

How to play poker, covering hand rankings, draw, stud, and flop games, cash games, and tournaments

POKER HAND RANKINGS	
Royal Flush	10♥ J♥ Q♥ K♥ A♥
Straight Flush	4♣ 5♣ 6♣ 7♣ 8♣
Four of a Kind	K♠ K♥ K♣ K♦ 3♠
Full House	10♥ 10♠ 10♦ A♠ A♣
Flush	10♠ K♠ 2♠ 6♠ 7♠
Straight	7♣ 8♠ 9♦ 10♠ J♥
Three of a Kind	5♠ 5♥ 5♣ J♦ A♦
Two Pair	A♠ A♥ 3♣ 3♠ J♣
One Pair	Q♦ Q♥ 2♥ 8♠ 9♣

Hand rankings for *most* variations of poker are identical, following a hierarchy of five-card hands valued according to the likelihood of their occurrence.

See the conclusion of Chapter 4 of James McManus' *Cowboys Full* for a full explanation of the ranking of poker hands.

The most widely known variation of **draw poker** is five-card draw, a game played with as few as two but (usually) no more than five players. Like hold'em, five-card draw is played with blinds, which are forced bets (called the "small blind" and "big blind") made before the cards are dealt. Sometimes all players are additionally required to contribute an "ante" prior to the initial deal.

After the blinds and antes are posted, players are dealt five cards each. A round of betting follows, starting with the player sitting to the left of the big blind and proceeding in a clockwise direction. Remaining players are then allowed to discard unwanted cards (from one to all five) or to remain "pat" and keep the five they were originally dealt. Those discarding cards are dealt new ones to replace them. A second round of betting follows, this time starting with the small blind (or first remaining player to the small blind's left). If at least two players remain at the end of the second round of betting, a showdown of hands determines the winner.

Stud poker plays differently than draw poker. In stud there are no blinds, though generally there are antes.

Five-card stud can be played with as few as two or as many as ten players. In five-card stud, players are dealt one card face down (their "hole card") and one face up. A round of betting ensues, with the player having the lowest up card having to pay a "bring-in" bet and action again proceeding clockwise from there. A third card is dealt -- face up -- and again there is a round of betting with the player having the best two cards showing leading the betting. The same sequence is followed with a fourth and fifth card, both also dealt face up. That means by the end the remaining players have four cards showing and only one hidden -- in other words, almost all of their five-card poker hand is exposed. Following a final round of betting, if at least two players remain a showdown of hands determines the winner.

Seven-card stud can be played with as few as two or as many as eight players. This variation of stud begins with three cards being dealt, two face down and one face up, followed by a round of betting, again starting with a bring-in. Players are then dealt three more cards face up, with betting rounds following each new card (again initiated by the player with the best up cards). A seventh and last card is

then dealt face down, with one last round of betting afterwards. From those seven cards, players form the best possible five-card poker hand. Unlike in five-card stud, players know less about the value of their opponents' hands in seven-card stud, since they can only see four of the seven cards dealt. Also, if playing eight-handed and somehow all players remain in the hand until the last round (*very unlikely*), a single card is dealt face up in the middle to serve as all eight players' final card.

Speaking of sharing cards, **flop games** are variations of poker that always feature such "community cards" shared by all players. The most popular flop game by far is Texas hold'em, which is in fact a variation on seven-card stud.

In hold'em, there are blinds and sometimes antes, and games can be played with as few as two players, as many as nine or ten, or (theoretically) even more. Players are dealt just two "hole cards" face down, and a round of "preflop" betting follows, following the same sequence described above for five-card draw. Then three cards are dealt at once face up in the center of the table, called the "flop." Players begin forming poker hands from the two they have been dealt and the three "community cards" that all share. Following the betting on the flop, a fourth card -- called the "turn" -- is dealt, and another round of betting occurs. Finally a fifth and final community card is dealt -- the "river" -- and there is one more round of betting.

Like in stud, players are forming the best five-card poker hand from seven cards, only in this case they all share five of those seven cards, with only their two "hole cards" being unique (and unknown to others).

All of these variations of poker can be played either with "fixed-limit" betting in which the betting amounts are prescribed beforehand or "no-limit" betting in which there are no restrictions on the amount players can bet.

Cash games differ from **tournaments** in several respects. Incidentally, poker tournaments are a relatively recent phenomenon, and in fact most of the stories we'll be encountering this semester concern players engaged in cash games, not tournaments.

Whereas in a cash game there is usually a wide range of allowable amounts that players can buy into the game with (and sometimes no limits at all), tournaments feature the same entry fee for all entrants. When players lose all of their chips in a cash game, they are allowed to rebuy (if they can) and keep playing. However, in tournaments players losing all of their chips can no longer continue, unless the tournament allows for rebuys and is still in the rebuy period.

In cash games, chips are generally of equal value to cash -- that is, a \$1 chip equals \$1, a \$5 chip equals \$5, and so forth. Thus whatever players win or lose in chips equals the amount of money they've won or lost, too.

In tournaments, players buy in for a certain amount, then all start with the same number of chips which may or may not be related to the entry fee. (For example, a \$120 tournament may feature a structure in which players start with 3,000 chips.) As play ensues, blinds/antes and/or stakes rise according to a predetermined schedule, meaning players cannot simply fold and wait indefinitely for the best hands or they will eventually lose their chips. Tournaments continue until one player has won all of the chips from his or her opponents, with that player generally winning a significant percentage of the overall prize pool. Others making it deep in the tournament also receive lesser cash prizes according to their finish. Usually only the top 10-15% of finishers in a tournament win money.