



READING POKER TELLS

ZACHARY ELWOOD



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Preface

An update

This book was originally published in June of 2012 and I'm writing this in October of 2015. In that first edition, I wrote this introductory paragraph:

"I believe this book will be, at the time of its publication, the best resource on poker tells available. I've filled this book with practical information that I've learned from more than eight years of playing live poker professionally and semi-professionally. I've done my best to make this a book that will improve almost any player's game, no matter their skill level or the stakes that they play."

I humbly believe I accomplished this goal. This book has since received many positive reviews, including some from very experienced players. Many players have called it the best book on poker tells.

I've since written another book: *Verbal Poker Tells*, released in 2014, which examines verbal patterns in many televised hands. I'm very proud of that book. I put nearly eight months of full-time work into it and it's the only book of its kind. You can find the Verbal Poker Tells paperback on Amazon, the audiobook on Audible.com, and the ebook in several formats (including Kindle) on my website, www.readingpokertells.com.

I also recently, in 2015, released a video series on poker tells, which uses actual poker hands from televised cash game and tournament footage. If you enjoy this book, you can check out the video trailer, watch sample clips from the videos, and sign up for a free email course at www.readingpokertells.video.

For more information about me, flip to the [About Me](#) section at the end.

Feel free to email me your questions, thoughts, and criticisms at info@readingpokertells.com. I do not pretend to be infallible; I am always learning and welcome all discussion.

What's in this book?

There are many ways poker players unwittingly give clues about the strength of their hands. In this book are many common physical and verbal tells that I frequently rely on to read my opponents. Some of these concepts are common knowledge; some are well-known only to professional poker players; some have never been written about anywhere else before.

This book also presents an original way of thinking about tells. My system organizes poker tells into situational categories, giving you a framework for thinking about the behavior you see at the table. These categories will help you understand how tells that look the same can mean different things in different situations. I think this system of mentally organizing behaviors will improve your tell-reading abilities.

There's also a section on manipulation and deception. This section includes maneuvers meant to influence your opponents, or to induce them to give away information. Many people will consider some of these strategies immoral or "angle-shooting." Even if you don't plan on using these maneuvers, they're worth knowing so that you can recognize them if your opponents use them.

Who is this book for?

This book is mainly for people who play live poker or who want to transition from online to live poker.

You'll get the most out of this book if you're already an experienced, winning player. That being said, I think anyone who regularly plays live poker, no matter the stakes, would benefit from reading this book. If you're a very experienced live player with a high win rate, you probably won't get much from this book, but there may be a few concepts that are new to you.

Even if you aren't a winning player yet, you'd do well to realize how much information you might be giving away. If it does nothing else, I hope this book will convince you of the importance of concealing your own tells.

This book is also for anyone interested in human psychology. I think a lot of the behavioral concepts in this book apply to any competitive setting where deception is an important factor.

Using this book

You shouldn't think of this book as hard and fast rules for interpreting your opponents' actions, but instead like a book on martial arts. You can learn a lot about theory and about important physical maneuvers from a martial arts book. You might even learn a good technical way to punch somebody or chop a brick in half. But a book won't teach you how to kick someone's ass. You'll need to get out there and actually fight people to learn how to do that.

Reading this book will get you thinking in the language of physical tells and will mentally prepare you for spotting them and interpreting them in the real world. But there is no substitute for playing.

Games

I use Texas Hold'em throughout this book for hand examples, just because it's a simple, common game, but you should be able to extrapolate most concepts to other games.

Photographs

While it may be tempting to flip through the photos in this book to see what the most obvious poker tells are, I don't recommend doing that. I consider the photos the

least-relevant information in this book, which is unfortunate because photos are eye-catching and they are what many people tend to concentrate on the most. But using poker tells practically is, for the most part, about studying behavioral patterns that occur over time; it is not about how someone looks at a specific, frozen moment in time.

Video is a much better tool, because it can show you a person's behavior over time. (This is why I think my blog is a good place for learning, because I can link to videos that illustrate what I'm talking about.) But even video isn't that great a teaching tool if it only shows you a single hand, because in order for the information to be practical, you should be correlating a player's behavior over a series of hands, not just a single hand. I have included photographs when I think it aids in illustrating a specific facial expression or body language. But you should keep in mind that photographs are generally poor tools for teaching tells.

Albuquerque, New Mexico

February 2005

I'm in a \$5-10 no-limit Hold'em game. There are eight players at the table. A loose, not-very-good regular named Tony is under-the-gun and raises to \$40. I'm two to the right of the button and I look down at **T♦ T♠**.

Both Tony and I have around \$2,400. I take a couple seconds, studying the people behind me out of the corner of my eye. I know them both pretty well.

The player to my immediate left has chips out as if to call. This is a defensive move that probably means he would like to call the \$40, but that he does not plan on raising. If he was actually strong enough to raise, he wouldn't give any indication of wanting to call because he'd want his raise to be a surprise. The player on the button is holding his cards in one hand, slightly off the table, in a pose that I know from experience means he's going to muck.

Facing a raise from a loose player like Tony, I'd probably re-raise with TT about half the time. Knowing the guys behind me are folding makes me feel better about raising in this spot.

I raise to \$120. Everyone mucks over to Tony, who calls the raise after a few seconds.

I've played with Tony a lot; he's a very loose-aggressive player, and he usually does all right against most of the ABC-strategy regulars and tourists. He's probably a slight winner in the game. He's a decent hand reader and smart enough to make good folds when he realizes he's beat, and he gets good value on his actual hands. But he's much too aggressive when he shouldn't be. He's a wealthy guy and not afraid of making big bluffs.

And I've played with him enough to understand a good amount of his body language and speech patterns. He's a loud, animated guy, and underestimates how much attention people are paying to him. His behavior can vary a good deal between the times he's got a weak hand and when he's got a strong hand.

The flop comes: J♥ 9♦ 8♥

After a couple of seconds, he checks to me. I wait a couple of seconds and bet \$180. He calls immediately. His immediate call makes me feel pretty confident he didn't flop a set, a straight, or two-pair. It's also unlikely he has an overpair, or even a strong Jack. With all of those hands, he would be vulnerable on such a draw-heavy board and would have taken at least a little time to consider a raise.

An immediate call in such a spot, for many people, is usually a drawing hand that is worth an obvious call. In this case, he could either have a straight draw or a flush draw. The straight draw could be something like T9, JT, or even KQ. There's a lot of flush

draws, and there's also quite a few hands like 7♥ 6♥ or K♥ Q♥ that would give him the straight and the flush draw. In this spot, I'm leaning toward something like 9T because I think Tony would often be aggressive with the flush draw, or at least he would think about a raise for a little while.

The turn makes: J♥ 9♦ 8♥ 5♦

Tony stares at me for a few seconds, and then bets \$400 into the \$600 pot. When he bets, he does this thing that a lot of players do when they're betting with a vulnerable hand: he puts out his chips into the pot for the bet, and then holds a stack of chips a few inches behind the betting line, almost as if to subtly imply he's ready to call if I were to raise him. I wait a few seconds. He stays completely quiet. When he's got a big hand, he often will talk to his opponent. It doesn't mean that when he's quiet he's always bluffing, but it makes it more likely. There's a possibility he has the Jack, but I think it's unlikely. Both his fundamental play and his tells lead me to believe it's very likely I'm ahead. I call.

A King comes on the river: J♥ 9♦ 8♥ 5♦ K♠

This is a very bad card if he was semi-bluffing any draw with a King in it. After a few seconds of staring at the board, Tony bets \$900.

I weigh the possibilities. My real problem is that, from his perspective, my hand is fairly face-up as a one-pair hand. My hand range is mainly TT, QQ, or AA, and not too much else. He would feel comfortable betting two-pair here, and maybe even just a rivered pair of Kings.

Logically, there are very few hands he could have in his range at this point. But when somebody puts a lot of money in the pot, it's going to be a weirdly-played big hand a good amount of the time. I start wondering if I've read him wrong and maybe he could have played a set or a straight like this. Or maybe he had KJ and hit two-pair on the river.

Throughout all of this, Tony is completely quiet. Like I said, this doesn't always mean he's bluffing, but it does make it more likely. He's also not looking towards me at all, except for an occasional fleeting glance. This is a more reliable indicator that he's bluffing because, when he has a big hand, he's more willing to give an opponent a little more direct eye contact.

As I'm thinking, Tony is riffling his chips with one hand. Trying to get a read, I stack up enough chips for a call, as if I'm ready to push them in, and I see his chip riffling slow down to about half-speed. This is also a common tell for a lot of people. Many people respond to the anxiety of an impending call by "freezing in the headlights" and slowing down their breathing or hand movements.

All of these things are indicators that he's bluffing, and I feel better about the call. I put in the money, and he mucks his hand. I don't have to, but I show the Tens. Tony gets very angry. "That's the worst call I've seen this week, sir."

"Can't believe it was good," I say sheepishly, reinforcing my image to the rest of the table as a loose and stubborn player who doesn't think too much.

POKER TELL THEORY

The importance of tells in poker

When I play poker, I watch my opponents carefully. I watch how they act when they have weak hands, how they act when they have strong hands, how they talk, how they sit, where they look, how they physically place their bets, and many other tendencies.

Over the years I've learned to read the average poker player pretty well; much better than I would have thought possible when I was first starting out playing. This doesn't mean that I'm "soul-reading" people in every hand I play; it just means that there are sometimes, a few times a session, situations that come up where an opponent's behavior makes a certain hand strength much more likely than another hand strength.

Some poker tells result from ignorance or mental laziness. Most poker players don't know that they might be being observed very carefully, and so they give away a lot about their intentions. They might stare at their hole cards when they have a weak hand. They might show an obvious intent to fold, or call, or bet. They might call quickly when they're weak, or bet quickly when they have a big hand, or have other noticeable bet-timing tells. These kinds of tells aren't related to extremes of emotions, but are just a result of the player not making an effort to "balance" their behavioral patterns.

Other poker tells result from emotional states, like anxiety, excitement, and relaxation. Many players tend to avert their eyes downward when they bluff (as liars are prone to do). Many players become very still and silent after bluffing, due to anxiety. Many players have a tendency to make more eye contact when betting with a strong hand, due to being more relaxed.

Unless you are a natural reader of people, learning to read poker tells is like learning another language. Learning to read poker tells means learning where to look for tells on a player's body, and when you should look for them. It means having an internal catalog of human gestures, expressions, and verbal statements, and knowing how to correlate that information with the behaviors of a specific player.

You should think of poker tells as being like any other observation you might make about an opponent. Just as you give weight to how reliable a player's betting patterns are, you can give weight to how reliable a player's tells are. If you are very uncertain about the reliability of a tell, you wouldn't assign much weight to that information. But if you have observed a player for a while and are confident about his behavioral patterns, his tells will impact your decisions.

Tells should seldom be your sole reason for doing something. The large majority of the time you should just be playing your best fundamental poker strategy, just as you would play online, in the absence of live tells. Some games will be tough, and you will only

infrequently spot a tell that influences your decision. Some games will have several players who have a lot of tells, and your play will be drastically changed.

But you should never fall in love with tells; always remember that tells should influence your play only when you have solid reasons to trust their reliability.

While tell-reading is only a small part of playing great live poker, it's a powerful weapon to have in your arsenal. In my opinion, making good reads can add between 10% and 30% to a good player's win-rate. Also, if you're playing against experienced players and you haven't worked on eliminating your own tells, this will drastically reduce your win-rate. If you're playing live for significant stakes, and you aren't very good at reading tells or at hiding your own tells, you won't be making anywhere near your maximum profit potential.

Everything means something

I have a belief that some people might find extreme. I believe that *everything* a poker player does at the poker table means something. Every movement, every spoken word, every little twitch: it all means something. I think that it's theoretically possible, with infinite knowledge, to interpret every action at a poker table to discover exactly what a player is holding at any given time.

And I mean this fully. I believe you could theoretically differentiate between very similar hands; for instance, whether a pre-flop raiser in Hold'em was holding a pair of twos or a pair of threes. Assuming infinite knowledge of all information about the physical attributes of a player (heart rate, muscle tension, moisture of skin, tone of voice, etc.), and assuming infinite knowledge of that player's hand history—then theoretically there would be enough evidence to determine what a player is holding at any given time.

This is all only theoretical. Obviously, infinite knowledge is nowhere near possible in an actual poker game. You will never be able to observe *all* of the information available, let alone remember it. Our powers of observation are very limited. But we should strive to absorb as much *important* information as we can.

The science of physical tells

Dr. Paul Ekman is a scientist who has had a long career studying the meaning behind human facial expressions. His books are well-respected classics in the field, and he consults for industries as diverse as criminal investigation work and 3D character facial animations. (I recommend all of Ekman's books. Even if most of the information doesn't directly apply to poker, it will improve your understanding of human behavior.)

He and Dr. Maureen O'Sullivan conducted a survey of people that took place over many years. This survey was dedicated to finding what they termed "truth wizards", participants who were exceptionally gifted at spotting deception in the mannerisms and speech patterns of other people. After testing 20,000 people, Ekman and O'Sullivan had identified only fifty people as truth wizards—that's 0.25%, or one-quarter of one percent of the population.

The average person could do no better than 50%, which is no better than random. The truth wizards could identify deception with an accuracy of 80% or higher in the challenges the experimenters gave them. The wizards came from a wide range of backgrounds; most worked in jobs not related at all to identifying deception (although Secret Service agents did show the most aptitude.)

Dr. O'Sullivan said the wizards "are extraordinarily attuned to detecting the nuances of facial expressions, body language, and ways of talking and thinking."

She also said, "Some of them use the demeanor and vocal clues...but others base their judgments on behaviors and word usage that no researcher has previously identified."

If these studies are accurate, it means there are some people who are naturally skilled at reading other people. I believe such people exist; luckily for most poker players, there are very few of them around. Stu Ungar was a player who I think fell into this rare category.

Also, for the record, I don't believe I am one of these naturally-skilled people. But I do believe, as Ekman does, that such information can be studied, acquired, and taught.

Side Note: Dr. Paul Ekman

One of Paul Ekman's discoveries (also credited simultaneously to other scientists doing similar work) was that the major facial expressions—sadness, fear, surprise, happiness—were universal, across continents and cultures. Even though Charles Darwin, in his 1872 book "The Expression of the Emotions in Man and Animals", had already stated that he believed the major emotional expressions were universal, the idea had never been accepted in the mainstream. Most people had been operating under the assumption that facial expressions were culturally learned. The fact that the major facial expressions, and the underlying physiology, are universal is great news for students of body language and poker tells. The same basic tells will apply across different races and cultures.

Side Note: Stu Ungar

Stu Ungar was an expert of both gin rummy and poker. He was so good at gin rummy, and made so much money at it, that virtually no one would play him. Then he turned to poker and proceeded to dominate that game, too. In his short time playing competitive poker (he had serious drug problems for a large part of his career), he won three World Series of Poker championships.

While he was said to have a photographic memory and a natural mathematical understanding of cards, the skill that seemed to set him apart at poker was his ability to read people very, very well. Many other professional card players testified to his seemingly clairvoyant way of knowing what other players had. It's my opinion that Ungar was one of the very few super-gifted readers of people to focus all of their skills on card games.

Achieving excellence

If you want to become a great reader of poker tells, it's necessary to start with the belief that it's possible to become a great reader of poker tells. If you're someone who thinks that tells are of no real importance, then it's almost impossible that you'll ever be a great reader of poker tells, simply because your mind isn't going to be open to the many ways that you might improve.

I've been playing and studying poker seriously for eight years now, and I'm constantly amazed at how many factors can influence even the simplest poker decisions. I think the main weakness of most players is in thinking that they have already accumulated most of the knowledge needed to become a great player. This mindset leads to a know-it-all mentality and an inability to absorb new kinds of information that might take their game to a higher level.

When it comes to poker tells, many players, even many experienced ones, tend to downplay the importance of tell-reading ability. This may be because they have become winners without relying on poker tells, and they think tell-reading is a soft skill that either doesn't contribute to a win-rate at all or else contributes very slightly. (Go to Appendix, ["Common Criticisms of Using Poker Tells"](#) to read some criticisms of tells along with my rebuttals.)

Many players also underestimate how much information they're giving away with their own verbal statements and body language. Because they can't read tells or don't think tells are important, they don't bother to work on eliminating their own tells.

If you want to become the best poker player you can be, it's good to acknowledge the possibility that you may be at the beginning stages of your education. Starting with the belief that there is greatness possible in reading people opens your mind to the almost infinite amount of information that is present in a live game.

The importance of correlation

The most important concept when studying poker tells is correlation. *Correlation* is the act of establishing a relationship between two things. Applied to poker, correlation refers to matching a player's tells with specific situations. Once you've correlated a tell with a specific situation, this enables you to draw conclusions when you see that same tell in the same situation in the future.

Observing how your opponents behave in certain kinds of situations (for instance, when making a pure bluff on the river, or when value-betting with a strong hand) allows you to correlate their behavior with their hand strength. The more times you notice a connection between a player's behavior in a specific situation and his hand strength, the stronger the correlation is, and the more weight you can give to that information.

You should always keep in mind that tells are *tendencies*. By which I mean, they're something a specific player is more prone to do than not do. Tells are not something a player performs every single time (although I've seen tells that are probably 99% reliable for a player). Just as you'd gather information about an opponent's play (for example, what percentage of the time he raises pre-flop), you can gather information on the reliability of his tells (for example, the percentage of the time a player's eyes glance towards his lap as he's in the act of bluffing).

Some tells will be statistically insignificant, meaning there is no correlation between hand strength and behavior. Some tells will be *very* significant, meaning that they will have a very good chance of having a specific meaning. Those are the most useful tells and the ones we want to find.

But even a tell that is only slightly reliable can be useful in situations that we think are break-even spots from a fundamental strategy standpoint. (For instance, if we think it's even-money whether to call a river bet or fold to that bet, then a tell that is only correct 60% of the time will still be very useful in the long run.) Generally, though, if you can't fairly easily spot tells that seem likely to be statistically significant, you should move on and either study a different player or study another behavior of the same player.

Most of the common tells I will describe in this book are tendencies of a large percentage of the poker-playing population. But of course not everyone will have the same tells. Some players will exhibit tells that very few other people exhibit. (For example, I've played with a few people who slump in their seat and look dejected after bluffing, but this is the opposite of most players' behavior.) Some players will have eliminated most of the commonly-seen tells, but might have quirks of their own that are highly reliable. Some experienced players will have virtually eliminated their tells through hard work and experience.

So while you should learn the common poker tells, you should always keep in mind the importance of correlation. As a general rule, you should almost never act on potential tells you've spotted unless you have already correlated them with a player's past behavior. Only when you're very comfortable in your reading ability should you stray from this advice.

A system for interpreting tells

In most poker tell books, tells have been discussed without much of an organizational framework. They have been presented either as long lists or in categories that can seem a bit arbitrary. I believe my method of thinking about tells will improve your ability to understand and remember tells.

There are no tells that mean the same thing regardless of situation. Everything is situational. You can't say something like, "When this poker player stares at me, he's got a weak hand"—it doesn't work like that. You might say something like, "when this player stares at me when it's my turn to act, he's got a weak hand", or "when this player slouches in his chair after he bets, he's got a strong hand", because those are specific situations. The biggest mistake I've seen other poker tell books make is not emphasizing the importance of the situation.

I've divided tells into three primary categories, depending on when during a hand a player exhibits them.

The three primary situational categories are:

- *Waiting-for-Action Tells*
- *During-Action Tells*
- *Post-Bet Tells*

Waiting-for-action tells are tells that players exhibit while they are waiting for an opponent to act. Waiting-for-action tells can reveal either a player who wants you to bet or who doesn't want you to bet.

During-action tells are tells that players exhibit while it is their turn to act. These include such tells as how long it takes them to bet or check, or the physical manner in which they bet.

Post-bet tells are tells that players exhibit after making a bet. Post-bet tells can reveal either a player who wants a call or who doesn't want a call.

Now I'll explain these categories a little more with some examples of hands.

Waiting-for-action tells

Let's say you're heads up with a player and it's your turn to act. Your opponent's *waiting-for-action tells* are the tells he might exhibit while it's your turn and he's waiting for you to act. This could be either when you are first to act or when your opponent was first to act and he has checked to you.

Some examples of waiting-for-action tells are:

- *An opponent staring at you when it's your turn to act*
- *An opponent who avoids looking at you when it's your turn to act*
- *An opponent holding out chips as if he's going to call if you bet*

During-action tells

Let's say you have checked to your opponent. Your opponent's *during-action tells* are the tells that he exhibits while it is his turn to act, as he checks or bets. These can be bet-timing tells (how long it takes to make a bet or to check) or behaviors associated with the physical act of betting.

Some examples of during-action tells are:

- *An opponent waiting a long time to bet*
- *An opponent saying "I bet" in a confident voice*
- *An opponent throwing chips forcefully into the pot*

Post-bet tells

Let's say your opponent has now bet. Your opponent's *post-bet tells* refer to any tells he exhibits after he bets.

Some examples of post-bet tells are:

- *An opponent smiling slightly after betting*
- *An opponent avoiding eye contact after betting*

- An opponent's eyes getting slightly wider after betting

The importance of categories

The situational categories I've described are intellectual constructs; they are not completely perfect and can overlap slightly. But they are very useful for organizing your thoughts and observations about tells.

Without a framework for thinking about tells, you can easily be overwhelmed by the immense amount of information present at the poker table. One confusing fact is that some common tells can appear exactly the same, but can be opposite in meaning. For instance, one common tell that indicates waiting-for-action *weakness* is for a player to stare at you while it is your turn to act. Another common tell for post-bet *strength* looks exactly the same; after a player bets, he will stare at you.

Again: these two behaviors look the same but have opposite meanings. If you didn't know to distinguish between waiting-for-action tells and post-bet tells you might think something like: "Oh, in an earlier hand, I saw him staring at me before I bet and he was weak. Now he's gone all-in and he's staring at me in the same way. He must be weak again!" Then you'd call his bet and lose and you might think: "This poker tell stuff is for the birds."

This kind of basic misunderstanding is something I think happens often with people just starting out at learning tells. I think it also accounts for a lot of players' mistrust of using tells.

Make no mistake about it; you have to work at noticing and interpreting tells. Unless you're playing with very weak competition, it doesn't come easy. You're basically learning how to see in a new way—to take a confusing mass of information and turn it into something usable. Having a good mental framework for observing tells will help you take the flood of sensations at the poker table and form it into coherent observations.

Limitations of hand strength categories

Along with the situational categories, tells must be categorized by hand-strength. The two basic hand-strength categories are *Strong* and *Weak*.

This is obviously a simplification. An opponent can have hands that are not clearly strong or weak. For example, they can have a decent hand that is vulnerable or a draw that's strong.

Even when poker tells are at their most reliable, they only tell us how a player *feels* about his hand or what he intends to do. They can't directly tell us the strength of the player's hand. We have to infer, based on the situation and based on the type of player we're playing with, what these tells mean.

