

Golf 101

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Introduction

This is a guide for people who want to explore playing **golf**. It's not how to swing a golf club or technical stuff like that; videos and coaches can show that. This is to help understand basic terminology and customs of playing golf. The observations are based on playing in the United States, but golf is very similar around the world.

One Hole of Golf

One hole of golf is its own little world, where you use the clubs to move the ball from a **Tee Box** to the **Green** where the **physical Hole** is located. The goal of golf is to use as few hits or strokes to get the ball into the hole. Every time you touch or hit the ball with a club counts as a **stroke**, whether the ball moves half an inch or 300 yards.

Tee Boxes

There are usually multiple tee boxes for each hole and are color coded. The actual **markers** for tee boxes vary. They can be large metal balls, painted logs, small signs, or many other things. The location of markers within each tee box is changed daily to help prevent wearing out the grass in the tee box.

The tee boxes furthest from the hole are marked with blue or black. Those are typically used only by the best players during a tournament. Next is the white tee box, which is often used by intermediate level players. Then we have the red tee box, with is for less experienced players including beginners. Sometimes there will be a fourth tee box, yellow or gold in color, for very young or very new players. Most often I've seen blue, white, and red tee boxes.

There is a mistaken but very common notion that white tees are for men, and red or gold ones are for women. Which tee box is used should be based on the player's handicap, which we'll discuss much later.

Hole Features and Hazards

Each hole has one or more tee boxes, as just discussed, and a green where the physical hole is located. The hole location is marked by a **flag** to help see it from a distance. The distance from a tee box to the green can be anywhere from about 90 yards to 600 yards or more.

The main feature between the tee boxes and the green is the **Fairway**. The fairway is typically a very short grassy surface and could be from 10 to 50 yards wide. A short strip next to each side of the fairway is slightly longer grass (under an inch) called the “**first cut of rough**” (or just “**first cut**”) which is often only a foot wide. Further from the fairway is the **Rough** (or **primary rough**), which can be a few inches long grass, or natural grasses that are up to maybe six inches long. If you’re among trees, the rough can be hard dirt around the tree trunks.

Why does it matter if you’re in the fairway or rough? Your drives and fairway shots can roll many more yards closer to the green if you’re in the fairway, whereas the first cut and rough put the brakes on and leave you longer (or more) shots to the green.

Even further from the fairway or crossing the fairway can be trees, bushes, and other vegetation. These **hazards** can be subtle or huge. Vegetation can be anything from a small area of longer grass, up to a gully full of overgrown trees and weeds.

There can be areas marked with **red stakes** as being **out of bounds**. If your ball goes in there you can’t hit it out, you have to take a **penalty stroke** and then hit the ball (or a different ball if you can’t recover yours) from nearby in the rough, no closer to the hole than you lost your ball. A penalty stroke adds to your total number of strokes for the hole, even though you didn’t hit the ball.

Bunkers or **sand traps** are often located left and right from the fairway about where a good player will hit their first tee shot. In that location they are called **fairway bunkers**. There are also usually sand traps near the green, sometimes called a **greenside bunker**, so if your stroke to get the ball on the green misses a little, then you must get it out of the greenside bunker.

How your ball sits when it comes to rest is called its **lie**. On a fairway the lie is generally excellent, i.e. you can see all of the ball and there is nothing blocking hitting it. First cut of rough is also good. The bad lies come in rough or bunkers. The ball can be sitting on top of long grass and be a good lie, or it can settle down and be harder to hit cleanly. Similarly in a sand bunker the ball can be sitting on top of the sand (good lie) or be partially or fully embedded in the sand (called **plugged**, a terrible lie).

Your lie can also be affected by other hazards nearby. Your ball could be easy to hit, but a tree blocks your path to the green. The edges of sand bunkers are sometimes elevated, so a good lie near a tall edge can still be challenging.

How does lie affect your play? If your ball is in a bad lie, your best shot might be just to get it back on the fairway and not try to get much distance. If your ball is in a good lie, you can hit it nearly normally as if it was in the fairway and make more progress toward the green.

Water hazards can be next to the fairway or green, or even cross the fairway. They can be ponds, streams, creeks, or even an ocean. They can be natural features or man-made. It is very rare to recover your ball from a water hazard, so you typically must take a penalty stroke and hit another ball from where your ball entered the hazard.

Par for the Course

Each hole is assigned a **Par** value. Par represents how many strokes you should (ideally) take to get the ball from tee box to hole if you're a *really good* golfer.

The shortest holes are **par 3**. Your stroke from the tee box (also called your **Drive**) should get the ball on the green, and you putt twice to get the ball into the hole.

