

Breaks in Tempo

What is a Break in Tempo?

The Laws of Contract Duplicate Bridge define proper communication between partners in the following (Law 73):

"During the auction and play, communication between partners should be effected only by means of the calls and plays themselves. Calls and plays should be made without special emphasis, mannerism or inflection, and without undue hesitation or haste."

"Variations in tempo, manner or the like may violate the Proprieties when the player could know at the time of his action that the variation could work to his benefit. Inadvertently varying the tempo or manner in which a call or play is made does not in itself constitute a violation of the Proprieties, but inferences from such a variation may properly be drawn only by an opponent, and at his own risk."

Aren't I Allowed to Stop and Think?

Of course; sometimes it's necessary to think through an unexpected turn in the bidding or play. It's always better to try to anticipate situations and to be prepared to bid and play without significant variation in rate. That is, of course, not always possible.

So What's Wrong?

In short, a variation in tempo is not an offense. However, that **variation is Unauthorized Information (UI) for the player's partner.**

During the auction, any call that partner makes must be made solely on the basis of that partner's hand and without any influence from the Unauthorized Information. This burden is particularly heightened when the player breaks tempo by visibly hesitating and subsequently passing. There is always the clear message that some other action was considered. In this case, partner must take every precaution not to act on that UI. In effect, a hesitation followed by a pass virtually takes all decisions away from their partner. If partner has reasonable options, among which is to pass, then pass must be their choice.

During the play, Unauthorized Information gained from variations in tempo during the bidding or play has the same effect. Partner cannot utilize this UI in defending a contract.

What About the Stop Card?

The "Stop" card is utilized to non-verbally announce a Skip Bid, one that skips one or more levels of bidding. The next player to call is expected to pause (the ACBL states that this pause should be about 10 seconds, but nobody expects that amount of time), studying their cards in the meantime, before making their next call. The pause is required **with or without deployment of the Stop card**. In this case, a hasty Pass would constitute Unauthorized Information, as would unduly long hesitation.

What Should I Do?

Try to anticipate turns in the bidding and play as much as is reasonable, in order to try to maintain a uniform rate of bidding and play. When a difficult decision arises, take the time to reach a correct decision; but to protect your partner, it is advised that once you consider the Pass card quickly to avoid hesitating and Passing. (In other words, once you visibly hesitate, try very hard to take some positive action. Otherwise, your partner will be virtually powerless to act.)

My Partner Broke Tempo; What Do I Do?

If your partner broke tempo during bidding, but did not Pass, you are in pretty good shape. Try to ignore the UI (partly because it's proper, partly because it's legislated, partly because you will likely draw a wrong inference and get a bad score). Make your call based solely on partner's action and not the additional UI.

If your partner broke tempo and Passed, you face a monumental challenge in justifying any bids you make. Take every conservative position that you can, passing if it is at all an option, and refraining from making penalty doubles unless that call is inevitable with your holding.

If your partner broke tempo during the bidding or during the defense of a contract, bend way over backwards to ignore that information during the defense. If two leads or discards are available, choose the one that is contrary to what UI you may have gained.

Penalties?

Any use of UI will subject the offender(s) to an adjustment on the board in question (Law 12). Continued infractions of this type could subject the offender(s) to additional penalties.