for the service. However, casinos may require a fee for some types of transactions, such as out-of-area checks or credit-card transactions.



Dealer

The *dealer* in a poker game distributes the cards to players according to the rules of the game. The dealer shuffles the cards and then deals them one at a time from the top of the deck, clockwise to each active player. The dealer also manages the pot, announcing who is to bet and, in some games, the rank of cards shown.

In some games, the dealer is also a player, and the role of dealer rotates around the table. If the dealer is a player, he or she acts last in the betting rounds. In some games, the dealer also chooses the game and announces the rules.



Betting

Poker is about betting whether the player's cards are of a higher (or lower) rank than other players' cards. The decisions of when and how much to bet are learned skills that minimize luck and maximize winning.

Betting Lingo

POT

The purpose of poker is to win money in the pot. The *pot* is the aggregate of chips or money at stake in the current deal. The pot also is known as the *pool* or the *kitty*. During a round of betting, once all players have contributed equally to the pot or have *folded* (relinquished any rights to the pot), the pot is said to be *right* (or *balanced*), and the next round of cards is dealt or the hands are compared in the *showdown*. (Refer to "The Game of Poker" flowchart on page 5.) Note that the pot in most home or friendly games is a loose pile of chips in the center of the table added to by each player; however, dealers at casinos and card rooms stack and manage the pot chips.



ANTE

To encourage players to bet toward winning the pot, an ante or blind is contributed to the pot before cards are dealt. An *ante* is a contribution made by each player. A *blind* is a contribution made by a few selected players, typically the two to the left of the dealer. In Hold'em, for example, the game may begin with the first player to the left being required to make a *small blind* contribution of half the initial betting limit—\$1 in the case of a \$2 limit. The player to the left of the small blind makes a *big blind* contribution—\$2 in the case of a \$2 limit.

BET

To *bet* is to offer a wager on the outcome of an event. If the player determines that the cards dealt are of sufficient rank to have potential value against other players' cards, the player bets a specific amount of money. The player makes a bet because he or she believes that the cards held are, or have reasonable odds to become, the best hand at the table.

FOLD

To *fold* is to withdraw from the current deal and relinquish all rights to the pot. If the player determines that the cards dealt are not of sufficient rank to have potential value against other players' cards, the player folds. Players signify folding by turning their cards face down in front of them. They also may announce "I fold."

CALL

To *call* is to make a bet that is exactly equal to the preceding active player's bet. The player announces "I call," or "I see."

CHECK

To *check* is to make a bet of zero, retaining rights to the pot without adding to it. The player announces "I check." The first player in a round may check; then subsequent players may check. However, if a subsequent player makes a bet, the bet must be called or cards folded to ensure that all active players are equally invested in the pot.

RAISE

To *raise* a bet is to increase it over the required amount. If the bet is \$10, subsequent players may call (match), raise (increase) it, or fold. If the bet is raised, all players get the opportunity to call the raise or fold. A player makes a raise because he or she is relatively certain that the cards he or she holds are the best hand at the table. The player announces "I raise" or, for subsequent raises, "I reraise."

People

Poker is a game of analyzing the relative value of cards you hold versus the value of the cards other players hold. Because you cannot see their cards, you must learn how to “read” the players. Although this skill comes with experience, there are proven techniques for analyzing people and cards through what are called *tells*.

A tell is an outward indicator of internal thought. Many players attempt to minimize facial expressions and other actions with a “poker face” so other players can’t read what they are thinking and—thus—analyze their cards. Some players wear sunglasses, even when in a low-lit casino, to keep others from reading their eyes

Reading Tells

KNOW YOURSELF

Other players at the poker table will be similar to you in many ways. Knowing what you would do with a specific hand will help you analyze the tells of other players. With a pair of aces, you might cover your mouth to hide a grin. With a straight, you might act anxious for the next round of betting. With a full house, you might grab your chest.



BLUFFING

A *bluff* is when a player makes a bet on a hand that he or she does not believe is the best hand at the table. By acting as if they hold the best hand—by raising on a weaker hand such as pair of nines—the player may encourage other players to misread the hand and to fold.



Player Types

You will soon recognize that players can be grouped by types who often identify themselves by facial expressions, dress, or mannerisms. Knowing the common types will help you read other players and learn how to respond to their playing methods—and win more often.

- **Loose players:** *Loose players* play all but the worst hands. They more frequently attempt to bluff, especially late in the hand, if they realize that they don't have the best hand at the table. Loose players are invested in most pots, but win few. Loose players are impatient. They often are referred to as *fish* because there are so many of them.
- **Tight players:** *Tight players* play only the best hands. They rarely bluff because they strongly believe that their hand is the best one at the table. Tight players invest in fewer pots and win more of them. Tight players are patient. They don't play or bet weak hands.
- **Aggressive players:** *Aggressive players* prefer to raise or to fold. They know that they will win some hands with poor cards due to their aggressiveness by causing others to fold.
- **Passive players:** *Passive players* prefer to call or to fold and rarely raise. They know that they will win some hands, but prefer not to lose on others.
- **Most players:** Most poker players are a combination of these types, with one or two characteristics more dominant than others. In addition, some players purposely display one type of action periodically just to confuse players who are trying to read them.