Most holes are **par 4**. Your tee stroke lands on the fairway, and you need one more stroke to get the ball on the green. Two putts and you're done.

The longest holes are **par 5** or *very rarely* more than par 5. Your drive lands on the fairway, you use two fairway strokes to get on the green, and then two putts to finish.

The Golf Course

Golf is played on a **golf course**, which typically has 18 holes spread out over a very large space. A golf course might take up 140-170 acres of land.

Par also refers to the total number of strokes expected to finish the entire course. That's just adding up par for each hole. A typical **par 72 course** will have four par 3s, four par 5s, and ten par 4s. Courses with 18 holes range from par 70 to par 75.

Most courses have 18 holes divided into two sets of 9 holes, called the **Front 9** and the **Back 9**, with numbered holes 1-9 and 10-18 respectively. Between the front 9 and the back 9 is sometimes called **The Turn**. The turn brings you back to the clubhouse and is often used for a snack and/or bathroom break.

You may be assigned to start on the back 9, or you might sign up to only play 9 holes instead of 18. The starter will tell you which holes to play, which we'll discuss later. Some golf courses have 27 holes, so you will be told which two sets of 9 holes you'll play. They might be labeled something simple like A-B-C, so you could be told to play C first then A.

There are also "**Executive**" **golf courses** which only have par 3 holes. These are good for practicing your **short game**, which is just drives and short strokes around or on the green. They have 9 or 18 holes, and hence a total of par 27 or par 54.

Scoring

The Scorecard

Your **scorecard** helps you keep track of your score and see the overall layout of each hole. Sometimes each hole is mapped separately, as in this example, and sometimes the whole course layout is shown in a single diagram.

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9		
Black	73.5/132	552	406	432	414	207	423	368	200	621	3623
Blue	71.2/128	502	377	405	387	185	393	336	178	594	3357
White	68.9/122	477	349	380	344	175	365	311	150	564	3115
Gold	64.1/113	385	286	304	307	157	275	251	129	492	2586
Par		5	4	4	4	3	4	4	3	5	36
HOLE		1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	OUT
Handicap		15	1	11	7	13	5	9	17	3	OUT
		REPAIR BALL MARKS				FILL DIVOTS WITH SAND					
Scorer:											
Attest:											

Scorecard for the front 9 holes on Royal Kunia Golf Course.

This example shows the front 9 holes which has two par 3s, two par 5s and five par 4s. The tee boxes on this course are black, blue, white, and gold. The approximate yardages to the middle of the green is given for each hole for each tee box. For example, hole #1 is par 5, and the yardages from black to gold are 552, 502, 477, and 385 yards respectively. Yes, there can be a huge difference between tee boxes! Sometimes tee boxes will be nearly the same distance, for example white and red tees might be inches apart on a par 3 hole, whereas on a long par 5 like hole #1 the gold tees are almost 100 yards shorter than the white tees.

In this view the holes show the tee boxes at the bottom of each diagram, and the greens at the top. The diagram of hole #1 shows that near the green it turns slightly left, called a **dogleg** left. In contrast, hole #7 is a much sharper dogleg left, and hole #2 is slightly dogleg right. The diagrams show trees (darker green), water hazards (blue), and sand traps (beige) in addition to the general layout of the hole.

The players' names are entered in the wide column on the left, and each player's score for that hole is entered under the HOLE number. Typically each scorecard is shared by only two players, so other information can be entered if you want. For example, I keep separate track of how many putts I had on each hole in addition to the total number of strokes for that hole.

The Handicap entry at the bottom of the card shows how relatively difficult each hole is. Handicap 1 is the hardest hole on the course, and handicap 18 is the easiest hole. *This is a different handicap term from your handicap as a golfer*, which is covered later.

The last column shows the total number of yards for each set of tee boxes (e.g. 3623 for black tees) and you can add up the total number of strokes for these 9 holes, called the **OUT** holes because the back 9 holes lead you back **IN** to the clubhouse. Yes, the front 9 are OUT, and the back 9 are IN. No one said these terms made sense. The other half of the scorecard shows the total number of yards for each tee

box. Total yardages for 18 holes can range from 4000 yards for red or gold tees to 7000 yards or more for tournament tees.

Birdies and Bogies

When you take the number of strokes to finish a hole as par, your score is called ... par. For a beginner this can be rare.

If you take one more stroke than par, you got a **bogey** on that hole. Two strokes more than par is a **double bogey**. Three over par is a **triple bogey**, and so on.