For instance, some players who flop a good draw in Hold'em (for example, overcards and a flush draw) might give tells associated with having a good hand. They might bet with confidence on the flop. When you're facing a pre-flop raiser and there are two diamonds

on a Ten-high board, you have to take into account the fact that this guy could be betting confidently with a hand like AK of diamonds.

But that's a problem usually only on the flop because the flop is, for the most part, the only place where a draw is going to be stronger than a made hand. When that same player who flopped a strong draw with AK of diamonds gets to the turn and doesn't make his hand, his odds of hitting a hand have been almost cut in half. On the turn, with a slimmer chance of winning, he will be more likely to exhibit tells associated with a weak hand. If he gets to the river and still hasn't made a hand and is now bluffing, he's going to be even more likely to exhibit weak-hand tells.

Hand strength is usually relatively undefined on the flop. This is because of the possibility of draws. Additionally, in no-limit games, flop bets are smaller and less likely to produce emotion-based tells. These issues also often apply to the turn. This is why I tend to just play with my best fundamental strategy on the flop and turn, regardless of reads.

The river is a much different story, because there are no draws possible. So if you get a reliable read of strength or weakness, it will be more likely to mean something. In most cases a typical player, when he reaches the river, will usually have his own internal answer as to whether he wants action or doesn't want action.

Pre-flop, in a no-limit game, can be similar to the river, because there are no meaningful draws possible. (You could call AK, AQ, etc. "drawing hands", but in this instance I would not consider them "meaningful draws.") Pre-flop is not nearly as reliable as the river, but with some players you can notice differences in their pre-flop behavior. For example, many players will feel ambivalent with most of their hands, but they will show signs of anxiety when they push all-in with junk, or show signs of relaxation when they push all-in with a high pair.

The reasons in the previous three paragraphs are why I tend to rely on emotion-based tells mostly for big river bets, and occasionally for big pre-flop bets.

Breaking tells into 'strong' and 'weak' categories is a simplification, but it is a necessary simplification. If you have a reliable read on someone, it will give you an answer to the question, "Does he want me to play or does he want me to fold?" In most situations, against most players, that will be very valuable information.

Conscious and unconscious behavior

I consider Mike Caro's book on tells to be a classic and I wholeheartedly recommend it to everyone. However, I disagree with the emphasis he placed on whether a tell was from an "actor" or from a "non-actor."

In his book, Caro split his tells up into two primary sections: *Tells from Actors* and *Tells from Non-Actors*. He said players who act either weak or strong will usually be the opposite of what they are representing. This is a fundamentally true observation but, in my opinion, this idea is only really of much use if you're playing with very bad players. Most players in mid- to high-stakes games are not actors—their most common tells don't

come from them trying to put on an act; their tells come from them accidentally exposing their level of anxiety or relaxation.

The main problem with focusing on whether a tell is “acting” or “not acting” is that many tells don’t easily fit into one or the other category. For example, [many players, when they have a strong hand, will avoid looking at the person whose turn it is to act, and avoid looking at the action in general.](#) Why are they doing this? If it’s a beginning player, he might be actively trying to trick you into thinking he isn’t interested in the action. His actions may be exaggerated. He may actively try to look bored. He may stare off at the television. But you will see decent players perform this tell sometimes, and they are not trying to act. They are reacting to a natural, subconscious instinct to look unassuming. Their tells will not be exaggerated, but will be subtle.

[Another example would be players with strong hands who slump in their chair very slightly, making their body smaller.](#) You can see experienced players exhibit this tell. It’s a natural animal instinct to become less threatening when you don’t want to scare your prey—hence the ducking down and becoming smaller. But, again, on the surface it might seem like a conscious act designed to deceive.

There are many human behaviors like these that blur the line between conscious and unconscious. This makes thinking about acting vs. non-acting an impractical way to think about tells. It’s especially impractical because it’s usually only with the most beginner-level players that these tells will be consciously over-acted and exaggerated. If you’re playing with somewhat-experienced competition, you should train yourself to be looking for more subtle tells than the ones exhibited by beginners.

Tell factors

There are factors that will affect how tells are displayed and how much meaning you should assign to them. Here’s a rundown of some of the major factors:

No-limit games: No-limit games produce more stressful situations than limit games do. The most useful tells at no-limit will be related to anxiety and the release of anxiety (relaxation). The most significant tells will be more likely to be observed when big bets are made. On the other hand, no-limit players will be more likely to be harder to read than limit players at comparable stakes. You won’t see as many tells as you see in a limit game, but the reliable tells you do see will be much more profitable.

Limit games: There are not many emotion-based tells in limit, because the bets are much smaller. Tells in a limit game will mostly come from lazy players who give away their honest intentions or “tricky” players who give away information with simple attempts at deception. Many limit players, even some decent ones, don’t worry about concealing their own tells because the cost of leaked information isn’t very high and because there aren’t many observant players in most games. One important point about limit: the pot is usually offering a very good price, so you should hardly ever be making a fold based on a read, unless that read is very reliable.

Pot size: Typically, the larger the pot is, the more emotional-type tells there will be. This means you shouldn’t waste a lot of mental energy trying to study how players act in small pots. It’s still possible to see some of the more passive, lazy tells, but the most valuable

information will come when you get to study how people act when they're in the more stressful situations.

Player skill: Tells are usually the easiest to spot and use when they come from mediocre players. Good players can still have tells, but they won't be as easy to spot. Good players are also capable of manipulating your perception of them and giving false tells (although this is pretty rare.) Your time will generally be better spent focusing on the patterns of your worst opponents. (One thing to note: if a player is completely brand-new to the game, to where they barely know how to play, it will be very hard to get accurate reads on them. Beginning players will not know the relative strength of their own hands, so interpreting their own estimation of their hand strength will not give you much information. An opponent has to be at a certain base level of competency in order for it to be possible for them to be reliably read.)

Emotion: A change in a player's emotions can change his natural tendencies. For example, a player who normally places his chips in the pot consistently may go on tilt and start throwing his chips forcefully into the pot in certain situations, or if he's up against a player he dislikes. Some players will become easier to read; some players will become very unpredictable and become harder to read.

The round of betting: As discussed earlier, the more well-defined a player's hand strength is in a certain situation (like when a player bets big on the river, or pushes all-in pre-flop) the more likely the chance of getting a reliable read. The more chances of draws there are, like on the flop and turn, the more a person with a strong draw, or a vulnerable made hand, will have skewed ideas about their hand strength, and the less likely it is you will get a reliable read.

II. TELLS

General Poker Psychology

Reading poker tells is primarily about sensing fear and the absence of fear (otherwise known as relaxation). Most discomfort at a poker table is a form of fear. Everything from the sheer terror of a degenerate gambler who's bluffing with his case money, to the small discomfort a decent player might feel when he continuation-bets a flop he hasn't connected with. Most of the tells I will describe in the following chapters are just variations on the theme of sensing an opponent's amount of anxiety or relaxation in specific situations.

When a player is waiting for you to bet, you are looking for clues to help you determine if he is fearful of you betting or not fearful of you betting. After someone has bet, you are trying to determine if he is fearful of being called or not fearful of being called. If you can figure out how fearful a player is, then you have probably answered the question, "What does this player want me to do in this situation?"

So what does fear look like at the poker table? Well, it can look very different, depending on the situation. I'll explain, using the two main categories I introduced in the last chapter: *waiting-for-action* and *post-bet*.

Post-bet fear

The most potentially fear-inducing situation for poker players is making a pure bluff (meaning a bluff that has a zero or nearly-zero chance of winning if called). The money being bluffed is at stake, as is the entire pot. Adding to the tension is the fact that the bluffer's opponent has an opportunity to study him after he bets. His opponent's decision might take some time, maybe even minutes, and the bluffer has to sit there and act cool under his opponent's scrutiny, all the while doing his best to not give his weakness away.

When a bluffer feels fear, it is the fear of someone afraid to be found out. The bluffer is, for all intents and purposes, lying. In some ways, he is feeling the same anxiety a guilty criminal might feel when being interrogated by the police. Now I'll contrast this fear with the fear of someone who doesn't want his opponent to bet.

Waiting-for-action fear

A player who has a weak hand, and who is waiting for his opponent to act, is more likely to feel a different type of fear. The player wants to win the pot, but his opponent might prevent him from winning the pot by betting into him. This player feels threatened by his opponent, and would prefer that his opponent didn't bet; this can be either because the waiting-for-action player wants to get a cheap showdown, or because he himself might decide to bluff. In any case, his opponent betting would be a bad thing for him.

This opponent is not under as much stress as a bluffer. And his fear is different; it is more *defensive* or *wary* than guilty. The waiting-for-action player with a weak hand can't be said to be lying, and it isn't his turn to act so he doesn't feel the pressure of being observed. He is merely threatened by his opponent, and would like to prevent a bet.

I described *post-bet fear* as being akin to the type of fear a criminal might feel when being interrogated by the police. You might describe *waiting-for-action fear* as the kind of defensive fear you might have when you're walking alone down a dark alley at night, and you see an intimidating person walking towards you.

The difference between these two types of situations is why I have separated the tells in this book into *waiting-for-action* and *post-bet*. (*During-action* is the third category, but it's not nearly as important as these two.) A player with a weak hand can exhibit very different behaviors, depending on if he's waiting for his opponent to act or if he's the one who has just bet. You should keep this in mind when reading this book and when observing tells.

GENERAL INDICATORS OF RELAXATION AND ANXIETY

Before getting to the specific tells, I'm going to describe some general indicators of anxiety and relaxation. If you know much about human behavior, a lot of the following information may seem like common sense to you. It's still helpful to review it, especially if you have never tried to apply this knowledge at the poker table.

These descriptions are general tendencies and are more likely to be true of people who have nothing to hide. Because it rewards deception, the game of poker will tend to twist these natural behaviors in various ways. But even considering this, the following descriptions will still often be very accurate indications of the emotional state, and thus the relative hand strength, of a player.

Movement and stillness

People who are anxious are more physically tense than people who are relaxed. They hold themselves tighter. They don't move as much. They are wary.

Think of a prey animal when a predator comes near. Think of a deer in a car's headlights. The natural instinct of a frightened animal is to freeze, to not attract attention. Humans are no different; the instinct is fairly hardwired.

Someone who is relaxed has a looser body. They move their arms loosely. Their gestures are flowing. They are mentally loose and this translates directly to their body movements.

Silence and talking

Anxious people are less likely to talk freely than are people who are relaxed. Just like a frightened animal goes silent in an attempt to hide from a potential threat, anxious people go silent.

People's throats literally contract when they are under stress. It becomes physically more difficult to speak. Nervous people may feel a dry, nervous swallowing reflex because their throats suddenly feel uncomfortable.

Anxious people who attempt to talk in a relaxed manner may find it difficult. They may talk a lot in an effort to appear relaxed, but their thoughts might not flow well or they may stop talking at weird moments. Anxious people avoid saying anything that could potentially offend an opponent or make an opponent suspicious.

What about relaxed people? They have the capability to talk freely, in a relaxed manner. They may feel relaxed enough to crack jokes. They may say aggressive or subtly hostile things to their opponents. They are more likely to be unconcerned with how other people view them or judge them.

Real smiling and fake smiling

People who are relaxed are more likely to exhibit genuine smiles. How can you tell a real smile from a fake smile? This is a whole complicated area of study in itself. But, in a nutshell, fake smiles don't involve the eyes nearly as much as real smiles do. Fake smiles also don't lift the corners of the mouth in the same way that real smiles do. Most people smiling to be polite, or smiling out of nervousness, have voluntary control over their mouth muscles, but they don't have control over the muscles that indicate a real smile. (Although some people are better at faking smiles than other people.)

Eye exposure

When someone is nervous, his or her eyes will tend to be open more. The whites of their eyes will be more exposed and visible.

People who are relaxed tend to have more closed eyelids; they show less eye-white.

Eye contact

This is the major area of difference between *waiting-for-action fear* and *post-bet fear*. This is due to the waiting-for-action fear being the fear of a threat, while the post-bet fear is more fear of exposure. The difference between these two types of behavior is the reason eye contact can be such an important tell. Here is how the two types of fear can manifest in a player's amount of eye contact:

Waiting-for-action eye contact: A person who is afraid of someone (like a poker player with a weak hand who is worried that his opponent will bet) will tend to watch the other person carefully. The anxious person will keep their full attention on the potential threat as much as they can (as long as watching the other person will not increase the threat, as in the case of staring at a threatening person on the street).

Keeping an eye on the potentially threatening person prevents the possibility of being attacked out-of-the-blue. It can also serve another purpose: it can let the potentially

dangerous person know that they are being watched and that they should also be on their guard.

A relaxed person who doesn't feel threatened (like a player with a strong hand who is waiting for his opponent to act) won't feel as compelled to watch the other person. His gaze is more likely to be unconcerned and unstressed. If he has the upper hand in a competitive situation, he may actually avoid eye contact with a competitor because he doesn't want to intimidate the other person.

Post-bet eye contact: People who are afraid of being exposed (e.g., bluffers) will tend to make eye contact less than people who are relaxed. Making eye contact may be uncomfortable for them because they are afraid their fear will be sensed by others and their secret will be discovered. They would prefer to not look at the people who study them.

Relaxed people (like players with strong hands) are more capable of looking at the people around them with a loose, spontaneous gaze. Their thoughts aren't on how they're perceived or who they're looking at. They don't care if they make eye contact with people who are observing them, because it doesn't much affect them.

This basic stress-related behavior informs many of the specific tells I will describe in the next sections.

You should always keep in mind that experienced poker players will have overcome many of the more instinctual emotional habits that mediocre players tend to have. When playing with players you know are experienced, you should be less likely to believe any emotion-based tells.

STUDYING RELAXATION FIRST

The best way to begin observing a player's tendencies is to first observe him when he has a strong hand and is relaxed.

Ideally, you'd be able to first watch how a player acts in a few pots when he has a big hand. This would allow you to get a sense of how that player exhibits his relaxation. For example, does he get physically loose? Does he talk more? Does he throw out his chips in an aggressive way? Knowing how a player acts when they're relaxed and not scared will let you easily see how their more anxious behavior differs.

In the real world, you don't get to choose the order in which you learn about a player's tendencies. But it's still best to use a player's behavior with a strong hand as a reference point for later comparisons.

Waiting-for-action tells: Weakness

Waiting-For-Action tells are tells that a player exhibits while he is waiting for an opponent to act. The tells in this section are waiting-for-action tells that indicate a player has a weak hand. They are in a very rough order so that the tells I consider most important are listed first.

LOOKING AT YOU

When it is your turn to act, some opponents will tend to look at you more when their hands are weak.

Many players will give away information with how much eye contact they give you when they're waiting for you to act. A player who has this type of tell will often display the following pattern:

When he has a strong hand and he's waiting for you to act, he will tend to look at you very little. He may even avoid looking at you altogether and look down at the table or across the room.

When he has a weak hand and he's waiting for you to act, he will tend to look at you more. He may even stare at you.

There are several reasons that players might display this looking-at-you tell when they are weak. Some reasons are:

An instinct to watch for danger: It's an animal's instinct to keep its eyes on something that might be a threat. Humans are no different; we want to be ready if a situation becomes dangerous. By watching you when he is weak, a player is essentially on his guard for an attack.

A defensive act: When a player is watching you, and not wanting a bet, there may be an element of, "I'm watching you carefully; you better not try anything funny." A player who exhibits this tell may also exhibit other defensive behavior in his posture or tone of voice.

A need to study an opponent: A player with a weak hand is more likely to study his opponents than if he held a strong hand. This is because strong hands are more likely to play themselves; there is less need to look for weakness in an opponent or to look for a bluffing opportunity.¹

¹*This reasoning applies to both good and bad players. Good players may study their opponents to determine the proper play. (For instance, a good player might study his opponent for a read to determine if he might be able to get away with a bluff.) Bad players will often put on an act of studying their opponents even if they don't know what they're looking for.*

If a player is looking at you when it's your turn to act, it may be for one, or more than one, of these reasons. And as pointed out earlier, these reasons don't have to be

conscious. As with many tells, this one can be a player's natural inclination, and not something they are consciously thinking through.

[The inverse of this tell is described in the chapter 'Looking Away From You.'](#) Some players with strong hands will avoid eye contact with a potential bettor. These players don't want to intimidate their opponents out of getting involved. These two tells are basically opposite sides of the same coin.



The player across the table has a weak hand and is waiting for us to act. He's staring at us in an unconscious attempt to prevent us from betting. This is a common pattern for weaker players.

Multi-way situations

Now let's take a look at how this tell can apply to multi-way situations. Let's say you're in a no-limit Hold'em game full of mostly bad players. It's pre-flop, you're on the button with $3\spadesuit 2\clubsuit$ and there've been three limps and a raise in front of you. The raise comes from a loose-aggressive player who is constantly raising pre-flop. You think it might be a good spot to make a move with your junk hand, but you'd like to get a little more information. So when the action gets to you, you pause for a couple seconds.

When you pause for a few seconds, many players will often turn to see where the action is. If you look out at the table and see that all of the players in the hand are watching you,

waiting for you to act, then you should feel better about raising—because when players are looking at you, there's a better than average chance that they have weak hands.

If, however, you've paused for a few seconds and you see that the raiser isn't looking at you and seems to be actively avoiding looking in your direction, then you might have a problem. Or if you see a player to your left is acting the same way, you might have a problem.

Once again, let me re-emphasize the importance of correlation. If you're playing with players who are consistent in their actions and don't give away anything, then the significance of this tell (or any tell) will go down drastically. For this tell (or any tell) to have much meaning, you should have correlated it with a player's past behavior in at least a few hands.

However, this tell is so common I often will still trust it in the absence of correlation, assuming I think I'm playing with fairly weak competition. I will often look for this tell when I'm contemplating an aggressive pre-flop raise. Using peripheral vision, I can usually get a sense of how many of the players at the table are looking toward me and who's looking away. If I see several people looking towards me when it's my turn to act, this will sometimes encourage me, if the situation is right, to bet with a weak hand or bluff.



The player on the far left is contemplating a bet. When you see your opponents turn to face you when it is your turn to act, they are more likely to have weak hands than strong hands. Opponents with strong hands will be less likely to look where the action is.

For players who always look at you

Some players will make an effort to look at you consistently when it's your turn to act no matter what kind of hand they have. Some of these players may still be giving away their

strength or weakness with how relaxed their eyes are. ([See the Relaxed Eyes chapter for more information.](#))

GRABBING CHIPS DEFENSIVELY

A player who acts as if he is going to call you is probably weak.

You're playing limit Hold'em. You're heads-up on the river against a mediocre player. You've got A♦ 8♦. The board is A♠ T♠ 7♣ 2♦ 3♦. You've bet the flop and the turn. From the way the hand's been played, you think it's even-money whether your opponent has a Ten or a better Ace.

You contemplate a value bet. As you do so, you play with your chips. You notice your opponent grabbing his chips as if he's ready to call your bet. This is an important clue; you know that this player, like many players, makes this intention-to-call gesture only when he is fairly weak. You bet your hand and he calls with King-Ten, which is exactly the kind of hand you expected to see.

Think about it this way: why would a player with a strong hand give you any indication that he was going to call you if you bet? This is almost always a ploy designed to slow you down and discourage a bet.



The player on the left is contemplating a bet. The player on the right is physically announcing his intention to call a bet. This will generally indicate weakness. The player may or may not actually call, depending on their personal tendencies, but there is very little chance they will be raising.

The most amateur players will hold out their chips in a very obvious way, basically stating that they're ready to call your bet. With more experienced players, the tell is more subtle than this. The more subtle variations of this tell are not an act; rather, they are an instinctual physical reaction to being threatened. Usually you'll see it as someone counting out chips kind of absent-mindedly or someone with their hand poised over their chips as if ready to pick them up. This tell can include a wide range of very subtle hand and arm movements. Once you get better at spotting this tell, you can even try to induce it by just subtly reaching for your chips and watching to see if your opponent's hand moves slightly towards his chips, or maybe lifts his chips off his stack.

Sometimes players attempting to discourage your bet in this way will fold if bet into. Sometimes they will call the bet. You should try to take note of the situation in which a player exhibits this tell. Does he display this tell when he's leaning toward folding? Or does he display it when he's leaning toward calling? Players will usually have specific tendencies in this regard. Limit players are more prone to showing this tell and following it up with an actual call. No-limit players are usually more cognizant and don't display this tell; if they do perform this tell, though, it will usually mean they will be folding to a bet, not calling.



This is the same kind of tell shown in the last picture, only more subtle. Instead of grabbing his chips in an obvious way, the player on the right is just touching his chips. These types of tells can be even more subtle than this.

One thing is pretty certain with this tell, and it's the most important point: whether a player plans to call or fold when you bet, if they're performing this tell they will virtually *never* be raising. Knowing that a player with this tell isn't going to raise will let you narrow down their hand range a lot. Not having to fear a raise also lets you feel much more comfortable when value-betting.

Post-bet version

I occasionally even see [a post-bet version of this tell](#). Someone will bet with a vulnerable hand and then hold their chips out subtly, implying that they're not afraid of more action, which usually means they don't want more action.

A hold-over from a previous betting round

Some players will perform this tell on the flop if they feel threatened. Occasionally these players will continue holding their chips defensively even as the turn comes out. If the turn helps them, it will still appear as if they are holding their chips defensively. If you weren't aware of this possibility, it might appear that the player is performing a false tell in order to fool you, when in fact he was just posed in the same position he started in. With players who stay in a stationary position like this, you have to take into account that this is a possibility, and that the new card may have helped them.

Distinguishing from pre-loading

Sometimes you will see an honest "pre-loading" of a bet, with a player stacking chips as if they're planning on calling, raising, or betting. An honest pre-loading is more likely to be exhibited in multi-way pots, usually pre-flop, when the pot is still small and people's guards are down. Pre-loading usually occurs right before a player is to act, so it's usually something only the player acting immediately before the pre-loader can spot. It may take some experience in reading the player and the situation to determine if the player is pre-loading or grabbing chips in a defensive way. [See the Pre-loading chapter for more information.](#)

INDICATING A FOLD

Players will often show their honest intention to fold pre-flop and in multi-way pots.

When the action is multi-way and when the pot is small, mediocre players are not as careful about concealing their intention to fold, because there is not much direct benefit to hiding that information. Even players who have good etiquette, and who normally wouldn't act out of turn, will frequently give away their intent to fold in multi-way pots.

This might seem like an obvious tell. I know everyone has seen players who make it obvious that they're getting ready to fold. But I don't think many people truly take advantage of this easy-to-spot information. By paying full attention to situations when the players around you are telegraphing their weakness in this way, you can give yourself much more playing room and raise or call with more hands.

Pre-flop indications of folding

Pre-flop (or the first betting round of any poker game) is as multi-way as it gets. When there's a bunch of people still in the hand, there's little direct downside for a player who

gives away his intention to fold. It should become a habit for you to watch how the players behind you are holding their cards. Some will blatantly hold their cards with their arm extended, as if they're about to toss the cards in the muck. Some people won't be that clear-cut, but will still have certain patterns that make their intentions easy to deduce.

