

Classic Canasta

FOREWORD

Canasta is an excellent card game for two or, ideally, four players. Why? It's played for enjoyment, not money! At a social level it doesn't require too much concentration; people can talk, drink and generally have a good time while playing. It involves excitement, laughter, groans, judgement and a bit of luck every now and again. Canasta is the perfect way to end an evening with friends. Unlike Bridge, enough of the game can be learned in 20 minutes for beginners to play confidently at their first sitting.

I recommend that new players are introduced to Canasta by playing a few trial hands with everybody's cards face-up on the table. This way beginners can see what's happening at any particular time and the various options available to each player can be discussed openly. A seemingly difficult game will suddenly start to look rather simple. Yes, the rules below do look incredibly complicated, but if someone studies these notes, he or she can teach this great social asset to others as well as themselves. Believe me, you'll be amazed how easy it is once you start playing the cards. Give it a try!

The information below comes from a variety of sources, so I can't claim authorship. I did, however, edit, rewrite and repackage everything to make it easier for new players to understand this great game. *Jim*

INTRODUCTION

The game of Canasta is said to have originated in Montevideo, Uruguay, around 1940. From there it spread to Argentina, the USA and hence throughout the world. The rules were standardised in North America around 1950 and it was this version of the game, called *Classic Canasta*, which gained worldwide popularity. Canasta is generally agreed to be best for 4 players, playing in partnerships. However, there is a version for 2 players, which is given later. Beginners might prefer to teach themselves the 2-player version before trying the classic 4-player game.

CLASSIC CANASTA

(4 Players in 2 Partnerships)

Please Note: Canasta has numerous variations. The most popular version is Classic Canasta, which can also be played with minor variations.

THE CARDS

Canasta is played with two standard 52 card packs plus 4 Jokers (two from each pack), making 108 cards in all. If you like the game, packs of specially designed Canasta cards can be bought on-line or in most quality stores.

Each card has a point value as follows:

Jokers:	50 pts
A, 2:	20 pts
K, Q, J, 10, 9, 8:	10 pts
7, 6, 5, 4:	5 pts
Black 3:	5 pts
Red 3:	100 pts

A, K, Q, J, 10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4 are called **Natural Cards**.

Jokers and Deuces (2s) are **Wild Cards**.

Black 3s and Red 3s have their own 'special functions' (see later).

With some restrictions, Wild Cards can be used as substitutes for any natural card.

THE DEAL

Canasta is best played with 4 players in 2 partnerships, these partnerships playing against each other. Players sit opposite their Partners. If you don't have a special canasta pack, mix two 52 card standard packs, complete with their 4 Jokers, to make a 108 card Canasta pack.

The first dealer is chosen at random and thereafter the turn to deal rotates clockwise after each hand. The dealer shuffles the pack and the player to dealer's right cuts the cards. Each player is dealt 11 cards and the remainder of the pack is turned face-down in the centre of the table to form a Stock Pile. The top card of the stock is taken off and placed face-up, next to the Stock Pile, to start the Discard Pile. If this first face-up card is either Wild (a Joker or a 2) or a Red 3, another card is turned and placed on top of it, continuing until a card which is neither Wild nor a Red 3 sits face-up on the Discard Pile. All Wild cards or Red 3s should be stacked at right angles to the rest of the pile, to indicate that the Discard Pile is **frozen** (see later). Play is now ready to begin with the player to dealer's left, but first we need to understand **Melds** and **Canastas**.

MELDS AND CANASTAS

1. The object of the game is to score points by melding cards. A valid meld consists of 3 or more cards of the same natural rank (any rank from Four up to Ace), such as **5-5-5-5-5**, **10-10-10-10**, **A-A-A** etc.
2. Wild cards (Jokers and 2s) can normally be used in melds as substitutes for natural cards of any rank. For example: **Q-Q-Q-2** or **8-8-8-2-Joker** would be valid melds. There are, however, restrictions on using wild cards.
3. When playing with partners, melds belong to a partnership, not to an individual player. They are kept face up in front of one of the partners. Typically, a partnership will have several melds, each of a different rank. You can add further cards of the appropriate rank to any of your side's melds, whether begun by yourself or by your partner, but you can **never** add cards to an opponent's meld.
4. **Black 3s** and **Red 3s** each have their own special function and cannot be melded in the normal way.
5. A **meld of 7 (or more) cards** is called a **Canasta**. If all of the cards in it are natural, it is called a **Natural Canasta**. If it includes one or more wild cards it is called a **Mixed Canasta**. If any wild cards are added to a previously natural canasta, it thereby becomes a mixed canasta.

