Chapter 1

Card Game Basics

In This Chapter

- Speaking card game lingo
- Following the rules and etiquette of card games
- Hand-picking the best card game

I'm sure that if you've ever played cards at all, you don't need me to explain what fun 52 pieces of pasteboard can be. But just in case, here goes . . .

Because you don't know what the other players have in their hands in almost every card game, playing cards combines the opportunity for strategy, bluffing, memory, and cunning. At the same time, you don't have to play cards all that well in order to enjoy yourself. Cards allow you to make friends with the people you play with and against. A deck of cards opens up a pastime where the ability to communicate is often of paramount importance, and you get to meet new faces and talk to them without having to make the effort to do so.

If you want to take the plunge and start playing cards, you encounter a bewildering range of options to choose from. Cards have been played in Europe for the last 800 years (see the sidebar "Card games through the ages" for more details), and as a result, you have plenty of new games to test out and new rules to add to existing games.

One of the features of *Card Games For Dummies,* 2nd Edition, is the diversity of card games covered in it. I can't hope to list *all* the rules of every card game within the chapters, so this chapter discusses the general rules that apply to *most* card games. Get these basics under your belt so you can jump in to any of the games I describe in detail later in the book.

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Talking the Talk

Card gamers have a language all their own. This section covers the most common and useful lingo you encounter as you get to know various card games.



When card games come together, the players arrange themselves in a circle around the card-playing surface, which is normally a table. I describe it as such for the rest of this section.

Getting all decked out

You play card games with a *deck* of cards intended for that game, also referred to as a *pack* in the United Kingdom. The cards should all be exactly the same size and shape and should have identical backs. The front of the cards should be immediately identifiable and distinguishable.

A deck of cards has subdivisions of four separate subgroups. Each one of these subgroups has 13 cards, although the standard deck in France and Germany may have only eight cards in each subgroup. The four subgroups each have a separate identifiable marking, and in American and English decks, you see two sets of black markings (spades and clubs) and two sets of red markings (hearts and diamonds). Each of these sets is referred to as a *suit.*

Card games through the ages

Some form of playing cards existed in China, at least 80 years and maybe as much as 250 years before they surfaced in Europe. The earliest known Chinese cards had four suits, described in mid-15th-century sources, and featured 38 cards: 9 each in three suits and 11 in the fourth. Similar cards are used in parts of China and Southeast Asia to this day, though the deck composition and designs are not identical.

Although some scholars claim the Saracens or the Persians invented card games (the Persians certainly seem to have invented Poker), the Mamelukes of Egypt appear to be credible ancestors of modern card games. A Mameluke deck from around 1400 A.D. consists of 52 cards with suits of swords, polo sticks, cups, and coins.

National standard designs appeared in the late 15th century. Swiss decks (with shields, flowers, bells, and acorns) and German decks (with hearts, leaves, bells, and acorns) appeared by 1475. The French deck (with spades, hearts, diamonds, and clubs) first appeared by 1480.

In Great Britain, The Worshipful Company of Playing-Card Makers was set up in 1628 to produce cards, and a tax was introduced on every deck. Laws were also made to ban the import of cards; from then on, you could only play with cards of domestic origin. 1862 was a very significant year for the rise in popularity of playing cards. Along with a fall in the duty charge of playing cards, Thomas De La Rue patented the process for mass-producing cards. From then on, well-designed playing cards were in plentiful supply.

Ranking card order

Each suit in U.S. and U.K. decks has 13 cards, and the rankings of the 13 vary from game to game. The most traditional order in card games today is ace, king, queen, jack, and then 10 down to 2.



As you find throughout this book, the ranking order changes for different games. You see numerous games where 10s or perhaps jacks get promoted in the ranking order (such as in Pinochle and Euchre respectively), and many games have jacks gambol joyfully from one suit to another, becoming extra trumps (as in Euchre).

Also, Gin Rummy and several other games such as Cribbage treat the ace exclusively as the low card, below the two.

Preparing to Play

Before you can start any card game, you need to ration out the cards. Furthermore, in almost every game, you don't want any other players to know what cards you have been dealt. That is where the shuffle and deal come into play.

Shuffling off

Before the dealer distributes the cards to the players, a player must randomize, or *shuffle,* them in such a way that no one knows what anyone else receives. (Shuffling is particularly relevant when the cards have all been played out on the previous hand.)

The shuffler, not necessarily the player who must distribute the cards, mixes up the cards by holding them face-down and interleaving them a sufficient number of times so that the order of all the cards becomes random and unpredictable. When one player completes the task, another player (frequently in European games, the player to the right of the dealer) rearranges the deck by splitting it into two halves and reassembles the two halves, putting the lower half on top of the other portion. This is called *cutting the deck.*

Getting a square deal

In most games, one player is responsible for distributing the cards to the players — this player is the *dealer.* For the first hand, you often select the dealer by having each player draw a card from the deck; the lowest card (or,

perhaps, the highest) gets to deal. After the first hand is complete, the rules of most games dictate that the player to the dealer's left deals the next hand, with the deal rotating clockwise.



