

# The Eight Mistakes in Poker

by David Sklansky

Not too long ago, I was trying to decide on what my next poker article should be about. Normally I would pick some sort of bad play that a novice was likely to make. I would dissect it and show why it was wrong. Then I would give the correct play (in most circumstances). Since I have seen hundreds of bad plays in poker I had plenty to choose from.

Then something hit me. With all the arguments and analysis as to how to play a poker hand, there are really only eight things you can do wrong in a flat limit game. After all, there are really very few options in poker. When it is up to you to bet, you can bet or check. When there is a bet to you, you can call, raise or fold. Thus any "bad play" that you might make during a poker hand must fall into one of eight categories.

Upon realizing this I had the subject for this chapter: Define and analyze the eight general mistakes in poker and give some specific examples where they might come up.

I consider the following chapter one of my most important and useful to the serious poker player and have thus placed it first in this section.

What makes one person a winning poker player and a second person a losing one? Assuming they both play in equally tough games, the obvious answer is that the winning player plays better.

What does it mean to play better? This question can be answered in many ways, but it all boils down to one thing: the better player makes the correct play more often in a particular situation. In other words, he makes fewer major mistakes. What kind of mistakes is a bad player apt to make? On first glance, it may seem that there are many bad plays that one can make in poker; the fact of the matter is that they all fall into one of eight categories.

When someone is playing limit poker, there are only five possible options. If he is first to act, he can check or bet. If someone else has bet, he can call, raise or fold. (How much to bet or raise is an additional decision in no-limit poker. Thus, no-limit adds the possibility of betting or raising the wrong amount. This mistake will not be covered in this chapter.) All limit poker plays can be reduced to one of these five decisions. Making the wrong decision is the only error that can be made. Every poker mistake can thus be placed in one of the following eight categories:

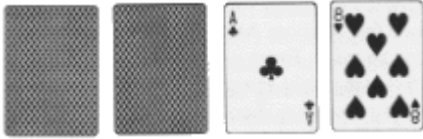
1. Checking when you should bet.
2. Betting when you should check.
3. Calling when you should fold.
4. Calling when you should raise.
5. Folding when you should call.
6. Folding when you should raise.
7. Raising when you should call.
8. Raising when you should fold.

These mistakes are made by good and bad players. However, some of these errors are worse than others, and the bad player is more apt to make one of the critical mistakes. Let us examine each of the foregoing possible mistakes.

**Mistake No. 1. Checking When You Should Bet.** This is one of the most common and critical mistakes in poker. When there are more cards to come, it is usually correct to bet a mediocre hand

if you are first to act. This is true even if your hand figures to be second best, and it is especially true if you have to call after you have checked and your opponent has bet. Betting accomplishes two things. Your opponent may fold if his hand isn't as good as you thought. Also, even if he doesn't fold, you have shown strength that may allow you to steal the pot on a later round.

A common example of this mistake is checking something like



into a



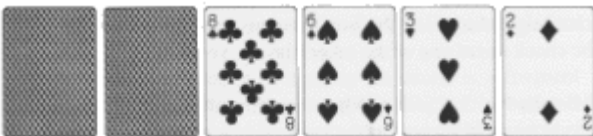
on fourth street in seven-card stud, even if you only have two eights and think he has two queens. Not betting is wrong.

Another situation in which players tend to check when they should bet is on the end with a hopeless hand. In other words, they don't try to bluff. It is not necessary that the bluff be favored to work in order for it to be worthwhile. You are usually getting odds of anywhere from 5-to-1 to 10-to-1 on your bluff, so it only has to work occasionally to show a profit. You also gain advertising value when you are caught.

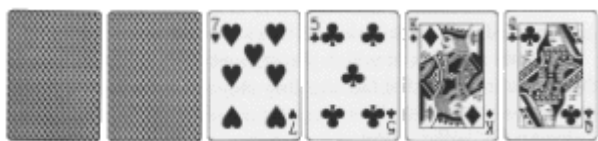
A third example of this error is checking on the end with a big hand in hopes of getting in a check raise. It is frequently better just to bet than to attempt to maneuver a check raise. This is even more true against tough players who are capable of folding when you check raise. Thus, for instance, you should usually bet a hidden full house into a possible flush in seven-card stud. (You may also win three bets by betting rather than checking.)