THE INITIAL MELD

6. For each partnership, the first time in a hand when they place one or more melds (face-up) on the table is called their **Initial Meld**. When making the initial meld for your partnership, you must meet a certain **Initial Meld Requirement** (see below), in terms of the total value of cards that you put down. You are allowed to count several separate melds laid down at the same time in order to meet this requirement. In Classic Canasta you are also allowed to use the top card of the discard pile along with cards from your hand to satisfy the minimum count, **before** picking up the remainder of the pile (see later).
7. The initial meld requirement applies to a partnership, not to an individual player. Therefore, after either you or your partner have made a meld that meets the requirement, you can both meld freely for the rest of that hand. However, if the opponents have not yet melded, they must still meet the requirement in order to begin melding.

INITIAL MELD REQUIREMENT

If your partnership has not yet melded, then in order to meld for the first time, the total value of the cards you lay down must meet a minimum count requirement. This requirement depends on your partnership's cumulative score from previous hands as follows:

Cumulative Score	Minimum Count of Initial Meld
Negative	 15 points (i.e. no minimum)
0 - 1,495	 50 points
1,500 - 2,995	 90 points
3,000 or more	 120 points

To achieve this count, you can place several melds on the table and the melds can be of more than the minimum size of 3 cards. The standard values of the cards you play are added to check whether the requirement has been met.

In order to achieve the minimum count, you must either meld entirely from your hand after drawing from the stock, or you must use 2 natural cards from your hand which match the top card of the discard pile. In this second case, you can count the value of the top discard, along with the cards you play from your hand in this and any other melds, towards the minimum count. You cannot count any other cards in the pile which you may intend to add in the same turn. (See TAKING THE DISCARD PILE below.)

Example: There is a King on top of the discard pile and a King and a Queen buried in the pile. You have 2 Kings, 2 Queens and a 2 in your hand. If your initial meld requirement is 50, you can meld K-K-K, Q-Q-2, using the King from the top of the pile, for 70 points. You can then add the King and Queen from inside the pile to these melds in the same turn, if you wish. (See TAKING THE DISCARD PILE below.) But you could not make this play if you needed a minimum count of 90: even though the King and Queen from the pile are ultimately worth a further 20, you cannot include these towards your initial requirement.

Bonuses for Red 3s, canastas and so on **cannot** be counted towards meeting the minimum requirement. Even if you have a complete canasta in your hand, you are not allowed to put it down as your initial meld if the total value of its individual cards does not meet your minimum count requirement.

There is just **one exception to this minimum count requirement**. If, having drawn from the stock, you are able to meld your entire hand, including a canasta, without having previously melded any cards, you may do so (with or without a final discard) and **Go Out** (see later) without having to meet any minimum count requirement. In doing this you will score the extra bonus for going out **Concealed** (see later). This option remains available to a player who has exposed Red 3s, provided that they have not melded anything else.

MORE ON MELDS

8. Every meld must contain at least 2 natural cards. The smallest possible meld consists of 3 cards, which could be 3 natural cards (such as **K-K-K**) or 2 natural cards and a wild card (such as **4-4-2**).

9. Melds can grow as large as you wish. A meld of **7 or more** cards counts as a **Canasta**. No meld can contain more than 3 wild cards - so a 6 card meld must include at least 3 natural cards and a canasta must contain at least 4 natural cards. There is no limit on the number of natural cards that can be added to a canasta. **Don't forget:** a wild card added to a natural canasta downgrades it to a mixed canasta and, once a canasta contains 3 wild cards, no further wild cards can be added.

10. Melds consisting entirely of wild cards are not allowed. A wild card in a meld cannot be moved to another meld or back into your hand.

11. It is not allowed for one partnership to have two separate melds of the same rank. Any cards melded by a partnership which are the same rank as one of their existing melds must be added to that meld. It is however quite possible and not unusual to have a meld of the same rank as one of your opponents' melds.

STARTING THE PLAY

On picking up their 11-card hands, each player checks to see whether or not they hold a **Red 3**. Before playing any other cards, each player, at their first turn to play, must immediately place face-up on the table any Red 3s

that they were dealt and draw an equal number of cards from the top of the face-down Stock Pile to replace them. The player to Dealer's left, starts the game.

