

A Practical Guide

THE ULTIMATE GUIDE TO PLAYING POKER



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POKER

Gambling trends come and go, but one that seems here to stay is poker.

Since the game's popularity boom in the early 2000s, poker has gone from being a niche gambling activity to becoming a widespread recreational hobby, spectator sport, and even legitimate career path. A big part of this steady popularity is thanks to how fun and accessible playing poker online is.

To the outsider, poker and all its jargon can seem like an intimidating world to enter though. If the poker bug is biting you just now, our downloadable poker guide will teach you everything you need to know about how to start playing (and playing well) for real money.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF POKER



Poker's exact origins are murky. Some say it came from the Persian card game As-Nas, while others claim it's inspired by the old Italian game primero, a French game called brelan, or an English game called brag.

1800

What we do know is that poker's unique betting system first appeared in the Mississippi river area in around 1800. Riverboats helped spread the game up and down the region, which then went west during the California gold rush and north and east during the Civil War.



Over the next century, the game slowly went from being illegal backroom entertainment in saloons to being a popular offering in America's first casinos.

1970

In 1970, the first World Series of Poker (WSOP) was held at Las Vegas' famed Horseshoe Casino. The event grew steadily in participation and popularity, even getting TV coverage from CBS and ESPN in the 70s and 80s.



The legalization of Texas hold'em and Omaha in several states and on Native American lands saw a further growth in participation, as more and more poker rooms opened across the country. Poker and its terminology began to enter the public lexicon and regularly made appearances on TV shows and in other forms of media.



2003

Then came the boom. Better TV coverage (which now allowed fans to see players' hole cards), the advent of online poker rooms, and online qualifier Chris Moneymaker winning the 2003 World Series of Poker triggered an explosion of unprecedented attention.

Suddenly, everyone was playing poker and the participation numbers at the WSOP, online, and at local cash games skyrocketed worldwide in a boom that the gambling industry is still enjoying today.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ONLINE AND LIVE POKER

Although the online and live versions of poker might seem like the same game, they are actually two completely different animals.



Online, games go much faster than they do in real life. A countdown timer, no needing to count chips, and no needing to wait for the next deal keeps things fast enough to the point where it's not uncommon to see between 50-75 hands per hour.

Considering that many online players play on many different tables at the same time (sometimes up to 24), it's no wonder that playing live can feel painfully slow.

While this pace allows you to gain experience much quicker than the old-fashioned way, it also means the swings in the game are much crazier. As quickly as you can grow your stack with a series of strong hands, it can shrink just as rapidly if you aren't careful about what hands you're participating in.

Because of the large amount of hands you see, you'll also experience a lot more bad beats, straight flushes, four of a kinds and every other type of poker event.

In live games, you'll see much looser play compared to online. This includes betting much larger amounts ahead of the flop (around 6x the size of the big blind compared to 2-3x online) as well as many 'limpers'.

In live games, players tend to avoid folding without seeing the flop, so will often call and 'limp' along with a below average starting hand just to see if something miraculous comes up on the board.

Finally, opponents online are generally much softer. At lower limit tables in particular, you'll often go against extremely predictable players that only raise when they have the nuts (the best hand possible) and that call with below average hands simply because it's not too costly to do so.

Many call these players 'fish' and once you understand basic poker strategy they are the most profitable people to play with.

HOW POKER IS PLAYED

In many ways, poker is the perfect game: easy to learn, impossible to master, and a balanced mix of skill and luck. While many have made a career out of the game, it can still be a cruel mistress to even the most experienced players.

Most forms of poker involve 2-10 players sitting around a table. In casual games, players will take turns being the dealer while in tournaments (and online) there will be an actual dealer.

In nearly every form of poker players alternate between being dealt cards and betting and trying to assemble a 'hand' (a group of cards) that outranks all the other players'.

PLAYING TEXAS HOLD 'EM

Easily the most popular poker game in the world, Texas Hold'em has become so popular that many just call it 'poker'.