Etiquette

Poker is like any other human interaction in that there are rules for conduct that should be followed. Breaking these rules can earn you the label of “bad sport” and eliminate you from future play. Fortunately, most of these poker etiquette rules are common sense and easy to learn.

Etiquette Rules to Follow

PLAY IN TURN

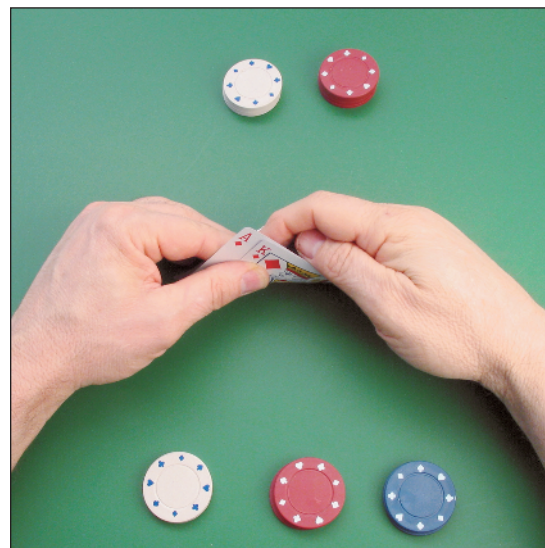
Poker play typically begins with the person on the left side of the dealer and continues clockwise. In some games, however, the first player to bet is the one with the highest or lowest card showing; then the clockwise rule begins. Never play out of turn, even if you’ve decided to raise or fold. Wait until it is your turn to do so because it might impact the decisions of those before or after you.

To assist in identifying the dealer, some card games and venues use a chip-like marker with “D” or “Dealer” on it that is placed to the left of the active dealer, as in this photo. It’s called the “dealer chip” or “dealer button.”



NEVER LOOK AT OTHER PEOPLE'S HANDS

Cards dealt face down are intended for only the owner's eyes. Do not attempt to look at these private—or *hole*—cards. In fact, avoid looking at or near a player who is viewing his or her hole cards. Many poker games have some cards face up that can—and should—be viewed toward analyzing the players' hands. If a dealer accidentally flips up a hole card when dealing, the hand may be called *dead* and must be redealt.



Here are some other etiquette rules to follow when playing poker:

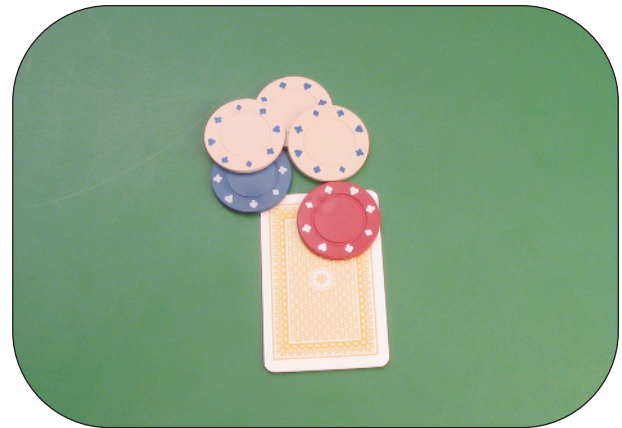
- **Don't Discuss Active Hands:** The dealer might routinely identify the hands or potential hands ("possible straight" or "pair of queens"), but players typically don't comment on hands. However, a few will "trash-talk" as a distraction to upset other players and make them *tilt*, or play emotionally.
- **Muck Your Cards:** If you fold your cards, place them in the discard or "muck" pile face down near the center of the table where the dealer can reach them. These cards are then disqualified from further play and cannot be viewed during the current game. If any one player sees another's mucked hand, all players have the right to see it.
- **Be a Good Winner:** Congratulations! You've won the pot! Don't dance, jump up and down, or make rude remarks to any other player or the dealer. Once it is acknowledged that you won the pot, simply move it in front of you and stack your chips. If someone compliments the hand, thank them.
- **Be a Courteous Loser:** Someone had a higher flush or full house than yours. You lost—maybe big. Don't scowl, curse, or make angry gestures at other players or the dealer. Accept your losses, learn from them, and put your ante in for the next hand. It might be a winner.
- **Know Your Game's Etiquette:** Each poker game has a few etiquette rules of its own. Also, poker venues have different rules for behaving when playing. Some are covered in future chapters. Others you will discover by watching others play, win, and lose. Enjoy!

TIP

The best advice from pros is: *Know why you are playing poker.* If you prefer friendly, home games with little or no money, stick to that goal and don't try to play cutthroat poker. However, if your goal is to play poker as an income source, play low-stake games until you develop your poker skills before moving to the big-money tables.

