

FOURTH SUIT ARTIFICIAL

When opener rebids in a new suit, responder often has a problem:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♥
1♠	?

To begin with, a responder who now wants to raise clubs should be able to sign off, invite game, or make a forcing bid in clubs. Standard bidding does not permit all three. In the auction above, responder might have one of these hands:

- 1) ♠3 ♥KJ872 ♦965 ♣J976
- 2) ♠3 ♥AJ872 ♦965 ♣KQ97
- 3) ♠3 ♥AKJ87 ♦965 ♣KQ97

With hand 1) responder bids 2♣, expecting opener to pass or bid 2♥. With 2), responder wants to bid more than 2♣, but is a 3♣ bid forcing or merely invitational? Let's say it's invitational, as most experts play, so 3♣ is the right bid. But what about hand 3)? Now we would like to play 3♣ as forcing. If we do, then we would have to bid 2♣ with hand 2), but surely it's not right that a weak bid should have such a wide range of strength. And if 3♣ is not forcing, then what?

Another sequence:

Opener	Responder
1♦	1♠
2♣	?

Responder might have one of these hands:

- 1) ♠AQ875 ♥765 ♦Q32 ♣AQ
- 2) ♠AJ872 ♥765 ♦K2 ♣K76
- 3) ♠AJ9872 ♥7 ♦432 ♣AK7

With 1) responder has no call, unless he plays 3♦ as forcing. If so, what does he do with Kx in clubs instead of AQ? A weak preference of 2♦ would be inadequate. With hand 2) responder wants to invite game, but how? Raising a secondary suit with Kxx is misleading. Besides, 2NT might be the spot if opener has a minimum hand. With 3) responder wants to be in game, but where? Opener might have a little something in spades, but responder can hardly bid 4♠ without some investigating. A 3♠ bid is not forcing, is it? If it is, what does responder do without the club king? Bid just 2♠?

Another:

Opener	Responder
1♥	2♣
2♦	?

Responder has ♠643 ♥K2 ♦K87 ♣AKJ73. Now what? Without some understanding about fourth suit bids, a 2♠ call may only be postponing the problem. Suppose opener bids 2NT over 2♠ (and what does that bid require?). Should responder raise to 3NT?

Fourth Suit Artificial (FSA), popularly called Fourth Suit Forcing, can handle all these situations, and more, provided that the partnership has an agreement about the requirements for bidding the fourth suit, and about the meanings of subsequent bids by both partners.

FSA is defined as a bid of the fourth suit at the two or three level by responder, when neither partner has previously jumped in a new suit or bid notrump. Higher level fourth suit bids are either real suits, or cue bids, or whatever, and the following is not a conventional fourth suit bid:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♦
1♥	1♠

The 1♠ bid is natural. Although it may be based on some three-card holding, opener will assume that 1♠ shows a suit. This is standard procedure. To make up for this, the following is a conventional fourth suit bid:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♦
1♥	2♠

The 2♠ bid is FSA, not a regular jump shift, and not a splinter bid in support of hearts (use 3♠ for this). Why not use 1♠ as FSA? Because it is too valuable as a natural bid, and the seldom used 2♠ bid can be used instead.

FSA does not apply when either partner has made a jump in a new suit (except for the last sequence above):

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♥
2♠	3♦

Opener	Responder
1♦	2♠
3♣	3♥

These fourth suit bids are natural, showing some high card strength if not a real suit. However:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♦
1♥	3♣
3♦	3♠

The 3♠ bid is FSA, since the jump to 3♣ was not in a new suit.

FSA does not apply when the opponents have bid, but does apply when an opponent has made a takeout double and received no response:

South	West	North	East
1♣	Dbl	1♥	Pass/dbl
1♠	Pass	2♦ is FSA	

FSA does not apply in Checkback Stayman sequences:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♥
1NT	2♣ - Checkback Stayman
2♦	2♠
2NT	3♦ - natural, 4-5-4-0 or 4-4-4-1, not forcing

With FSA a jump preference by responder, or a jump rebid in the same suit, is invitational (as most people play):

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♥
1♠	3♣

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♥
1♠	3♥

Neither sequence is forcing. If responder has too strong a hand for these non-forcing rebids, he must choose some other call. The alternative will often be FSA.