Here's a few common patterns you might see:

- Occasionally players will let their weak cards sit out kind of far from them, as if unafraid that someone might accidentally muck them. If the cards were strong the player would probably do something to protect them, or at least position them closer.
- Some straightforward players will place a card protector on their cards if they intend to play their hand.
- Some opponents with mediocre cards will place a card protector on their cards as if to announce they're interested in the hand. Or else they'll have chips in their hand as if to indicate they're willing to call. But they won't do either of these things when they have a very strong hand. If they had a strong hand, they wouldn't want to give any indication that they're interested in playing. This means that if you see them "expressing interest" in playing, their hands are weak to medium-strength, not strong.

For many players, a little bit of observation will allow you to correlate their way of holding starting cards with their intended pre-flop action. Spend some time watching one player at a time to get a sense for how readable their actions are. Concentrate first on the player immediately to your left. Once you feel pretty comfortable with one player and what he's doing (or if you decide he's not giving anything away) move on to observing the next player.

This type of tell is usually only displayed by the weakest players. Better players will usually have a consistent way of handling their cards. But you'd be surprised how often even good players will give away their honest intentions to fold if they're distracted, bored, or tilting.

(Also, to state the obvious; some players don't look at their hole cards until it's their turn to act, so obviously this tell won't work for them.)



It's pre-flop and the player in the foreground is waiting to act. He looks at the players behind him for honest indications of folding.

Indications on later streets

In multi-way pots on later rounds, this tell is useful for different reasons. When players are in multi-way pots and they have a hand with no chance of winning, they're less likely to be thinking about outplaying or bluffing multiple players. Also, a player may be disappointed by the outcome of the hand (having missed a draw, for example) and so won't care about the usual etiquette of not revealing action out-of-turn. In both of these situations, players are more likely to be transparent in their actual intention to fold, because they don't see any immediate benefit to continuing to appear interested in the hand.

Let's say you're in a limit Hold'em pot with two other players. On the river, the first player bets. You're second to act. You pause for a moment (good things can happen when you pause a second or two) and notice the player behind you looking frustrated and gesturing to fold. Knowing he's folding means you can consider calling with more hands or raising for value or a bluff.

As a false tell

In Caro's book, he said that when you notice people readying to fold out-of-turn it is usually deception, and that they were concealing great strength. I think this may be true at very low stakes games, or maybe very infrequently with decent players who have worked at setting up this tell for a big situation. But I have practically never seen anyone pretend they were folding as a false tell. Probably the main reason is that it's just not a very useful false tell, because you can pretty much only use it once against an opponent and then they

know they can't trust your physical behavior. If you see this tell in typical games, and especially in multi-way pots, it is much more likely that a player is simply stating his intention to fold out-of-turn due to boredom or frustration or bad etiquette.

STARING AT BAD BOARD CARDS

Some players will stare at newly arrived cards when these cards do not help their hand.

In Hold'em, you'll often see players stare at the board immediately after the flop, the turn, or the river has come out. For many of them, especially beginners, this is an indicator that the cards haven't helped them. (In 7-Card Stud or other games without community cards, a player might stare at their own board.)



The turn card has just arrived and these two players continue to stare at the board. Some players will stare at the board when they haven't connected and look away from the board for a moment or two when they have connected.

A player who has this type of tell will usually have the following pattern:

- When the board cards come out and he hits a strong hand (like a set or even just top pair), he will quickly look away from the board. He may return to looking at the board fairly quickly afterward.
- When the board cards come out and he doesn't connect, he will continue staring at the board cards.

You might think that players who stare at the board when weak are actively trying to deceive their opponents by feigning interest in the cards. But I think it's more likely that most people stare at the board because it is simply the path of least resistance. It's natural to look at the new cards that have arrived, and unless there's a reason to look away (e.g., the player has hit their hand, or they want to observe the action, or they have to act), most players will continue to stare at the board.

This tell is sometimes just a lack of its related reaction: looking away quickly when a player sees cards that have hit his hand. In my opinion, the looking-away reaction is an instinctual attempt to not draw the attention of his enemies to a valuable object. ([See 'Looking away from good cards' for more information.](#))

Some people recommend *always* watching an opponent's face when new cards come. I think this is a good idea in theory, although staring at your opponents that much can have negative side effects, such as them wanting to play harder against you, or else them starting to study you more in return. If you're comfortable staring at players and are ready for some psychological warfare, go for it. Also, if you're wearing sunglasses and your opponents can't see where your eyes are looking, there's little downside to watching opponents as much as you can.

Some bad players will display this tell very consistently and it will be a very profitable tell. Most experienced players will stare at the board cards in a consistent way, whether weak or strong, because they are making an effort to be inscrutable, so this tell will not be useful against them. If you're playing against decent competition, you would be better off devoting your mental energy to other things. Once you're tuned in to this tell, you should be able to peg the players that exhibit this tell within a few minutes of sitting down with them.

Quizzical look

Sometimes a player feigning interest in the board will furrow his brow and look slightly quizzical, as if he's witnessing something interesting, or trying to figure out a math problem. This expression is usually just a variant of staring at the board and will usually indicate that the player has not connected.

STARING AT WEAK HOLE CARDS

Many players tend to stare longer at weak hole cards than they do at strong hole cards.

As noted in the previous tell, players have an inclination to look away quickly from cards that have helped, and to stare at cards that haven't helped. This tell can be especially pronounced with hole cards.

Many players will tend to glance away quickly from good hole cards. They will tend to put them down quickly as an instinct to hide their good fortune. ([See 'Looking away from good cards' for more on this.](#)) Understanding this reaction allows us to understand the opposite behavior these players exhibit when looking down at weak cards. For most

players, the longer they look at their hole cards, the less likely it is that they have a strong hand. This tell doesn't have to be extremely pronounced to be useful. Depending on the player, it might only be the difference of a few fractions of a second.

To put it simply: in a typical game of average players, if I see a player look down at his cards for the first time, and stare at them for a couple seconds, I'd say that player has a weak hand about 90% of the time. (This tell is much more meaningful than its opposite: putting cards down immediately. If I saw a player take a first glance at his hole cards and put them down immediately, in a fraction of a second, I would guess that player has a strong hand maybe a little more than 50% of the time.)

This tell is useful in all poker games. In 5-Card Draw, you can often see this tell when a player picks up his cards all at once, and stares at his hand, trying to see if anything is playable. Conversely, when he gets a big hand, he will look at the cards quickly and then put them down quickly. Or when a player draws a single card, fans his cards, and then just stares at the hand because it hasn't been helped. Or in 7-Card Stud, when a player receives his last card down and just stares at it and his board cards because he still doesn't have a hand.

Peripheral vision can help you spot this tell in most games. As the cards are dealt, you can look towards the center of the table and use peripheral vision to see who's putting cards down quickly and who's staring at their hand for a few seconds. If you see all your opponents staring at their cards for a couple seconds, you can feel more comfortable entering the pot with weaker holdings.

Many times, spotting this tell will make up my decision if I am contemplating an aggressive pre-flop raise. If I've spotted a few people who have looked at their cards for a few seconds, I know that the level of risk has decreased and that these players will likely be folding to a raise. My favorite use of this tell is in no-limit games when I've seen a player stare at his cards for a few seconds and I'm quite certain, based on previous observations, that he's weak. If this player gets involved in a pot with me, I can raise him pre-flop much more aggressively than I otherwise would.



The cards have just been dealt. The player on the left is using his peripheral vision to study how the players behind him look at their hole cards.

Home games

This tell is very helpful in Guts-style games (popular in some home games), where a player's hand is usually only two or three cards. In Guts games, players usually have to put their hands in position above the table, and then either hold onto their cards or drop their cards at the end of a countdown; this indicates if they are contesting the pot or are folding. This tell alone will let you crush these games, simply by using peripheral vision to see who's ready to play quickly and who's staring at their cards for a few seconds before being ready.

Indian poker is popular in some very friendly home games. It typically is played as a variant of a five-card stud game, except you hold up your single hole card on your forehead, so that everyone can see your hole card except you, and so that you can see everyone else's hole cards. People's tendency to look away from good hands is a very valuable tell in this game. It's often possible to tell when you hold a strong hand because your opponents will avoid looking at the card on your forehead when it's good for you, whereas they will often appear to "study" the cards of players who hold weak hands.

Indian poker and guts poker are not played at casinos and rarely played for significant stakes, but if you get a chance to play them, you will clearly see this tendency of glancing away from good cards and staring at bad cards. Observing this tell in these games where it is more obvious will help you spot this behavior when it is displayed more subtly in other, more serious games.

DEFENSIVE EXPRESSIONS AND POSTURES

A waiting opponent who has assumed a defensive posture or expression is often weak.

Similar to how a waiting-for-action opponent who doesn't want you to bet will stare at you, some players will seem physically ready to "go to war" with you. They might look at you, turn toward you, lean toward you, grab their chips, sit up straighter in their chair, scowl at you, or assume a number of other defensive poses. Their bodies will get tense and their faces will look more tough or angry, as if preparing for a confrontation.

Defensive body postures are only likely to be displayed when a player is sitting directly beside you. This is just because a player can't try to physically intimidate you when they're far away. They can stare daggers at you across the table, but they can't act out aggressive body language unless they're very close to you.

If I asked you to look tough or angry, what facial expressions come to mind? One way to do this would be to harden your lips, making them smaller and slightly jutting, and to lower your eyebrows. Your opponents will sometimes unconsciously assume varying degrees of this expression when they are weak and trying to discourage a bet.¹

¹A note: Be sure to look for the furrowed brow (which can be subtle) that goes along with the pursed lips. This is because lightly pursed lips by themselves can mean something completely opposite. Try this: raise your eyebrows and purse your lips. What does that feel like? It might feel like you're trying to hide something or get away with something. It's possible that if you witness the pursed lips without the lowered eyebrows you are actually seeing a player with a good hand trying to be coy.

This tell can be used similarly to [the grabbing-chips tell](#). A player performing this tell may have a hand he will call with, but he is most probably in defensive mode and would prefer a check. Almost certainly he will not be raising you. In a no-limit situation, if I had a weak hand and I spotted a player acting this way on the flop, I would probably bet into him, thinking a call is possible. If he calls, and has the same posture on the turn (and assuming the player isn't a calling station), I'd bet again, expecting a fold.

Spotting this tell can also be useful for making thin value bets. If you spot this tell on the river, you can bet some hands you might usually check.



The player on the left has checked. He has a defensive, angry face. This waiting-for-action tell will indicate weakness for many players.

SHUFFLING CARDS

A player who does a one-handed shuffle with his cards against the table (after having looked at them) is probably weak.

I see this tell a lot pre-flop in Hold'em. Players do a one-handed shuffle of their cards when they are planning on folding. I think it's probably just a nervous release of energy—something to do while you wait to fold. Think of it this way; a player with a good hand will generally not want to draw attention to himself at all, even in such a small way.

I find myself doing this one a lot; that's how I initially came to notice it in other people.

FAKE SMILES

A player who is feeling uncomfortable will not usually smile genuinely.

If you're in a significant pot and a player doesn't want you to bet, he will be unlikely to exhibit a real smile. [Go to 'Fake Smiles' for more about differentiating between real and fake smiles.](#)

EXCLAMATIONS ABOUT BOARD CARDS

A player who makes a spontaneous exclamation about board cards is very unlikely to have connected very well with those cards.

When it's a multi-way pot, and a flop comes out with something like **K♦ Q♦ J♦** or the turn puts three of a kind on the board, you will sometimes hear someone in the hand make some sort of instant exclamation, like "whoa", or an impressed whistle, or something like that. Or maybe the flop comes up 6-6-x, and someone laughs and says, "Sixes again? Sixes are hot tonight!"

In my experience, 95% of the time, a player who makes a sudden, spontaneous exclamation like this will not have connected with the board in a significant way. They may have a good hand, but they won't have the trips, or the set, or the quads, or the flopped flush, or whatever the super-strong hand would be in the situation.

This tell is surprisingly accurate, even for higher-stakes games where you would think the tell is so obvious that players would be more careful. In low-limit games, it is very useful. I can really only remember a couple times in all my years of playing where a player who made a quick exclamation about the board actually showed up with the goods.

Think about it this way: players who actually connect hard with the board will not want to draw attention to themselves. When someone suddenly stumbles across a super-strong hand, his natural, immediate instinct is to stay quiet and hide that information from others.

Again, this tell is typically useful only in multi-way pots. Players in multi-way pots are more likely to have their guards down, and more likely to make comments about the game. In heads-up situations, players are more buckled down and try not to give anything away.

Waiting-for-action tells: Strength

Waiting-for-action tells refer to those tells that a player exhibits while he is waiting for an opponent to act. The tells in this section are waiting-for-action tells that indicate a player has a strong hand. They are in a very rough order so that the tells I consider most important are listed first.

LOOKING AWAY FROM YOU

Some players with good cards will tend to look away from you when it is your turn to act.

It's a no-limit Hold'em cash game. You have **K♦ K♠**.

You raise pre-flop and get one caller: a fairly tight player who you've been reading very well.

The flop comes **Q♠ T♦ 2♣**

Your opponent displays his typical sign of weakness by staring at you while you wait to act. ([See 'Looking at you' for more on that tell.](#)) You bet and he calls. You wouldn't think he would exhibit the staring-at-you tell so much if he hit a Queen, so you put him on a Ten, a pair of Jacks, or a Broadway straight draw.

The turn puts another Ten out there, so the board reads **Q♠ T♦ 2♣ T♠**.

As your opponent waits for you to act, you see him behaving differently; instead of staring at you, now he is looking down at the table, and occasionally glancing toward the television in the corner. You have been in this same spot several times with this opponent and you know what it means; he's hit his hand. In this case, he hit trip Tens. You know if you bet you're getting raised. You check to him and fold to his bet.

Some players, when they hold strong hands, will tend to avoid looking at their opponent. There are two basic reasons for this:

They don't want to intimidate their opponent: Many players with good hands don't want to potentially scare an opponent out of the pot, or prevent an opponent from betting. They want to appear as innocuous as possible in the hopes that their opponent will decide to shove some chips towards them. (This can be an instinctual behavior or a conscious behavior.)

They have less reason to study their opponent: A player with a strong "no-brainer" hand has less incentive to actually pay attention to his opponent. Players, even good ones, are less likely to study their opponents when they hold a really strong hand that plays itself.



You are contemplating a bet. This man, your opponent, is looking completely away from you, seemingly unconcerned. For many players, this will be an indication of strength.

You will see this tell displayed in varying degrees of subtlety. On the more obvious side, a player will look very far away from you and refuse to even meet your eyes. I've seen some players reposition their bodies in their chair just so they could more easily look in a far-away direction. Sometimes it'll appear that something across the room has caught

your opponent's eye, and the current hand is the last thing on his mind. Sometimes he might look in your direction, but not directly at you: maybe to the side of your head, or above your head, or down at the table. Sometimes the player may even seem to be looking at you but will have a faraway, thousand-yard stare. As with all tells, you'll have to see how this general tendency plays out in specific people. The primary thing to look for is a lack of eye contact.

This is a good place to remind you that this tell will only be true of some players. Without correlation beforehand for a specific player, you should not trust this tell. Some players who are waiting for you to act will always look at you in a consistent way. Some players will be more likely to stare at you when they have good hands. As always, correlation is key.

LOOKING DISAPPOINTED

Some players with good hands will tend to look somewhat disappointed with the situation.

Like most tells, this one can vary greatly in subtlety. You will see the extremely obvious acts of players who will shake their head and [exhibit Caro's poker clack](#) with a disgusted look on their face. And you will see players whose actions are less an act and much more subtle; they look slightly disappointed, they wear a slight frown, they slump their shoulders a little bit.

Often, a player will subtly slouch his shoulders and lower his head; this can be an instinct to appear smaller and less threatening. This is an important postural change to recognize because it is common to see when a player holds a strong hand. Their height may shrink by a couple inches. Their shoulders might move inward slightly, making their chest appear smaller. They will have a vibe you would consider slightly dejected.

It can be difficult to judge the nuances of a person's expressions in the heat of battle. One way to objectively judge someone's general "vibe" is to imagine what you would think of that person's expression if you were to see them in other situations; for instance, if you saw them walking down the street or sitting in a coffee shop. This kind of distancing can help you reach a better decision about what kind of a demeanor they are projecting.

You should also keep in mind what a player's baseline expression is; some people just have a naturally sad or angry look.

Disappointed faces

Try this facial expression—stretch your lips outward and slightly downward on both sides, which will stretch your lips thin. Now shake your head and imagine that you just heard your poker friend tell you he got busted out on the bubble of a huge tournament, and think to yourself, "That's too bad." You will find that your eyebrows probably lower

a bit, too. This stretched-out mouth expression is one that will appear in varying degrees when a player wants to appear weak.



This player is waiting for his opponent to act. He looks vaguely disappointed or maybe saddened by the situation. For many players, this will indicate strength (assuming they don't usually act like that).

Acting vs. not acting

Caro classified this type of tell as a “tell from an actor”, but, as I said earlier, I think that that’s a simplification. I have caught myself exhibiting this type of tell (and others) when I was trying my best to not give away information, so I know that these tells aren’t necessarily conscious attempts at acting.

Think of a predatory animal making itself smaller to avoid detection. A poker player with a big hand displays similar behavior by making himself smaller and less threatening when he is trying to catch his “prey.” A bit dramatic, maybe, but I think it’s a similar concept: it’s behavior that is more instinctual than conscious.

Honest expressions of disappointment

Inexperienced players will sometimes be telling the truth when they look disappointed. This is more likely to occur in multi-way pots. ([See ‘Indicating a Fold’ for more about multi-way situations.](#)) It is also more likely to occur when a player has low morale. In both of these situations, a player is not as worried about concealing the weakness of his hand because he has given up on any chance of winning that particular hand. But the

higher the stakes you're playing, the more careful you have to be that someone is not tricking you with an elaborate act.

LOOKING AWAY FROM GOOD CARDS

Some players will tend to immediately glance away from cards that have helped them.

When new cards come that help their hand, some opponents react with an immediate involuntary movement of their eyes away from those cards.

Ever see the movie *Blood Diamond*? There's a scene where the African guy who's been forced to mine diamonds suddenly spots a huge diamond in the river, right there at his feet. He knows that everyone around him would want to have that diamond, and he wants to get it for himself. What would be your first instinct in a situation like that if you were him? Your first instinct is to look away from the diamond in the hopes that nobody's attention is drawn to where you're looking. It's a natural instinct to hide your interest when your interest will make your enemies interested. So it's understandable that players instinctually try to conceal that they have gotten help from the board.

Board cards

Some players will immediately look away from a good board, but then make an effort to look back at it. Sometimes you will notice that these players have a kind of distant, unfocused expression when they look at the board, kind of like they were looking past it. This is because they are only pretending to look at the flop, while their actual attention is elsewhere, possibly on you or another opponent, hoping you'll bet.

Hole cards

As mentioned in a previous chapter, the same tell can be true for hole cards. Sometimes, bad players will put their hole cards down very quickly (as in a fraction of a second) when they see a strong hand. This tell is true generally for very weak players. Even when present it can be quite subtle, and might only be the difference of a few fractions of a second. (Conversely, players who stare at their cards for a second or two are likely to be weak, and that is a far more powerful indicator than this tell is. [See 'Staring at weak hole cards' for more information.](#))

PRE-LOADING CHIPS

Players will sometimes show their honest intention to bet, raise, or call pre-flop and in multi-way pots.

Just like some players give away their honest intention to fold, some players give away their intention to bet or raise. When the action is multi-way, especially pre-flop, and when the pot is small, some players are not careful about concealing their intention to bet or raise, because there is not much direct benefit to hiding that information.

You can usually spot this tell by pausing a second or so before acting and watching the player or players immediately behind you. If you see someone stacking up their chips in a subtle way, and you have already correlated this player's behavior in such a situation to mean he is readying a bet, you can take that into account.

It's important to keep in mind that this tell is more likely to be displayed in multi-way pots. With heads-up or even three-way pots, players will be less likely to reveal this information, because players typically give away less information in short-handed situations. In heads-up or three-way pots, if you see someone grabbing their chips out of turn, it is more likely they are grabbing chips defensively, and giving away their weakness ([see 'Grabbing chips defensively' for more information](#)). The more multi-way the pot is (especially pre-flop, because that is the most multi-way street), the more likely it is that a player is giving away his true intentions to participate in the pot. There will usually be a difference of subtlety between the two types of actions; the defensive chip-grabbing will be more ostentatious, whereas the pre-loading of a bet will be more subtle and less obvious.

I don't think many people truly take advantage of this information. By taking a couple extra seconds, and by paying full attention to situations when the players around you are giving away their intention to play, you can gain valuable information.

REAL SMILES

A player who is feeling uncomfortable will not usually smile genuinely.

If you're in a significant pot, and a player isn't afraid of your bet, he will be more likely to exhibit a real smile. [Go to 'Fake smiles' for more about differentiating between real and fake smiles.](#)

ACTING STRANGELY EARLY IN A HAND

If a player is acting "strangely" in the early stages of a hand, before there's much at stake, it often indicates strength.

Many of the previous tells in this section are examples of players "acting strangely" in various ways. "Acting strangely" is a relative term; it means someone doing something that is out-of-the-ordinary for them. So, for example, a player who usually looks focused may look down at pocket Aces and then look across the room, as if distracted. Or a player

who is usually quite stoic may hit trips on the flop and get a very sad look on his face. Or a player who is in the middle of telling a story may hit trips and get suddenly quiet.

When you notice behavior that is unusual very early on in a hand when there hasn't been much action, it should get your attention. Many players would be able to maintain more of a poker face, or hide their emotions better, if the pot was more substantial. But the fact that it is early in a hand and there isn't much at stake can result in their defenses being lowered and allow more information to slip through.

This type of tell is more common in multi-way pots, especially pre-flop, because players who are heads-up are more cognizant of not trying to give anything away. Multi-way pots result in players' guards being lower than normal.

A common situation in which you might see this kind of behavior is when it hasn't been raised pre-flop (so the pot is small and multi-way) and the flop comes with a pair. A player might suddenly look kind of sheepish, or suddenly look down at his lap, or get quiet. Don't make the mistake of seeing someone act suspiciously early in a hand and jump to the conclusion it's because they're bluffing; a more likely conclusion is that they've got a big hand.

RELAXED EYES

How relaxed a player's eyes are can sometimes reveal how relaxed he is.