Hold em's object is to make the best five-card hand between the two private cards that you are dealt and the five community cards in the middle of the table. 'Best' is determined by a hierarchical ranking of hands, shown in the next section.

POKER PLAYING STEPS

The game flow looks like the following:

Before a hand starts, the two players to the left of the dealer put forced bets called 'blinds' into the middle of the table. The two blinds and the dealer chip rotate after each hand.

1

Each player is dealt two community cards face down that only they can see (called 'hole' cards).

2

A round of betting occurs: players have the option to check (pass), call (match a previous players' bet), raise (increase the bet), or fold on their turn.

3

Three community cards are dealt and flipped face up in the middle of the table (called the 'flop').

4

Another round of betting.

5

A fourth card is dealt into the middle of the table (called the 'turn').

6

Another round of betting.

7

A fifth and final card (called the 'river') is dealt.

8

One last round of betting.

9

Players reveal their hands in the 'showdown'. The player with the best hand according to the rankings below wins the 'pot'. The pot is the total of all money bet.

10

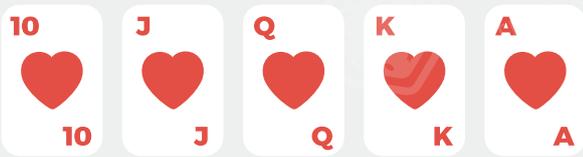
RANKING OF HANDS

The object of hold'em and most poker games is to make a set of five cards that is better than all the other players.

Hands are ranked by a hierarchy that looks like the following:

1

Royal Flush



A, K, Q, J and 10 of the same suit

2

Straight Flush



A five card sequence (e.g., 5, 6, 7, 8, 9) of the same suit

3

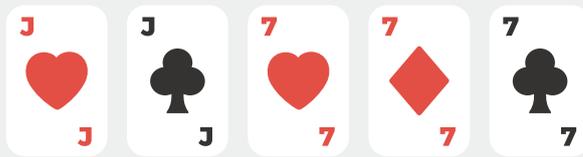
Four of a Kind



Four cards of the same rank (e.g., four Kings)

4

Full House



Three of a kind and a pair (e.g., three jacks and two 5s)

5

Flush



Five cards of any rank all in the same suit (e.g., five spades)

6

Straight



A five card sequence (e.g., 8, 9, 10, J, Q) in any suit

7

Three of a Kind



Three cards of the same value
(e.g., three 8s)

8

Two pair



Two different pairs
(e.g., two 3s and two 8s)

9

Pair



Two cards of the same rank
(e.g., two 10s)

10

High card



If no one has any of the above,
the highest card wins

A royal flush beats everything below it, while a straight flush beats everything except the royal flush, and so on.

When two or more players have the same hand, the tie is broken by whoever's hand has the highest-ranking card. For instance, if Player A had three-of-a-kind 7s while Player B had three-of-a-kind 8s, Player B wins due to 8 outranking 7.

In the event of two players having the same identical hand with the same high card, the pot is split evenly. Suit does not affect ranking of hands.

This hand hierarchy applies to a large number of poker games but not all. In some games, the object is to assemble the lowest hand possible with the Ace being the lowest card. In others, you are trying to get both the highest and lowest hand possible per each turn. More on those games below.

BETTING

While you can play poker for free online or with friends, the game's true strategy only comes out when there is some skin in the game, usually in the form of money.

So that some money is always at stake on each hand, there are 'forced bets' at the beginning of each hand. These usually take two different forms and their amount is determined before play begins:

Antes:

Common in stud poker. Before each hand, each player is required to put the same amount of money into the pot.

Blinds:

Common in community card games (like Hold'em and Omaha). Before each turn, the player to the left of the dealer bets the small blind. Also, the player two spots to the dealer's left bets the big blind which is double the amount of the small one.

Betting procedures in most poker games are similar and always go in clockwise rotation (to the left when facing the middle of the table).