After FSA, a 4NT bid by either partner is natural unless a major suit fit has been definitely (not tentatively or implicitly) agreed.

WARNING: DO NOT USE FSA IF AN ADEQUATE NATURAL BID IS AVAILABLE!

Two-Level Fourth Suit Bids

Fourth suit bids at the two level are at least game tries, but responder could have game-going strength or more. The fourth suit bidder may have any holding in the fourth suit, from a singleton to a real suit (no voids, please).

Kings and queens are better when led up to, not through, so avoid bidding the fourth suit bid with a holding like Kx or Qxx. Look for another bid, probably notrump. A doubleton queen is sometimes acceptable, since a notrump bid with Qx in the only unbid suit is somewhat risky. Axx is a common holding for FSA, with the hope that partner will bid notrump with Qx.

Opener's response to FSA is to continue showing his hand, giving priority to supporting partner's major suit with a very strong doubleton (two of the top four honors) or any three cards. He need not have the fourth suit stopped for a 2NT bid; three small cards, Qx, or even a singleton facecard will do in a pinch. Responder will not raise to 3NT without Jxx, xxxx, or better in the suit. Yes, xxx opposite xxx may be good enough, but we can't do everything. Sometimes responder can tell that opener has at least three cards in the suit, and then it's okay to raise with xxx (example later).

Opener makes the call that best describes his hand, not just his holding in the fourth suit. He may bid notrump with certain holdings in the fourth suit, or he may raise the fourth suit, but his first duty is to describe his hand. If some other bid does a better job, he chooses that bid.

Suppose the bidding goes:

Opener	Responder
1♦	1♠
2♣	2♥
?	

If opener has ♠A ♥K3 ♦QJ765 ♣QJ832, he bids 3♣, not 2NT, because 3♣ gives a better picture of the hand.

In trying to show his hand, opener may choose to rebid a strong four-card minor suit:

Opener	Responder
1♦	1♠
2♣	2♥

With ♠32 ♥76 ♦A10765 ♣AKJ8, opener should now bid 3♣, not 3♦. With AKJ85 of diamonds and A1076 of clubs, he should bid 3♦. Responder must remember that a rebid of the second suit may not be five cards long, although such a rebid does imply that the first suit has at least five cards.

Responder can pass any minimum bid, so opener must not be bashful with a good hand. If he raises the fourth suit bid, or jumps, he shows a good hand and game must be reached:

Opener	Responder
1♦	1♥
1♠	2♣
2♦/2♥/2♠/2NT are all non-forcing	
3♣/3♦/3♥/3♠ are all forcing to game	

Let's examine the meaning of all these bids:

2♦ implies long diamonds, no heart support, probably Jx or worse in clubs, and a minimum hand.

2♥ is usually based on three-card support, but could be a very strong doubleton (KJ, AQ, etc.)

2♠ may not be a five-card suit. Assume a strong four-card suit in a 4=5 hand.

2NT implies a tolerance for notrump, in this case probably at least xxx in clubs (with all that room at the two level to bid something else), and a minimum hand.

3♣ is a good hand with no suitable bid, game-forcing. Denies much in clubs.

3♦ is a good hand with a good diamond suit.

3♥ may not have much in high cards if the shape is 4=3=5=1, because the hands probably fit very well. However, opener does not promise a singleton club.

3♠ is a good hand with six diamonds and five spades, or possibly four very strong spades in a 5-4 or 6-4 hand.

3NT is a good hand with clubs stopped, Qxx or better. It may be chanced with a stiff king.

A raise of the fourth suit is necessary when opener has a good hand but no way to show it conveniently. Perhaps he doesn't want to bypass 3NT with a four-level jump. While the following auction may be difficult, the extra strength will probably provide safety.

If the fourth suit bidder bids again after a minimum rebid by opener, opener must also bid again if game has not been reached and a limit bid has not been made. The limit bids are: any bid by a passed hand, a rebid of the fourth suit, a notrump bid, or a direct raise of opener's last bid:

Opener	Responder
1♦	1♥
1♠	2♣
2♠	?

