

**10 TIPS TO MASTER
NO-LIMIT HOLD'EM**

PREFLOP STRATEGY

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10 Tips to Master No-Limit Hold'em Preflop Strategy

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Introduction

Welcome! I am excited to share with you 10 tips to master preflop no-limit hold'em strategy. This ebook is not meant to be a complete guide on how to play no limit hold'em. It is instead designed to ensure you do not commit the common mistakes that many small and medium stakes players regularly make that result in them having almost no chance of winning. For a full, in-depth guide on how to crush tournaments and cash games, check out my Tournament and Cash Game Masterclasses in PokerCoaching.com. Much of this content comes from my extensive book 100 Essential Tips to Master No-Limit Hold'em. If you like this ebook, you will love that book!

Focus on Ranges

When playing any poker game, it is mandatory that you stop thinking in terms of your and your opponents' specific hands and instead think in terms of ranges. You should actively make a point to play many hands in the same manner so you are not easy to play against. Your opponents should be trying to do the same. Unless your opponent is incredibly straightforward and predictable (which almost no one is in today's games unless they are relatively new to poker), you must accept that you will essentially never know what their specific hand is. You cannot "put them on A-K", but you can put them on a range, which may or may not contain A-K.

Suppose someone raises from first position in a 9-handed tournament with a 1bb ante that is paid by the big blind (the current live tournament structure which will be used throughout this ebook), with an 80 big blind (bb) stack. Assuming they are playing decently well, they could reasonably have any of these hands:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action	Hands		
Raise	16.1%	214 / 214	100.0%
Fold	83.9%	1112 / 1326	

Your specific opponent may raise with a wider or tighter range, even if they are playing well. For example, some players play slightly more suited hands such as K-7s, 9-8s, and 8-7s. Others may raise with a few more big card hands like K-Jo. Others may raise with all pairs. However, your decent opponent will never play hands like K-7o, J-6s, 7-2o, or 4-3o because they are definitively unprofitable to play from first position. If the flop comes 6-5-4, you can be quite confident that your opponent will rarely have a straight (although they could have other strong hands like a set, two pair, or an overpair).

Suppose your opponent raised from early position when 80bbs deep in a tournament and everyone folds around to you in the big blind. Here is roughly the GTO (game theory optimal) defense strategy:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action

Hands

3-bet

5.6%

74 / 762

9.7%

Call

51.9%

688 / 762

90.3%

Fold

42.5%

564 / 1326

You may elect to 3-bet (re-raise) with a slightly different selection of hands, but you should essentially never have hands like A-A, K-K, and A-K when you call (because you should 3-bet), and you should also never have hands like Q-6o, J-4o, and 7-3o (because you should fold).

Because both players have ranges that consist of different types of hands, each specific flop will favor one player over the other, which will determine their postflop strategies. For example, A-K-Q is excellent for an early position raiser, whereas 6-5-4 is excellent for a big blind caller. As players bet or check postflop, this will potentially impact their range by further narrowing it until all the betting rounds are complete. At that point, each player's range will be the narrowest, but still not one specific hand. While you will have one specific hand in each exact situation, over the long run, you will play many different hands in the exact same manner.

Learn to Count Combinations of Hands

In order to understand how hand ranges interact with each other, you must realize that there are not the same number of combinations of each hand in each situation. They are not all equally likely due to there being a different number of combinations of pairs and unpaired hands. Also, as cards are removed from the deck either because they are in your hand or on the board, that further makes each specific hand less likely.

Let's first discuss unpaired hands. There are 16 combinations of each unpaired hand, 4 suited and 12 unsuited.

A♣-K♣	A♣-K♦	A♣-K♥	A♣-K♠
A♦-K♣	A♦-K♦	A♦-K♥	A♦-K♠
A♥-K♣	A♥-K♦	A♥-K♥	A♥-K♠
A♠-K♣	A♠-K♦	A♠-K♥	A♠-K♠

For example, on Ah-6c-4d, there are 16 combinations of 7-5 available ($4 \times 4 = 16$).

