

Blackjack | Basic Strategy & Card Counting

Michael P. Johnson

The basic playing strategy of blackjack is a set of rules that tells you the way to play every hand dealt to you when the only information you have is your hand and the dealer's "up" card. In other words, what decision should the player make? Should they take a hit, stand, split, or double down?

Basic strategy is the mathematically correct way to play every hand and doing so will make you the largest amount of money and it will minimize the amount you will lose over time.

Blackjack is a mathematical game that has a fixed set of rules.

Splits:

- Always split Aces
- Never split 10s
- A pair of 9s split against dealer's 2 through 9, except for 7, otherwise stand
- Always split 8s
- A pair of 7s split against dealer's 2 through 7, otherwise hit
- A pair of 6s split against dealer's 2 through 6, otherwise hit
- A pair of 5s double against dealer's 2 through 9, otherwise hit
- A pair of 4s split against dealer's 5 and 6, otherwise hit
- A pair of 3s split against dealer's 2 through 7, otherwise hit
- A pair of 2s split against dealer's 2 through 7, otherwise hit

Soft Totals:

- Soft 20 (A, 9) always stands
- Soft 19 (A, 8) doubles against dealer's 6, otherwise stand
- Soft 18 (A, 7) doubles against dealer's 2 through 6, and hits against 9 through Ace, otherwise stand
- Soft 17 (A, 6) doubles against dealer's 3 through 6, otherwise hit
- Soft 16 (A, 5) doubles against dealer's 4 through 6, otherwise hit
- Soft 15 (A, 4) doubles against dealer's 4 through 6, otherwise hit
- Soft 14 (A, 3) doubles against dealer's 5 and 6, otherwise hit
- Soft 13 (A, 2) doubles against dealer's 5 and 6, otherwise hit

Hard Totals:

- 17 and higher always stands
- 16 stands against dealer's 2 through 6, otherwise hit
- 15 stands against dealer's 2 through 6, otherwise hit
- 14 stands against dealer's 2 through 6, otherwise hit
- 13 stands against dealer's 2 through 6, otherwise hit
- 12 stands against dealer's 4 through 6, otherwise hit
- 11 always doubles
- 10 doubles against dealer's 2, through 9, otherwise hit
- 9 doubles against dealer's 3 through 6, otherwise hit
- 8 always hits

The explanations for basic strategy decisions on the previous page are for operators who do not find memorizing charts an easy way to go or may not be visual learners, however, below is the basic strategy chart. It MUST be learned.

Never Take Insurance or Even Money											
Pair Splitting											
	Dealer's Upcard										
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	T	A	
(A,A)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
(T,T)	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
(9,9)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	Y	Y	N	N	
(8,8)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	
(7,7)	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	
(6,6)	Y/N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	N	
(5,5)	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	
(4,4)	N	N	N	Y/N	Y/N	N	N	N	N	N	
(3,3)	Y/N	Y/N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	
(2,2)	Y/N	Y/N	Y	Y	Y	Y	N	N	N	N	
Key:	Y	Yes, Split the pair.									
	N	No, Don't split the pair.									
	Y/N	If Double After Split is allowed / If Double After Split is not allowed									

Soft Totals											
	Dealer's Upcard										
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	T	A	
(A,9)	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	
(A,8)	S	S	S	S	Ds	S	S	S	S	S	
(A,7)	Ds	Ds	Ds	Ds	Ds	S	S	H	H	H	
(A,6)	H	D	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H	
(A,5)	H	H	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H	
(A,4)	H	H	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H	
(A,3)	H	H	H	D	D	H	H	H	H	H	
(A,2)	H	H	H	D	D	H	H	H	H	H	
Key:	H	Hit									
	S	Stand									
	D	Double if allowed; If not, hit.									
	Ds	Double if allowed; If not, stand.									

Hard Totals											
	Dealer's Upcard										
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	T	A	
17	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	S	
16	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H	
15	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H	
14	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H	
13	S	S	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H	
12	H	H	S	S	S	H	H	H	H	H	
11	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	
10	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	H	H	
9	H	D	D	D	D	H	H	H	H	H	
8	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	H	
Key:	H	Hit									
	S	Stand									
	D	Double if allowed; If not, hit.									