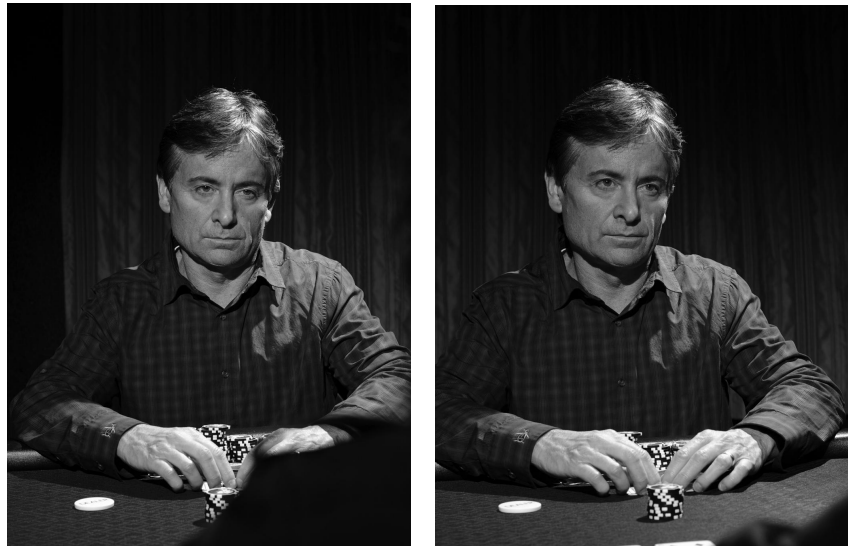
As has been said a few times, many players, when holding a weak hand and waiting for their opponent to act, will stare at their opponent. But some players will make a consistent effort to look at their opponent, no matter how strong or weak their hand is. Is there a way to read these players? There's one major way that players in this situation can give away information, and it involves how relaxed their eyes are.

Let's say you're in a no-limit Hold'em game, and you're heads up on the turn with a decent player. You've raised pre-flop and bet the flop. All you've got is AQ for over-cards. Now the turn comes; a K, which is a blank for you but possibly a good scare card.

As you contemplate a bet, your opponent stares at you intently. He often stares at you in these spots. The first few times you played with him, you didn't think there was any information to be had from him in these situations, because he was so consistent in his actions. But there have been a couple times lately when you've been able to correlate a certain relaxation of his eyes with better-than-average strength. You look at him now and notice that his eyes are kind of at half-mast. You think back to when you've seen him waiting for you to act when he had a weak hand and didn't want you to bet; his eyes in that situation were more wide, more alert.

Thinking about all of this, you decide to check to him instead. He makes a decent bet and you fold. You offer him ten bucks to see his hand. He obliges, showing the KQ for top pair on the turn. You add this information to your mental database.

The primary thing to notice about someone's eyes is usually the eyelids and how exposed the whites of the eyes are. Tension and anxiety tend to make a person's eyes open more than when that person is relaxed. The eyes of someone who's relaxed will tend to be more closed, with less eyeball exposed. (This is also true of some animals. Cats supposedly communicate friendship to other cats by looking at each other and slowly lowering their eyelids. Doing this indicates that they are comfortable and don't pose a threat.)



This man is waiting for his opponent to act. In the photo on the left, his eyes are more closed, indicating greater relaxation and therefore greater possibility of high hand strength. In the photo on the right, his eyes are more alert and aware, indicating greater anxiety and therefore greater likelihood of a weak hand.

The speed of eye movement is another thing to correlate. A relaxed opponent is more likely to have eyes that move around freely, because his general relaxed body language also applies to his eye muscles. An anxious opponent, as we know, is generally more tensed up and still, and this behavior often applies to a player's eyes. An anxious opponent may have a more frozen, self-conscious gaze, with more control over his eye movements. This kind of thing can be very subtle and is admittedly hard to spot.

You also might study their blinking tendencies. Some relaxed opponents will tend to blink more; some will tend to blink less. In my experience, reduced blinking is more likely to mean someone with a weak hand and increased blinking is more likely to mean a strong hand. (Increased blinking has been linked with lying in some studies, but in my opinion studies having to do with lying and interrogation are often very unrelated to how poker players behave, just because the motivations and emotions involved are so different.)

A relaxed person can behave many different ways, because they are relaxed and not worried about how they appear. For example, their eyes might move around more when they're relaxed, but then again they might not. Their eyes might blink more, but they

might not. Being relaxed includes a larger set of behaviors than does being anxious, because being relaxed allows for more room to behave different ways, whereas being anxious usually results in narrowing a set of behaviors to a smaller range.

The main thing you'll need to do (as with most situations) is to compare how the opponent stares at you in this waiting-for-action situation when he's weak compared to when he's strong. You may notice that when he's weak, his eyes don't swivel around as loosely as when he's strong, or that he doesn't blink much, or that his eyes get slightly wider. Then you need to compare that information to the next time you're in the same spot with him, and maybe you'll notice a difference. Or if you don't notice a difference, you will stop looking for that tell and focus on other things.

GLANCING AT CHIPS

Some players who help their hand will tend to quickly glance down at their chips.

The gist of this one is that a player who has helped his hand immediately glances down at his chips. This is an immediate reaction from a player who realizes he has a good hand and then looks to check on his potential profit by seeing how many chips he is able to put into play.

According to Mike Caro, who emphasized its importance, it's not a conscious action, just an unaware, instinctual reaction that many players seem to have.

I think this tell is useful only in the lowest stakes games. It's worth mentioning, but you won't see it much; that's why I put it last in this section. In my opinion, a player has to be pretty new to the game, and still very easily excited by good cards, to exhibit this tell.

During-Action tells

During-action tells are tells that occur from the moment it becomes a player's turn to act, until the moment the player completes their action.

During-action tells can include: the length of time it takes to bet (these types of tells are called bet-timing tells), the betting motion itself, and any verbal or physical behaviors that accompany an opponent's bet, check, or call.

This chapter is not broken up into strong or weak like the other chapters.

BET-TIMING

The length of time it takes a player to act can be a result of many factors.

The length of time spent on completing an action is much more likely to be truthful in limit than it is in no-limit. In limit poker you won't see physical and verbal deception very often because, in the fixed-limit format, it just doesn't pay to spend a lot of time trying to deceive your opponents. Decisions come fast and furious, with each individual decision being much less important than any similar decision in no-limit.

In limit, immediate bets or raises (and by immediate, I mean occurring in a half-second or less) are very likely to represent very easy decisions, and very easy decisions usually indicate good hands. You will not often see someone bluff immediately when the river comes (although most people will usually bluff within a couple seconds).

Also, in limit, long pauses will usually represent genuinely difficult decisions. Most regular players will not spend a long time acting as if a decision is hard when it is not; this is because they don't want to antagonize people by slowing up the game. Plus, the usefulness of deception is greatly reduced in limit because the bets and pots are smaller. (But if the amount of a single bet is meaningful to a player, his actions will more likely approach the tell behavior seen in no-limit. An example of this would be limit at nosebleed stakes, like the Andy Beal matches¹.)

¹Andy Beal is a Texas multimillionaire businessman who challenged a group of the best poker players in the world (Jen Harman, Barry Greenstein, and Phil Ivey, to name a few) to heads-up limit Hold'em battles. Some of these games were played as high as \$50,000/\$100,000 – still the highest limit games ever played. Read the book “The Professor, The Banker, and the Suicide King” by Michael Craig for a great telling of this story.

In no-limit, it is much more common for behavioral deception to take place, because each individual decision is so important. It is much more common in no-limit to see actions mean the opposite of what a superficial interpretation of the situation would indicate. A complete novice to poker (and to deception) might infer that a quick bet means strength and a bet that takes a long time means weakness or indecision. But in no-limit, where there is more value to deception, mediocre players are more prone to bet rather quickly when bluffing and to take a longer time when value betting. Good players, on the other hand, will disguise their hand strength by balancing the length of time it takes them to act.

Of course, all of that is a very simplified explanation. Bet-timing can vary greatly in any game, at any stake. There are just so many different situations, and so many different player tendencies. Also, bet-timing tells are one of the more consciously controlled behaviors, which means there will be more “acting” and therefore a lot more complexity and confusion. To illustrate some of the complexity in this area, here are a few examples of tendencies you might see in some players.

- You might have a player who often takes a long time before he checks when he has a weak hand. He is giving the impression (either consciously or unconsciously) that he has things to consider and might have a hand that warrants a call.

- You might have another player who, when he checks, always checks quickly, whether his hand is strong or weak. He doesn't want to give anything away about his hand so he strives to equalize his behavior, even if that means not thinking that long about his decision.
- You might have another (more tricky) player who, when he holds a strong hand, will often wait a long time before checking, in an attempt to induce action from an opponent who he hopes will read him as weak for doing that. (This is an example of a false tell.)

This gives a very quick glimpse of some of the complexity when it comes to bet-timing tells. And these examples were only talking about checks. Factor in bets, raises, re-raises, different positions, and multi-way pots, and you've obviously got massive behavioral complexity.

The best advice I can give is that correlation and consistent observation will help you make sense of some of these things. Just know that it is a complicated area, so don't be discouraged if you don't make quick progress.

The most important thing to consider is a player's known playing style and their motivations in the hand. A player will sometimes purposefully take a certain length of time during their turn-to-act, based on what they are trying to accomplish in the hand. So the first thing to ask yourself is, "What are they trying to accomplish by acting quickly or by taking a long time?"

The following sections include some general observations about bet-timing. This advice will apply primarily to no-limit games, though some of it will also apply to limit. As stated, though, limit betting is generally quick, with less information to be gained from these type of tells.

Speed of Checking

In no-limit Hold'em, it is a common strategy for the pre-flop raiser to follow up his pre-flop raise with a bet on the flop. (This is known as a *continuation bet*.) Some opponents who hold strong hands will check quickly to the pre-flop raiser, because they don't want to prevent the pre-flop raiser's natural inclination to fire a continuation bet. They don't want to arouse suspicion by taking too long to check.

Most average players who hold mediocre or weak hands will take a few seconds to check to a pre-flop raiser in significant pots. If you're the pre-flop raiser and you're heads-up with an average player who usually takes a few seconds to check to you, and now he has checked quickly to you, this should make you wary. ("Quickly" in this case is relative, depending on how fast the player usually acts. It might be anywhere from one second to five seconds, depending on what's normal for that player.)

A quick check from a player who is last to act is not as worrisome. Often the player last to act is just grateful to have gotten a free card and isn't thinking too much about his image or how his actions may be interpreted.

Your average player who is last-to-act and takes a long time to check is similar to the first-to-act player who does the same thing; he is probably weak. This player often wants his opponent(s) to think he was considering a bet but changed his mind.

When combined with other tells, bet-timing tells can be very revealing. Let's say it's a pretty substantial heads-up pot and the turn card has just arrived. Your opponent stares at you while it's your turn to bet (which we already know is a sign of weakness for some people). You check to him and then he takes a long time to check. While neither of these tells might be very powerful on their own, when combined they point to a fairly high likelihood that this player has a weak hand.

Or let's say instead that this player is first to act and has checked to you quickly when the turn comes, which is a bit out-of-character for him. You study him; he doesn't look at you; his gaze is focused on the table. These two factors (his speed in checking and his demeanor) might make it more probable he's hit a big hand.

Speed of Calling

In big-bet games, a player who calls a significant bet quickly is often giving away a lot of information. Calling a bet quickly means that the player has ruled out a raise as the best strategy and done so quickly. (In most games, a "quick" call will be around three seconds or less, but of course this is relative and will vary based on the normal speed of a specific game and the speed of a specific player.)

An immediate call usually limits a player's hand range to either extremely strong or to a moderately strong hand. An immediate call will usually eliminate hands like two-pair or top pair, good kicker from their range. With these types of hands a player is more likely to take time to consider a raise, because their hand is vulnerable. If the board is very draw-heavy, an immediate call could eliminate hands as strong as a set, a straight, or a flush, just because the more draws there are possible the more vulnerable even strong hands become. Same idea with really bad hands, like third pair or if a player was floating; with bad hands, you'd expect the player to give a few seconds thought before calling.

In my experience, an immediate call is usually a drawing hand with obvious value, like a high flush draw or a straight draw with two overs, or a hand like top pair with a vulnerable kicker. Something where the value is obviously apparent. Or else it's a hand like top pair, good kicker, where the player knows they aren't folding that to you but also knows he won't be raising.

The immediate call will sometimes be a very strong hand that is clearly invulnerable (e.g., a set on a very dry board, or a flopped full house) but this is fairly rare. Most people with a very strong hand are going to at least consider a raise for a couple seconds, even if they will almost always be slowplaying the hand. Another factor is: these players usually won't want to draw attention to themselves by calling abnormally quickly; they'll often want to think for a couple seconds.

A quick call can also be interpreted as a defensive tell, because the player calling is basically saying, "I'm not going anywhere; I've got a good hand that I don't even need to think about calling with." So we would expect a player expressing strength in that way to be vulnerable.

All of these factors mean that when I'm playing with someone who calls a significant bet quickly, and I'm weak myself, I start thinking about my chances of a pulling off a bluff.

Betting Immediately and Taking a Long Time to Bet

When it's a player's turn to act, you might be able to get some information about his hand by how soon he bets or by how long it takes him to bet. The more significant a bet it is, the more meaningful these bet-timing tells can be.

In no-limit games, there will tend to be a "normal" time frame for how long it takes to bet; in other words, a length of time that is not out-of-the-ordinary. In a small stakes no-limit game, the players might bet or raise very soon after it is their turn to act, and that would be normal. In a high-stakes game or a big buy-in tournament, players might regularly take a minute or more to make a decision, and that would be normal. This means that only the extremes of bet-timing are going to be useful for gaining information. The two extremes are:

- *Betting or raising immediately (generally a second or less for most games)*
- *Taking a very long time to bet or raise*

Both of these behaviors are by definition not "normal." This is why if you see a player making a significant bet immediately or taking a very long time, it is unlikely to be a bluff. Because these behaviors could be considered strange, a bluffer instinctually will not want to do them.

Most bluffers instinctively feel that betting immediately might arouse an opponent's suspicion. Betting immediately can be seen as an aggressive, challenging statement to another player, communicating something like "I don't even have to think about this decision against you." Most bluffers avoid such behavior, because that kind of behavior makes an opponent want to figure out "why is he betting so quickly?" From a bluffing perspective, it's much better to wait a couple seconds and then bet. A bet that takes a couple of seconds still communicates strength and confidence, but doesn't attract much attention.

In the same way, most players feel that taking a really long time might make an opponent think that they are considering a bluff. The gut instinct of your average bluffer is to appear as normal as he can, and to bet within a normal time frame. (And this is despite the fact that good players will be more likely to give a player credit for a big hand if that player bets immediately or takes a long time to bet.)

For example, if I make a turn bet and a player raises me in less than a second, I'm thinking there's almost no chance I'm being bluffed. Similarly, if a player takes a whole minute to make a large bet on the river, and that player usually takes 15 seconds to act in such a spot, I'm going to respect that bet more than average.

If someone has a reliable bet-timing tell, the tell will probably only be useful in significant spots. Less-important decisions are less likely to be correlated with meaningful tells. So if a player makes a small continuation-bet on the flop and bets

immediately, I'm less likely to assign that much meaning because the player can be comfortable with a wide range of hands, because there's not much at stake yet. In other words, the player isn't yet afraid of seeming "strange" to me.

It's important to remember that bet-timing, because it's consciously controlled, can vary greatly. Good players will generally not have bet-timing tells, but they are also capable of using them purposefully as false tells. You should discount the usefulness of these tells against good players.

Betting immediately as a bluff

An immediate, significant bet will sometimes be a bluff. One spot you will often see this is when a player has bluffed or semi-bluffed previous streets and has "painted himself into a corner" on the river so that he feels "forced" to bluff.

For example, a pre-flop raiser might continuation-bet the flop quickly, semi-bluff the turn quickly, and fire out an immediate river bluff. This is a common pattern for bad players who want to appear confident and who aren't conscious of how their actions appear to others. If you notice this pattern it might clue you into a bluff.

This leads us to another factor in bet-timing tells; how hard the board is to read. In most significant spots, an immediate bet is unusual whether a player is first to act or not. But an immediate bet is even stranger if it comes soon after new board cards have arrived. Most players need at least a few seconds to absorb how the new card or cards have changed the game.

For example, let's say you're heads-up in a big pot going into the river, and your opponent is first to act. The river comes and your opponent bets out immediately, without even seeming to consider the board. That is definitely much more "strange" a behavior than if you had been first to act and he had bet immediately after you had checked, because he would have had more time to think about his decision.

Some boards are really easy to read, even when a new card arrives. For example, a player who's been betting his flush draw the whole way and then makes it on the river doesn't need to think about his bet. He's made his hand and he is capable of betting immediately. Same with a player who's flopped a set; there's usually not too many turns or rivers that will make him second-guess a bet, so he is also capable of betting immediately.

Other situations require at least a few seconds thought from most players. If a player is betting an overpair the whole way and a four-straight comes on the river, he'll probably have to think for a few seconds about his action. Or if he backdoors a medium-strength flush, he'll probably have to think for a little bit.

The complexity of the board is another factor you can use in trying to distinguish a bluff from a value-bet. Mostly, I would use it in context with the pattern mentioned earlier, where a player has bet multiple streets and is in a spot where he could feel compelled to bet the river.

For example, let's say you're in a pot with a weak opponent who has raised pre-flop and bet the flop and turn. If a four-straight comes on the river and he fires out a large bet

immediately without even seeming to think about how this card might have hit your hand, this is one clue that he is bluffing.

To sum up, most of the time, significant immediate bets will indicate strength. Sometimes it will be a bluff, but usually only when a weak player has “painted himself into a corner.”

BETTING MOTIONS

Betting motions refer to how a player puts his money into the pot when betting or raising. Does a player stack his chips carefully and push them forward slowly? Does he push them forward kind of aggressively, with some forward motion? Are there any little flourishes he does with his hand when he bets?

There are many ways a person can bet. The most important thing to notice is how forcefully a person pushes chips forward. You want to try to memorize as much as you can about an opponent’s betting movements so that, after the hand’s over, you can match it up with what that player had.

Keep in mind that the hand movements I’m talking about are very subtle. We are not talking very exaggerated movements (those will be addressed in the following section.) We are not talking someone who’s throwing chips across the table. We are talking about somewhat decent opponents who are making an effort to be consistent in their betting movements. We are talking mostly unconscious movements. These subtle movements can take a good amount of careful observation to tune into and notice but once spotted they can be very valuable.

There can be multiple factors influencing how forcefully a player bets. Mike Caro said, in short, that people who throw their chips into the pot forcefully are trying to appear strong and so are actually weak, and vice versa. This was one of his major examples of ‘weak means strong; strong means weak’. The reality, though, is much more complex than that. The first important thing to realize is that, for the people that exhibit these types of tells, they will have one of two basic tendencies.

Tendency #1: Betting forcefully when bluffing; betting more gently when value-betting

Some opponents, if you watch their hands carefully when they are betting, throw their bluffs and semi-bluff bets into the pot with a little more force than when they are betting a good hand. This can be very subtle; it might just involve a slightly faster flick of the wrist when betting. Their chips may travel across the table a bit further. Or their hands may move upward slightly after they release their chips. Or they may cut their chips out with a bit more of a flourish.

The basic psychology behind this is Caro’s ‘weak means strong’ idea; these players desire (for the most part unconsciously) to appear confident when they are bluffing, so they instinctively opt for a bit more forcefulness/quickness when they are betting weak.

Conversely, when they are betting a strong hand, they instinctively don't want to arouse suspicion and so bet more gently and slowly.

Tendency #2 – Betting forcefully when value-betting; betting more gently when bluffing

Some players will behave in the opposite way. These players will make slightly more forceful betting movements when they've got a strong hand. These players get more relaxed when they have a good hand, which makes them more physically loose and animated. They bet a little harder as a release of psychological energy, maybe as a result of anxiety being removed.

Conversely, when they're bluffing, their betting motions will be more leisurely and calm. They instinctively bet gently when bluffing because they don't want to arouse someone's attention, or else they want to appear more in-control and hence strong.

Differentiating these tendencies

These two tendencies just described are opposite of each other, and yet they are understandable at a psychological level. A gentle betting motion is easy to imagine as either a wish to not attract attention (a bluff) or a wish to conceal strength (a value bet). A forceful betting motion is easy to imagine as either an attempt to communicate confidence (a bluff) or an attempt to attract attention and action (a value bet).

Because these opposite tendencies both make sense but are mutually exclusive, it might make you wonder: what good are they? These tells are useful because many players will have one of these tendencies and not the other. My observation is that the second tendency is more common; if a player has a betting motion tell, he will be more likely to bet slightly more forcefully when value-betting than when he is bluffing.

(My thoughts on this differ from Mike Caro's. In his book he says that a forceful bet is more likely to be a bluff. I think he says this because he is mostly describing low stakes players who are more likely to be consciously putting on an act. In my experience, the behavior of regular poker players will be much more subtle and can vary greatly.)

Getting reliable reads on people using this kind of tell is not easy. Keep in mind we are talking mostly subtle hand movement. If you can't fairly quickly see who is exhibiting these types of tells, then it's best not to concentrate on them. Experienced players will usually put their chips in the pot consistently, and you should notice that about them, and realize it's not worth your time to observe their betting movements. But if you notice a player whose betting movements vary a lot from one spot to the next, then that might mean he has tendencies that are worth observing.

Other betting movement observations

Here are some related betting motions you can study when a player bets or raises:

- *How far forward does he push his chips into the pot?*

- *How far does his arm extend outward when he bets?*
- *Does he keep his arm bent or does he extend it completely?*
- *How does he arrange his chips when betting?*

Mike Caro pointed out that bluffers are more likely to bet with their arms straight out. I don't know whether this is true for most players, but I do know it's something that some players are prone to do. All of the aforementioned observations are things I will occasionally try to correlate, but I don't start out with any preconceived notions, just because I haven't noticed that there are any tendencies that apply to a lot of players. (It's also possible that I don't study these tells as much as I study other types of tells, and my information is deficient in this area. I welcome any feedback.)

EXAGGERATED BETTING ACTIONS (STRONG MEANS STRONG)

The previous section dealt with rather subtle hand movements that were mostly unconscious. Now I'll address the very forceful bets you will occasionally see players make. This kind of exaggerated behavior could be grouped under "strange behavior", and strange behavior as a whole is usually indicative of a strong hand. ([See 'Acting strangely' for more information.](#))

One of the common misconceptions about poker tells is that players who bet with a lot of physical force are betting this way to cover up a bluff. This idea has become part of popular poker knowledge; you can find it repeated a lot on the Internet and in poker tell books and articles.

In general, I think Caro's strong-means-weak concepts are correct, but this is one of those cases where it has been misapplied. While there are some rare people who put on an aggressive demeanor when bluffing, this is far from the norm. Most people who bet in an aggressive, ostentatious, or "strange" manner are value-betting, not bluffing.

I'm referring to actions like shoving chips into the pot very hard, or throwing chips towards a specific opponent, or staring down an opponent when betting, or performing any ostentatious or over-the-top behavior that is out-of-the-ordinary for that player.

Bluffers want a potential caller to go away. For the most part, they don't want to do anything strange that could arouse their opponent's interest. This is true for almost everyone, regardless of skill level. Bad players are naturally reserved and restrained when bluffing, because they are anxious about getting called. Better players, while they are less anxious and are capable of being physically looser, know that the best course of action is to act calm and normal when bluffing, so as not to give an opponent a reason to call, even if it's a false reason. (Good players will generally act consistently calm in all bluffing situations but, like all players, if they are throwing chips in forcefully or otherwise acting weird, they are more likely to have a good hand.)