When a round of betting begins, the first player to the left of the dealer has the option to either:

Check:

To not place a bet, passing the option to do so to the next player.

Bet:

Wager (put in the middle of the table) an amount of money equal to or greater than the small blind.

If a bet is placed, the next player can either:

Call:

Match the previous player's bet.

Bet:

Increase the wager more.

Players can also fold on their turn, which sees them return their cards to the dealer (face down) and ends their chance to win the hand.

When a player bets or raises, the betting goes around the table back to the original bettor until each player has either folded or wagered an equal amount of money into the pot.

Betting is where the skill aspect of poker comes into play and is an art in and of itself.

If you have a strong hand do you bet big as soon as possible, or do you take things slower as not to scare the other players into folding? If you have a weak hand, do you fold it right away or try and get other players to fold early thinking you have a monster hand?

Countless books have been written about the topic and how your personality affects whether you bet aggressively or passively based on your personality, how many chips you have, and the game situation.



OTHER TYPES OF POKER

If you've ever scanned the list of winners at a World Series of Poker event, you know that the game comes in all different shapes and sizes. Online that is true even more so and it's not uncommon to come across poker variations that you've never seen before (or will never see again anywhere else).

As fun as new spin-offs are, most serious poker players and online poker sites offer the same several game types. Taking the time to learn the rules and strategy for each will prepare you for any game that gets called out at your next poker night.

OMAHA

Omaha is another community card variant often found in both live and online card rooms. Instead of two cards like in Texas Hold 'Em, players are dealt four at the start of each hand.

From there, the dealing of the five community cards and the betting system are identical. The main exception is that a player's five card hand must be made up of exactly two of their own cards and exactly three of the community cards.

There are many variants of the game, such as Omaha Hi-Lo 8. In this, the pot is split on each hand and players try to put together the best five-card low hand (five unpaired cards at or below 8) and best high hand (normal poker hand ranking). Aces are considered low, and since flushes and straights are ignored the best possible low hand is A-2-3-4-5. Sometimes there is no eligible low hand, which rewards the entire pot to the high hand winner.



STUD

Stud is a family of games in which players are dealt cards both face up and face down over the course of several betting rounds. One of the oldest types of poker, today its most common forms are five and seven-card stud.

In the seven-card game, players put forth an ante and are then dealt three cards (called 'third street'), only one of which is face up.

The player who has the lowest-valued showing card starts the betting action. Once the betting completes a round, everyone is dealt another card face up ('fourth street'). This process repeats for fifth and sixth street, for which all cards dealt are exposed.

For seventh street, the final card is dealt face down for players to look at privately. After the final round of betting, players compare hands in order based on the last to bet or raise. The player with the best five card hand wins the pot.

Five-card stud is played similarly, except that hands are compared after fifth street is dealt (still dealt face up).

RAZZ

Razz is like if stud poker and hi/lo had a baby. The game has a strong following and receives a little bit of airtime almost every year at the World Series of Poker.

Like in seven-card stud, you are dealt seven cards across a number of turns, but the object is to make the lowest unpaired hand. With Ace being the low card, this makes 5-4-3-2-A the best hand.

Razz is almost always a limit game, meaning there is a maximum that can be bet by a player each round. Bet amounts double for the fifth card, and like in 7-card stud the final card is dealt face down.



HORSE

HORSE is a medley of the above games in which five different games are cycled through (one per round): Hold'em, Omaha hi-lo, Razz, Seven-card stud, Seven-card stud hi-low split Eight or better.

For those that love variety or just want to practice a bunch of different poker games equally, HORSE is for you. And although they might be difficult to find online, there are versions that incorporate even more poker games and carry crazy abbreviations like THORSEA (the additions being triple draw, no limit hold'em, pot limit omaha) and CHORSEL (crazy pineapple and lowball).