If responder is a passed hand, no bid at this point is forcing. Otherwise:

2NT is invitational, not forcing.

3♣ is not forcing, showing a real suit and an opening bid (but bad fit). To force, bid 3♣ instead of 2♣.

3♦ is forcing (not a direct raise).

3♥ is forcing (but not if opener had bid 2♥).

3♠ is not forcing, showing good three-card support.

A rebid of the fourth suit shows that it is a real suit. Since this bid is made in the face of a possible misfit, each partner having a two-suited hand, it requires a hand of approximately opening bid strength. With less, or with fitting cards in partner's suits, bid notrump instead of using FSA. With more, jump in the fourth suit instead of using FSA. Example:

Opener	Responder
♠AQJ3	♠72
♥5	♥AQ1043
♦KQ973	♦2
♣743	♣AQ952

Opener	Responder
1♦	1♥
1♠	2♣
2♦	3♣
Pass	

Responder would have bid a forcing 3♣ over 1♠ with a better hand, and 1NT over 1♠ with a weaker hand. Opener is happy to pass 3♣ with his bad fit. With a better fit (♠Q1087 ♥K ♦AQ973 ♣J87), he could bid 3NT.

When opener rebids a major at the three level, a rebid of the fourth suit by responder is defined as a slam try in the rebid major:

Opener	Responder
1♠	2♦
2♥	3♣
3♠	4♣ - slam try in spades

Opener	Responder
1♥	2♣
2♦	2♠
3♥	3♠ - slam try in hearts

In either case responder would normally bid notrump rather than show a biddable fourth suit, so this fourth suit rebid is more useful as a device to imply a hand that is too good for a mere raise to game in opener's rebid major. The principle does not apply if opener's rebid suit is a minor (diamonds, spades).

If opener bids 2NT in response to FSA, possibly with only xxx, Qx, or even a singleton king or queen in the fourth suit, responder must not raise to 3NT without at least Ax, Jxx, or xxxx in the suit. She might *pass* with less, however:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♥
1♠	2♦
2NT	Pass

Responder has ♠A98 ♥A7632 ♦Q2 ♣J87. If opener does not have diamonds stopped, 2NT may still be a good contract. If the jack of clubs were the king, responder would have too much to pass 2NT. She must not raise notrump with Qx in the fourth suit, however. A forcing 3♣ would be right.

When responder does not raise notrump, she doesn't necessarily deny strength in the fourth suit. She may be fishing for slam or some superior suit contract, as any suit bid over 2NT is forcing.

If opener jumps to 3NT over the fourth suit bid, he shows a good hand and a stopper in the fourth suit, so responder can pass with a weak doubleton or singleton ace, king, or queen. She may not pass with a smaller singleton in the fourth suit, and if she even thinks of doing so then she should not have used FSA. Conversely, when responder pulls a jump to 3NT back to a suit, she strongly implies a singleton in the fourth suit:

Opener	Responder
1♥	1♠
2♣	2♦
3NT	4♣

Responder has ♠AJ765 ♥K3 ♦6 ♣J10832. Rather a strange fourth suit bid, but responder thought that 4♣ over 2♣ would sound too strong for this 9 HCP hand, and she wanted to find out if opener perhaps had some spade support or a strong heart suit. Opener's hand: ♠7 ♥AJ842 ♦AJ7 ♣KQ74.

Don't push to make a fourth suit bid, however. This convention is meant for hands that are difficult to bid by other means. Suppose you respond 1♠ to a 1♦ opening with ♠AK874 ♥932 ♦K86 ♣92, and partner rebids 2♣. Your correct call now is an invitational 3♦, not 2♥. Why? Because 2♥ could lead to complications--you have to look ahead. For instance, if partner's next bid over 2♥ is 3♣ you would have to bid 3♦, which is forcing. With ace of clubs instead of the jack, a jump preference to 3♦ would not suffice, and a 2♥ bid would be correct.