If you take one stroke less than par to finish, that's a **birdie**. Two strokes less than par is an **eagle**. Three strokes less than par is extremely rare, even among professional golfers, and is called an **albatross**.

And if you go straight from the tee box to finishing (also called **holing out**) that's a **hole in one!** Most holes in one are on par 3s. A hole in one on a par 4 is also an albatross and is extremely rare among professional golfers. I've never heard of a hole in one on a par 5. A par 5 albatross is holing out on your second stroke.

Clubs

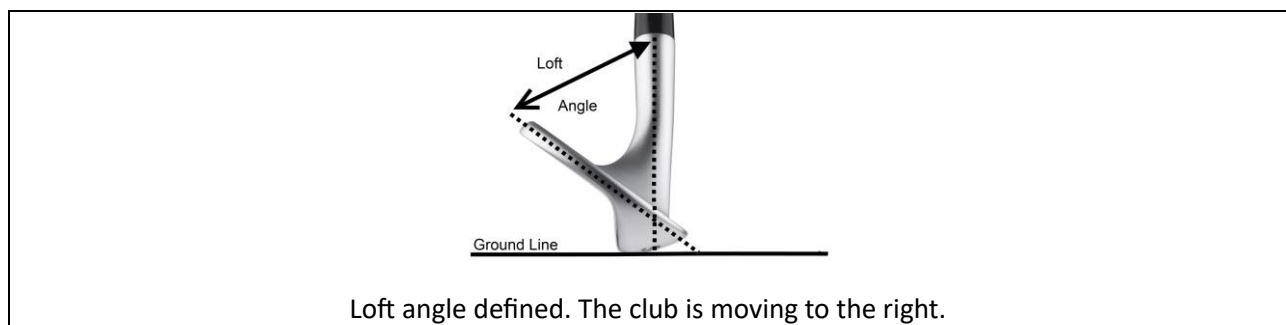
Golf clubs are a very messy topic. There are a dizzying variety of choices and prices. We'll focus on the basics. *Golf allows you to carry up to 14 clubs.* You don't need that many to start out. Maybe 5 or 6 are enough. We'll outline all of them.

Drivers and Loft

The **driver** is the longest club, and often has a fairly huge head (the part that hits the ball). *The driver is only used from the tee box.* Why? The head is so big that you couldn't get good contact with the ball unless the ball is lifted off the ground with a tee. The tee holds the ball an inch or two off the ground. *The tee is also only used from the tee box,* hence its name.

The driver is also the hardest club to hit well, which is part of the reason it is not needed to get started. When professionals hit from the tee box it looks huge and dramatic but it isn't that critical to playing well. A beginner might hit the ball 100-120 yards with a driver. Professional women golfers are in the 250-280 yard range, and pro men 270-350 yards. The challenge is that even at 100 yards, if your aim is off by a few degrees, you can miss the fairway or even hit out of bounds.

Loft is the angle the face of your clubs make from vertical. The face is the part of the club head that actually hits the ball. Drivers range from 7 degrees loft for very powerful male golfers to 10-14 degrees for beginners. I use 10.5 degree driver, which is good for your first couple of years playing.



Woods and Hybrids

The next smaller clubs are **fairway woods** and **hybrids**. Woods are called that because they were literally made of wood many decades ago. Now pretty much every metal imaginable is used.

Fairway woods, as the name suggests, are designed to be used on the fairway or maybe first cut of rough. Their heads are much smaller than a driver, so they can sweep the ball off the ground.

Similarly, hybrids are clubs designed for either fairway use or to help lift the ball out of rough. Some hybrids look like a fairway wood, others look like an iron. Loft for fairway woods and hybrids is typically from 10-20 degrees. For example I have a 3 wood which is 15 degrees, a 5 wood which is 18 degrees, and a 4 hybrid which is 22 degrees. This gives me a range of lofts to suit many occasions.

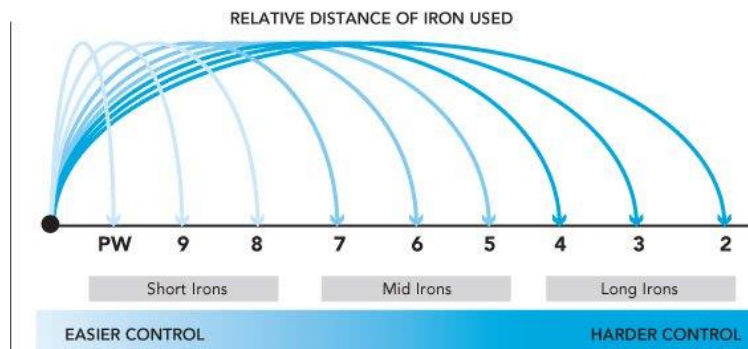
For a beginner, a wood or hybrid in the 20 degree range would be good. When I first started playing, I couldn't use a driver yet and used a 5 wood from the tee box all the time. Woods and/or hybrids are typically used for most of your strokes between the tee shot and getting close to the green ("close" being within about 100 yards for beginners).