In order to begin to learn card counting and the aspects of advantage play, one MUST learn the basic playing strategy for the game. By mastering the chart above and continuing to observe the game, any operator should pick it up will ease.

As we move into card counting from basic strategy, we first need to ask the question, “what is card counting”? From everything anyone has ever heard concerning card counting, one would think it is a very difficult task to master, however, it is not.

Card counting takes patience, willpower, and motivation to learn properly. One does not have to be a genius, however.

Card counting is an attempt to decrease the casino house edge by keeping a tally or count of all low and high valued cards. All cards in the deck are given a value and the patron has to keep track of the value of the cards on a running tally.

There are many different count systems that can be used, but the one system that is regularly used is known as the Hi/Lo system. The value of the cards are as follows:

Hi/Lo System

- 2-6 / valued at +1
- 7-9 / no value
- 10-A / valued at -1

Every card that is dealt must be given a value. The more “low” cards (2 thru 6) that are dealt, the higher the count will rise and the richer the shoe will be with “high” cards (10 thru Ace). The more “high” cards in the shoe, the more likely the player is to receive or be dealt a blackjack.

After you have mastered basic strategy, it is then time to learn how to run down a deck of cards. When I say, “run down a deck of cards”, I mean take a deck of cards in your hands and flip them over one by one, giving them values (+1, -1, or 0). When you have flipped the last card, you should have a total of “0”. Repeat this act until it comes quick and easy to you. Do not try to count anyone down on a table prior to becoming comfortable with this.

Cancel Them Out

The easiest way to count down a shoe or deck of cards on a table is by using the CANCEL OUT method. When observing players being dealt to, don’t start counting until the player’s first two cards are on the table layout. Once this occurs, start cancelling out their cards... you see, a negative and a positive cancel each other out. A 2 cancels out a 10, 4 cancels out an Ace, a 3 cancels out a Face Card. This is quicker than counting each individual card.

One thing should be made clear. Every hand leads into the next hand. For instance, if I have a total of +3 at the end of the first hand of the shoe, the next hand will begin at +3. On the second hand, should the running count move from a +3 to +5, the third hand of the shoe will begin on a +5 and so on and so forth.

At first, when learning, do not attempt to keep track of a certain spot’s wins/losses and wagers. Become comfortable with counting, then move on... do not try to tackle too many things at once.

Practice is important when it comes to card counting and advantage play. An operator, once having the basics down, must be committed. Motivation is important. You have to be willing to work at it every day. PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE...

The Proper Way to Observe a Game and a Player

Once we are comfortable enough counting cards and with the concept of advantage play, we then begin to use the skills we have learned to monitor the blackjack tables in our pit. Our pit will notify us of a player. Many times, the players are known, and we have them in our database. We are familiar with them in some way. Sometimes, however, the player is not well known, and we really need to evaluate them and become familiar.

The first thing an operator needs to do in every situation is to use a variety of cameras to cover their play. One camera will be a fixed shot of the table. This will show the entire layout, cards, and spots on the layout. It will show everything on the table.

A second camera can be a PTZ that is zoomed down on the spot or spots the player is gaming. Sometimes, depending on the situation... camera angle, player location, etc., the use of a PTZ might not be necessary. The cheques may be clearly visible to the naked eye.

A third camera, and this is important, is a PTZ that shoots across the pit and gets an overall angle of the table. With this camera, the player is observed from a short distance and it shows who he or she interacts with throughout their stay.

The fourth camera is an overall of the pit. Basically, what this camera is utilized for is to monitor and observe the floor people. Are they doing their jobs properly?

What To Look For In An Advantage Player

When evaluating a player, one must look for the following:

- How is the player's decision making or in other words, is the player using good basic strategy?
- Is the player tipping the dealer after every hand?
- Are we seeing he/she utilizing any side wagers that may be offered on that particular blackjack game (a 21+3 side bet)?
- Is the player paying attention to the game?
- Do we observe the player drinking alcohol?
- Is the player sitting at spot 1 or spot 6 / first or third base?
- Do you see the player raising or lowering their bets dramatically?