7♣-5♣	7♣-5♦	7♣-5♥	7♣-5♠
7♦-5♣	7♦-5♦	7♦-5♥	7♦-5♠
7♥-5♣	7♥-5♦	7♥-5♥	7♥-5♠
7♠-5♣	7♠-5♦	7♠-5♥	7♠-5♠

However, if your opponent will only play 7-5s (which will usually be the case unless they are in the big blind), there are only 4 combinations of that hand available. If they will not play any combinations of 7-5 (such as when you raised

from early position and your opponent is also in early position), then there are 0 combinations available.

If one of the cards is not available because it is either in your hand or on the board, there are 12 possible combinations. If the flop comes Ah-6c-4d, there are 12 combinations of A-K available because no one can have a hand that contains the Ace of Hearts because it is on the flop.

A♣-K♣	A♣-K♦	A♣-K♥	A♣-K♠
A♦-K♣	A♦-K♦	A♦-K♥	A♦-K♠
A♥-K♣	A♥-K♦	A♥-K♥	A♥-K♠
A♠-K♣	A♠-K♦	A♠-K♥	A♠-K♠

You can quickly figure out how many combinations of an unpaired hand are available by multiplying the number of the first card that is available by the number of the second card that is available. In this case, there are 3 Aces and 4 Kings, giving you $3 \times 4 = 12$ combinations of A-K.

On Ah-6c-4d, there are 9 combinations of A-6 because an Ace and a 6 are on the board, meaning there are 3 of each remaining (3 x 3 = 9).

A♣-6♣	A♣-6♦	A♣-6♥	A♣-6♠
A♦-6♣	A♦-6♦	A♦-6♥	A♦-6♠
A♥-6♣	A♥-6♦	A♥-6♥	A♥-6♠
A♠-6♣	A♠-6♦	A♠-6♥	A♠-6♠

Remove A♥ and 6♣

A♣-6♣	A♣-6♦	A♣-6♥	A♣-6♠
A♦-6♣	A♦-6♦	A♦-6♥	A♦-6♠
A♥-6♣	A♥-6♦	A♥-6♥	A♥-6♠
A♠-6♣	A♠-6♦	A♠-6♥	A♠-6♠

If your opponent only plays A-6 suited, only 2 combinations exist. If instead the board was Ah-6h-4d, there would be 3 combinations of A-6 suited available, Ad-6d, Ac-6c, and As-6s.

If the board was Ah-Ac-6d, there would be 12 combinations of 6-5 (3 x 4), 8 combinations of A-J (2 x 4), and 6 combinations of A-6 (2 x 3), assuming all suited and unsuited versions are played.

Now let’s discuss pocket pairs. There are 6 combinations of each pocket pair.

A♦-A♥	A♦-A♣	A♦-A♠
A♥-A♣	A♥-A♠	A♣-A♠

If one of the cards is not available because it is either in your hand or on the board, there are 3 possible combinations. On Ad-6c-4s, there are 3 combinations of A-A.

A♦ - A♥	A♦ -A♣	A♦ -A♠
A♥-A♣	A♥-A♠	A♣-A♠

If two of the cards are not available because they are in your hand or on the board, there is 1 combination. On Ad-Ah-4s, there is 1 combination of A-A.

A♦ - A♥	A♦ -A♣	A♦ -A♠
A♥ -A♣	A♥ -A♠	A♣-A♠

When someone raises before the action gets to you, many of the best hands to 3-bet (re-raise) contain an Ace. This is because when you have an Ace in your hand, it makes it less likely that your opponent has a strong hand that will never fold, such as A-A, A-K, A-Q, or A-J. When you have an Ace in your hand, it makes A-A 50% less likely and A-K, A-Q, and A-J 25% less likely. A relevant card in your hand that makes it more difficult for your opponent to have a premium hand is referred to as a blocker. Blockers are powerful!