Irons

The largest number of clubs in your bag is **irons**. Traditionally the very low loft irons (number 2 to 4) are very hard to hit, so most sets of irons start with a 5 or 6 iron and go up to a 9 iron. The larger the number, the more loft it has. Here is an example from TaylorMade.

Iron number	Loft
6	27 degrees
7	30.5
8	35
9	40

Once you have a fairly consistent golf swing, the irons are designed to give about a 10 yard distance difference from one number to the next. So if you hit 120 yards with a 6 iron, you should hit 110 yards with a 7 iron, 100 yards with an 8 iron, etc.



Lower number irons can hit longer, but are harder to control.

Wedges

When you get closer to the green than your 9 iron, you use a **wedge**. The wedges have names, which can be confusing. Most iron sets include a **pitching wedge** and some include a **sand wedge**. The variety of wedges is designed to give you control (eventually) over how far you hit the ball.

The loft for wedges goes from the pitching wedge (about 42-45 degrees) to a lob wedge at 60 degrees. Many do NOT recommend a lob wedge for beginners because the ball goes almost nowhere with that much loft. My collection of wedges looks like this:

Pitching wedge	42 degrees
Gap wedge	46
Sand wedge	52
? wedge	56
Lob wedge	60

I'm not sure if my 56 degree wedge even has a name, but I'll use it instead of the lob wedge most of the time for very short chip shots. Different brands use different lofts for the same wedge name, but this gives the general idea. For a beginner I'd recommend a pitching wedge and a sand wedge.

Note that loft is not the only difference among clubs. The weight of the club head can differ a lot. My 3 fairway wood is very light compared to my 5 wood. A sand wedge and hybrid clubs usually have heavier heads to help swing through rough grass or sand. That's part of why practice swings are a good idea, to give you a feel for this particular club.

Putters

Putters are used on the green or nearby. They are the shortest club and have zero loft. Their purpose is to hit the ball very accurately. There are a million styles of putter and range from \$60 to hundreds of dollars. A putter is a necessity for a beginner or any golfer.

Club Summary

At a minimum, a beginner needs:

- A fairway wood or hybrid in the 3-5 number range (15-20 degrees loft).
- An iron, number 6 or 7
- A 9 iron or pitching wedge
- A sand wedge
- A putter

As you build experience and decide to invest more, consider

- A different wood or hybrid
- A used full set of irons. If you can, get a better brand (TaylorMade, Callaway, Ping).
- A gap wedge

Then if you go really crazy, get a driver, a set of new fitted irons, and fill out your wedges. A new set of irons can run \$600 to a few thousand. A new driver can be \$400-\$600 easily, and fairway woods and hybrids are often \$200-\$400 each. Like any hobby, the amount you can spend is not limited. I saw a collector's putter, never intended to be used, that was \$2600.

Golf Club Ideal Distances

<p>Here is a summary of how far a man might hit various clubs, depending on how fast the club is swung. Don't be intimidated by these numbers, I hit a drive about 120-150 yards, and many women rarely get to a 200-yard drive. We'll get into personal handicap scores later.</p> <p>If you watch golf on TV, you might see a pro on a short par 3, say 140 yards, use a gap wedge. Don't expect you'll use the same club for that shot! <i>A big part of playing golf is learning what YOU can do, and playing the best game you can.</i></p>	Club	Slow Swing (Higher handicap)	Middle Swing (Mid-handicap)	Fast Swing (Low handicap & scratch golfers)
	Driver	215+	240+	275+
	3 wood	185-195	205-225	240-260
	5 wood	175-185	195-205	235-245
	3 iron / 7 wood	165-175	185-195	210-220
	4 iron	155-165	175-185	200-210
	5 iron	150-160	165-175	185-200
	6 iron	140-150	155-165	170-190
	7 iron	130-140	145-155	155-175
	8 iron	120-130	135-145	140-165
	9 iron	110-120	125-135	130-150
	Pitching Wedge	100-110	115-125	120-135
	Gap Wedge	90-100	105-115	110-125
	Sand Wedge	80-90	90-110	100-110

Golf Equipment

We've discussed the clubs at length, but what else do you need to play golf?