Before the deal for the first hand, a process may take place to determine where the players sit. In games in which your position at the table is important, such as Poker or Hearts, you often deal out a card to each player and then seat the players clockwise in order from highest to lowest.

The player to the dealer's left, frequently the first person to play a card after the deal, is known as the *elder* or *eldest hand.* The *younger hand* is the player to the dealer's right. These players may also be known as the *left hand opponent* and *right hand opponent* (which you sometimes see abbreviated as *LHO* and *RHO*). The dealer may also refer to the player sitting opposite him — his partner in a partnership game — as the CHO, or *center hand opponent.*



You may have been brought up on the sober concept that the right way to distribute the cards to each player is to pass them out one at a time, face-down, in a clockwise manner. However, that style is by no means the only possible, or indeed acceptable, way to deal. Games from south and eastern Europe and Switzerland, as well as tarot games, feature counter-clockwise dealing and playing. And in Euchre the cards are dealt clockwise, but in batches of two or three, rather than one at a time.

The due process of a deal involves the dealer taking the deck in one hand and passing a single card from the top of the deck to the player on his left, in such a way that nobody can see the face of the card. The dealer then does the same for the next player, and so on around the table. The process continues until everyone receives their due number of cards.



Players generally considered it bad form for any player to look at his cards until the deal has been completed.

In several games, only some of the cards are dealt out. In such games, you put a parcel of undealt cards in a pile in the middle of the table. This pile is known as the *stock* or *talon.* Frequently, the dealer turns the top card of the stock face-up for one reason or another, and this card is known as the *up-card.*

The cards dealt out to a player, taken as a whole, constitute a *hand.* It's normal practice to pick up your hand at the conclusion of the deal and to arrange the hand in an overlapping fan shape; if you like, you can sort the cards out by suit and rank, as appropriate for the game you're playing, to make your decision making easier. Make sure, however, to take care that no one but you can see your cards. Similarly, you shouldn't make any undue efforts to look at any one else's hand.

Most card games need not only a dealer (a job that changes from hand to hand) but also a scorekeeper — not normally a sought-after task. The least innumerate mathematician may be landed with the task — or the soberest player. The good news is that scientific studies have shown that the scorer generally wins the game. I wonder why!

Exposing yourself (or someone else)

In general, any irregularity in a deal that leads to a card or cards being turned over invalidates the whole deal, and the normal procedure is for the dealer to collect all the cards and start over.

However, some minor exceptions to this principle exist, and these tend to result in the dealer getting the worst penalty if he exposes cards from his own hand. But most casual games call for leniency.

Bidding fair

Some, but by no means all, the games in this book include another preparatory phase of gameplay during which players have to estimate how much their hands will be worth in the latter stages of the game. The game may call for a silent estimate (as in Ninety Nine), an announcement (Oh Hell!), or an *auction* (Euchre or Bridge), in which whoever makes the highest bid wins a right to form a prediction. The process may off the option to make a single call (Euchre) or a competitive auction (Bridge). Either way, these phases of the game are known as the *bidding*.

Frequently, a contested auction results in one player or partnership winning the chance to determine the boss, or trump, suit. This right is also known as *determining the contract.* One player or side essentially promises to achieve something in the play of the cards in exchange for being allowed to determine which suit has special powers.



The bidding at games such as Euchre, Pinochle, or Bridge should be distinguished from the *betting* at Poker or Blackjack. At Pinochle or Bridge, players must predict how many points or tricks respectively they can take, with penalties if they overestimate their hands' values. In games such as Spades or Oh Hell!, underestimation is similarly penalized. However, at Blackjack, you have to pay to play, without seeing your hand. At Poker, by contrast, although you must put up a stake in order to stay in the game and receive cards, the real expenditure comes after the initial bet, when you have to pay to stay in the game.

Making a Declaration

Are you the impatient type? Want to score points even before the gameplay begins? Well, some games have a *declaration* phase, in which you score points for combinations of cards that are worth certain amounts based on a predetermined table of values unique to the game. You can accumulate these points in a game like Pinochle, and sometimes an exchange of cards is permitted to improve your score on the hand.



Having a number of consecutive cards in the same suit, is called a *run* or *sequence*. Having three or four cards of the same rank (obviously in different suits, unless, you have more than one deck of cards in play in which case there are no such restrictions) is called a *set* or *book*.

Playing the Game

The most important phase of most card games resides in the *play* of the hand. In many of the games in this book, the objective is to try to accumulate points — or, in a game like Hearts, to try to *avoid* accumulating points.