That is all there is to counting combinations of hands before the flop!

Start with GTO Ranges

When most players start learning how to play no-limit hold'em, they often think a reasonable strategy is to play decently strong preflop hands and then try to get their money in, or to splash around preflop looking to flop a strong hand and then get their money in. The problem with these strategies is that all your opponents have to do to crush you is to fold whenever it is clear you want to get your money in. If you rarely get paid off with your strong hands, you will have a difficult time winning. So, you have to figure out how to logically and profitably add bluffs to your strategy. Using the well balanced, fundamentally sound GTO (game theory optimal) strategy will accomplish this.

80bbs deep in a tournament against a 3bb preflop raise from the cutoff, a straightforward, honest player may use this strategy from the button:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action	Hands		
3-bet for Value	8.1%	108 / 330	32.7%
3-bet as a Bluff	0.3%	4 / 330	1.2%
Call	16.4%	218 / 330	66.1%
Fold	75.1%	996 / 1326	

Notice that when they 3-bet, they almost always have a strong hand, and when they call, they have a marginal hand. While you often want to 3-bet with your best hands, the GTO strategy for hands like A-Js and A-Qo is to just call because when you get 4-bet, you will be in a tough spot with a hand that would otherwise be in excellent shape against an initial preflop raising range. These hands play excellently in small pots but horribly in large pots. Calling with all marginal hands also sets you up to get crushed by a 3-bet from a player yet to act.

When someone who uses this face-up strategy happens to 3-bet, all the initial raiser has to do to beat them is fold hands that are likely to be dominated, call hands that are getting the correct implied odds to try to outdraw the strong 3-betting range, and 4-bet hands that are strong enough to get all-in profitably against the strong 3-betting range. When the logical counterstrategy is simple and obvious, most players will quickly find and implement it.

Instead of playing this straightforward, honest strategy, here is a much better strategy (which is much closer to the GTO strategy):

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action	Hands		
3-bet for Value	4.1%	54 / 386	14.0%
3-bet as a Bluff	8.4%	112 / 386	29.0%
Call	16.6%	220 / 386	57.0%
Fold	70.9%	940 / 1326	

This strategy is quite robust because when you 3-bet, your opponent will not know if you have a premium hand that you are happy to play a large pot with or a bluff. This polarized strategy is ideal when you are in position against a preflop raiser who plays well.

Of course, if your opponent plays poorly, you should adjust your strategy so that you exploit the specific mistakes they are likely to make. If your opponent usually folds to 3-bets, 3-bet more often with bluffs (especially with an Ace or King, which blocks your opponent's continuing range). If they call 3-bets every time, 3-bet with a strong, but decently wide linear range of only the best hands that crushes their junky calling range. In order to win as much money as possible from poker, you must constantly adjust to the mistakes your opponents are making.

Whatever you do, when playing against competent opponents, do not play in a face-up, honest manner. If you do, they will steal all the small and medium pots when you have non-premium hands, and they will almost never pay you off when you actually have the nuts (the best possible hand), which will make it impossible for you to win in the long run. That said, do not play in an overly fancy/tricky manner either. Simply start with fundamentally sound GTO ranges and then adjust to exploit whatever your opponents do incorrectly.

Use Intelligent Preflop Raise Sizes

While some players mix up their preflop raise sizes based on the strength of their hole cards, their position, or in some other way, I recommend you use the same preflop raise size based on the effective stack depth (the shortest stack likely to be involved in the pot) and your position.

Here are my recommended bet sizes from all positions except the small blind and big blind.