Balls

Golf balls are certainly a necessity! As a beginner, you'll lose a fair number of balls, and ball performance isn't critical, so get inexpensive balls. I use Callaway Supersoft, which are around \$2 each. As you get more consistent in your play, then it will matter to get better quality balls. Titleist Pro V1 and Pro V1X are high end balls and run about \$5 each.

Traditional golf balls are white, but it's hard to see a white ball against a white (cloudy) sky, so yellow, pink, orange, red, and other colors are available. Get what makes you happy. To start I'd get at least a dozen balls.

Tees

Tees are needed for your tee shots. Most are wood or plastic. Tees come in various lengths, from about 2" to 4". Many have lines or stripes marked so you can push them in to give a consistent ball height. Plastic ones are more expensive but can have a handy molded ledge to stop them from being pushed too far into the ground. Get what you want. A bag of 20-25 tees will probably last a while.

Golf Bag

Golf clubs are heavy, so a bag is necessary for carrying them. There are four levels of golf bags, depending on how many clubs you have and how you'll play. Prices range from about \$80 to \$800, with most around \$150-200.

- A **carry bag** is designed to be carried by the golfer. They are thin and light, and aren't designed to hold a lot more than your necessities.
- A **stand bag** has two legs that extend when you put it down. It can typically hold a full set of clubs but not a lot more.

- A **cart bag** is to be used on a golf cart, whether a **powered cart** or a **push cart**. A cart bag has more pockets for extra stuff and may have dividers to help keep your clubs apart from each other.
- An extra huge version of the cart bag is a **tour bag**, which holds everything but the kitchen sink and is carried by your caddie. If you have a caddie you probably aren't reading this.

A powered cart is a gas or battery-powered cart you ride in. They hold two people and their bags. You generally pay a premium to use a powered cart on public golf courses. Private country clubs often assume you'll use a cart.

In contrast a push cart holds one stand bag or cart bag, and is used if you want to walk a course instead of riding in a powered cart. Many public courses allow you to rent a push cart or you can buy one. Push carts have three or four wheels and are typically about \$200.

Other Equipment

A glove

A **glove** is usually worn on your non-dominant hand, so if you're right-handed, you'll wear a glove on your left hand. A glove is optional but helps give you a non-slip grip on the club, so I consider it highly recommended. The glove is typically worn for every stroke except putting.

For cold weather, there are golf gloves for both hands, to help you keep warm.

A towel

A **towel** is attached to your bag with a little clip and is used to wipe off clubs when they get dirty. Technically optional but highly recommended.

Ball Marker

A **ball marker** is a small, usually metal item used to mark your ball position on the green. It is used to replace your ball when someone else will be putting close to your ball, to avoid distracting them. Many ball markers are metal so they can attach to a magnet which is clipped to your hat. The magnet can be clipped to your shoelaces instead if you prefer, or you can just keep the marker in your pocket if you have one. A ball marker is a necessity, but you can use a coin if you wish.

Divot Tool

A **divot tool** looks like a two-prong fork. It isn't needed for a beginner. When you hit a high approach shot to land the ball on the green, a soft green can get a dent in it from the ball impact. That dent is the divot. The divot tool is used to fluff the green back to level and erase the dent. Divot tools are often combined with ball markers, bottle openers, or other tools.



A divot tool. The round part is a ball marker, held by a magnet, and the right end is a bottle opener.

Club Covers

You can get **covers** for your club heads. This helps prevent damage from them hitting each other. Covers for irons and wedges tend to be fairly plain, but covers for drivers, fairway woods, hybrids, and putters can be very elaborate and cost \$30 to over \$100 each. Tiger Woods uses a tiger cover for his driver, not surprisingly. Covers are not strictly needed, but a good idea as you get better quality clubs.

Golf Shoes

During a golf swing your feet shouldn't move much, so **golf shoes** have spikes in the soles to help your feet stay in place during your swing. The spikes are also helpful for walking up and down hills on the course without slipping. Spikes are usually plastic for most golfers and vary in length from nubs to replaceable crowns. Golf shoes are not needed for beginners but are a good idea as you progress.

Very high-end golf shoes can have metal spikes. Plastic spikes are generally safe for indoor floors, such as in the clubhouse, but metal spikes are often banned indoors to prevent floor damage.

Rain Gear

You can play golf in the rain as long as there is no danger of lightning. Rain jackets, rain pants, or golf umbrellas can be worn or carried. Jackets for golf are designed to allow enough range of motion for a full swing, so they differ from traditional raincoats. Many golf bags and push carts include a place to keep an umbrella. If you get caught in the rain, be sure to dry out your gear afterward to prevent mold.