THE HOUSE EDGE

Even though poker is a game of skill and you are playing against others instead of the casino, the house is still taking a small cut. This is called the 'rake' and is a small percentage taken by the casino from each hand's overall pot, typically around 2.5-10%.

A rake is generally not taken if the hand ends before the flop.

While this might not seem like much the rake can add up, especially if you are only winning smaller pots. In a way, the rake is another opponent you must overcome when trying to profit playing poker.

The rake is typically smaller online than when playing in land casinos. For both, it is basically a commission that helps the casino make a profit and cover the costs of operating the game.

POKER STRATEGY FOR BEGINNERS

Poker is such a strategy-rich game that even MIT offers a class on it. Even still, there is no one perfect strategy, as in the end being successful at poker always involves a little bit of luck.



Taking the time to learn the basic tenants of poker strategy can minimize Lady Luck's influence on your play and give you an advantage over players that have no real strategy though.

BEING AWARE OF POSITIONS



One of the biggest boons to a new player will simply be becoming aware of their playing position. That is, letting not only the strength of your hand dictate how you play, but also where you are seated around the table.

The dealer and the player(s) immediately to their right are the most advantageous seats at the table. Sitting in these 'late' positions gives them more information to act on (since everyone else has already had their turn) and have more control on the size of the pot. Conversely, the blinds and the first player to act are in an early position, acting with little knowledge of what other players might have.

If you have a just above average hand and are in an early position, there's a good chance many people after you will have something better. But with that same hand in a late position, several players might fold before it's your turn, giving you better odds of having the strongest hand.

HAND PROBABILITIES

In addition to just knowing hand ranks, having a basic understanding of the odds for each appearing in a given hand can help you make decisions toward what action to take.

For five card poker hands (as used in Texas hold'em), those numbers look like the following:

| Hand | Ways to Draw the Hand (Including Different Suits) | Probability (% of the time you can expect to draw this hand) | Odds (number of ways to not draw the hand compared to each time you do) |
|-----------------|---|--|---|
| Royal Flush | 4 | 0.000154% | 649,739 : 1 |
| Straight Flush | 36 | 0.0015% | 72,192 : 1 |
| Four of a kind | 624 | 0.0256% | 4,164 : 1 |
| Full house | 3,744 | 0.17% | 693 : 1 |
| Flush | 5,108 | 0.367% | 508 : 1 |
| Straight | 10,200 | 0.76% | 254 : 1 |
| Three of a kind | 54,912 | 2.87% | 46.3 : 1 |
| Two pair | 123,552 | 7.62% | 20 : 1 |
| One pair | 1,098,240 | 49.9% | 1.37 : 1 |
| High card | 1,302,540 | 100% | 0.995 : 1 |

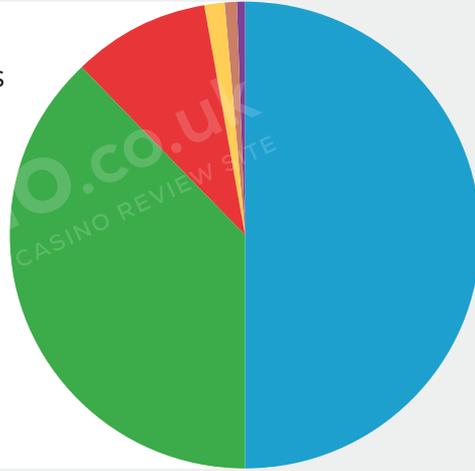
As you'll see, many of the game's higher ranking hands are rare occurrences. But their statistical scarcity means that when you are holding a four of a kind, there's a very low probability that another player is holding something better on the same turn. Conversely, even if a pair is on the board, don't be afraid to play strong with your flush out of fear that someone might be holding the other half of that four of a kind: the odds are against it.

STARTING HAND STRENGTH AND PROBABILITIES

It's also helpful to know the probability of being dealt certain combinations of hands. There are free online calculators where you can figure out the win probability in any poker scenario imaginable, but even just being aware of the approximate odds of being dealt one of the game's 15 best hands can make a big difference.