Stack depth	When folded to	When facing a limper	When facing a raise	When facing a 3-bet
More than 125bbs	3bbs	5bbs	3.25x IP, 4.5x OOP	3x IP, 3.5x OOP
60bbs-125bbs	2.75bbs	4.5bbs	3x IP, 4x OOP	2.75x IP, 3.25x OOP
35bbs-60bbs	2.5bbs	4.25bbs	2.7x IP, 3.2x OOP	2.5x IP, 3x OOP
22bbs-35bbs	2.25bbs	4bbs	2.7x IP, 3.2x OOP	All-in
12bbs-22bbs	2bbs	3.5bbs	All-in	All-in
Fewer than 12bbs	All-in	All-in	All-in	All-in

If any bet would put in more than 35% of your stack, you should usually go all-in instead.

As the effective stack depth decreases, your bet sizes should also decrease. This is mainly because with a short stack, you do not need to use large bet sizes early to build a pot such that you can get all-in on the river when your hand justifies it.

When facing multiple limpers, roughly add 1bb more to the raise amount listed for each limper beyond the first. So, with 80bbs, when three players limp before you, make it $4.5 + 1 + 1 = 6.5\text{bbs}$.

When facing a raise and one or more callers, add the raise amount to your 3-bet size for each caller. So, if there is a 3bb raise and 2 callers, make it $3 \times 3 + 3 + 3 = 15\text{bbs}$. The same logic applies when facing a 3-bet.

When you are in the small blind or big blind, you should add 1 additional unit of the last bet amount to the numbers listed above. So, when it folds to you 800bbs deep in the small blind and you want to raise, make it $2.75 + 1 = 3.75\text{bbs}$. When one player limps around to you in the big blind and you want to raise, make it $4.5 + 1 = 5.5\text{bbs}$. When there is a 2.5bb raise and two callers before you and you want to 3-bet in the small blind, make it $3 \times 2.5 + 2.5 + 2.5 + 2.5 = 15\text{bbs}$.

Following the above chart will ensure you always use an excellent bet size in all situations before the flop.

The main time you should adjust your preflop raise size is when your opponents play especially poorly in a way that you can predict. For example, if you know your opponents will fold far too often to small raise sizes, raise smaller with a wider range of non-premium hands, especially from the late positions. If you know your opponents will call any amount they do not think is “too much”, perhaps you should raise to 6bbs (or more) with all your premium hands and to the above recommended amount with your playable, but non-premium hands. Of course, when you use two obviously different raise sizes with hands of different strengths, it turns your range face-up, which could result in your opponents counter-exploiting you. Also, be careful that you do not make these adjustments incorrectly because if your opponents start folding all their marginal and junky hands because you used a gigantic raise size, you will lose substantial value with your premium hands.

From In Position, 3-Bet Polarized

Assuming you are striving to play the GTO strategy, when someone raises before you and you will be in position against them, you should 3-bet with a polarized range that includes your best hands that you want to get a lot of money in with as well as some hands that are not quite good enough to call. Your calling range should contain all hands that are strong but do not want to 3-bet and face a 4-bet. This pattern holds true as long as you are not extremely shallow stacked.

Suppose with 80bb effective stacks in a tournament everyone folds to the hijack who raises to 2.5bbs. If the cutoff folds, here is an easily implementable strategy that is close to the GTO strategy for this situation:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action

Hands

3-bet for Value

3.3%

44 / 350

12.6%

3-bet as a Bluff

6.6%

88 / 350

25.1%

Call

16.4%

218 / 350

62.3%

Fold

73.6%

976 / 1326

J-J+, A-Qs+, and A-Ko are happy playing for a lot of money. The 3-bet bluffs either have excellent blockers to your opponent's continuing range (A-xs, K-xs, and junky offsuit Broadway hands), or excellent postflop playability (suited connectors and gappers). By 3-betting with this range, your opponent will have an impossible time knowing if you have a premium hand or a bluff, which will make you difficult to play against.

Notice that your calling range is also well protected, containing many strong hands like 10-10, A-Qo, A-Js, and K-Qs. Calling with these strong hands allows you to call with a few marginal hands, such as 6-4s and 5-3s.