Sun Protection

A round of golf typically takes 4-5 hours, so remember appropriate sun protection. Hats, sunblock, and other protection are often needed. Since golfers often wear short sleeve polo shirts, there are sun sleeves you can get to protect the rest of your arms.

Rangefinder

Very optional for a beginner, but a good idea if you can afford it, is a rangefinder or golf watch.

A **rangefinder** is a fist-sized laser that tells you how far away something is. Usually I aim mine at the flag, and use the distance to decide which club to use. Rangefinders start at \$200. I also use mine to tell how far away hazards are, like the front of a bunker.

A **golf watch** is an application for a smart watch or a dedicated watch just for golf. It uses GPS to tell where you are, and typically tells you how far to the front and back of the green. They start at \$100 for a dedicated watch, such as from Garmin. Fancier models can also tell you how far bunkers and other hazards are, using a map of your current hole. The only downside is they don't tell you how far the flag itself is.

Practice Play

Before venturing onto a golf course, it's good to get some idea what you're doing with your clubs. Group or private lessons are highly recommended. You can look up local pros on the [PGA](#) or [LPGA](#) websites.

Once you have some foundations to work with, go to a **driving range**. Here you rent a bucket of balls (typically 40-100 balls) and go to a practice mat. **Do not use your own balls on a driving range!** You won't get them back. If you want to practice drives (you do) buy a rubber tee. The rubber tee is pushed

through the bottom of the mat through a hole. Practice mats are generally on a concrete pad, so you can't use regular tees. When you're done, make sure to keep your rubber tee!

On the driving range there are usually markers for 100, 150, and 200 yards. Practice all of your clubs except the putter and see how far the ball goes for each one. Notice also how high the ball goes. Sometimes you have to keep the ball flight low to stay under tree branches, or high to go over a bunker.

If you're having trouble getting the ball in the air, try a few things. These are some of my most common errors. 😊 I'm no coach, so take this with a grain of salt.

- Adjust the ball position forward or backward a little (like an inch) compared to your feet. Does that make a difference?
- Make sure your arms are straight on the downswing; it's easy to pull up and push the ball (it never goes up) or top the ball (it goes down into the mat and dribbles forward).
- Keep your upper body from drifting forward or backward during your swing; it should rotate but not drift.
- And if you're hitting the ground before your ball, adjust the ball position and/or make sure your hips and body start turning at the start of your downswing. Your whole body swings the club, not just your arms.

You can also peruse YouTube videos for the area you're having trouble; drives, fairway, pitching, chipping, or putting. I've found videos from Danny Maude or Golf Channel to be most helpful, but you do you.

And most importantly, if none of that helps, make a mental note of the trouble you're having and ask your coach about it at your next lesson!

If you have space and funds for it, at home you can get a [putting practice mat](#), and/or a [practice net](#) for long shots.

Course Play

Before You Play

So you've got all your gear, done some practice on the driving range, and gotten some lessons to get a rough idea of how far you hit the ball with various clubs. Time to play!

Assuming you have a choice, which golf course to start on? Usually, a public or municipal course is more accommodating to beginners. You can sign up, usually by phone or website, for either 9 (**half round**) or 18 holes (**full round**) to play, starting at your **tee time**. While golf is a social sport, you can play alone if you wish to avoid the gaze of your friends, but you could be grouped with 1-3 strangers to fill out the group if the course is busy.

Be sure to **arrive and check in at least 30 minutes before your tee time**. When you arrive at the course, there may be a place to **drop off** your bag, so you don't have to carry it from the parking lot. More exclusive golf country clubs might have valets to help unload your bag. Park your car.

Most courses have a **pro shop** which sells you golf clothing and accessories. If your course has a pro shop, that's where you'll check in and pay for your round of golf. If there's no pro shop or it's closed,

there is usually a **Starter's office**. The cost for golf varies widely. Here in Hawaii, I've paid \$28 for a full round when walking a push cart, up to \$85 at a country club where it's assumed that you will be using a powered golf cart.

Warm Up

While waiting for your tee time, you have time to warm up. Many players like to **stretch gently**, focusing on your waist and upper body. Your coach can help you with warm up exercises.

Almost all golf courses have a **practice putting green**, so grab your putter and a few balls. Practice putting at different distances, and if the green has contours (little hills) see how much they bend the ball's path.

Some golf courses have a driving range as well. If you allow at least another 30 minutes before your tee time, you can rent a bucket of balls and warm up your swing at the driving range. Don't use your balls at any driving range!