Here's another example of looking ahead: You have ♠K32 ♥76 ♦AQ97 ♣Q1087, and partner opens 1♣, you respond 1♦. When he rebids 1♠ it is tempting to use FSA (2♥). If partner has hearts stopped, this hand may play well in notrump. But partner may not have hearts stopped, and may have

to bid 3♦ with a hand such as ♠A1083 ♥J2 ♦K52 ♣AJ32. Too weak to bid further, you would have to play in this inferior contract. So, you must jump to 3♣ over 1♠. Again: Do not use FSA if an adequate natural bid is available.

The fourth suit bid denies four-card support for any major that opener has bid. Any later raise of such a major will be based on good three-card support. A raise to game in a secondarily bid major therefore promises good support for opener's minor suit, in case opener doesn't want to play a 4-3 trump fit:

Opener	Responder
1♣	1♥
1♠	2♦
3NT	4♠

Responder has ♠KQ3 ♥A7652 ♦9 ♣K874. Opener passes with ♠AJ104 ♥K ♦KJ4 ♣QJ653, but bids 6♣ with ♠J765 ♥K ♦AJ5 ♣AQJ65 (playing responder for a singleton diamond). With weaker spades, responder would have bid 4♣ over 3NT, hoping to raise spades later.

Responder should be very careful about making a fourth suit bid with much more than opening bid strength. Opener will assume that responder's hand is limited to just game-going strength at most, and will jump to 3NT with as much as 18 HCP. Responder could hardly raise this to 4NT with only 15 HCP and, say, xx in the fourth suit. Opener might also have just 15 HCP, and nine tricks could be the limit of the two hands. If responder does have a very strong hand, she is on her own. Until she makes a definite slam try, not just any old jump to game, opener will figure her for no more than mere game-going strength.

FSA can be used in many ways to show hands that are otherwise difficult to bid. Opposite a 1♣ opening, you respond 1♥ with ♠AJ9 ♥KQ8765 ♦3 ♣QJ7. Opener rebids 1♠. You should now bid 2♦, planning to follow with a forcing 3♥ bid. If opener bids 3NT over 2♦, you bid 4♥, which implies a singleton diamond and strongly suggests a 3-3 holding in opener's suits (with four clubs, the usual bid over 3NT would be 4♣). It also tends to deny a stronger heart suit, with which you would bid 3♥ or 4♥ over 1♠. Opener can now bid 4♠ over 4♥ with ♠KQ76 ♥2 ♦QJ4 ♣AK1062.

If the Fourth Suit Bid Gets Doubled

South	West	North	East
1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass
2♣	Pass	2♥	Dbl

Opener passes with a minimum hand and nothing important to show, such as a good long suit, trump support for spades, or enough heart strength to redouble. A redouble shows Ax, Jxx, or 10xxx or better in the fourth suit, a holding that will play okay in notrump opposite Qx or singleton king. Opener cannot bid 2NT or redouble with just three small cards in the fourth suit, but he can still bid 2NT with Qx or a singleton king. Responder won't raise notrump without Qx, Jxx, 10xxx, or better

(9xxx is not good enough here). In this situation North can raise a 2NT bid to 3NT with Qx because South won't bid 2NT with three small.

If a Raise of the Fourth Suit Gets Doubled

South	West	North	East
1♦	Pass	1♠	Pass
2♣	Pass	2♥	Pass
3♥	Dbl		

A redouble by North shows a heart stop, probably Ax(x).

Three-Level Fourth Suit Bids

Responder's FSA bid at the three level is forcing to game. Opener need not make a precipitous leap with a good hand, unless the hand is best described that way. A 3NT bid shows at least Qx or Jxx in the fourth suit.

Responder must pull 3NT back to a suit with a weak doubleton in the fourth suit (no singletons at this level, please). Opener can rebid notrump (4NT) with safety in the fourth suit. If opener then bids the fourth suit, that is a cue bid showing the ace. In this auction, opener has A65 in diamonds, responder 32:

Opener	Responder
1♠	2♥
3♣	3♦
3NT	4♣
4♦	4NT
Pass	

If opener had K65 in diamonds, he would just bid 4NT over 4♣.