For many average players, having a good hand is a big psychological release for them. It means they are free to get a little creative and crazy, to throw some chips around a little

harder, to try to psych out their opponents with some table talk. These kinds of players will sometimes throw their bets in forcefully when they have made their hand. Or they might “talk shit” when they are strong. For many of your opponents, appearing strong in these ways will actually mean they are strong.

For these reasons, when you see a player betting in an ostentatious manner, you should be cautious. For example, if you see a guy fire his chips halfway across the table, you should be aware that this guy is probably not bluffing. Or if you see a guy reaching for just a few chips to make a small bet, and then seemingly change his mind and throw a bunch of chips in, that’s probably a strong hand. If a guy bets into you while staring you down and giving you the middle finger, he is almost certainly not bluffing.

Differentiating subtle hand movements from exaggerated ones

I want to distinguish this more extreme tell from the subtle betting motion tells in the last section. A very forceful betting motion should be considered a separate type of tell.

For example, a player might have the following basic tendency: he pushes his chips in slowly and carefully when he has a strong hand, but tends to push his chips in with a little bit more forward force when he’s bluffing. He might also be capable sometimes, when holding a strong hand, of shoving his chips into the pot very quickly and forcefully, in an over-the-top manner (like maybe when he’s been losing a lot, or maybe when he’s angry at a certain player.) These three behaviors are not contradictory, even though they overlap a bit; this player (and many players) are just capable of exhibiting more than one behavior in a situation. If you don’t take this complexity into account, a player’s behavior can seem random and very confusing.

The main thing to remember from all of this is that whatever a player’s usual tendencies are, when he’s betting in an ostentatious or overly aggressive manner, there’s very little chance he is bluffing. I think this is an important concept to remember, because it covers a wide range of player behavior and will tend to trump a player’s more usual tendencies.

ANNOUNCING A BET

The way a player announces his bet or raise may be correlated to his hand strength.

There are many ways to announce a bet or a raise. In most situations you can just stick the money in the pot and it will be obvious what you’re doing. In no-limit and pot-limit games, sometimes you need to announce the amount of your bet or raise to make things clear.

Some people, however, will announce “bet” or “raise” or “call”, or will announce the amount of their bet, even when it’s not necessary. In my experience, most people who announce their specific action in situations where it’s not necessary to do so are more likely to have strong hands. In other words, a player who puts in enough chips so that his

action would obviously be a raise, but who says “raise” anyway; his hand is more likely to be strong than weak.

This can basically be considered a subset of [the idea that players with vulnerable hands will be less vocal in general](#). Players who go out of their way to announce a raise or bet are just generally going to be more confident and less afraid of giving away information, and this is more likely to indicate someone with a decent hand.

Tones of voice

Some players, when holding a strong hand, will tend to announce their actions in sad tones of voice. This adheres to the general rule of “weak means strong”, although only the weakest players will display this in an obvious way.

It’s pretty common for mediocre players with good hands to announce their bets with a questioning vocal pattern – giving an upward inflection at the end of the amount, like, “Three hundred?” A questioning tone of voice implies uncertainty, which implies weakness: hence their instinctual use of this tone when they’re actually strong. (I will occasionally use a questioning inflection when I bluff, because this tell is well-known to many players.)

Poker Clack

In Mike Caro’s book, he describes a sound he calls *poker clack*. It’s the clacking, ‘tsk tsk’ sound you make by creating a vacuum behind your tongue and then moving your tongue quickly forward from the roof of your mouth. It’s the sound someone might make when commiserating with someone about a misfortune; it basically has the implied meaning of, “That’s too bad.”

Mike Caro describes this tell as pretty much universally meaning strength. In my experience, he is correct. I don’t hear it very often, just occasionally from extremely weak players. But once in a blue moon I will hear it in a higher-stakes game and it has never let me down.

MAKING SPEECHES

A player who talks before or during a bet is more likely to hold a strong hand.

As a general rule, someone who is willing to talk is more relaxed than someone who stays quiet. If you’re up against a usually quiet opponent who starts to explain why he’s making a bet as he pushes his chips in, that should set off some warning bells, no matter what the content of his speech seems to be.

Go to the Post-bet chapter ‘[Talking](#)’ for more about talking as an indication of a strong hand. Go to [General Verbal Tells](#) for more about analyzing statements.

SHRUGGING AND UNCERTAINTY

Players who shrug while betting are often holding strong hands.

You will often see inexperienced players shrug when they put chips into the pot, almost as if to say, “Well, I guess I’ll bet, but I’m not too sure about it.” They’ll almost always have very strong hands.

This tell is well-known and most regular players are aware of it. Therefore, you won’t be seeing it when you’re playing with even slightly experienced players.

You might sometimes see shrug-like gestures, like when a player throws his chips in with his hand in a slightly palm-up gesture. When an average player displays any gesture that implies indecision or uncertainty, it will typically mean strength.

LOOKING AT THE DEALER

Players with strong hands will sometimes look directly at the dealer when betting.

You’ll often see a player who looks directly at the dealer when betting. Sometimes the player will announce the amount of his bet or raise directly to the dealer, clearly enunciating the action.

I don’t fully understand this one. I’ve just witnessed it a lot. I think in some cases the player just wants to make sure the dealer gets the action correct, because he might be afraid of having his intentions not made clear. Another theory is that the player, by talking directly to the dealer, is unconsciously announcing how serious he is with his bet.

Staring at the dealer while betting can look a little strange, and this is another reason why it’s usually a sign of strength; as you know, players with weak hands don’t like to do weird things that could attract attention.



The woman on the left is looking directly at the dealer as she puts out her bet. This is generally a sign of a strong hand.

AGGRAVATED EXPRESSION WHILE BETTING

Some players bet with an aggravated expression after it has been checked in front of them. This often means a decent hand but not a strong hand.

I've seen this tell in lower stakes games, usually limit. It usually is in multi-way pots, when a number of players check to the guy who is last to act. The guy bets with a slightly perturbed, smirking look on his face, almost as if to say, "Well, if nobody else is going to bet, I guess it's up to me." Or it can happen in a heads-up pot where it's been checked by both players on the flop and then checked once on the turn; the second player bets, but with that same expression of, "Guess I have to bet."

As you would interpret from the classic "weak-means-strong" philosophy, this player appears upset with the turn of events, and so probably isn't that upset. In my experience, though, he also won't be very strong. Typically, when I see this tell, the player will have something like top pair with a medium kicker, or a second pair that he expects is good. It is hardly ever a very strong hand. A player with a strong hand in this spot would be more likely to remain stoic, or look disappointed as opposed to aggravated, in the hopes that someone gives him some action.

Interestingly, this is one of the few tells I've been able to regularly correlate with a medium-strength hand, as opposed to simply *weak* or *strong*.



On the flop, four players check to this man in late position and he bets. He has an aggravated expression, almost as if to say, “I guess it’s up to me to bet.” For most players, this will indicate a decent hand, but not a great hand.

BETTING IN THE DARK

Players who bet in the dark, before the next round of cards come, are more likely to be strong than weak.

An example of “betting in the dark” is when a pre-flop raiser gets called and then makes a bet in the dark, before the flop has come out. You see this more frequently in limit than in no-limit. With amateur players, this is almost always going to mean strength. It’s usually a hand like AA, KK, QQ, and maybe even AK, but not often much worse than that. The player holds a big hand and wants to get a little weird/creative/aggressive. When they’re holding a big hand is the best time to get a little creative, so they figure.

Sometimes there’s also an element of defensiveness, because they don’t want to be scared out of betting if the flop comes down bad for them, so they make it easy for themselves and just bet in the dark.

Betting in the dark is sending a subtly passive-aggressive message; something like, “I don’t care what the other cards are, I can win this hand by playing you with these two cards right here.” Because people with weak hands don’t like to make aggressive statements (whether verbal or non-verbal), when a player bets dark, it is usually going to mean he started out strong. You could also group this hand under “strange behavior”, which is also usually going to mean strength from most average players. (See ‘Acting strangely’ for more information.)

A good player is capable of betting dark with a weaker hand, but I still would say a good player who does this is more likely to have a strong hand than a weak hand.

TREMBLING HANDS

A player who has trembling hands is often very strong.

The idea behind this one is: a player whose hands shake when he bets is showing a release of anxiety and/or a show of excitement. His cards are so strong that he is assured of a lock, and you are seeing his excitement and lack of fear. It will not be a bluff, because bluffers will be careful to hide their nervousness and will be still.

Mike Caro brought this tell into popular consciousness. People talk about this tell constantly as if it was one of the most important things he ever wrote, when it's really just one of the more visually obvious tells that beginners have a good chance of spotting.

While this tell is generally true, I don't think it's useful for people to spend any time trying to spot this tell. I've only witnessed it a couple of times over the years, and it really is only of much use with players who are complete beginners. Only beginners will get so excited when they make the nuts that their hands will tremble—anyone with a small amount of poker experience just isn't going to get that excited.

Also, you should be aware that there are many reasons people's hands can shake. My hands can shake very slightly when my blood sugar is low. Old people's hands shake for a myriad of reasons, like having Parkinson's disease. Someone could be going through drug withdrawal. Just so you're aware that this behavior can have multiple causes and is far from being an important tell.

Post-bet tells: Weakness

Post-bet tells refer to those tells that a player exhibits after he has made a bet or raise. The tells in this section are post-bet tells that indicate a player has a weak hand and doesn't want a call. They are in a very rough order so that the tells I consider most important are listed first.

STILLNESS

Some players will be more still than usual after they bluff.

When animals are in danger, they freeze up. It's a physiological response to fear and anxiety: the deer-in-the-headlights reaction that we're all familiar with. And this is how most people react at the poker table when they're anxious.

Some bluffers will try to act relaxed by smiling or talking or moving around a bit. Where you can sometimes find the stillness is in the hands, the eyes, or the chest. The hands will often be frozen in place, placed in a pose on their cards or resting on the table. The eyes will often be very still, not looking around at all, or they will move in small, self-conscious jerks. Blinking may be less frequent, or very stiff and repeated at set intervals. A player's breathing may be more shallow, less frequent, or may even stop altogether for a while. Even if a player is making an effort to move or look around in a relaxed way, you may notice a stiffness to his movements.

The best way to look for this tell is to observe its opposite first. [Players are more prone to being physically loose when they hold a good hand.](#) If you've noticed that a player has been physically loose in a few pots when he's strong, then you would like to observe him in a pot when he's bluffing. The more you can study a player in these key spots, the more chance you have of getting a reliable read.

Stillness of a player's legs and feet can be very meaningful, provided you've noticed that a player has the tendency to move his feet when he has a good hand. I've played with some players who shake their legs constantly throughout a game, and then when they bluff their leg or legs stop shaking. This can be a great place to look because many players are not as consciously aware of that part of their body.

Inducing this tell

The stillness tell can sometimes be induced when you're contemplating a call. Your opponent may be engaged in some motion or gesture, but when you reach for your chips, the player's actions suddenly slow or stop. For example, your opponent may stop shuffling his chips, stop bouncing his leg, or pause his breathing for a couple of seconds. Or, he may be talking to his neighbor, trying to seem relaxed, but when you reach for chips, his face will get still and he'll stop talking.

Basically, you want to try to be in tune with your opponent's physicality. You want to try to *feel* how your opponent reacts to your actions. You want to sniff out the tension that they want to hide from you. When this is working well, it can feel like a psychic connection.

A note about good players

Most decent players will have it as their general strategy to stay very still and unreadable after betting, no matter the strength of their hands. (Phil Ivey and Patrik Antonius are examples of players who remain very still and stoic in significant post-bet situations.) This is especially true when good players are playing in tough games against their peers. When they are playing amateurs, good players will be more relaxed and less worried about leaking information. As always, before relying on a tell, you should have correlated that the tell is meaningful for a particular player.

AVOIDING EYE CONTACT

Players who are bluffing will often not be able to meet your gaze and will avoid looking in your general direction.

You may have heard that bluffers will try to stare you down. This is oft-repeated in many poker tell books and articles. While it is true for some people, it is not generally true. In my experience, most bluffers will not want to look you in the eye, and their eye contact with an opponent will be greatly reduced compared to the times they are value-betting. When most bluffers do look at you, their eye contact will be fleeting, and possibly accompanied with neutral (or even friendly) facial expressions or verbal statements.

When a no-limit opponent makes a big bet, and I am uncertain of what to do, I will typically wait for a little while, looking for clues. Players with good hands are more likely to engage you in some way. They might sneak glances at you, or look at you openly, or they might talk, or they might make a physical gesture that indicates relaxation. If I don't get any kind of relaxed response like that after a few moments of waiting, the chances of the person bluffing has increased in my mind. If an opponent completely refuses to meet my eyes after he's bet (and always assuming I've already noticed that he tends to look at me after value-betting) then it's very likely that he's bluffing.

I don't recommend frequently burning up a lot of time by always waiting for a while when it's your turn to act, but for large, important pots a longer pause will sometimes give you really good opportunities to gather information. Players with good hands will sometimes show signs of irritation and anger in these spots, either from you taking too much time or just from being studied. They may start looking at you more openly, and even giving you some hostile expressions. Many players take it as a personal affront that someone might try to read them, which (perhaps ironically) can lead to them being easier to read. Seeing a player who has bet into you get irritated is great information, because bluffing players will virtually never show those emotions; they will just want to remain neutral.

As I mentioned, while I think this tell I've described is more common, there are some players who have the opposite tendency, and who avoid eye contact when they have a strong hand. [Go to the post-bet section 'Looking away from you' for more information on that.](#)

You can try to induce this tell by attempting to engage the player in some way. [This is addressed more in a later section.](#)

SILENCE

Many players will tend to be very quiet after making a bluff.

A bluffer is generally anxious and wants to avoid notice. Silence is one of the instinctual ways a player tries to make himself invisible. This tell goes hand-in-hand with the stillness of a bluffer mentioned in the last section.

Just as with the last tell, you should try to observe a player when they have a strong hand first, because that will give you a baseline for their relaxed behavior. Then you'll more easily be able to see how their behavior varies when they're bluffing.

This tell is most useful for the talkers—the guys who haven't figured out that they should probably just be quiet when they're involved in a hand. These guys can sometimes make their hands very obvious. Many of them will talk a lot when they've got a strong hand, and then clam up completely when they're bluffing. It can sometimes be surprising that people will make the differences in their behavior this obvious. You may often wonder if you are being set up by a false tell, but you'll find that this happens far less than you'd think. If you've correlated a player's behavior over several significant hands, then chances are you are seeing a real tell. Most people are pretty oblivious to the fact that other people are observing them and paying attention.

Sometimes the talkative guys, when bluffing, will go out of their way to make small talk with their neighbor in the hopes of appearing relaxed and normal. These players might also put on a relaxed smile to go with the talk, which may stand out as being unusual. Sometimes this talk will seem distracted and forced when compared to the player's usual manner of speech. Your particular read in such spots is going to depend on how much you've studied the player and how relaxed you think he is.

Most players aren't super talkative, but will still give you occasional clues those few times they do talk. As with the last tell, a pause after your opponent has bet can occasionally induce that player to interact with you verbally. Some players who hold strong hands will be more likely to talk to you after you've deliberated for a while. They might spontaneously say something like "What have you got?" or "Tough decision, huh?" Whereas most bluffers will stay pretty clammed up if not prompted to speak.

Some good players like to ask questions of an opponent who has just bet in the hopes of getting a read. How much an opponent engages them verbally or with eye contact can tell a good player a lot. [This is addressed more in the section on 'conversational probes'.](#)

A note about good players

Assuming they're playing against tough competition, good players will mostly keep quiet after betting, no matter what they hold. When playing bad players, a good player is more likely to be verbally tricky. A good player is more aware of how his table image is perceived, and is more capable of effectively manipulating his opponents.

LOOKING DOWN AFTER BETTING

Some players will glance downward for a short period during, or right after, making a bluff.

Humans have an instinct to lower their heads and look at the ground when lying. You've probably experienced this instinct when you've lied to others, or else witnessed other people doing it. It seems to be a deeply ingrained instinct. It shows up a lot when players are bluffing.

This tell typically only occurs during or right after a bet, not before. The typical tell is that while the player extends his arm for a bet, his head and his line of sight dip down in the direction of his chips. This downward glance will usually only be for a second or two, although it may be longer. Sometimes, it can be more subtle, with only the player's eyes, and not his head, dipping downward as he bets. A player who is value-betting a strong hand is more likely to keep his head and eyes facing straight ahead when betting.

I think the real value of this tell comes from the fact that this behavior is not normally associated with weakness in most people's minds. It's largely off-the-radar, so players aren't going out of their way to hide this behavior.

I usually look for this tell, [the stillness tell](#), and [the eye-contact avoidance tell](#) in combination. A player bets the river, immediately glances down for a second while betting, then looks back up to stare at the flop. He is still, just looking at the flop, not moving. I wait a few seconds, watching him, and he does not even glance towards me. For your average player, the presence of these three tells together will mean a bluff a large percentage of the time.

This is also a useful tell in limit poker. In some limit games, this will be the only tell of much use if the players are fairly experienced. I often use this tell to make up my mind in spots that seem pretty break-even. For example, even if I think my read of this tell is only about 65% reliable, if I see it, I'll be more likely to try a bluff-raise on the turn or a light call on the river.



The woman on the left is betting. As she puts out her bet, her head dips down momentarily, as if she was looking down at her lap. This will be a quick movement; it won't last long. For many players, this can be an indication of a bluff.

FAKE SMILES

A player with a fake smile is more likely to have a vulnerable hand than a strong hand.

Smiles are one way players can give away their emotions. Paul Ekman, in his book *Telling Lies*, says:

Smiles are probably the most underrated facial expressions, much more complicated than most people realize. There are dozens of smiles, each differing in appearance and in the message expressed.

He goes on to describe a dozen different smiles, and the nuances of their meanings.

He also says:

Any emotion can be falsified to help conceal any other emotion. The smile is the mask most frequently employed...It is selected often because some variation on happiness is the message required to pull off many deceptions...Still another reason for the popularity of the smile as a mask is that it is the easiest of the facial expressions of emotions to make voluntarily.

These are good reasons why you see so many people using smiles in so many different ways at the poker table. Some of it is acting. Some of it is a result of anxiety. Some of it is a result of a release of anxiety.

For some people, spotting fake smiles is easy. For some people it's surprisingly difficult. Some psychologists think that most people's inability to differentiate a fake smile from a real one serves an evolutionary purpose. Being effectively "fooled" by fake smiles means less confrontation in our social interactions. If people were able to easily tell if others were humoring them or only being nice for selfish reasons, relationships and society would be weakened.

I'm not going to pretend to be an expert on recognizing real and fake smiles, and even if I was, I couldn't teach that in a book. But I will give you a quick rundown on the basics of how I use smiles at the poker table.

A real smile involves not just the mouth and cheeks but the eyes as well. Ekman describes how a genuinely felt smile is displayed in this way: "[the zygomatic major] muscle also stretches the lips, pulls the cheeks upward, bags the skin below the eyes, and produces crow's-feet wrinkles beyond the eye corners." A real smile uses an entirely different set of muscles than a fake smile. A fake smile uses only the consciously-controlled muscles around the mouth; the eyes are not wrinkled, and the cheeks are not pulled upward to the same extent.

Another big difference is that a fake smile is more likely to be asymmetrical. This means that if the smile is lopsided (for example, the left side of the smile is higher than the right side), it is more likely to be fake.

You typically won't see someone expressing much emotion, real or fake, when involved in a significant pot, but sometimes you will. Maybe a player can't restrain his glee or relief upon catching a big card and starts to joke around with a big smile on his face. Maybe a player with a good hand hears something funny and doesn't bother to restrain his genuine relaxed laughter. Maybe a player with a weak hand hears something funny and tries to respond in a natural way, by laughing or smiling—but can't quite pull it off.

If you want to learn more about this, I'd recommend reading Ekman's books (*Telling Lies* would be a good start, because it's also about recognizing liars), or doing an Internet search for 'Ekman real fake smiles', and finding some sites and documents that way. Ekman also has his own online facial expression recognition test that you can purchase. Or do some real-life research; for example, if you work in an office setting, study the smiles at your next work meeting—most of them will be fake.

THE LITTLE SMILE

Some players tend to display a small, arrogant smile during or after bluffing.

Have you ever made a big bluff and started to feel a silly little smile creep onto your face? Nothing overly dramatic or obvious, but just a small smile slightly lifting the edges of your mouth, almost as if to say to the world, "I'm not worried." But you are worried. You think you're getting called on this one. And the little smile makes you feel exposed. You want to get rid of it, but it's too late; the smile is there and it's hard to get rid of without looking awkward.

I've had that experience. And I know other players have. I've witnessed this behavior at a wide range of stakes.

The little smile is usually not acting; it is usually an instinctual, nervous reaction that arises from an aggressor who is aware he is in a position of weakness. The little smile leaks out as an unconscious attempt at communicating relaxation and confidence.

Sometimes the little smile is very temporary. A player may have this smile for a few seconds and then become aware he is doing it and quickly force it away.

Also, the little arrogant smile is not to be confused with the genuine smile, which will be bigger and more real. ([Read more about differences between real and fake smiles in the 'Fake smiles' chapter.](#)) The most important difference is that there is nothing that seems to cause the little arrogant smile, whereas there will usually be something that causes a genuine smile, like someone's comment or a funny occurrence. The little arrogant smile comes unbidden out of an instinctual reaction to being put in a position of weakness.

The little smile can be very subtle. Sometimes the difference between a person's neutral mouth and a slight smile might be only the difference of a couple millimeters at the edges

of their lips. The more you practice studying people's faces, the more you will be able to spot slight changes in expressions.



The player on the right has just bet. She has a tiny smile on her face. For many players, this small smile after betting will indicate a bluff.

CONCILIATORY ACTIONS

Players who are bluffing will often act or talk in ways that seem aimed to appease their opponents.

By 'conciliatory actions', I mean body language or speech aimed at defusing a potential conflict or hostile interaction. A bluffer just wants his opponent to go away. He wants his bet to speak for itself and he doesn't want to be drawn into a conversation or even a slight body language interaction that might rouse someone's attention or ire. He will avoid any behavior or verbal statements that could potentially "offend" his opponents.

Imagine your typical bluffer as a scared dog who knows he has to stand up for himself when the big alpha dog comes near him. The scared dog must stand his ground and act a bit confident, because giving away weakness may cause an attack. But he also must lower his head, avoid looking the alpha dog in the eyes, and be cautious in his movements, because he doesn't want to provoke aggression. He just needs enough confidence to survive the encounter; he doesn't want to start an actual fight.

Staying silent, staying still, and avoiding eye contact (the first three tells in this chapter) are all examples of conciliatory behavior tells. With these behaviors, a player reduces the chance that he might offend his opponents.

Conciliatory smiles

A smile can be a type of conciliatory action. A bluffer might put on a smile as a nervous reaction to being put on the spot by his opponent's question or stare. It is an attempt at disarming the aggressor, his opponent. It's not a genuine smile; you could describe this smile as mainly friendly and harmless. It may be lop-sided, which is another indication of a smile that isn't genuinely felt. It's what some people might call a "shit-eating grin." It's a smile performed out of nervousness and out of an attempt to not arouse the other person's ire.