The Starter (person) will announce when you (and your group) are **On Deck**. That means you are next in line to start playing, so you should get to your first tee and be ready to play. The Starter will announce when you are up, i.e. next to **tee off**.

Which Tees to Use?

Time to play! Which set of tees (tee box) do you use? As mentioned earlier, there are generally three or four sets of tee markers. Which set of tees you use for your round depends on how well you expect to score. Beginners typically score a full round above 110, so red tees are appropriate.

Most men play white tees even if they are not in the score range shown, scoring 81-90 on a par 72 course. A score of 90 would be 18 over par, which is an average of a bogey on every hole.

Beginning golfers might take 1-4 years to score under 100! It all depends on how often you practice and play, and how much coaching you get.

Many golf courses have blue, white, and red tees. As noted earlier, black and gold tees are a little less common.

Make note of which players in your group are using which tees. The tees furthest from the flag tee off first.



Starting Play

Before teeing off, make sure the group of players before you have played far enough ahead of you that you can't hit them with your tee shot. This applies to fairway shots too; make sure you won't hit anyone before you. Ensuring the green is clear falls in the same category. If you are in range of hitting the ball onto the green, wait until the previous group has left.

If you hit a wild shot, and someone unexpected might get hit, shout **FORE!** to warn them. Yes, we really do yell that if needed. Conversely if someone uprange yells FORE, duck!

Within each tee box, the order of play is not critical for most players. Whoever is ready to tee off first does so, called **Ready Golf**. In much more formal settings, such as tournament play, the person who had the lowest score on the previous hole has **honors** and tees off first on the next hole.

After everyone has teed off, **whoever is furthest from the hole hits next**, and the other players stay alongside or behind them. This pattern continues until everyone is on or near the green.

Awareness of where other players are is an important part of golf courtesy, both within your group and nearby on the course. It's fairly common for a ball to cross onto an adjacent fairway, so stay aware of possible conflicts.



If your ball lands on the green and leaves an indent or **divot**, use your **divot tool** to fluff the surface back up. The goal in fixing an indent in the green is to restore the ground to its original smooth surface and help the grass heal from the impact of the shot.



If you are using an iron or wedge and pull up a piece of turf, replace it, step on it, and if available, sprinkle some **turf mix** on the spot. This helps the turf re-root. Most powered golf carts carry turf mix. You are not expected to bring your own if you're using a push cart.

When everyone is on the green, **whoever is furthest from the hole putts first**. If your ball is near their line of play, put your ball marker behind your ball and take the ball away to avoid distracting them.

After everyone has finished the hole, **make sure to collect your golf clubs!** You might need a wedge to get on the green, then putt to finish. After putting, it's easy to forget your wedge and walk away.

Scoring

After each hole, record your score. The total number of strokes from tee to last putt is the only information needed. If you wish, you can record the number of putts made in addition to the total score, to give you an idea whether you're having trouble getting to the green or putting once you're there.

More advanced players keep score like you see professionals do, noting with circles or squares when you have birdies/eagles or bogeys/double bogeys. You could also record your score as how many strokes above or below par you were for each hole, such as +1 for bogey, 0 for par, etc.

At the end of each nine holes, total your score. Don't be discouraged if your score is well above par, that's normal for beginners. Scores for 18 holes are often in the 110s or 120s.

For formal play such as tournaments, you have to sign your scorecard and turn it in to the scorekeeper at the end of the round. You'll see professionals do this; and it's terrible if they forget to turn in their score.

If it makes you feel better, I once had a purely awful day during a tournament and scored 150 on par 72! The scorekeeper looked at my scorecard and congratulated me for my determination. In the same tournament, one man scored 80 on the first round and was so disgusted he didn't come back.

Your Golf Handicap

A quick measure of how good a golfer is is given by their handicap. In order to establish a handicap, you log scores for each round or half round you play into a software tool such as the phone application **GHIN Mobile**. It takes a few rounds before you will get an official handicap number, before that it's a preliminary value.

At a minimum, for each entry you provide which course you are playing, which set of tees you used, and the total score. More advanced entries can include the number of strokes for each hole, which is recommended. GHIN will yell at you if you do not enter your scores the same day; the reason for this is that they will account for weather conditions that day.

What does your handicap mean? It means that 10% of the time, your total score will be that number above par or better. If you have a handicap of 12, then the best 10% of times you play you'll be 12 over par or less. Your handicap is NOT your average total score above par.