After drawing the top card from the Stock Pile, but before discarding, players may be able to play some cards from their hand face-up on the table. To play cards to the table in this way is known as **melding** and the sets of cards so played are called **melds** (see above). These melded cards remain face up on the table until the end of the current hand.

TAKING THE DISCARD PILE

Under certain conditions, instead of drawing from the stock, players are permitted to take **all of the discard pile**. In order to do this, they must be able to meld the top discard, without needing any of the other cards in the discard pile to make their meld valid. The procedure is:

1. Place the necessary cards from your hand face up on the table, and add the top card of the discard pile to them to form a valid meld.
2. Take all the remaining cards of the discard pile and add them to your hand.
3. If you wish, make further melds from the cards you now have in your hand.
4. Discard one card face up on the discard pile to end your turn.

Examples:

1. If there is a 5 on top of the pile and another 5 buried in it, you cannot use a single 5 in your hand to take the pile and meld the three 5s. But if you have two 5s in your hand you can meld these with the 5 on top of the pile, take the pile, and then add the previously buried 5 to this meld.
2. You play 2 cards from your hand that make a valid meld with the top discard: these could be either 2 natural cards of the same rank as the top discard, or 1 natural card and 1 wild card.
3. If the top discard matches the rank of one of your partnership's existing melds, you can simply add it to that meld and take the pile.

Each player's turn begins by **either** drawing the top card from the face-down stock **or** taking the whole of the discard pile. Players may then meld some cards before ending their turn by discarding one card face-up on top of the discard pile.

A player may always opt to draw the top card of the face down stock pile. Remember: You can only take the discard pile if you can meld its top card direct to one of your melds or, if necessary, in combination with cards from your hand. There are additional restrictions on taking the discard pile if it is **frozen** against your partnership (see below).

Note that you can **never** take the discard pile if its top card is a **Wild Card** or a **Black 3** (see below).

Note also that it is not necessary to take the discard pile in order to meld. If you wish, you can meld after drawing the top card from the stock.

FROZEN DISCARD PILE

There are 3 ways that the discard pile can be **frozen** against your partnership.

1. The discard pile is frozen against all players if it contains a wild card. To show that it is frozen, the wild card is placed at right angles in the pile, so that it is still visible after other cards are discarded on top of it.

2. In the unusual case where a Red 3 is turned up to start the discard pile after the deal, the discard is frozen against all players, and the Red 3 is placed at a right angle to show this.
3. If your partnership has not yet melded, the discard pile is frozen against you.

When the discard pile is frozen against your partnership, you can only take it if you hold in your hand **TWO natural cards** of the same rank as the top card of the discard pile, and you use these with the top discard to make a meld. This meld can either be a new one, or could be the same rank as an existing meld belonging to your partnership, in which case the melds are then merged. (Sometimes holding back two natural cards from a meld can be a good tactic, especially if you suspect your opponents might be about to freeze the discard pile by discarding a wild card. They might do this if they think your partnership has a better chance than theirs of taking a large discard pile - with all its lovely points!)

Example: Suppose the pile is **frozen** and our team already has a meld of four 7s on the table. If the player before me discards a seven, I cannot pick up the discard pile unless I have two further 7s concealed in my hand. If I do have two 7s in my hand, I can add them and the discarded 7 to our meld (making a canasta), and then take the pile.

RED 3s are Bonus Cards

If you draw a Red 3, you **must** immediately place it face-up on the table with your partnership's melds (or where your melds will be, if you have not yet melded). You then draw a replacement card from the face-down stock. Although Red 3s score bonus points they do not count as melds, and do not help you to satisfy the minimum count requirement for your initial meld. Also they do not prevent you from subsequently scoring the bonus for going out with a concealed hand (see later).

Occasionally it happens that a Red 3 is turned up at the end of the deal as a start card for the discard pile. This freezes the discard pile. When the discard pile is eventually taken, the player puts the Red 3 face-up with the partnership's melds, but does **NOT** draw a replacement card.

BLACK 3s are Stop Cards

By discarding a Black 3 you prevent the next player from taking the discard pile. However, Black 3s **do not freeze** the pile. After the Black 3 has been covered by another card, it has no further effect, and the pile can be taken in the usual way.

Black 3s cannot be melded, except in one exceptional case. A player who is 'going out' may meld a group of three or four Black 3s as part of that last turn. Such a meld of Black 3s cannot contain wild cards.