As stacks get shallower, you should 3-bet with fewer bluffs, and your bluffs prefer to have blockers to your opponent's continuing range because they are less likely to call and more likely to go all-in or fold. By having an Ace or King in your hand, it becomes less likely they have a reasonable hand to go all-in, so those hands become the preferred 3-bet bluffs with shallow stacks, as you can see here in the implementable GTO strategy when the hijack raises and you are on the button, but this time with 30bbs:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action

Hands

3-bet for Value

4.7%

62 / 302

20.5%

3-bet as a Bluff

3.6%

48 / 302

15.9%

Call

14.5%

192 / 302

63.6%

Fold

77.2%

1024 / 1326

Notice that now you are 3-betting with a smaller percentage of bluffs and most of your bluffing combinations are high offsuit hands (36 offsuit combinations compared to 12 suited combinations).

From the Small Blind, 3-Bet Linear

Assuming you are striving to play the GTO strategy, you should 3-bet with a mostly linear range from the small blind. In a cash game with no ante and a rake (the default small and medium stake cash game structure in most casinos), you should actually have no calling range when someone raises, resulting in you only 3-betting with the best hands and folding everything else. Many players make the blunder of calling with all sorts of marginal hands from the small blind, which will make it difficult for them to win in the long run due to consistently paying the rake.

For example, here is the implementable GTO strategy 100bbs deep in a cash game when the cutoff raises and it folds to you in the small blind:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action

Hands

3-bet

10.0%

132 / 132

100.0%

Fold

90.0%

1194 / 1326

I realize this strategy probably seems extremely tight, but it is the GTO play if your opponents are also playing GTO (which is quite tight in cash games with a rake). Of course, if your opponents raise wider and fold too often to 3-bets, or call 3-bets too often and then fold to small continuation bets too often on the flop, you can 3-bet a little wider. That said, you cannot call with lots of marginal suited and connected hands because you lack position and the rake will devour your stack.

In a tournament with an ante and no rake taken out of each pot, you can have a calling range because the postflop pot will be larger, giving you better pot odds. Here is the implementable GTO strategy 80bbs deep when the cutoff raises and it folds to you in the small blind:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action	Hands		
3-bet	11.5%	152 / 366	41.5%
Call	16.1%	214 / 366	58.5%
Fold	72.4%	960 / 1326	

The actual GTO strategy uses many more mixed frequencies, but this implementable strategy is close to it and is much easier to use in-game. Notice how much wider you can play when there is no rake and an ante. While this 3-betting strategy is not perfectly linear, it is close to it. Most of the best hands 3-bet and most of the weaker hands in the playable range call.

From the Big Blind, 3-Bet with the Best Hands and Strong Suited Hands

Assuming you are striving to play the GTO strategy, from the big blind, you should 3-bet with your best hands and your strong suited hands. Because you are closing the action, you are less incentivized to 3-bet, resulting in you 3-betting mostly with your best hands that flop well while calling with a decently wide range. That said, many players make the mistake of only 3-betting with their absolute best hands from the big blind, perhaps 9-9+, A-J+, and K-Q. While you should usually 3-bet these premium hands, you should also include an adequate amount of intelligent “bluffs”/lesser value hands so you are not easy to play against.

For example, in a cash game, here is your strategy 100bbs deep from the big blind facing a cutoff raise:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action

Hands

3-bet

8.6%

114 / 390

29.2%

Call

20.8%

276 / 390

70.8%

Fold

70.6%

936 / 1326

While you still have a few weak hands in your 3-betting range, most of your non-premium 3-bets come from reasonably strong suited hands.

In a tournament with 80bbs facing a raise from the cutoff, here is your defending strategy from the big blind:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action

Hands

3-bet

11.2%

148 / 1002

14.8%

Call

64.4%

854 / 1002

85.2%

Fold

24.4%

324 / 1326

Getting far better pot odds due to there being an ante and no rake, you should call far wider. As your calling range gets extremely wide, you should ensure it is protected by calling with some of your strong hands like 8-8, A-10s, and K-Js. As your range gets extremely wide, most of your bluffs should come from the medium suited connectors.