The standard way of accumulating or avoiding points derives from the concept that a game is made up of several distinct phases; in each phase (except for certain games like Poker and Blackjack), players detach cards from their hands and put them face-up on the table, in order. Whoever plays the highest card in the suit led usually gets to collect all those cards and stack them face-down in front of him. This unit of playing cards is called a *trick* — your success in many competitive card games hinges on how many tricks you win during the course of play. (Again, however, some games in the book, such as Pitch or Setback, feature trying to win specific valuable cards rather than simply trying to obtain the majority of the tricks.)

So the high card takes the trick. But how do you get to that point? Here are the steps that get you there:

1. **The first player to act makes the *opening lead,* or the lead to the very first trick.**

   Depending on the rules of the game, the elder hand (the player to the dealer's left), the dealer, or the player who selected the contract during the bidding process makes the opening lead.

2. **The player who wins the trick generally leads to the next trick and so on throughout the hand, until everyone plays all their cards.**

   The order of play nearly always follows a clockwise or occasionally counterclockwise pattern in relation to the deal or the winner of the trick.

The player who wins the trick makes the next lead and scores or avoids points. But it doesn't always take the high card to win the trick, and sometime you make mistakes during the course of a hand. The following sections detail tricks and penalizing treats.

Winning with high cards or trump

The concept that the highest card played on a trick wins the trick is a simple one, but it doesn't do justice to the rules of most games in this book. Each has more complex rules than that. For example, in most games, it isn't simply the high card that wins the trick; it's the highest card in the *suit led.*

My point is that most games (but not all!) state that when a player leads a suit — say, spades — all subsequent players must play spades if they still have one in their hands. This concept is called *following suit.*

So what happens if you can't follow suit? Well, here is where the concept of the trump suit comes in. Many of the trick-taking games have a trump suit, which has special powers. You may like to think of this as the "boss" suit, which outranks all the other suits. In games such as Whist, you select the boss suit at random. In other games, such as Euchre, the initial suit is random, but the players have a chance to select another suit if they want to. And in some games, such as Bridge, the choice is entirely up to the players playing individually or acting in a partnership.



So, what do trumps do, besides build real estate and host reality television? Well, if you have no cards in the suit led, you can put a trump on the lead (or *trump it*). This action is also called *ruffing the trick.* Consequently, the importance of the trump suit lies in the fact that the smallest trump can beat even the ace of any other suit. So, if a trick doesn't have any trumps in it, the highest card of the suit led takes the trick; however, if one or more trumps hit the table on a trick, the highest trump takes the trick.

Failing to follow suit

Most games have rules that require you to play a card in the suit led if you can; and indeed, that is your ethical requirement. However, if you can follow suit but don't, you incur no penalty — you only face a penalty for being *caught* failing to follow suit! The penalty varies from game to game but is generally a pretty severe one.

In failing to follow suit, you have three terms to bear in mind:

- **Revoke:** The sinful failure to follow suit when you're able is known as *revoking* or *reneging.* (The latter term seems to be exclusive to the United States and is now synonymous with the revoke.)
- **Trump:** Putting a card from the trump suit down when a suit is led, in which you have no cards. If you play a trump, you stand to win the trick — so long as no one else subsequently plays a higher trump.
- **Discard:** The laying down of an off-suit card when you're unable to follow suit is called a *discard* or *renounce,* although the former term is more common these days. Discarding implies that you're letting go a card in a plain, non-trump suit rather than trumping.

Say your hand consists solely of clubs, diamonds, and hearts, and you're playing out a hand where hearts are trump:

- If another player leads a club and you play a diamond or a heart on the lead, you revoke.
- If a player leads a spade and you play a heart, you trump the spade.
- If you play a diamond on the lead of a spade, you discard.

Playing out of turn

For one reason or another, players occasionally lose track of who won the previous trick. If a player neglects to remember that she's supposed to lead, a potentially long and embarrassing pause ensues until someone plucks up enough courage to ask her whether she's thinking about what to do next or if she's spacing out.

More frequently, however, somebody *leads out of turn,* under the false impression that the action is on her. If this happens, the general rule is that the next player can accept that lead by following to the trick, if he wants to do so. Alternatively, he may be so hypnotized by the sight of the card that he may genuinely think it's his turn to play, so he follows suit innocently.

Either way, the general rule is that the next player's following legitimizes the original mistake. However, some games state that up until the faulty trick is completed, if anyone spots the error, you still have time to pick the whole trick up and correct the error.