Poker Smarts

Poker is a game of making good decisions based on knowledge and experience. Knowing the basics of the game, how it is played, and how to interpret your own cards is important to all variations of the game of poker, as is knowing how to read the “tells” of other players, and having a knowledge of odds. Learning the rules of specific games is vital to success, too.



Where to Gain Experience

Experience comes from actually playing the game. Most new players learn techniques playing with friends at home, watching games on TV, or playing online. These are inexpensive sources of experience. This book will save you hundreds of hours of learning by playing, but you still must play poker.

Later chapters offer tips and strategies for playing poker at home, online, in casinos and card rooms, and in tournaments. To gain winning experience for these venues, I recommend that you find a source for free or low-cost poker games and make as many mistakes as possible, learning from each one. Toward that end, here are proven methods for building poker smarts.

FAMILY POKER

Ask around among family and friends and you might find a few who are willing to teach you what they know about poker without taking your money. Play for pennies, buttons, matchsticks, or whatever form of low-cost exchange you can find. Remember to supplement your practice with formal instruction (this book) or other resources so that you don't pick up bad habits.



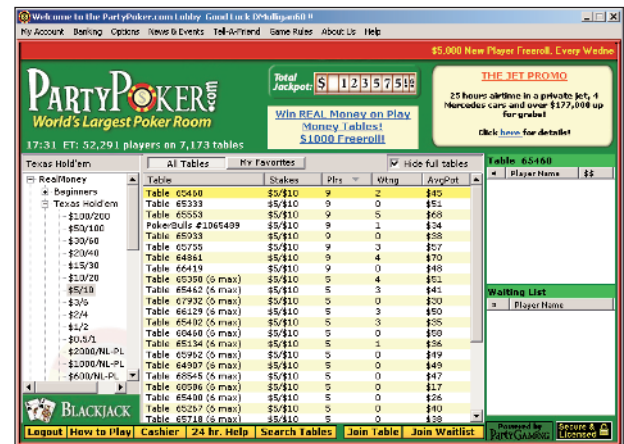
SOFTWARE POKER

There are numerous free and low-cost poker programs available for your computer. One is Fat Cat Poker, which pits you against four other players and the dealer in games such as Five-Card Stud, Seven-Card Stud, High Chicago, Hold'em, and two versions of Five-Card Draw. It also offers game statistics for the "live" games. The software is inexpensive and a free demo version is available online at www.accidental.com.



ONLINE POKER

There are dozens of popular poker sites on the Internet where you can play free games with players of all skill levels. Chapter 7 offers more specifics and some winning strategies. Meanwhile, if you have Internet access, visit www.pokerroom.com or www.ultimatebet.com for the software and requirements to set up a free account. You'll soon be playing fun poker with people around the world. It's great experience for building your poker smarts.



GAME PLAYERS

Many of the portable game players, such as Game Boy, and even many cellular telephones, have basic poker games you can play anywhere. It's not how the game is played at Atlantic City or a Gardena card club, but it's still fun. You'll memorize the poker ranks and discover your own strategies for playing the world's favorite game.



Poker is not illegal. You can play it anywhere with anyone without worrying about the “poker police” taking you off to jail. However, betting is *not* legal everywhere. In many places, you cannot legally flip a coin and bet money on the outcome. Nor can you play poker for money. This section takes a closer look at the laws.

Gambling vs. Gaming

Gambling is the illegal betting on an outcome, whether it is a horse race or a Royal Flush. Gaming, on the other hand, is betting or placing a bet where it is legal. Gaming is legal when authorized by the state, such as in a lottery, or when done at a location licensed by the state, such as a Las Vegas casino, or by the federal government, as at an Indian casino (shown).

Is playing poker for money online legal? It is if the state in which you live or play allows it. Currently, few jurisdictions allow online betting, so it is considered gambling. However, laws are being worked on to regulate and tax online gambling. At that time, it will be considered online gaming. Until then, players depend on the fact that laws against online gambling are not widely enforced.

Gaming laws are based on whether the game is won by skill or by chance, whether it is considered a social or a professional game, and whether the infraction and penalties are petty crimes, misdemeanors, or felonies.

For additional information on laws governing poker and other games of chance, visit www.gambling-law-us.com.



Taxing Your Poker Winnings

Whether your poker winnings are subject to taxation is a different matter. They are. Whether the winning came from gaming (legal betting) or gambling (illegal betting), you are required by law to pay taxes on the proceeds (winnings less losses and expenses). In fact, gaming casinos, card rooms, and other venues are required to report larger winnings to the state and federal government. If you win the big jackpot in the World Series of Poker, not only will all your relatives see it on television, the Internal Revenue Service and others with taxation jurisdiction will know. In some cases, an estimated tax of approximately 25 percent will be held back from your winnings until you file your income taxes. The minimum at which winnings are reported depends on the size of the prize, the state and federal authorities, and other regulations. Frequently, a single win of \$1,200 or more requires automatic reporting.

Good advice is to keep track of all poker winnings and losses (with a system such as Stat King, shown), including travel and related expenses. A tax advisor can help you determine what is and isn't deductible.

Good luck!