Decision making, or when to hit, stand, double, or split is very important when considering someone who may or may not be an advantage player. Advantage players... true card counters... will never deviate from perfect basic strategy. The player who is attempting to beat the house needs that mathematical edge.

If you're watching a player and he or she stands on a 15 vs. dealer's 10, most likely the player is not a card counter. There is only one reason an advantage player might consider doing this, and that would be if the player's table was being crowded by a floor person. And that's a big IF. However, if you see someone make a poor decision, it is safe to say they are not a card counter.

Card counters may never tip the dealer. If they do tip the dealer, it would be at the end of their run when they are cashing out. Do not expect a card counter to tip the dealer on every hand. If you do find someone who is counting cards AND tipping the dealer on every hand, it would be the player attempting to disguise the fact that he or she is counting.

Side wagers are not taken by advantage players. If you are observing a 21 plus 3 table, you will not see a player who is counting cards taking that little extra wager on the side.

Another thing to look out for would be the player's attention. Is the player paying close attention to the table or is he or she too busy talking to the other players? If a player is making his decisions while standing up with their head turned and speaking to other players while drinking a beer, most likely, they are not a threat to the house.

...which brings us to the next item on the list... booze. Usually, advantage players tend not to drink alcohol while gaming. The alcohol will slow down the player's thought process where it will become harder to concentrate on being able to not only play the game properly but make it difficult to keep track of the running count. So, if you find someone counting, they probably will not have an alcoholic beverage in front of them.

Location on the table can be a big factor for some as well. If you are sitting spot 3, for example, you would have to move your eyes back and forth (to your left and right) across the table in order to read everyone's cards. To make it easier on the advantage player, more than likely, the player will be seated at spot 6, possibly spot 1.

Any number of the examples above should help you wonder if the player is taking advantage. How is their basic strategy? Very good... Are they tipping or making side wagers? No and No... What spot are they sitting and are they paying attention? Spot 6 and very close attention.

As soon as you can answer these questions for yourself and come up with relatively the same answers, it is now time to begin running a shoe down on the player. Do as many as it takes to give you a positive or negative answer. Be sure.

Does the player start the shoe at a low wager? For instance, if the table limits are set at \$50-1000, does the player start out at the table minimum or close to that amount? When the running count goes from a 0 to +4 on a double deck game, does the player then increase his wager?

Another question you might ask yourself could concern how the player acts when the running count goes into the negatives. For example, if the count was at a +5 and the player had a \$500 wager, but throughout the hand the count went lower and ended up at a -2... would the player lower his wager back down to the table minimum of \$50 or would he or she keep it the same amount? The player's decision here would make all the difference in the world. If the player did lower the wager down to \$50 on the -2 count but moved it again when the count went from a -2 to a -4, you then know the player is not following the count.

A rule to go by... advantage players do not move their money when the running count is in the negatives. There is no point.

Another rule to go by... advantage players may sit out and not play once the count gets into the negatives. If this happens, it's a giant red flag. If you see this while running down a shoe, there is a good chance the player is taking advantage. But again, be sure. Add up all the factors you've learned.

A third rule to go by... an advantage player will never come straight out of the shoe with a wager at table max. An advantage player needs room to expand or grow from the beginning of the shoe to the end. They need room so they can move their wager with the count.

What To Do After Identifying An Advantage Player

After running down multiple shoes and making sure you have taken all of the factors into play, the pit now needs to know the player is exhibiting signs of advantage play.

When advising the pit of this information, BE SPECIFIC. Never tell them “they APPEAR to be counting” or “it looks as if we MIGHT have an advantage player”. Tell them “YES we have an advantage player” or “NO we don’t have an advantage player”.

Once we successfully relay this information to the pit, the operator who conducted the run down and verification of the advantage player must now write a “player evaluation”, in order to document the event. The operator must include all the characteristics of the player, explaining how he played.