Exposing yourself to public ridicule

The rules about exposed cards (accidentally dropping a card on the table as opposed to playing it) tend to vary, depending on whether you're playing a partnership game or playing on your own:

- In an individual game, the rules tend to be fairly lax; you can normally pick up your exposed cards, and the game continues. (Of course, your opponent benefits from seeing part of your hand, which is considered punishment enough for the error.)
- In a partnership game, the consequences of exposing a card are much more severe because you simultaneously give unauthorized information to both your partner and your opponents. Often, the rules of a game require you to play the exposed cards at the first opportunity, or your partner may be forbidden from playing the suit you let slip. These are the Draconian rules in place with games such as Bridge, for example.

Selecting the Best Card Game

All the card games in this book are excellent, of course — I provide only the cream of the crop. However, depending on the number of players and your collective experience and expectations, some games are more suitable than others. Depending on your needs, the following lists recommend certain games for various situations.

Miss Manners' guide to card-game etiquette

Some elements of card-game etiquette relate to basic good manners and polite behavior, and some deal with areas that come perilously close to cheating. On the etiquette front, for example, you shouldn't pick up your cards until the deal is finished — if for no other reason than that you may cause the dealer to expose a card if your fingers get in the way.

After you pick up your hand, avoid indicating in any way whether you're pleased or unhappy with its contents. This is particularly important in a partnership game where you can't divulge such potentially useful information.

The idea that you should play card games in silence may give the impression that you can't enjoy yourself — that you should focus on winning to the exclusion of having fun. That isn't the case, but you should avoid conversation if it gives away information that you're not entitled to pass on or if the sole purpose of your remarks is to upset or irritate your partner or opponents. (The rules in Poker are a little different. Conversation during a poker game is one way for players to influence their opponents.)

The tempo of the way you play your cards can also be very revealing. You can make it clear by the way you play your card that you have doubt or no doubt at all as to what to do. You can't eliminate doubt altogether, but you can try to make your mind up before playing a card so that you avoid conveying information by your tempo to your partner and opponents. Again, though, in Poker, anything goes!

As a general point, though, the best card game to play is probably the one that some of your players already know. You pick up strategies of the game, as well as its customs and traditions, much faster by playing with experienced players rather than in a group consisting entirely of beginners.

If you have a specific number of players:

- **Solitaire games:** Accordion and Poker Patience if you're short on space; La Belle Lucie if you can spread yourself out. (See Chapter 2 for Solitaire games.)
- **Two-player games:** Gin Rummy (Chapter 4), Spite and Malice (Chapter 3), and Cribbage (Chapter 16).
- **Three-player games:** Pinochle (Chapter 14) and Ninety-Nine (Chapter 9).
- **Four-player games:** Bridge (Chapter 12), Euchre (Chapter 10), Hearts (Chapter 13), and Spades (Chapter 11).
- **Five- to eight-player games:** Hearts (Chapter 13) and Oh Hell! (Chapter 9).
- **Eight or greater player games:** Eights (Chapter 6) and President (Chapter 17).

If you're picking the game based on time constraints:

- You can play Setback (Chapter 15), Whist (Chapter 8), and Euchre (Chapter 10) to specified target scores, which you can adapt to reflect the time you have available.
- You can play Ninety-Nine (Chapter 9) for a specified number of hands.
- If you have a few years at your disposal, I recommend an ongoing battle of Spite and Malice (Chapter 3).

If you're selecting your game based on the type of play:

- Serious, competitive types tend to enjoy Whist (Chapter 8) and Bridge (Chapter 12).
- If you're playing in a cramped space (on a plane, train, or bus), Hearts (Chapter 13) and Eights (Chapter 6) work well.
- In a bar, Cribbage (Chapter 16) goes well with alcohol.
- For large groups in a social setting, Poker (Part VI) and Blackjack (Chapter 18) are ideal.
- For games that combine bidding and play, Pinochle (Chapter 14) and Spades (Chapter 11) are good choices.

- The best partnership games are Bridge (Chapter 12), Whist (Chapter 8), and Euchre (Chapter 10).
- If your deck of cards is defective, you want to play a game that doesn't deal out all the cards. You can play Oh Hell! (Chapter 9), Spite and Malice (Chapter 2), and Setback (Chapter 15) with a deck that has missing cards.

If you're selecting the game based on the experience level of the players:

- **For beginners:** Oh Hell! and Ninety-Nine (both in Chapter 9) have simple, easy-to-understand principles.
- **For children:** Go Fish, Concentration, and Cheat (all in Chapter 3) are all simple, but they require younger players to think in order to win. Knockout Whist (Chapter 8) is the best introduction to trick-taking games for children.
- **For groups with mixed experience levels:** Knock-Out Whist (Chapter 8) and Fan Tan (Chapter 7) rely heavily on luck, which gives everyone a sporting chance. Rummy (Chapter 4) also comes easily to inexperienced card players.
- **For experienced card players:** Pinochle (Chapter 14) and Cribbage (Chapter 16) offer new thrills and challenges.