Properly Combat Limpers

When someone limps before the action gets to you, you have to decide how to respond. The main overriding factor in how you should proceed is if the initial limper is tricky or straightforward.

If the initial limper is tricky, meaning they will limp with some of the best hands looking to re-raise if someone raises, you should raise only or mostly with your absolute best hands plus some blockers to their premium hands that do not play too well in multi-way pots. Some limpers will be heavily weighted towards A-A whereas others will limp with A-A plus a wide range of marginal hands they think are not strong enough to make an initial raise. It is up to you to figure out each specific opponent's range composition.

Playing 75bbs deep against one tricky limper who you do not know especially well from early position, if you are also in early position, this is a reasonable strategy:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action

Hands

Raise

5.1%

68 / 282

24.1%

Call

16.1%

214 / 282

75.9%

Fold

78.7%

1044 / 1326

This raising range may seem tight, but you have to remember that this type of player wants you to raise some portion of the time. If your opponent wants you to do something, you should not do it unless it is actually in your favor. If you expect someone yet to act to frequently raise (as some aggressive players will), you should call with a tighter range. When there is a player yet to act who you know with a high degree of certainty will raise over limps, strongly consider limping behind with your best hands, looking to put in a re-raise.

If you are in a later position, you can call a bit wider with additional suited hands. Marginal offsuit hands that are not connected will rarely be playable, even for 1bb. From the small blind, you can call a bit wider with offsuit connected hands due to your better pot odds, but don't get too carried away against a tricky limper. From the blinds, raise with an extremely polarized range, and perhaps with only the best hands if you expect to completely lack preflop fold equity.

If you know the limper's range is heavily weighted towards A-A and K-K, you should raise with only A-A, maybe K-K, and perhaps a blocker hand like A-Jo as a bluff, opting to call and see the flop with all the other pairs (even as strong as Q-Q!) and suited hands that have excellent implied odds. Do not automatically assume that just because someone limps that they must have a marginal hand!

Against straightforward players who limp only or mostly with hands they think are not good enough to raise, you should raise far more often because most decently strong hands will crush your opponent's limp/calling range.

75bbs deep against one straightforward limper from early position, when you are also in early position, here is a reasonable strategy:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action	Hands		
Raise	15.7%	208 / 326	63.8%
Call	8.9%	118 / 326	36.2%
Fold	75.4%	1000 / 1326	

Against straightforward limpers, you should raise with a strong linear range, opting to limp behind with suited hands that play well enough postflop. You should immediately realize that this limping range is quite marginal. If the opponents yet to act will frequently raise over limps (as they should against two marginal limping ranges), you should tighten up your limping range a bit, perhaps to the point that you raise with all playable hands in your range. If you limp behind, someone yet to act raises, and then the initial limper calls, all hands in the above limping range can call and see the flop as long as the raise is not too large.

From the later positions, you can raise with a wider range depending on how often you expect the straightforward limper to continue both preflop and postflop. Do not get too carried away raising limpers with all sorts of junk though, because unless they fold far too often, it will be difficult to profit with junky hands.

Against multiple limpers, the initial limper's strategy should be your main concern. Most players who limp behind the initial limper almost never have a premium hand because they would have raised. If the initial limper is tricky, you should proceed with caution. If they are straightforward, you should proceed aggressively. As more limpers enter the pot, offsuit unconnected hands like K-8o and J-7o become especially terrible, so do not raise them and do not call with them even when getting excellent pot odds.

Against multiple limpers, be sure to raise a bit larger than the size of the pot to ensure you have fold equity. Many players make the mistake of raising over multiple limpers to something like 5bbs only to have all the limpers call. When someone has to put in 4bbs to win a 20bb pot, they should not fold too often. By raising far less than the size of the pot, you essentially force your opponents to play well, even with their marginal ranges. You make money when your opponents make mistakes, not when they play well.