**Mistake No. 2. Betting When You Should Check.** This is not as common or critical an error as [Mistake No. 1](#), but it can come up. Suckers frequently make this mistake when all the cards are out and they are betting a decent hand, but can only get called if they are beaten. Trying a hopeless bluff is another example of this mistake. Better players will sometimes make this error when they bet a fair hand on the end for value in situations when they are more likely to win an extra bet on the end by checking and calling than by betting (usually because checking gives them a chance to snap off a bluff).

Players will also occasionally bet instead of going for a check raise, the correct play in certain situations. For example, suppose you are playing seven-card lowball; you have an



your opponent has



The right play is to check raise with a 6-low, but players don't. If you bet, your opponent will probably just call with a 7; if you check, he will probably bet.

Another instance when the opportunity to check raise is often missed is illustrated by the following example. Suppose you are playing draw poker, jacks or better to open. The player to your right opens, and you call with a



(flush draw). Two or more players come in after initially checking and draw one card, obviously to flushes or straights. The opener also takes one card and checks. You should check your flush if you make it because the worst that can happen is that you lose one bet from the opener in the event that everyone else misses his hand. If you check and someone else bets (either because he made his hand or because he is trying to steal the pot), you figure to win three bets instead of one. If you bet yourself, you figure to just get called by the come hand; the opener won't overcall. An added advantage to checking in this spot is that you save money if the opener fills up. If he check raises one of the other players, you just fold.

**Mistake No. 3. Calling When You Should Fold.** This mistake is made by most players in the early rounds of betting because they don't understand the concept of effective odds as explained in my book [The Theory of Poker](#). Briefly stated, the concept suggests that it is not worth chasing with a hand even when it appears you are getting good odds because of the bets to follow.

Another situation in which players make this mistake is when they do not consider the fact that they may make the hand they are drawing to but still lose. However, this mistake is only critical in an early round of betting. With one card to come, mistakenly drawing to two pair against an obvious flush getting 7-to-1 odds really costs you a fraction of a bet and is no big deal. (Which is why the "percentage players" with no real feel for the game can't beat some of the better players who may make this error.)

Another example of *Mistake No. 3* is calling on the end "for the size of the pot" when it is impossible that you could have the best hand. I see this a lot.

**Mistake No. 4. Calling When You Should Raise.** This is probably the worst mistake and the most common. When there is a lot of money in the pot, you should usually try to narrow the field by raising when another player bets. Most players will do this if they figure to have a somewhat better hand than the bettor on their right. However, they will usually just call if they think their hand is *much* better in hopes of trapping players behind them. They are probably wrong. You really need a monster hand to slowplay in this situation. Even then there is no guarantee that the other players would not call a double bet.

In the situation where you probably have the second best hand, it is also worth raising in order to give yourself the best chance to win the pot. This play may also get you a free card on the next betting round, as you may now be checked to. Two obvious examples of this play are, in razz poker, to raise a possible four-card 7-low with a four-card 8-low or to raise an apparent two small pair with one pair of aces in seven-card stud when there are players behind you.

Calling instead of raising in head-up situations is a frequent mistake as well. Even when it appears you can't beat the bettor, a raise has three advantages: (1) Your opponent may fold instantly if he was bluffing or semi-bluffing; (2) Your raise might get you a free card on the next round; (3) Your raise might enable you to steal the pot on a subsequent round if you catch a good card.

There are so many examples of this mistake that I can't begin to enumerate them. Just to show, however, that it occurs in all games, I will give you an example from jacks or better draw poker, "Gardena style." Should a player open in late position, it is usually much better to raise than to call on his immediate left with a 16-way straight draw such as



By raising, you (a) may win it immediately, (b) may be able to steal it after the draw and (c) still may win even if he calls. You also figure to get a flush draw out behind you, which is obviously to your advantage.