Normal golfers have a positive handicap. Beginners often have a handicap in the 30s or 40s. A handicap of 36 means *on a good day* you will average a double bogey on every hole. Similarly, a handicap of 18 is a bogey average, and a handicap of 0 is a par average. A **scratch golfer** frequently hits par on each hole. If you're extremely good or a professional, you can have a handicap that is negative. To get an idea of what extremely good play is, to enter the US Open qualifying round, you need a handicap of 1.3 or less.

As you continue to golf and enter more rounds, your handicap can go up or down. Hopefully down.

Why is Golf so Challenging?

On its surface, golf looks straightforward. Hit the ball until it's on the green, then putt it in the hole. Repeat.

Other than the difficulty in hitting a little ball with a club that is moving very fast (50-150+ mph), we noted earlier how important accuracy is for driving and fairway shots. A couple of degrees left or right and you could land in sand (fairway bunker), water, deep rough, out of bounds, or hit trees. In the last week I saw a professional golfer hit a 67-yard drive because he hit a tree branch.

In practice or during lessons, you can try the same shot over and over. While playing you only get one shot and have to deal with the consequences if it went poorly.

Swing speed changes wildly during the game. Tee shots and fairway shots are often full swing, but approach shots (wedges or short irons) can be slower, and chips and putts are gentle in comparison. But then you go to the next tee shot and are back up to full swing!

Course maintenance can affect a course greatly. How recently was the rough mowed?

Rain is a huge factor. Elite courses have carefully planned water drainage systems, but municipal courses can have puddles in the fairway, in bunkers, and standing water on the green. Rain can drastically slow a ball's flight, and hitting a wet fairway can bring a ball to a not-screaming halt.

Heavy rain or thunderstorms can stop play. Lightning can jump 30 MILES from a cloud, so if you hear thunder, get off the course immediately. Golf clubs make great lightning rods. People don't.

Wind can be a mixed blessing. A strong tailwind can add yards to your long shots, but that can also make you overshoot the green. The reverse is true for a headwind. You might need a club with less loft to avoid losing distance from the wind.

The terrain is often not level to make life more interesting. Your coach will teach you how to adapt your club selection and aiming if the ground is slanted left or right, uphill or downhill. More difficult courses will often have less level terrain on fairways and greens.

The time of day you play can also matter. I played near sunrise once, and the greens were very slow compared to the previous day. Why? Dew on the green slowed the ball. Later in the day that dew is long gone, and the greens are faster (less resistance to the ball rolling).

Sunshine itself won't affect your ball, but if you're facing into the sun, it may be a lot harder to aim accurately. A very dry course tends to play fast, which is good for getting to the green more easily but can also make putting harder to control.

It typically takes 4-5 hours to play a round of golf, so be aware of your body's needs. Stay hydrated and bring or buy snacks. Reapply sunblock as needed.

Golf is a very mental game. After you have a little control over the ball, how well you played on one hole can influence the next hole. It can be difficult to regard each hole as its own world. Another mental challenge is responding to poor shots. If you hit your tee shot into trees, how do you recover?

Understanding Tournaments

Watching golf can be very helpful. I find the short game most interesting. How do they handle getting out of a greenside bunker? When they are pitching onto the green, how large and fast is their swing? Try to predict how fast they will putt.

The scorecard for par on TV just shows the number of strokes with no highlighting. A birdie is a single circle around the number. An eagle is a double circle around the number. A bogey is a single square around the number. A double bogey is a double square around the number. So basically, circles are good, squares are bad!

Most pro tournaments are in a four-day format, with 18 holes played each day. On Thursday and Friday, there are a lot of players, often over 100. After play on Friday they make **The Cut** to get the field down to about 60-70 players for the weekend. As a result, the drama on Friday's play is predicting what the **Cut Line** is. A Cut Line of +2 means everyone who scored a total of 2 over par on the first 36 holes or fewer makes the cut. Everyone +3 or higher goes home.

At the end of play on Sunday, the player with the lowest total score wins, typically several or many strokes below par for all 72 holes.

If there is a tie for first place, there is a **sudden death playoff** to determine the winner. The people tied for first place play one more hole; if one person does better on that hole, they win the tournament. If they get the same score, they go to a second hole. This continues until someone wins. Which holes do

they play? That's up to the tournament. They might play the same hole over and over or play a series of holes until a winner emerges. The sequence of playoff holes is selected before the tournament starts, to keep from introducing any bias toward a particular player.

Notice that a tie requiring a playoff means after playing 72 holes, par is about 288 strokes, and more than one person got the best score! **Consistency is a huge factor in golf**, which is why even casual players develop routines before each shot.

Conclusion

This is a summary of the terminology and play of golf. There is a lot of assumed knowledge to play golf, so hopefully this introduction has clarified the foundations.