THE PROBABILITY OF BEING DEALT...

- **23.3%** Any two suited cards
- **5.88%** Any Pocket Pair
- **0.90%** Off suit Ace-King
- **0.45%** Pocket Aces
- **0.30%** Suited Ace-King



| Starting Hand Rank | Pocket Cards |
|--------------------|---------------|
| 1 | AA |
| 2 | KK |
| 3 | QQ |
| 4 | AK (suited) |
| 5 | JJ |
| 6 | 10 10 |
| 7 | AQ (suited) |
| 8 | AJ (suited) |
| 9 | AK (off suit) |
| 10 | KQ (suited) |
| 11 | A10 (suited) |
| 12 | KJ (suited) |
| 13 | AQ (off suit) |
| 14 | 99 |
| 15 | JQ (suited) |

CALCULATING OUTS

Once you have a solid understanding of card hand ranks and the likelihoods of certain hands, you can begin practicing counting your 'outs'.

An out is basically the number of cards in a given game situation that could complete your hand. For instance, if you were dealt two spades and two more came out on the flop, you would have 9 spades in the deck that could complete your flush (13 spades in the deck minus the 4 spades in play = 9 outs).

There are advanced out charts online that cover basically every possible situation, but the most important ones to memorize are:

| Starting Hand Rank | Pocket Cards | # Of Outs |
|-----------------------|-----------------|----------------------|
| A pair | Three of a kind | 2 |
| Two pair | Full house | 4 |
| Inside Straight | Straight | 4 |
| Open-Ended Straight | Straight | 8 |
| Three of a kind | Full house | 6 (flop) or 9 (turn) |
| Four of the same suit | Flush | 9 |

Generally speaking the more outs you have, the better chance you have of completing your hand. Remember that an out is only a card that can help you gain the best hand and not your opponent.

POKER'S NOTORIOUS CHEATS

Cheating in poker has been around as long as the game itself. Even with better security measures in casinos and online, mischievous players have still found a way to cheat the system at least temporarily. In the end though, they all get found out like these notorious cheaters did.



JEAN-PAUL PASQUALINI AND CEDRIC ROSSI

The most common form of cheating in live poker is signalling. This is when two or more colluding players communicate to each other what cards they are holding or what action they should take through subtle movements like hand signals.

At the final table of a 2009 Partouche Poker Tour event, players Jean-Paul Pasqualini and Cedric Rossi took first and second, winning a total of over \$2 million dollars. Years later, damning video evidence showed that the duo were using signals to tell the other what they were holding.



These signs included touching the head to signal they held an ace or two hands on the head to signal pocket aces. Unfortunately the two basically got away with it as the only repercussion they faced was suspension from the Global Poker Index's rankings.



RUSS HAMILTON

Winning the No Limit Texas Hold'em Main Event at the WSOP will ensure that your name is forever remembered in poker history. However, 1994 winner Russ Hamilton is now more remembered for the cheating scandal he took part in about a decade later than his big victory.

In 2008, the Kahnawake Gaming Commission said it had reason to believe Hamilton had duped players out of \$22 million on the poker site UltimateBet, for which he was an advisor. The commission alleged that Hamilton had access to manipulated software that let him see other players' hole cards in real time during online games. After Hamilton himself was caught on tape admitting his guilt, the site refunded that sum of money to as many of its defrauded players as possible.

POKER'S BIGGEST WINNERS

Part of poker's appeal is that most of the pros look like average Joes. We see them raking in pots worth hundreds of thousands of pounds and think 'If they can do that, why can't I?'



The following four are some of poker's biggest winners ever and are also responsible for luring in countless amounts of players to trying the game out.

THE BIG ONE

The biggest prize ever awarded for a poker victory came at the 2012 WSOP, but it wasn't the No Limit Hold'em main event. Instead, it was a special event featuring a \$1 million dollar buy-in (11% of which went to the One Drop Foundation) and a prize pool of \$42.6 million.