Recall from the preflop raise chart earlier that if there are 4 limpers, make it roughly $3 \times 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + 1 + .5 = 7.5\text{bbs}$. If there is an ante in play or if you are out of position, raise a little larger. If you think your opponents will call a "normal" raise but will almost always fold to a "large" raise, experiment with

making it “normal” when you want to get called (when you have a premium hand) and “large” when you do not want to get called (when you have a non-premium hand). If your opponents will always call a 7.5bb raise but will always fold to an 11bb raise, you have found an extremely profitable spot.

As stacks get shallower, you have to be especially careful raising limpers because they can shove all-in over your raise, forcing you to fold your non-premium hands. That said, most players who limp with shallow stacks have incredibly weak ranges, allowing you to raise and steal the pot a large portion of the time either preflop or with a postflop continuation bet.

Play Tighter in Multi-Way Pots

Many players incorrectly think they should loosen their ranges when someone raises and multiple players call because they are then getting amazing pot odds. However, they fail to consider that they are far more likely to be dominated, resulting in them having a much more difficult time realizing their equity.

Suppose 100bbs deep in a tournament, the lojack (the first player to act at a 6-handed table/the third player to act at a 9-handed table) raises to 3bbs and everyone folds to you in the big blind. Here is roughly your GTO strategy:

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action

Hands

3-bet

7.2%

96 / 870

11.0%

Call

58.4%

774 / 870

89.0%

Fold

34.4%

456 / 1326

You should continue with a wide range due to your excellent pot odds and closing the action in a heads-up pot. If the lojack uses a smaller raise size or raises with a range that is too wide, you can defend a bit wider, but even then, don't get carried away and call with hands like Q-5o, 7-4o, and 4-2o.

Instead suppose the lojack raises and then the button and small blind call. Here is the GTO strategy from the big blind. Now you should defend much tighter, perhaps with this range (depending on the callers' strategies):

AA	AKs	AQs	AJs	ATs	A9s	A8s	A7s	A6s	A5s	A4s	A3s	A2s
AKo	KK	KQs	KJs	KTs	K9s	K8s	K7s	K6s	K5s	K4s	K3s	K2s
AQo	KQo	QQ	QJs	QTs	Q9s	Q8s	Q7s	Q6s	Q5s	Q4s	Q3s	Q2s
AJo	KJo	QJo	JJ	JTs	J9s	J8s	J7s	J6s	J5s	J4s	J3s	J2s
ATo	KTo	QTo	JTo	TT	T9s	T8s	T7s	T6s	T5s	T4s	T3s	T2s
A9o	K9o	Q9o	J9o	T9o	99	98s	97s	96s	95s	94s	93s	92s
A8o	K8o	Q8o	J8o	T8o	98o	88	87s	86s	85s	84s	83s	82s
A7o	K7o	Q7o	J7o	T7o	97o	87o	77	76s	75s	74s	73s	72s
A6o	K6o	Q6o	J6o	T6o	96o	86o	76o	66	65s	64s	63s	62s
A5o	K5o	Q5o	J5o	T5o	95o	85o	75o	65o	55	54s	53s	52s
A4o	K4o	Q4o	J4o	T4o	94o	84o	74o	64o	54o	44	43s	42s
A3o	K3o	Q3o	J3o	T3o	93o	83o	73o	63o	53o	43o	33	32s
A2o	K2o	Q2o	J2o	T2o	92o	82o	72o	62o	52o	42o	32o	22

Action	Hands		
3-bet	10.7%	142 / 682	20.8%
Call	40.7%	540 / 682	79.2%
Fold	48.6%	644 / 1326	

Notice how much tighter you have to defend. The weakest suited hands become unplayable, as do almost all offsuit hands that are not connected or have one gap between them. Also, your 3-betting range becomes almost entirely linear, with your “bluffs” coming from offsuit hands with blockers, like A-10o and K-Qo, and decent suited hands, like Q-9s and 10-9s.