Conciliatory smiles can often be seen when someone asks a direct question of a player and the player isn't comfortable answering it. An example of this might be someone asking the player, "Do you have an overpair?" and the player looks at a loss for how to answer and instead gives a goofy, friendly smile and some vague response like, "I don't know."

It might also be seen when you stare at the bettor in an attempt to engage him, and he briefly looks at you and then quickly breaks eye contact while smiling nervously.

Responses to anger or aggression

You won't often hear a bluffer make aggressive or hostile statements, even if another player abuses him verbally or looks at him in a hostile manner. He's likely to absorb any abuse and try to look neutral and maybe even friendly.

You should start noticing the behavior of a bettor who, because he has a good hand, isn't afraid of interacting with his opponents. Then compare that to the behavior of that player when he doesn't want to attract so much attention to himself.

Keep in mind that conciliatory smiles and actions will not be overly dramatic—the point of them is just to avoid confrontation. The most noteworthy thing about conciliatory actions will be the absence of anything resembling confrontation.

Eliciting conciliatory tells

Some players will try to actively gather this information. [This is discussed in more detail in the Deception and Manipulation chapter.](#) When you're trying to elicit this type of tell, you try to engage your opponent in some way. You stare at him, you ask him questions. You might turn toward him to see how he reacts. You might even try borderline hostile statements, all just to get a reaction.

STARING AT BOARD CARDS

Some players, when holding a weak hand, will tend to stare at the board after betting.

Many players find the board the safest place to look after making a bluff.

This tell is not a strong indication if you haven't correlated it with a specific player's behavior; [some players \(including many good players\) will stare at the board after betting no matter if they are strong or weak.](#) This is why the post-bet tell is less reliable than the similar waiting-for-action tell. In other words, waiting-for-action staring at the board is more indicative of weakness than is post-bet staring at the board.

As with the pre-action tell, you will sometimes see bluffers adopt a quizzical expression after betting, as if finding something very interesting in the middle of the table. This is typically just another sign of weakness.

THREATENING TO FLIP A HAND OVER

A player who acts as if he's going to flip his cards over in response to a potential call is usually weak.

The threatening-to-turn-your-hand-over move is a pretty common closing-action tell ("closing action" means an action that will completely close the betting on the hand) seen at lower stakes. You can sometimes see it happen very clearly when a guy bets, another guy goes to call, and the bettor, almost in a threatening manner, prepares to flip his cards over. It can sometimes appear like some comical Western stand-off, with the one guy getting ready to draw his gun (call) and the other guy reaching for his own gun (threatening to flip his cards).

This tell will usually manifest in more subtle ways. Sometimes a bluffer, when faced with an impending call, will just barely pick the cards off the table, as if in the beginning stages of flipping the cards over.

These players think they're about to get called, so what's the one weapon they have left in their arsenal? They act like they're ready to confidently show down a winner. It's a last-ditch effort and you can't really blame them. But if they really had a strong hand, would they be going out of their way to telegraph their confidence? No, probably not. [This tell can sometimes be elicited by reaching for chips as if to call.](#)



The player on the left has just put out a bluff bet. In an attempt to dissuade his opponent from calling, he holds his cards as if he's ready to turn them over and go to showdown.

A visually similar, but opposite, tell.

There's a similar-looking tell where a player, after betting, holds his cards up fairly high in front of him, almost as if he were showing them to someone seated behind him. This tell is indicative of a strong hand, not a bluff. It's a relaxed behavior, whereas the threatening-to-turn-the-hand-over tell is more tense.

TALKING YOU OUT OF CALLING

Sometimes a player will try to talk you out of calling when he has run out of other options.

This behavior occurs when a bluffer sees you getting ready to put chips into the pot and is sure he is doomed. He will then say something, anything, to try to get you to not make the call. It could be something like, "You sure you want to call that?", or "Man, just fold. I'm telling you I got this." This tell is especially significant when the opponent is usually quiet and his statement stands out as being out-of-the-ordinary.

This tell is just a verbal equivalent of the last tell I talked about, where a weak player attempts to dissuade you from calling by threatening to turn his hand over. You really can't blame your opponent for trying to change your mind when he believes he's out of options. This tell is pretty obvious when it occurs, but it's of limited use because it

usually only happens when you're already in the act of putting your chips in the pot.

GRABBING CHIPS DEFENSIVELY

A player acting as if he's ready to call a raise by defensively holding chips is probably weak.

This is the same tell described in the waiting-for-action section except that it takes place after someone has bet. [I recommend going back and reading that chapter for more information.](#)

Basically, the gist of the tell is that the player bets and then grabs chips threateningly, maybe holding them in an outstretched hand or maybe just clenching them, indicating that he is willing to engage in more betting. A player will do this when they are betting either a vulnerable hand or a bluff. Someone exhibiting this tell is hardly ever going to have a strong hand.

The post-bet version of this tell is more rare than the waiting-for-action version.

GETTING FIDGETY

Some rare players will tend to get more animated when they are bluffing.

There are some players who get more fidgety and weirdly energetic when they bluff. They're not common, but they're out there. It pays to know that they exist so you can recognize this pattern if you spot it.

The thought process of these players probably goes something like, "Everyone knows that being still means you're bluffing. I've got to do something to look relaxed."

So they'll start moving their hands or their face, or looking around, doing whatever they can do to appear physically relaxed. I've seen a couple players exhibit this tell so extremely they look like they have Tourette's. They'll be full of nervous energy after they've put out a bluff, but more silent and still after they've value bet.

I have an unresearched theory that you're more likely to see this tell from very tight, ABC-strategy players. These are players who might be fairly experienced and know what the standard bluffing tells are, so they're trying not to look like that. But they don't bluff often enough to feel comfortable doing it, so they end up overdoing it and moving around too much.

HANDS NEAR MOUTH

A player who puts his hands near his mouth could be bluffing, but could just as easily be concealing a big hand.

Mike Caro talked about this tell. He said he'd found this tell had a greater correlation to bluffing than to value bets. His classification is the only reason I'm putting it in the weak category, because I think I see it displayed about equally between bluffs and big hands. I think the behavior is generally associated with lying, but in the context of poker, lying could just as easily mean someone's trying to conceal the strength of a big hand as it could mean they're bluffing you. Also, most people are aware that this posture has an association with weakness and discomfort, so people trying to feign weakness are capable of doing it.

I think this tell does have power once you have correlated it for a specific opponent and figured out what that player's personal tendencies are. I've just seen too many players do it when they're holding a strong hand for me to assign it any kind of general meaning. You just need to watch for this tell and correlate it, which is what you have to do with all tells.

Post-bet tells: Strength

Post-bet tells refer to those tells that a player exhibits after he has made a bet or raise. The tells in this section are post-bet tells that indicate a player has a strong hand and would like a call. They are in a very rough order so that the tells I consider most important are listed first.

LOOKING AT YOU

Some players who are betting for value will be more likely to make and sustain eye contact with opponents.

Most players with eye-contact tells will fall under one of two categories: if they have a strong hand, they'll either increase their amount of eye contact with an opponent, or they'll have less eye contact with an opponent.

In my experience, it's more common for players with strong hands to have increased amounts of eye contact. This is because most players' default behavior is to avoid eye contact when they bluff, so when they have a strong hand their relaxation results in them making more eye contact.

If you were going to try to observe a single type of tell, I would recommend studying a player's eye contact behavior in post-bet situations. These are the easiest types of tells to

study, and they are also the most useful. You can usually peg a player's basic tendencies after just a few significant pots.

We all know the feeling of having our opponent right where we want him. It can be a good feeling; looking at someone we know we're going to beat. There can be an element of schadenfreude there; savoring the feeling of crushing our opponent's hopes and dreams (at least in that one hand). This is also a contributing factor to why many players show a willingness to engage in increased eye contact when they hold a strong hand.

Increased eye contact with an opponent isn't widely associated in most people's minds with having a strong hand. In fact, the opposite is true: there's a big misconception that players who stare at you are probably bluffing. People have been misled by the often-repeated mantra that 'strong means weak'. But as I've stated, strong often can just mean strong, and this is especially true for eye contact. The fact that most people don't know the truth is also what makes this tell so powerful.

When trying to elicit this tell, I will often pause for a while after an opponent bets. When faced with a decent pause, a mediocre player with a strong hand will often engage you in some way, even if it's very slightly. They might start to glance at you, or look at you questioningly, or even get an irritated look on their face. Sometimes you will just get a blank, neutral stare that goes on for a few seconds. Against most players, when I see a willingness to look at me, the chances have gone up that I'm facing a real hand. (I don't recommend burning up a lot of time on a frequent basis, but for important pots a longer pause can sometimes lead to great information.)

An especially meaningful combination is when you look at an opponent who has just bet, and he has disappointed body language (slumped shoulders, a frowning face, etc.) and he's looking at you a lot. These are two very strong indicators by themselves; when combined they can be very meaningful.

LOOKING AWAY FROM YOU

Some players with strong hands will be more likely to avoid eye contact after they've bet.

If you haven't read the previous tell, do that now.

Some players' default behavior is to stare at their opponent. Some of these players will be less likely to engage in eye contact after betting with a strong hand.

The previous tendency, of increased eye contact when betting a strong hand, is more common in my experience. I wanted to include both tells here because eye contact tells in post-bet situations are so important. You should watch your opponents in these situations and see if they fall under either of these tendencies.

GETTING LOOSE

Players with big hands will be more likely to be physically loose.

Players who are relaxed act differently from players who are not relaxed. Relaxed players are more likely to move freely, breathe freely, look around, make jokes, make insults, and act purposefully strange. For certain players, any behavior that seems physically relaxed will be a very good indicator that they have a strong hand.

Even when it is not obvious on the surface, you can sometimes spot physical looseness in hands, eyes, shoulders, or legs. Even sometimes when a player is feigning anxiety or disappointment with his face, you will see the looseness in his extremities. His hands might move loosely over his cards, or gently flex his cards, or tap the table. His head might not move, but his eyes may move around in a relaxed way. Blinking might be spontaneous or rapid—it won't look restrained. His neck movements may be looser. His breathing and his chest movement might be loose and unrestrained.

Sometimes shaking legs can give someone away. A player exhibiting shaking legs after they bet is giving away their relaxation level, simply because a bluffer, or otherwise vulnerable player, will not usually want to attract attention to himself. Also, a bluffer is usually too full of tension to do something as loose as shaking his legs. While this tell is not always easy to see, you can sometimes notice a player's shirt moving, indicating that his leg is shaking.

REAL SMILES

Players with big hands will be more likely to show genuine smiles.

An average player, assuming the stakes are significant to him, and assuming he's in a significant pot, will be more likely to show a genuine smile when he's comfortable with his hand. If he's not comfortable with his hand, he'll be more likely to show a false smile. [See the post-bet section on fake smiles for more information.](#)

ACTING STRANGELY

A player who does something "strange" after he bets probably holds a strong hand.

This is a subset of the previous 'getting loose' category of tells. A player who is willing to attract attention to himself by doing something strange and out-of-the-ordinary during a hand is probably not afraid of too much. Also, a player who is willing to potentially piss

off his opponent is also probably not afraid of too much. A bluffing player generally would not risk increased observation by acting weirdly.

Strange actions could include: making exaggerated betting motions, making strange faces, saying strange things, or anything that is out-of-the-ordinary for that player.

One example of a “strange” action you can sometimes see players make is prematurely tipping the dealer after betting and before an opponent has called. This kind of irritating move is not something you see bluffers do, because bluffers, as you know, are more prone to engage in [conciliatory behavior](#).

Another example of a strange behavior could be your opponent calling the clock on you. If your opponent does this, he’s probably not bluffing. A bluffer wouldn’t risk arousing your anger or curiosity by calling the clock on you.

However, both this example and the previous prematurely-tipping-the-dealer are pretty basic psychology, so it’s always possible better players will try to mix it up a bit.

[See ‘Exaggerated betting actions’ in the during-action section for more on strange behavior.](#)

LOOKING IRRITATED, WORRIED, OR FEARFUL

Some players with good hands will appear worried or fearful after making a bet.

Similar to the [waiting-for-action behavior of acting disappointed when seeing good cards](#), a player who has just bet for value may look irritated, worried, or fearful. In the classic weak-means-strong interpretation, these players are putting on an appearance of weakness and so should be read as strong.

A player’s expression of fear or worry will generally be subtle. Most players are not making a conscious effort to appear fearful of being called; rather, they are instinctually putting on a show of weakness so that they seem less threatening to their “prey.” This might show up in the face as slightly knitted eyebrows, eyebrows sloped downward towards the nose, slightly pursed lips, slightly pouting lips, or a combination thereof. The posture could also be affected; shoulders could be slumped, the neck could be lowered, arms could be drawn inward slightly, etc.

There are many players who have a natural, baseline look of irritation or anger when they play. This might include a knitted brow and pursed lips. Others may have other emotional-looking baseline appearances. You have to take this behavior into account when trying to interpret their tells. Sometimes this will make them harder to read if they are consistent in their behavior. With some players, this will make them easier to read because they’ll lose their irritated appearance only when they are trying to bluff.

A small note: the post-bet display of disappointment or worry is related to the similar waiting-for-action tell, but slightly different. A player with a strong hand who is waiting for you to act might look more *disappointed* with the situation, whereas a player who has

bet with a strong hand might look more *worried* or *fearful*. They are related emotional displays, but they do have different manifestations. If a player is attempting to communicate any of these negative emotions, then it probably has the same meaning (a strong hand), but it is still a distinction worth making. (For a more in-depth analysis, I recommend Paul Ekman's book *Unmasking the Face*, in which he teaches the specific facial movements associated with different emotions.)

TALKING

A player who is more chatty than usual is more likely to have a strong hand.

The general rule is: the more a player talks, the more likely it is that he's got a strong hand.¹ This is regardless of the actual content of what he is saying. A player who's willing to be talkative is generally going to be more relaxed about the situation than a player who stays quiet. ([See the post-bet 'Silence' chapter for more information.](#))

¹This behavior is more meaningful in post-bet situations, so that's why I've placed it in this section. In waiting-for-action situations, some players who hold weak hands will try to talk an opponent out of betting.

A player who is talking may be trying to deceive you in some way, so you may be able to deduce other clues about the nature of their hand ([see General Verbal Tells for more information on this](#)). However, if you are uncertain about the interpretation of what they're saying, or if you'd rather not get involved in trying to interpret what they've said, you might simply judge the sheer wordiness as a clue to their strength.

HANDLING CARDS LOOSELY

Some players with good cards will tend to move their cards around a lot because they are so relaxed.

This is a subset of the idea that [players with good cards tend to get more loose](#), but it's a distinctive enough tell that it deserves its own section.

Players with good cards don't have anything to hide. Often, they'll move their arms or hands around loosely. This behavior can translate to how they hold their cards. You'll often see players who have bet and are hoping for a call lift their cards up high in front of them, almost as if showing the cards to an imaginary player seated behind them. They may pick up and look at the cards and put them back down a few times in a row. They may shuffle them impatiently. All of these physically loose behaviors are indicators of relaxation and of high hand strength.

This tell shouldn't be confused with [the tell of threatening-to-turn-over-a-hand](#).



The player on the left has bet. He is holding his cards up high, as if showing them to a player behind him. This will usually indicate a player who is relaxed because he has a good hand.

ACTING READY TO MUCK

A player with a good hand may act as if he's impatiently ready to muck.

Another indication of strength is when a player has bet and, while he waits for his opponent to act, he holds his cards loosely between two fingers as if he's ready to muck. (You see this in limit a lot more than in no-limit.) This motion can be interpreted as a borderline insulting statement, basically saying something like "we both know you're folding, hurry up and fold so I can muck and we can play the next hand." This statement acts as a kind of dare to the opponent who's thinking of calling. Because we know that bluffers avoid making any statement (verbal or physical) that could be interpreted as insulting or aggressive, it's easy to see why a player who performs this action will not usually be bluffing.

General Verbal Tells

This section describes ways to gather information from other players' verbal statements and speech patterns. These are not in any particular order.

Also note: my second book, *Verbal Poker Tells*, is all analyzing about verbal statements. The section below is a good introduction to a few concepts, but *Verbal Poker Tells* goes into a lot of detail on specific patterns and includes a lot of examples from hands I've played and also some well-known hands from World Series of Poker events and televised poker shows.

DISCLAIMERS

When a player makes a statement that tries to explain away the importance of an action, that player's strength is probably opposite of what they are trying to communicate.

There is a class of verbal statements that I call disclaimers. These are statements that attempt to explain away, or "disclaim", the real meaning behind an action. A basic example of this would be when a no-limit tournament player goes all in while announcing something like, "I've only got a few chips left. I guess I've only got one move." He is implying that him not having many chips left is a primary reason for going all in. More often than not, that player will be strong.

Another example would be when two players are heads-up on the flop and the player first to act says in a friendly manner, as if just noticing that it's only the two of them, "Just us? I'll check." With this statement, he's implying that he's checking because there are only two people playing, or because he's friendly with his opponent. What he's trying to say is, "I'm checking because we're heads-up, not because I have a weak hand." So, in actuality, he's probably checking because he has a weak hand.

That's pretty simple stuff. But sometimes disclaimers can be more subtle and can require more in-depth interpretation.

In a multi-way pot, the player last to act looks momentarily confused. "Everybody checked? I'll bet." He's implying that the main reason for his bet is that everyone has shown weakness, not that his hand is strong. This is probably untrue and he's likely strong.

Another example: It's a loose game, where there has been a lot of recent raising. A late-position player suddenly becomes belligerent when someone raises in front of him. "Raise! Raise! Raise! Everybody wants to raise!" he mock-yells, as if disgusted with how much everyone has been raising, and he throws in a second raise. He's implying that he's only raising because he's irritated and not because his hand is strong, so it's likely he's raising because his hand is strong.

LISTENING TO PLAYERS WHO ARE OUT OF THE HAND

Players out of the hand will sometimes tell the table, directly or indirectly, what kind of hands they've folded.

This kind of information is more likely to be gathered in cash games than in tournaments, because tournament players can sometimes be penalized for talking about their hands. In cash games, however, particularly low- and mid-stakes games, players will occasionally talk about their hands or make facial expressions that give you a clue about what they folded.

A common situation that comes up when playing with bad players is when the flop comes up with a pair and a player who folded pre-flop shakes his head, or curses, or turns to his neighbor to whisper something about his hand. You might even overhear them say, “I folded a Jack,” or something to that effect. Or the flop might come 8-5-4, and a folded player might look disgusted and whisper something to his neighbor, making it very possible that he folded 7-6.

Spotting someone giving away this kind of information can help you eliminate some cards from other opponents’ hand ranges.

LIARS AND TRUTH-TELLERS

Players will sometimes mislead you, but will seldom blatantly lie. They will tell you the truth more often than you think.

Some people think that all poker players are liars. All poker players sometimes lie; that’s definitely true. But in my experience, most players don’t often lie during a hand. They may misrepresent their hands, or mislead you, especially after the hand is over, but they will seldom tell an outright lie while a hand is going on.

Mark McClish, a federal law enforcement officer, wrote a book entitled “I Know You Are Lying”, in which he argues that people go out of their way to avoid lying, even when lying would seem to be easy to do and also be in their best interest. One of the main points of the book is that it seems to go against our instincts to lie and that we avoid it when we can; lying makes some people, including hardened criminals and murderers, uncomfortable.

I agree with McClish that there’s an instinctual, physiological discomfort most people have when they lie.

I believe that as long as there’s a potential for a lie to be found out, most people avoid lying. But in spots where people know for certain that there’s no way their lie can be discovered, they’ll feel more comfortable lying. What this means in poker is that people in the middle of a hand are less likely to commit a bald-faced lie, because their hand still could be exposed, whereas people who know their hands will never be seen (like when they are planning on mucking or have already mucked) are more capable of lying.

Verbal trickery

But even if people might avoid lying, many people love to verbally and ambiguously mislead. Ways of misleading, but not directly lying, are saying things like:

- *"I've got a good hand."*
- *"I've got it."*
- *"You should let this one go."*
- *"I've got a pair of queens" (when their pocket queens makes a set).*

A player who successfully misleads opponents accomplishes several things:

- *He gets his opponents to act contrary to their best interests*
- *He avoids the discomfort of lying*
- *He avoids being perceived as a liar*

Jamie Gold is a perfect example of a player who very much enjoys misleading opponents. He seldom out-and-out lied during his talkative performance at the 2006 WSOP (or on his television appearances since). Rather, he used ambiguous and misleading talk to try to achieve his goals.

Take as a case in point a hand from the no-limit cash game show *Poker After Dark* where Jamie Gold successfully misled Alan "Boston" Dvorkis. Alan was pretty short-stacked and raised with QT. Jamie looked down at pocket kings and raised Alan all-in. Jamie kept insisting to Alan that all he (Jamie) had was King high. Gold got more specific and twice said that he didn't have KQ. He even showed another player his cards and asked him if he had KQ; the other player said, honestly, "nope." Then Alan said that he was getting the right price to call if Gold had AK; Gold said "I said I have King high; I don't have Ace-King."

These statements led Alan to eventually call, thinking that if Jamie had KJ or weaker then Alan was getting acceptable odds. When Alan called, Jamie flipped over his Kings with the sheepish announcement, "The highest card in my hand is a King."

Needless to say, Boston wasn't pleased with this. But Jamie Gold could successively counter any accusations of being extremely under-handed with the argument that he had technically been telling the truth.

When a player tells you, "I've got King high," or anything that makes his hand seem vulnerable, your wheels should start spinning as to why he'd tell you this. It would seem like a really mean-spirited thing for Gold to straight-out lie in that spot. For one thing, they were on television, in a "friendly" game of "equals." For another, Gold has his reputation as a "world champion" to consider. For both of these reasons, I would consider a bald-faced lie unlikely.

At the same time, Gold is not the type of player to straight-out tell you his vulnerability in that spot. Virtually nobody would tell you they were vulnerable in such a spot.

Keeping these two things in mind; the fact that Gold is most probably not technically lying about having King-high, and the fact that he is most probably strong and not weak, a pair of Kings could be logically deduced.

I think this story is a good example of the kind of deductive logic you can sometimes use to analyze a player's statements. I've been in many spots similar to this where a player has said something about his hand, trying to be tricky, but instead he ends up telling me exactly what he has.

I think this story also gives you a good idea of the kinds of thoughts that go through a verbally tricky player's mind; they want to trick you, but they don't want to have to lie to your face to do it. They want to get the thrill of being a liar or a cheat without actually being one.

Truth-tellers

Some players will occasionally tell you exactly what they have. This doesn't much happen in tournaments anymore because of the rules in place that prevent people from talking about their hands. But people still talk about their hands a lot in cash games, especially in limit.

Some people will tell you their hands because they want you to fold. These players might have a vulnerable hand and, based on some sign of weakness from you, think they can dissuade you from calling and potentially sucking out on them. For example, in limit poker your opponent bets into you on the turn. You pause for a few seconds, considering your options. After a few moments your opponent tells you that he has a pair of queens (for an overpair) and that he'll show if you fold. Assuming this is a fairly predictable, straightforward player who doesn't usually talk about his hands, he's seldom going to be lying here. (And the fact that people will occasionally volunteer this information is another reason for sometimes taking a little time in difficult spots—you never know what information you might gain. Of course, if you're regularly taking a lot of time on easy decisions, the less information people will be apt to give you.)