GOING OUT ends the Hand

Play ends when a player **Goes Out**, i.e. disposes of all the cards in his or her hand. Players are only allowed to go out after their team has fulfilled certain conditions, including the completion of least one 7-card meld - a **Canasta**. Having achieved this, they can go out by melding all but one of the cards in their hand and discarding this last card. They can also go out by melding their whole hand, leaving no discard. It is legal to complete the required canasta and go out on the same turn.

If your side does not yet have a canasta, **you are not allowed to leave yourself without any cards at the end of your turn**. You must play in such a way as to keep at least 1 card after discarding. It is against the rules in this case to meld all of your cards but one, because you would then be forced to discard this last card, which would constitute going out illegally.

Note that it is not always an advantage to go out as soon as you are able to; the cards left in your partner's hand will count against your side, and you may be able to score many more points than your opponents by continuing. If you are able to go out but are unsure whether to do so, you may, if you wish, ask your partner, "May I go out?" This question can only be asked immediately after drawing from the stock or taking the discard pile and before making any further melds other than the one involving the top card of the pile, if it was

taken. Your partner must answer "yes" or "no" and the answer is binding. If the answer is "yes", you must go out; if the answer is "no" you are not allowed to go out. You are under no obligation to ask your partner's permission before going out; if you wish, you can simply go out without consulting your partner.

STOCK PILE RUNS OUT

Another way that hand can end is when there are no more cards left in the face-down stock. Play can continue with no stock as long as each player takes the previous player's discard and melds it. In this situation a player **must** take the discard if the pile is not frozen and if the discard matches any previous meld of that player's side. As soon as a player is entitled to draw from the stock and chooses to do so, but there is no card in the stock, the play ends.

If a player draws a Red 3 as the last card of the stock, the Red 3 is placed face up as usual and then, since there is no replacement card that can be drawn from the stock, the play immediately ends. The player who drew the Red 3 is not allowed to meld or discard.

CLASSIC CANASTA SCORING

When the play has ended, the hand is scored. Each partnership's score consists of:

- the total value of any bonuses they are entitled to (see the table below),
- plus the total value of all the cards they have melded,
- minus the total value of any cards remaining in their hands,

The bonus scores are as follows:

For going out	• • • • •	100 pts	
For going out concealed	• • • • •	200 pts	(While melding for the first time - must include a Canasta.)
For each natural canasta	• • • • •	500 pts	
For each mixed canasta	• • • • •	300 pts	
For each Red 3	• • • • •	100 pts	(But minus 100 pts, if the partnership does not have at least one meld.)
For all four Red 3s	• • • • •	800 pts	(But minus 800 pts, if the partnership does not have at least one meld.)

After the bonuses have been calculated, the cards melded by each team are counted using their standard values. For ease of counting and checking, the usual method is to group the cards into piles worth 100 points each.

Note that: in Classic Canasta, the values of the cards themselves are counted in addition to the bonus for the canasta so, for example, a natural canasta of 7 Kings is really worth 570 points altogether - 500 for the canasta and 70 for the Kings.

The cards remaining in the hands of the players are also counted using the same standard values, but these points count against the partnership and are subtracted from their score.

A cumulative total score is kept for each partnership. It is possible to have a negative score. When one or both partnerships have a total of 5,000 or more points at the end of a hand, the game ends and the side with the higher total score wins. The margin of victory is the difference between the scores of the two sides.

... AND THAT'S ALL THERE IS TO IT

Please let me reiterate: Once you try playing the cards and discussing how the rules work, you'll be astounded just how simple this game is! So find yourself another player (or 3 other players), 2 packs of cards, pencil & paper, a few drinks & some nibbles, and give it a try. I bet that within an hour of the first shuffle, you'll all think it's brilliant. I do. Enjoy. *Jim*

CANASTA FOR TWO PLAYERS

It's not a bad idea for two beginners to experiment with this version before introducing two more beginners to the Classic Game.

The modifications to the rules are as follows:

- 15 cards are dealt to each player (instead of 11).
- When drawing from the stock they draw the top 2 cards (instead of 1). At the end of a player's turn, only 1 card is discarded as usual.
- A player needs 2 canastas to go out (instead of 1).

All other rules are the same as in 4-player Classic Canasta. The target score is 5,000 points; when one or both players reach or exceed this, the player with the higher score wins.