The big winner of the The Big One for One Drop was Antonio Esfandiari, who outlasted 47 others (including poker greats like Phil Hellmuth and Sam Trickett) to win \$18,346,673.

Still the largest single cash prize in poker history, the win briefly made Esfandiari poker's top all-time earner until the 2014 edition of The Big One.

KID POKER AND THE PHENOM

Daniel Negreanu's poker accolades are about as plentiful as the amount of money he's won from the game. The biggest live tournament poker winner of all-time, Negreanu is estimated to have won over \$34 million dollars during his still-active career.

Having played poker since he was 15, the Canadian has won two World Poker Tour titles, made 36 final table appearances at the WSOP, and is the first player to win a gold bracelet at a WSOP, WSOP-Europe, and WSOP-Asia-Pacific event.



The biggest online poker winner of all time is a player Negreanu has faced many times, American Phil Ivey. 'The Phenom' is estimated to have won more than \$19 million playing poker online, all while also having a live poker career successful enough to put him in the top five money earners of all-time.

BRITAIN'S BIGGEST WINNER

Britain is well-represented on the world poker stage, but its most notable ambassador is Sam Trickett. The Englishman didn't start playing poker until 2005 after a knee injury ended his hopes of a football career. Fast forward five years later and 'Tricky' burst onto the scene cashing in five different events at the 2010 WSOP, including winning half a million dollars for his second place finish in the \$5,000 No Limit Hold'em event.

Trickett has ranked as high as fifth on poker's all time money earners list, and is one of the top three highest-earning European players ever. Of the more than \$20.5 million he's won in poker, half of that came from his runner-up finish to Esfandiari in the 2012 Big One for the Drop, which he received 'only' \$10.1 million as a consolation prize.

THE DOS AND DONT'S OF POKER FOR BEGINNERS



✓ DO

PLAY FEWER HANDS

It's understandable that when you start playing poker, you want to be involved in a lot of hands. While this might be exciting, it's also one of the quickest ways to drain your chip stack. Although it might mean you are folding pre-flop 80% of the time, most suggest only playing the top 10-15 starting hands in the game (which in live poker could mean playing just a few hands every hour).



❌ DON'T

GET EMOTIONAL

Being stoic and expressionless is called having a poker face for a reason. Online and in live poker, the best players focus only on the situation in front of him and don't let a hot streak or bad beat persuade them into betting recklessly.



✅ DO

PLAY SIMPLY

Countless newbies get into poker trying to implement the advanced strategies they see discussed on poker broadcasts. But what a lot of poker strategy builds upon is simply betting when you have a strong hand and checking or folding when you don't. While you'll occasionally fold something that would have been a killer hand, that's a much cheaper mistake than staying in too long with an average hand that never pans out.



❌ DON'T

BLUFF

While bluffing might be the most 'famous' poker strategy, it's something that even the pros rarely do. When you have a firm grasp on the nuances of the game, bluffing can be a helpful tactic to nick an occasional pot, but more often than not you will get called on it and burnt by someone that actually has a strong hand.



DO

PRACTICE

Books and tutorials can help you become a better player, but true knowledge only comes from applying what you've learned from those resources. People tend to not play realistically in free games, so the best practice usually comes from playing lower limit games where there is still some skin in the game.



DON'T

IGNORE THE ODDS

Playing poker is about paying attention during the entire hand, not just when it's your turn. Even online, every action the other players make (how long they take to act, when they raise, how much they bet) can give you clues as to what kind of hand they have.



DO

SET A LIMIT

Before playing poker regularly, figure out a bankroll for yourself. This is an amount of money that can outlast the natural ebbs and flows of poker and that you'd be ok with losing (financially and mentally) if you lost it all. If your bankroll is drying up, take some time to step away from the game or switch to less expensive tables.



**NOW YOU'RE READY
TO PLAY POKER**



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