Other times people will tell you their hands because they don't think you will believe them. Let's say there's an aggressive player who 3-bets pre-flop with 7-2. The flop comes T-2-2. He bets out and shouts, "I've got a deuce!", and then proceeds to tell his incredulous opponent, "I'm telling you I've got a deuce!" He knows no one is likely to give him credit for the deuce. He wants action and attention, and he loves the feeling of getting people to call him after he's already told them what he has. At the end of the hand, while he's raking the pot, he can say to his opponent, "I told you I had a deuce."

Specificity vs. ambiguity

You should be more likely to believe a player who tells you his hand when:

- *He states a pretty specific hand, without much room for ambiguity, and:*
- *You can think of a good reason for why he would tell you the truth in that situation.*

You should be less likely to believe a player who is telling you the strength of his hand when:

- *He makes ambiguous statements about what he has, and:*
- *You can't think of a good reason why he would want to reveal the strength of his hand.*

For example, in a no-limit Hold'em cash game, a usually-silent player tells you "I've got a set" after pushing all-in on the turn on a draw-heavy board. He could have a set and not want you to call. His statement is specific, his play fits logically with his hand, and there is an understandable reason why he would tell you his hand.

Also, the fact that he's all-in, and he won't have to make any more decisions, adds to the chances of him telling the truth. If he wasn't all-in and had more money behind, it would make less sense for him to tell you his hand. In a situation like this, you should strongly consider the possibility that this player is telling you the truth.

Imagine almost the same situation, except the board is not draw-heavy this time. Again, your opponent pushes all-in on the turn and you ask him what he has. He tells you, "I've got a set." His statement is specific, and makes sense with how he's played his hand, but you can't figure out why he'd give away his strength in this situation. Your first thought might be that it doesn't make logical sense for him to tell you his strength in this situation, so he must be lying and actually be weak.

But sometimes a player who has a big hand and who is already assured of a decent pot can just be so relaxed that he will tell the truth in an attempt to make you think he is being deceptive. Sometimes people with strong hands just like to mess with their opponents. As I've said before, acting strong doesn't always mean a player is weak; often strong will just mean strong. For the most part, players will avoid lying, even in spots where it would be to their advantage to lie. Even though it seems unlikely that the player would reveal his strength in this situation, you should still give serious consideration to him having what he says he has.

One more example. Your opponent pushes all-in on the turn and you think for a while. After a little while he says, "I've got you." He could very well have a good hand, it is true. But I would be less likely to believe someone who makes this statement than I would someone who makes a very specific statement like "I've got an overpair," or "I've got a straight." (But you should also always keep in mind two important points: 1) anyone willing to engage in conversation after they've bet is more likely to be strong than weak, and 2) bluffing players will typically not say things that could potentially piss their opponents off.)

With all things tell-related, you need to correlate. There will be some players who have no compunction about lying to your face about their hands. Such people should be placed in a special category in your mind, because most people will not feel comfortable doing that.

Liars

With people who *do* lie frequently, there is usually a pattern to their lies. Maybe they'll only say their hand is strong (when it's actually weak) when there's a big pot that they'd obviously like to take down; and maybe they'll only say their hand is strong (when it is actually strong) when the pot is small and they want to induce action from someone who thinks they're lying.

Or maybe they'll only lie based on how believable the situation is; if they're telling you they have top set after they've raised pre-flop, this is a lie, but if they're telling you they have an unlikely straight then that will be the truth.

I used to play in a limit game with a guy who adhered to this pattern. If he raised pre-flop and the board came out A-Q-3, he would insist that he had AQ, and that you should fold. This would almost always be a lie, because it was actually plausible that he had that hand. Whereas if he raised with 9-7 and flopped a straight, he'd be more likely to tell you the truth, just because he knew hardly anyone would give him credit for that hand. He liked telling the truth when he figured it wouldn't prevent him from getting action, and he liked lying when the lie was believable enough that it had a chance of getting people to lay down decent hands.

You might be able to simply correlate a player's hand strength with how much that player is talking. If you aren't able to correlate that, and you see no other patterns in their speech, you probably need to block out their chatter and concentrate on fundamental strategies.

Most people you play with will not be so gregarious that there will be a lot of "noise" to get in the way of analyzing their statements. When most players make a statement about their hand, you should listen to the statement and try to figure out what they are trying to accomplish.

EXPRESSING FEARS OF A BIGGER HAND

Players with good hands will sometimes feel relaxed enough to verbalize their fear of a better hand.

You're in a no-limit Hold'em tournament. You raise pre-flop with **K♥ Q♥**. A player behind you three-bets it and you call. The flop comes **K♠ 9♠ 3♥**. You check to your opponent and he bets. You call. The turn comes the **J♣**, giving you a gutshot to go with your pair. You bet out fairly big. Your opponent thinks for a while, shaking his head, and says, "Oh, man, you got a set of Jacks? I know you hit a set of Jacks." Then he pushes all-in. This speech makes you suspicious and you call. He shows you a set of 9s.

I hear this kind of thing pretty frequently. When a player has a good but not great hand, he will sometimes quite honestly express his fears that someone has hit a better hand. The first hand to enter his fevered imagination is naturally the most plausible hand that is better than his. In the hand just mentioned, if your opponent had pocket Jacks and had hit

a set, and if he had thought he might be beat, he might have said, “Oh, man, you got a set of Kings?” If he’d had a set of Kings, he might have said, “Oh, man, you got the straight?”

This tell only happens because the player has a strong hand. If he didn’t have a strong hand, he probably wouldn’t be relaxed enough to say anything. And if he did say something he probably wouldn’t be expressing concern.

And this tell doesn’t have to be an expression of very serious worry. In some cases, like in the set of 9s hand, it will be very unlikely that a player’s hand is beat. But the player is relaxed and says the first thing that comes to his mind. Also, stating his fear of a better hand, however unlikely, serves another purpose: expressing the possibility of being beat will make the player feel better in the event he is actually beat. In the set of 9s hand example, if you had actually beat the guy with a set of Jacks, he could say, “I knew you had a set of Jacks. But what could I do?”

COMPLAINING LESS

A player who has been complaining for quite some time, but who now is quiet and seemingly relaxed, probably caught a good hand.

Some players love to tell people about how bad they’re running. They tell everyone at the table about how they can’t get a hand, how all their hands get beat, how they can’t ever catch a straight or a flush, how everyone draws out on them, how they never get big pairs.

Some players will make it obvious how much they are disgusted with things, even during a hand. They’ll wear a disgusted look throughout every hand; they’ll shake their head in disbelief at their misfortune. Or maybe they’ll just have a subtle, perpetual scowl. If you’ve played cards for a while, you’ve seen this behavior before.

So when you see a player who’s acting like this suddenly change demeanor in the middle of a hand, you should be cautious. If this player is suddenly peaceful and friendly, and less grumpy than he’s been lately, then you should be on your guard. Try not to give him your money, so he can move on to complaining about how nobody ever calls him when he has a good hand.

SUMMARY

There are so many potential sources for tells, it begs the question, “How can you possibly observe all of this behavior at the table?”

The quick answer is: you can’t possibly observe and interpret all behavioral information while you’re playing poker. And you shouldn’t even try. Trying to observe everything at

the table will drive you nuts. Observing too intensely is draining and is not conducive to playing long sessions.

Not only that, worrying too much about tells distracts you from the much more important task of figuring out your opponents' basic playing tendencies and strategies. Focusing on fundamental strategy is by far the most important thing you should be doing with your mind when you're playing. Poker tells are something to pick up as you go, in those moments when your mind is not occupied, or after you already have a good understanding of your opponents' styles.

Experience will let you figure out what the most important tidbits of information are and how best to gather them. You will become more efficient at watching people. You will remember what has worked for you in the past.

Also, remember that there's no one correct way to study tells. Everyone will approach the information-gathering process differently. How you gather information at the table will be a function of your own personality and preferences. For example, I generally avoid any obvious watching of opponents; I prefer to gather information with peripheral vision and quick glances. More outgoing players might take a more in-your-face approach by staring at people or initiating conversations to actively gather information. I tend to focus a lot on eye contact tells and facial expression tells; others may find they read body posture or hand movements more easily. There is no correct method; there is just what you grow into and what feels natural to you.

You should think of the descriptions of common tells in this book as starting points to make your own observations. Some people will display many of these tells as I've described them. Others will show different variations of these tells, or tells completely opposite of the ones I've described. Some people will not have any noticeable tells.

There are no certainties when it comes to poker tells. But, over time, patterns become apparent. If you are attuned to the major ways tells can present themselves, you will pick up on some of those patterns. That was my goal with this book; to prepare you to observe tells no matter how they are presented, even when they aren't what I've described here. To make you better at watching people.

III. DECEPTION AND MANIPULATION

This section includes methods of manipulating your opponents to get them to change their actions, and methods of deceiving them about the value of your hand. Most of these maneuvers are of very limited usefulness. Although none of them are cheating, some of them could be considered morally questionable, or angle-shooting. Even if you believe some of these maneuvers are immoral or not worth using yourself, it pays to be aware of them so you can recognize when they are being used against you.

INFLUENCING PLAY IN MULTI-WAY POTS

By telegraphing an intended action (calling, folding, or raising) you might influence other players' actions.

Sometimes there are situations in multi-way pots where you can make your intentions known to your opponents in order to influence how things happen. Sometimes this can be for the sake of winning a pot; other times it can be just to gather information. Three examples:

1. A three-way pot. It's the river. You're last to act. The first player bets and you are fairly confident he's bluffing. You think the player who is second-to-act has a better hand than you, so you'd like him to fold so you can call or raise. To help accomplish this, you start to subtly stack chips as if you're planning on getting involved in the pot.
2. A three-way pot. It's the river. You're last to act. The first player bets and you know you are not calling. You'd like to influence the middle player to call so that you can see the first player's hand. To help accomplish this, you act as if you're going to fold.
3. Pre-flop in a limit Hold'em game. You have pocket Aces on the button. It's a very loose game and you'd like to reduce the number of opponents entering the pot in front of you. To help accomplish this, you prematurely hold out enough chips for a raise.

These are "truthful" tells; in #1 and #2, you are actually telegraphing what you will really do (provided the middle player obliges). In #3, you are telling the players in front of you that they can expect a raise.

In the situation in #1, when the first player bets, you start to gather your chips together as if you're going to call. This will usually serve to notify the middle player that you plan on calling. The reason this usually works, and the second player will believe you intend to at

least call, is that you usually don't have a reason to lie in this spot. If you're going to fold, there's not much point in pretending that you're going to call or raise (so the second player might think).

The second reason this works is because it's basically truthful—you really do intend to call (or bluff-raise), provided the second player folds. If other players have seen you perform this maneuver in the past, they may remember that it is a truthful tell and it will get more respect. Of course, if the second player calls, you can give an act of reconsidering your bet for a little while, as if you were going to call, but now you've got to think about it.

There is nothing wrong with having a truthful mannerism that announces what you really are going to do, provided you are fairly confident you know what the effects will be. And truthful feints like this one are much more capable of long-term use, unlike obviously false moves like [acting like you're going to call when heads-up and then folding to a bet](#).



These three players are in the pot together. The player on the left has bet. The player on the right is increasing the chances that the middle player calls by telegraphing her intention to fold.

In #2, you are purposefully performing [the indicating-a-fold tell](#). When the first player bets, you hold your cards as if you're about to muck them. As long as you're not doing this very often, most players will tend to take you at your word, just because it isn't often you see people be deceptive and act like they're going to fold and then raise. And if you perform this tell in spots where you actually do fold, it is even more believable.

Your opponents might think, "Oh, he's indicating a fold again; what a sucker." It can be okay to let them think that if you're only doing it when it's to your benefit. And of course you're not always indicating a fold every time you intend to fold, only when you have a reason to telegraph it.

The first two maneuvers are most useful on the last round of betting, when your actions are more likely to be seen as the genuine results of end-of-hand frustration (which is more likely to be truthfully shown in a multi-way pot).

Also keep in mind you should keep these indicating-your-action moves subtle. I'm assuming you're playing against fairly observant players who will pick up on subtle indicators. If you make it too obvious, like getting ready to stick your cards in the muck, or stacking your chips up for an obvious call, your opponents may draw attention to your bad manners, or think you're possibly colluding with another player (which, in an indirect way, you kind of are).

In the situation in #3, you are indicating a truthful raise. I'm sure you've played in very loose fixed-limit Hold'em games; the kind where there are regularly 6 people to the flop, and it's impossible to put anyone on any hand post-flop. Indicating your intention to raise pre-flop can be effective in cutting down the number of players who enter the pot.

By stacking up the chips for a raise and holding them conspicuously near the betting line or out in front of you, you let people know what your intentions are. You might even announce "raise" loudly, out-of-turn, in order to achieve the same effect. Unsubtle, yes, but it works in achieving that specific goal.

A move like this might seem weak because you're giving away information. And if you're playing with very good players, then I would recommend never doing such a thing. But when you're playing with mediocre players, and the action is really loose, there's not much downside to this maneuver. As poker players, we naturally rebel at actions that seem to give information away. But if an honest indication of what you're intending to do accomplishes something beneficial for you, there's not much argument against using it.

ACTING LIKE YOU'RE GOING TO BET

You can sometimes get a sense of an opponent's strength by acting as if you're going to bet.

It's a fixed limit game; you're first to act on the river. You've fired a bluff on the flop and the turn and you're considering firing the third barrel. You start stacking your chips up for a bet, but you are really just trying to get a reaction from your opponent. Your opponent, thinking you are betting, beats you into the pot, throwing his chips in for a pre-emptive call. You, of course, change your mind and fold.

That's a scenario I'm sure you've seen before. Let's take a look at another way this might work.

It's a no-limit Hold'em game. The river card has just arrived and you're first to act. Your hand is worthless. You start to stack your chips as if you're going to bet, just to try to get a reaction from your opponent. You look across the table and see your opponent stacking his chips as if preparing for a call. You have played with this player enough to know that

when he does this, he is trying to prevent you from betting and will likely fold. So you bet the pot and he folds. If you hadn't faked a potential bet and gotten that reaction from him, you would not have had that information.

If you're going to use this move to induce a tell, you should make your actions subtle. I'm just talking about touching your chips thoughtfully, or putting your hand near the chips. If a player is weak enough to perform a tell in reaction to this, it won't take much from you to induce that player to show it. So I don't recommend actually getting ready to put your chips in.

In some jurisdictions, making a forward motion with your chips, even if it's not completed, is considered a binding action and you will be forced to bet. Even if making a forward motion with your chips is not binding, you should be aware that a lot of people will still consider the maneuver angle-shooting and be angry with you. If the move is technically legal and you're comfortable with pissing people off, go right ahead, but just be aware that you might make some enemies.

I personally have never pushed my chips forward if I didn't intend to bet. But I don't have a problem with people who try such things. I always wait until a bet is fully completed before I act. If everyone at the poker table followed this same rule, no one would ever gain any information from performing these "tricky" maneuvers.



The action is on the player to the right. In an attempt to get a read on her opponent, she handles her chips as if she's going to bet. If the woman on the left is a good player, she'll give away zero information in this spot.

ACTING LIKE YOU'RE GOING TO CALL TO PREVENT A BET

By acting as if you're going to call, you might prevent an opponent's bet.

This is similar to the previous move. As Caro pointed out in his book, this maneuver replicates the [waiting-for-action grabbing-chips tell that indicates weakness](#). In this case, however, a good player can use this maneuver to gauge how strong an opponent is.

Here's how this one might work:

It's a limit Hold'em game and you're heads-up on the turn. You're second to act. You've got a gut shot straight draw with one overcard. If he bets, your opponent will have you beat the large majority of the time, although there is always the slight potential he could be betting worse hands than yours. Your opponent is reaching for his chips. Mirroring his action, you reach for your chips as if you're going to call. Your opponent's hand pauses, as if he's rethinking his bet. He checks to you. Your display of an intended call allowed you to stay in the hand, when you would have folded to a bet. Now you can either check behind or bet, depending on what you think is best.

This move should be limited to situations where you are definitely going to fold if your opponent bets. This might be useful against a very tight player who, when he bets, will have a hand that beats you the large majority of the time. For some weak and predictable opponents, setting up this slight psychological barrier to their bet will give you useful information. If a player continues with his bet, he is most likely strong and you can fold your hand as planned. If he rethinks his bet and checks, he is probably weak, and you can either check it down or make a bluff.

The thing you need to realize about discouraging your opponent's bet in this way is that, if it works, you're losing the opportunity to catch him bluffing. If your opponent is fairly aggressive, and he bluffs a good amount, and you have a bluff-catcher, then you might want him to bet. Don't use this move thinking you're being tricky when in fact you're being weak.

You should also realize that this maneuver has decreasing value if used more than once, because your observant opponents may notice that you are doing it and then folding when bet into. So be aware of what others may have noticed.

This maneuver is not very useful. I can think of only a handful of times in my life when I've used it. But against certain weak, predictable players, who will react in an expected way, it can come in handy. As I've said, this isn't a move to be used against experienced players, because they'll either interpret it for weakness or else know that you're fishing for information.

ACTING LIKE YOU'RE GOING TO CALL TO INDUCE A TELL

After an opponent has bet, you might induce a post-bet tell by acting as if you're going to call.

This is similar to the above maneuver, except you are performing it after an opponent has bet, not before he has bet. You are using the act of a potential call to induce a tell from an

opponent. For example, after your opponent bets, you act as if you're going to call. You reach for your chips and start to stack them out. This may cause your opponent to stop breathing for a few seconds. Or he may stop riffling his chips for a few moments. Or his smile may freeze on his face. Or some other clue may be given off by him.

Alternatively, you might see your opponent engage in relaxed behavior, like staring at you as you get your chips ready, or start talking to you, or the like. If you already have a good read on your opponent, this might tell you he is unconcerned about a potential call.

STALLING BEFORE PUTTING IN BET TO GET INFO

By stalling before putting in a bet or a raise amount in a no-limit game, you can get indications of what the people behind you intend to do.

In no-limit Hold'em, you can announce "bet" or "raise" before you put the amount of your bet or raise into the pot. This rule can be taken advantage of by announcing "bet" or "raise" and then waiting a few seconds to observe the out-of-turn actions by players behind you. Seeing people readying to fold or actually folding can of course be useful for sizing your bet. Seeing a player behind you who gives every indication he's ready to play will also be useful information.

Similarly, you can get reactions just by making it look like you're going to bet or raise, without committing to a raise. You may start to cut out chips for a bet and get a read on the people behind you. If you start to place a bet and you see the person behind you start to call, you can make the size of your bet smaller if you wish. If you start to put out a bet and see the person behind you obviously folding, you can feel safe about making your bet. (Be aware that some no-limit games will not allow you to cut out chips after you cross a betting line, so that any chips that cross the line will be counted as a bet. In such a game, this maneuver will not work.)

These type of maneuvers are probably the most immoral I've discussed in this book. For the record, I've never done either of these myself, but I have no problem with anyone who does. If you wait until it's your turn to act, and give no information away about your intended action, you will never be affected by people who do this kind of thing.

SHOWING SOMEONE YOUR HAND TO GATHER INFO

Showing or telling someone your hand can be used as a last-ditch effort to get a read on someone.

If you're reading someone well and he makes a substantial bet, you might consider telling that person your hand, or even showing him your hand, in order to get a reaction from him.

Here's an example. You're in a no-limit Hold'em cash game. You've got **T♠ 9♠** in the big blind. A loose, spazzy player in middle position raises it up and you call. You're both not very deep. The flop comes **J♠ T♥ 9♣**, giving you a vulnerable two pair. You decide to check to him. He bets the size of the pot. From his demeanor you decide he's got a good hand, with most of his range being behind your hand, and you want to try to get the money in now. You make a pot-sized raise and the player goes all-in for a pretty substantial over-bet.

This is a situation where you could easily be either way ahead or way behind. He could quite easily be doing this with AA, KK, or QQ. He knows you're an aggressive player and he's the type of player who would want to shut you out of the pot if he figures his overpair is good.

Just as easily he has any set, or KQ for the straight, or maybe JT for a better two pair. It's possible he'd play all of these hands the same way.

You've already played a good amount with this opponent and are reading him well. Right now he looks very confident; he is looking you in the eyes and his posture is relaxed; he doesn't seem worried. But his confidence doesn't really mean anything now, because he's going to feel confident with any hand in his range at this point, whether he's actually ahead or behind. (Plus the longer you wait, the more he's going to believe he's got the best hand.)

So you decide to throw a little wrench in the works. You turn your cards over, showing your hand, and say, "I've got two pair. Man, it's a tough decision. I don't think I can fold this." You look perplexed, shaking your head, and you count out chips for a possible call. (Showing your cards is not usually allowed in tournaments, but is usually allowed in cash games.)

Now you notice a change in his demeanor. He stops looking at you. His hands, which had been shuffling his chips, go still and sit kind of awkwardly on his cards. He gets a kind of tight smile on his face and does a little shrug, as if to say, "What can you do?" All of these signs look like a man who went from being sure he was ahead in the hand to someone who now is dreading a call.

Or, instead, let's say you showed him your hand and he acted in the following manner: he shook his head, while looking at you with kind of sad eyes, and said, "Oh, man, that's a tough decision." Or maybe he says, "Oh, you got two-pair?" while looking at you with raised, surprised eyes. Maybe he adjusts his glasses and double-checks his cards. Maybe he just looks superficially worried and sad. All of these signs individually, or taken in combination, point to a man who is putting on a show of concern, but who is actually relaxed and not really minding a call.

Of course, all of this is dependent on how well you're reading the guy in the first place. You may not get any information from him. You usually won't. But the point is: if you're on the fence about what to do, there's no downside to trying to get some extra information.

“WILL YOU SHOW IF I FOLD?” AND OTHER CONVERSATIONAL PROBES

You may use conversational gambits during a hand to gather information from your opponents.

There are a number of things frequently heard at the poker table. Some of them are questions like:

- *“Will you show if I fold?”*
- *“What do you have?”*
- *“Are you bluffing?”*
- *“Why’d you bet so much?”*
- *“How much have you got left?”*

These questions are asked honestly or naively by most players.

Let’s take the “Will you show if I fold?” question. Weak players use the question honestly. They’re hoping somebody will show them a better hand so they can rest easier in their fold. If they get shown a bluff, at least their curiosity will be sated.

When good players ask this question, they’re usually looking for information. Assuming pretty weak competition, a player who answers “yes” to this question has a weak hand. The reasoning goes: if a player had a good hand, he wouldn’t agree to show it if his opponent folded; he’d want his opponent to have to call to satisfy his curiosity. He doesn’t want to give information for free. He wants to get paid.

But that’s a pretty obvious bit of psychology, and even most amateurs are familiar with that concept. This makes any player’s verbal response to this question of dubious usefulness. What most good players are looking for, more than an actual answer, is how the player acts when he responds. Using the tells described in the Post-Bet section, particularly in regards to looseness and anxiety, a good player can get some clues as to an opponent’s comfort level.