All in all, remember that calling is frequently a bad play. Any time you start to call, consider raising instead. You will be surprised how often raising is the correct decision.

**Mistake No. 5. Folding When You Should Call.** This mistake is not too common, but it can be critical when it is made. It is more often made by good players than bad ones. When a good player makes it, it is usually when all the cards are out and he is trying to save the last bet, frequently seen in draw and lowball games. A player who will fold a pat nine-low 40 percent of the time when he is bet into may be costing himself a lot of money. Those players who play that way against me are going to have a lot of trouble. (See the chapter on game theory in [The Theory of Poker](#).) It is hard to save that last bet with a decent hand against someone who might take advantage of it. If you are wrong even once in 5 times, you can cost yourself a lot of money.

**Mistake No. 6. Folding When You Should Raise.** This doesn't come up too often. But one time it does arise is when you have the opportunity to try to bluff on the end against a tough player who may fold for one last bet. This is particularly effective if you check raise bluff a good player. However, your chances for success with this play must be higher than usual, as you are risking two bets to steal the pot.

Another instance of this mistake can occur when you have a drawing hand with one card to come but aren't getting good enough odds to call. A semi-bluff raise is a better play than folding if there is some chance that you will win the pot right there. This play comes up most often in hold `em when you have a straight draw' or third pair with an ace kicker. In fact, even if you are getting good enough odds to call, it is usually better to raise.

**Mistake No. 7. Raising When You Should Call.** This is also a rare error. There is, however, one situation in which it is frequently made. It occurs in multi-way pots when all the cards are out. Let's say the player to your right bets. You are fairly sure you have him beaten and figure that he will call

your raise. However, if he reraises, you are probably beaten. Meanwhile, there are one or more players to your left who will probably overcall with a worse hand than yours if you just call. Raising would normally be a bad play in this instance, as calling should win two bets with no risk.

A less common example of this error occurs when you have a strong come hand in a multi-way pot. Most players will not raise a bettor to their right for fear of knocking other players out. With certain hands, it may not even be correct to raise a bettor to your left who gets a few callers. If he is a good player, he will reraise when you raise, which may be bad for you. However, this situation is not so clear cut. For instance, if you have a small straight-flush draw, you don't mind him knocking out other drawing hands.

**Mistake No. 8. Raising When You Should Fold.** This error is normally made only by expert players because they know there are many situations where the proper play is to raise or fold because calling is out of the question. However, sometimes fold, raise and call is a better ranking of potential plays than raise, fold, and call. In other words, even though raising is better than calling, folding is better still.

In a recent game, I raised when I should have folded. The game was seven-card stud. A player showing



bet and another with



raised. I re-raised with two small pair, but I should have folded, even though I thought I had the best hand. Raising was certainly better than calling, but folding was better still, as I had too many ways to lose. Many of the aggressive players in Vegas frequently make similar errors, but it is not usually that bad an error and can serve to enhance their "wild" image. It is seen most often on third street in seven-card stud. Many aggressive players will raise others behind them if no one has yet called and they have the high card showing. This is usually a bad play when they have two total blanks in the hole, but raising is certainly better than calling.

When determining how to play a hand, you can never be sure whether you may be making a mistake. When deciding whether to risk an error, you should realize that a mistake can do 1 of 2 things: cost you an extra bet or cost you the pot. Obviously, the second outcome is worse. That outcome can result from *Mistakes No. 1, 4, 5, and 6*. These are the costlier mistakes, the ones that the pros rarely make. When in doubt, it is much better to cost yourself a bet than to cost yourself the pot. You cost yourself 1 or possibly 2 bets if you make *Mistakes No. 2, 3, 7 or 8*. (Notice, however, that *Mistake No. 3* can cost you quite a few bets when committed early in a hand.) What this all comes down to is that the best way to play winning poker is to play relatively few hands, but play them aggressively.