This big blind defense range against a raise and two callers is tighter than most players use, which is why many players squander a ton of chips in multi-way pots. While you can defend a little bit looser if you know the button and small blind are calling too loosely, you cannot get too out of line due to your complete lack of position and high likelihood of being against decently strong ranges that crush your offsuit hands that are likely to be dominated.

This concept holds true when you are in position too. For the most part, when there is a raise and a call before the action gets to you, suited Kings, suited gappers, and almost all offsuit hands go way down in value and you should usually 3-bet with a much more linear range.

Look Left

The idea that you should “look left” before you act when playing live poker is a simple yet powerful piece of advice that will win you a ton of money. While you will often find no useful information, you may be surprised to see that some players yet to act make their intentions clear before it is their turn to act.

Suppose everyone folds to you in the cutoff. If you look to the left and can tell that the button is going to fold, it is now as if you are on the button, allowing you to profitably raise with a substantially wider range. By looking left, you upgraded the cutoff, the second most profitable seat at the table, to the button, the most profitable seat at the table.

Suppose instead everyone folds to you in the cutoff. If you look left and can tell the button clearly likes their hand, you should raise with a substantially tighter range, allowing you to fold hands that fare poorly against a playable button range.

Suppose you raise preflop and a player in position calls. On every flop, look left to see if your opponent is interested in the pot. If they are, you should continuation bet far less often than normal, usually with only your best made hands and draws. If they are not, you should continuation bet with all your non-premium hands and check with your premium hands, which will force them to stay in the pot, giving them a chance to catch up to a second-best hand or bluff.

Once in a \$25,000 buy-in tournament, a loose, aggressive player raised to 2.5bbs out of his 25bb effective stack. I found A-Ko on the button, which is normally an easy all-in. As I was about to put my chips into the pot, I looked left and saw the player in the small blind stacking his chips up as if he was going to put them in. Instead of going all-in, I called, looking to get my money in as a nice favorite against the small blind. The small blind put their stack in, as did the hijack after some thought. It is difficult to know how much equity A-Ko has against these two ranges in this abnormal situation, but it is definitely more than the required 29.2% equity. Against these two opponents, I thought I had roughly 37% equity. Some players would have folded A-Ko in my spot, opting to not risk their tournament life, but this is an extremely profitable spot that you should not pass up. I was happy to see the small blind show Q-Js and the hijack show K-Jo, but it

did not matter when the flop came J-J-3 to bust me. Sometimes you are going to lose, and that is fine. By looking left, I gained a substantial amount of equity that I will eventually collect in the long run.

When looking left, also look for signs of extreme interest or disinterest in your opponents' behaviors. If someone normally watches sports on their phone when they are dealt in but not interested in the pot, but you look left and see them zoned in on the poker action, they probably have a playable hand. If someone slouches down in their chair when they are not interested, when you see them slouch down, you should presume they have a weak hand. In general, when the game is casual and friendly, and as the pot becomes more multi-way, players become more face-up with their mannerisms. Pay attention and correlate your opponent's abnormal actions to the strength of their cards. You will usually not be able to pick up live tells against world-class players, but most small and medium stakes players will give off many tells that will give you valuable information.

Conclusion

Thanks for taking the time to read this ebook. To continue your journey to poker mastery, I strongly suggest you go through my Tournament or Cash Game Masterclasses in PokerCoaching.com, depending on the form of poker you want to play. After mastering the content in that 40-hour-long interactive course, you will understand no-limit hold'em and be prepared to have an edge in pretty much any small or medium stake game you enter. If you want many more tips similar to these in this ebook, be sure to check out my book *100 Essential Tips to Master No-Limit Hold'em*.

Thanks for reading and good luck in your games!



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