For example, let’s say you are trying to figure out if a player is bluffing or value-betting, so you ask, “Will you show if I fold?” The player, who is usually moderately talkative in a hand, sits stiffly with an awkward smile on his face, but doesn’t look at you, then says, “Maybe” in a congenial way.

What might we conclude? He isn’t being talkative, he seems to be avoiding eye contact, he has an awkward (possibly fake) smile, his statement is friendly and unthreatening, and he doesn’t act at all perturbed by your question. All of these things are more indicative of a bluff than a value-bet.

Same situation: you ask the question and he says jokingly, in a very relaxed manner, “Why would you want to know a thing like that?” He’s more relaxed, and willing to engage in playful banter. He’s also making eye contact with you this time. Those are all signs of someone not afraid of being called.

What about a third alternative? You ask him the question and he says, “No” or, “Just play the game” in a gruff manner. Someone who has made a bet and then engages in aggressive or rude behavior, even in a small way, will not usually be bluffing. As you should know by now, most bluffers are likely to act conciliatory. [Players with big hands aren't afraid of saying potentially rude or aggressive things to their opponent.](#)

Good players will use questions like this one to gather information. Good players will notice what a bad player says, how he looks, and how relaxed he seems to be. Good players have accumulated a large mental database of people's actions and statements and what these things typically mean.

Using humor

Humor is also a good way to interact with people when they may avoid other methods of interaction.

There's something to be said for being a comedian at the poker table, if you know what to do with people's reactions. Many players don't know how to react well to joking, especially in higher stakes games. They might joke along with you, which can sometimes tell you that they're relaxed in that situation. Or maybe they'll get visibly irritated with the joking, which could also clue you in that they are feeling relaxed. Maybe a player who usually jokes around a lot clams up and seems uncomfortable when you joke with him in a big pot, which might tell you he's anxious. Unless people remain completely stoic, they are probably giving away information.

Using feigned anger

I have seen good players purposefully aggravate their opponents in order to get information. An example of this would be a good no-limit player who responds to a big bet on the river by berating his opponent's play. “You're just fucking horrible. Just horrible. You are the most clueless player at this table.”

As you've learned, how irritated a player allows himself to get can tell you a lot about his hand strength. A bluffing player is more likely to stay friendly or stoic, whereas a player who is value-betting is more relaxed and is more apt to let their real irritation or anger show. By purposefully irritating a player in a key spot, you might pick up some clues. (But of course you should always be careful who you're making enemies with.)

Using feigned confusion

Another little trick is acting like you're uncertain of the action. For example, let's say your opponent has bet all-in on the river for the amount of \$900, and you're on the fence about what to do. So you ask, “that's \$500, right?” and act like you're getting ready to call. If your opponent is bluffing, he may nervously try to inform you that the amount of the bet is larger, in the hopes that you will rethink your call. If he actually wants a call,

chances are he won't say anything, because he'd like you to commit yourself to the call, whether you know the correct amount or not.

In other situations, feigning confusion can sometimes result in people giving away information about their level of relaxation. A relaxed person, for example, might quickly volunteer to clarify things for you, whereas an anxious person will tend to interact with you minimally.

Don't talk too much

If you do try to gather information by being verbally tricky, don't make the mistake of talking too much. These kind of conversational gambits should be used sparingly, if at all. They are mostly for spots where you're on the fence about what the right move is and you're looking for a little bit of information. Some people try to amaze everyone at the table with their linguistic acrobatics, and they usually end up outplaying themselves by giving away more information than they're gathering.

LYING ABOUT YOUR HAND IN A FRIENDLY WAY

This is a useful strategy for keeping a player friendly toward you without showing him how you play.

Let's say there's a fish in a no-limit game with whom you've become friendly. At some point you bluff him out of a pot on the river. He folds and asks, "You hit the flush, huh? Come on, let me see it."

You don't want to show him your bluff; you'd rather let him think you had a good hand. But you don't want to say you had a good hand and not show the cards, either, because that isn't usually perceived as being very friendly. So instead, you fold your hand and tell him, "I wouldn't mind showing *you*, but I don't want to show all these other people. I'll tell you later." He's appeased and stays friendly. Then later you can tell him whatever you want about the hand.

"GOOD BLUFF"

An attempt to get a weak player to show his cards.

After a mediocre player has bet and his opponent has folded, and if I'm curious what the mediocre player held, I will frequently say "good bluff" in a very serious tone of voice. This will sometimes result in the player turning his hand face up or else telling me what he had. People sometimes do this out of a desire to prove me wrong and show that I'm

not as smart as I think. Or sometimes, with players I'm sitting next to, they'll lean in and whisper what they had out of a sense of camaraderie.

This works a surprising percentage of the time, even sometimes when I think it's very unlikely, considering the stakes. If it doesn't work, it doesn't work, but it has no real downside other than potentially irritating someone.

IMAGE-BUILDING

By how you talk and conduct yourself at the table, you can build an image and reinforce the mistakes of other players.

Your "image" at the table refers to how other players perceive you. You can build an image just by the way you play your cards. You might be perceived as a LAG, or a rock, or unpredictable, or known for big river bluffs, or a degenerate gambler, or more than one of these things. A good poker player knows how he is perceived by his opponents. He keeps track of how that perception can change due to game conditions, and tries to take advantage of how other players perceive him.

With players who don't know you, you can also build an image with how you talk and how you hold yourself. You may strive to give off an image of being wealthy and uncaring about the money. You may attempt to act less knowledgeable about poker than you are. If your act is convincing, most poker players, even competent ones, will apply the logic of Occam's Razor and come to the most-likely conclusion: that you're a mediocre player, not a good player trying to act like a mediocre player. It's a logical conclusion because there are many more mediocre players than there are good players.

The most useful images to build are the ones that influence your opponents to play in certain, predictable ways. For instance, it's widely recognized that if your opponents are playing too tight, you'd like to influence them to play even tighter. Similarly, if your opponents are playing too loose, you'd like to influence them to play even looser. Ideally, you'd like to exaggerate their basic mistakes to make them even easier to play against.

What does this mean in practice? Let's say you're playing an opponent that folds too much. Generally speaking, you wouldn't want to show this opponent your bluffs, because that would encourage him to start calling more, and play a better strategy. It's a much better plan to try to encourage him to continue folding, and to even fold more if possible. How might you do this?

Doyle Brunson pointed out one strategic way to accomplish this in his book *SuperSystem*. He recommended to be aggressive, but not overly aggressive, so that the opponent's attention isn't drawn to how much he is being bullied. If he becomes aware that he's being bullied, he'll take more stands against you and play closer to correct strategy. Being aggressive, but not overly aggressive, allows you to continually steal pots from him without him becoming attuned to what is happening. (Although, with the right players, getting them angry and on tilt could be just what you want to accomplish.)

Another method, which is more psychological than strategic, would be to choose what hands you show to this player and what kinds of things you say to him. For instance, when you actually have a strong hand, and he folds, you might choose to show it to him, to reinforce his idea that you are getting involved only with good cards. You might act disappointed that he has folded in a big pot, so he gets the idea that you'd prefer him to not fold as much. When you bluff him off a big pot and he asks you what you had, you could choose to lie and tell him you had a big hand. These are all ways to subtly encourage him to continue folding.

Similarly, with players who are too loose, you'd like to encourage them to play even looser. You want to encourage their fundamental mistakes. With these players, you might show them your bluffs and you might tell them that you bluffed them out of a pot when you were actually value-betting.

With opponents who are too aggressive, but not good, you might want to increase their aggression. You might imply that you are reluctantly folding decent hands, or even show a fairly strong hand that you folded, in an attempt to increase their aggression. If they think you're afraid to play a big pot without the nuts, it increases the chances that they will make big careless bluffs against you.

Sometimes, though, you want players to slow down against you in order to make them more predictable. If you're playing with decent, aggressive competition, it might be to your advantage to make them think you're willing to call down very light. This might be an image you establish by actually calling down light a couple times, or you could try to establish this image by only giving the impression that you're willing to call down light. For example, if you make a typical call against someone on the river with an overpair, and you lose, and someone asks you what you had, you might say you only had second pair, or top pair with a weak kicker, in an effort to appear more "unbluffable."

When trying to build an image with your words, you shouldn't make your performance over-the-top. For instance, in the example where you're telling someone you called down pretty light, you shouldn't tell them you called with a ridiculous hand, like bottom pair. No one's going to believe you if you say you're always calling down really light but you're playing very few pots. And no one's going to believe you if you claim you're always bluffing but you're playing very few pots. Your lies and deception should be subtle and believable, and fit in believably with your observable playing style.

FALSE TELLS

For many people, false tells conjure the following kind of story to mind:

In a big no-limit Hold'em game, a player exclaims, "Hot damn!" every time he's bluffing. He does this all night long, bluffing at small pots here and there and saying "Hot damn" until he's sure most of his opponents have picked up on his tell. He waits for a huge pot to develop when he's holding the nuts. Then he makes a huge bet and exclaims, "Hot damn!", which causes his "observant" opponent to call him.

It's a fun story. But there's a number of reasons why this thing will hardly ever happen in real life. For one thing, all the times the hero of this story is saying "hot damn", he must also be bluffing at a pot and he must also get caught bluffing, in order to build up the tell in his opponents' minds. In order to set someone up for his false tell, he's losing money by playing sub-optimally.

He also has to wait for the perfect situation in which to cash in on this false tell. The game would have to be very deep to justify this kind of deception. Even in a deep game, and assuming his false tell is perceived just as he wants it to be perceived, there's no assurance the perfect all-in situation would come up that would reward him for this whole act.

The third problem is that he can't be sure that his opponents are even noticing his act. If they're savvy enough to notice his behavior, they might be savvy enough to realize what he's doing.

So you can forget about using false tells for long, complicated, meta-game fake-outs, like we saw in that story. The most useful method of using false tells is just by faking well-known poker tells against somewhat-decent opponents. And these opponents should also be strangers to you, so that they're more likely to give you credit for being a fish and therefore believe your tells.

A simple example of this: you've sat down in a no-limit Hold'em game, with players you've never played with before. You're heads-up against a tight, decent player on the turn. You think he's very likely ahead, so you make a substantial bluff while saying in an uncertain tone of voice, "I guess I'll bet" and shrugging. Now, if you've pegged your opponent right, he'll have enough basic poker tell knowledge to interpret your actions as indicative of great strength, and he'll fold.

Mimicking a common tell like that is, in my opinion, the only practical way to use false tells. It's not something worth doing very often, but it can sometimes be a useful trick when playing with new opponents.

Faking common tells will tend to work against even quite experienced players. In the example I just gave, a very good player may notice your behavior and it might occur to him that you're performing a false tell. But false tells are just so rare; if the good player doesn't have any other knowledge of you, he will have to assume the most likely explanation: that you're just a fish.

Also, even if a player thinks it's possible you might be performing a false tell, most players don't want to risk being wrong in such a situation. If you perform a tell that your opponent knows usually means great strength, your opponent doesn't want to feel stupid by calling you just because he has a hunch you're performing a false tell. Because if he calls you and you turn over a good hand and he loses, he's going to have the added pain of knowing he spotted a common tell and didn't act on it as he should have.

Again, faking false tells should only be used against strangers, because strangers won't know your playing style, or how skilled you are. Strangers will always be more likely to believe you are a fish than believe you are a decent player pulling a complicated move on them. This is just because there are a lot more fish than there are good players.

The other reason you really can't use false tells against players you play with regularly is because false tells have rapidly diminishing value. If a regular player sees you using false tells a couple times, he'll adjust, even if he just adjusts by ignoring your behavior altogether. If you continue to try to fake regular players out, you'll get into a complicated mental war with them where you won't be able to predict how your premeditated tells will be perceived by them.

Here are a few more examples of how some common tells can be used as false tells:

Example 1: I'm in a no-limit Hold'em game with strangers. I'm heads-up against a tight pre-flop raiser. I flop a flush draw. I think it's likely my opponent has an overpair and will call any semi-bluff bet or check-raise I might make, so I just call his bet on the flop. The turn brings a blank. I think if I check, I'm probably in for a large bet if he has an overpair. If I bet out a standard amount, I'll be raised if he has the probable overpair. So I put on an expression of obvious disappointment, shake my head in a disgusted way, and I bet a third of the pot. My opponent looks at me with a bewildered look on his face and just calls. My false tell of looking disappointed (meaning strength to many players, even inexperienced ones) probably enabled me to get a cheap draw.

Example 2: I'm heads-up in a no-limit Hold'em tournament. It's the turn and I have a flush draw and a straight draw. My opponent makes a substantial bet. I think for a while with a disappointed look on my face, and then push all my chips in while saying, "Well, I've only got a little bit left. Might as well go all-in." The player looks at me knowingly for a while, shaking his head. [He knows what it means when a typical player makes excuses for going all-in.](#) He folds.

Example 3: It's a no-limit Hold'em game. I'm heads-up with a good player who I've only played a few pots with. I have a strong hand and make a bet on the river that I think it's unlikely he will call. In order to add to my chances of getting called, I get very still after betting and put a small, slight smile on my face. (Both of these are tells good players know bluffers often have.) He studies me a while and calls my bet.

Example 4: In a no-limit Hold'em game, I'm against a decent player on the river. I make a value-bet and he thinks about calling. When he reaches for his chips to shuffle them, I fake [the tell of threatening to turn my cards over](#). Seeing this well-known tell for weakness, he calls my bet.

Example 5: Here's one example of a false tell I used to use pretty regularly. It was a no-limit game, and there was an old man who was pretty decent, but who had a few glaring weaknesses in his game. If someone waited a really long time before betting, he would invariably think they were trying to Hollywood him with a strong hand (which is generally a good assumption in most games). He'd give their bet way too much respect and he would fold very good hands, sometimes face-up, saying something like, "Nice

try.” I would occasionally use this knowledge against him when we were heads-up and I wanted to pull off a bluff. I’d wait a very long time and then bet or raise. He always folded when I did this. (Of course, if he ever were to call me and see what I’d done, I would have to adjust.)

Example 6: A long pause followed by a check is frequently a tell of weakness amongst predictable players. Decent players are aware of this. Against decent players, I’ll occasionally try to induce a bluff by taking a long time to check to them.

Bluffing and the “Calling Reflex”

As has been pointed out, it’s a natural instinct for bluffers to get quiet and still. You might surmise that because of this, you’d be better off acting animated and physically loose when bluffing. But this would be a mistake.

As Mike Caro pointed out in his book, bad poker players have what he termed a “calling reflex.” Many gamblers are just looking for excuses to put their money in the pot. You don’t want to do fancy psychological tricks with these players when you’re bluffing, because they’re liable to perceive anything out-of-the-ordinary as giving them a reason to make a call against you. The best general advice is to remain consistently unreadable whether you’re bluffing or value-betting.

I’ve occasionally faked the false tell of being talkative (when I was bluffing) with players who I thought were decent enough to interpret my false tell in the way I wanted it to be interpreted. But, 99% of the time, you should just have a consistent style of behavior so you won’t have to worry about trying to psych out your opponents in such ways.

“Fancy play syndrome” and false tells

When first starting out at live poker, I used to be way too fancy for my own good when it came to false tells. I was constantly trying to deceive my opponents with complex acts, even though most of my opponents were not thinking much beyond what their hand was.

The most important thing I’ve since realized is this: *you should not perform an action unless you have a relatively good idea of what the consequences of that action will be.*

This could apply to any action you take in poker, or in any game, or in most real life situations. Ideally, you want to know how people are likely to respond to your actions. For example, before you bluff-raise the river, you should have some reason to believe it’s probable your opponent will fold (or at least will fold often enough for your bet to result in a positive expected value).

As the lesson applies to false tells, the lesson is: don’t present a false tell if you’re not pretty sure how it will be perceived. Against most opponents, good or bad, it is hard to predict how they will interpret your actions. If they are bad players, it’s a crapshoot as to what strange conclusions they will draw from your behavior. If they are good players, it’s likely they can figure out what you’re doing. If you don’t have a good idea how your deception will be interpreted, you should just focus on playing your A-game.

There are many players who try to perform false tells only when they have strong hands, because those are the moments when they are relaxed enough to try such a thing. For example, some players with strong hands will try to consciously “look weak” by feigning uncertainty, or looking down at the table, or doing something else that is out-of-the-ordinary for them. These players are only thinking of the specific hand they’re playing, and not how people may be observing their behavior over the course of many hands. In this way, their attempts at false tells actually become their tells.

BECOMING UNREADABLE

In most lower limit games, eliminating your own tells doesn’t much matter. Most people are very unobservant. But the tougher your competition becomes, the more you should try to become unreadable. Becoming unreadable is more than just wearing a completely stoic poker face at all times (although that will help). If you’ve read this whole book, you know there are quite a number of ways a person can leak information. I’ll go through a few ways you can start trying to limit the more common tells.

Bet-timing tells

How long you take before calling, betting, or raising can reveal information about your hand. For example, some player’s immediate calls can narrow their hand range a lot. For another example, some players will never bet immediately as a bluff. If you’re playing against observant opponents, you’ll want to balance your bet-timing range so you’re not giving away any information.

One way to do this is to occasionally take a significant amount of time even when the decision to call or bet seems obvious. This will establish in your opponents’ minds that you’re capable of taking a long time to make an “obvious” decision. This will allow you extra thinking time in hands where you really need it, without making it obvious to an observant player that you are doing something out of the ordinary. This is what it means to “balance” your bet-timing range.

In most games I play, even limit, I always wait at least a couple seconds before acting, no matter how insignificant the action seems. This was a discipline I originally began to follow to give myself a little extra thinking time, even when things seemed obvious. But it also has the added benefit of making me more unreadable.

Eye Tells

Where you look after you bet is a major source of information leakage. As is the amount of eye-contact you make with your opponents in different spots. When playing against good competition, you should try to remain consistent with your eye patterns, especially after betting, as this is when you are most under observation. One strategy for post-bet

behavior is to stare at the middle of the table and to remain as motionless as possible. This is the strategy taken by a lot of professionals in big-bet games.

Betting motion tells

Study your own betting motion tells. Do you sometimes toss chips in forcefully when you have a good hand? Or do you do that when you're bluffing? Try to make your actions consistent and unreadable. Find a way you're comfortable betting, and then force yourself to make that same motion every time you bet.

If you've read this book thus far, you are aware of the many ways poker tells can show up, so you'll know how to limit your own behavioral leaks. In most games, though, trying to always be completely unreadable might not be the best business strategy, because it might make you seem too intense and serious, which can lead to people playing harder against you. Also, constantly staying completely stoic gets kind of stressful after a while.

For these reasons, you might decide it best to assume a more friendly and relaxed demeanor for most situations, while reserving your full-on game-face for the serious spots. You might make a personal rule that says you will only enter your "unreadable" mode when the pot gets over a certain amount of money, or only after the turn or the river. This also reserves your focus for those tough spots when you really need it most.

Those are just a few examples of things you should probably think about when playing against tough competition. Only with experience will you get to a point where you can remain unreadable while still feeling comfortable and relaxed at the table.

APPENDICES

About Me

I used to be a professional poker player. I'm not a full-time pro now, although I do still supplement my income with poker. I quit the game primarily for psychological reasons. I realized it takes certain psychological characteristics to be—and remain—a professional poker player. I don't think I possess those necessary characteristics. Long story short: poker stresses me out too much, and I've discovered I'm much happier when I'm not playing it all the time.

I'm not a well-known poker player. There aren't any big tournaments I've won or famous players who know me. During the time when I played full-time, I played mostly in casinos in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and online. I never played very high; the highest cash games I've played regularly are \$20-40 limit and \$5-10 no-limit.

Also for the record, I don't consider myself an excellent poker player. There are many people with better fundamental skills than me. I'm aware that I've chosen to concentrate on an area of poker that is less important than learning fundamental strategy.

I am a long-time student of poker psychology, but I would never exaggerate and make the claim that I am a “guru” or “expert” on poker tells. Personally, I think I've reached maybe only 60% of my full potential when it comes to reading people. However, having said that, I also believe I'm more knowledgeable on this subject than 99% of the poker population—and that includes a lot of professional players, some of whom underestimate what you can do with tells. But with poker psychology, as with poker strategy, there's always so much more to learn.

Considering all of this, you might ask: why should you listen to me? There are a few reasons.

While I'm not a famous player or a very high-stakes player, I've had very good results. And I attribute a good chunk of my success to my understanding of the verbal and physical behavior of my opponents.

Also, since first publishing this book in 2012, I've been hired as a poker behavior consultant for two players who made the World Series of Poker Main Event final table. My work involved studying footage of them and their opponents for behavioral patterns. This has been educational to me because it gave me a chance to study strong, serious players in high-stakes environments.

The main reason you should listen to me, though, is simply because there are no better players writing about tells. Most players with good tell-reading ability (and assuming they also have decent fundamentals) are actively engaged in taking money from people at the table, and not just writing about it. This is the only reason I can think of why there hasn't been a better book on poker tells since Mike Caro's book 30 years ago. (And truthfully, if I enjoyed playing poker just a little bit more than I do, the book you're reading probably would never have been written.)

Most poker tell books that have been written in recent years, in my opinion, are pretty bad, for a number of reasons. Some of them are written by amateur poker players who play very low stakes—i.e., they are primarily writers and not poker players. There are a couple books written by Joe Navarro, a former FBI agent who freely admits he doesn't play poker—and while I'm sure he knows a lot about general behavioral concepts and about interrogating criminals, I don't believe many of his observations translate to the poker table.

The main problem with these books as a whole is that they tend to basically be a list of different tells. They don't teach the situational importance of tells or all of the factors you need to weigh when observing tells. Also, I just flat out disagree with a lot of the information in the books. I think the reason my book is better is because I actually play at significant stakes and I have ideas on how to incorporate tell-reading into an overall poker strategy. Listing a bunch of possible tells is the easy part, and anyone could do the research to come up with such a list. Explaining how to use those tells practically at the poker table is the valuable, and more difficult, part. That's what I hope my resources do for people.

And just because I wrote a book on the subject, please don't think that I consider reading tells to be the most important skill in poker. I don't believe that—not by a long shot. But I do believe reliable tells are much more prevalent than most people, even many professional players, realize. I believe working on your tell-reading ability opens up a whole new area for information gathering, and this can add substantially to your win rate.

I have another purpose for writing this book: a purpose that makes it worthwhile for amateurs, too. I have kind of a love-hate relationship with poker, which you may already have picked up on. I find a lot of the poker world unsavory: the taking advantage of problem gamblers, the milking of the unskilled, the thinly-veiled greed and self-interest, and the egotistical pride of many winning players who are usually doing nothing more impressive than slowly accumulating the money of people who are less intelligent than them.

I used to play regularly with a young guy who ended up getting murdered. The case hasn't been solved, as far as I know, but it was assumed by everyone that it was related to his addiction to playing poker (very badly I should add), and to needing money to fund that addiction. I've also known many people who were losing players but who were able to fool themselves into thinking they were winning players. I've known people, even some winning players, whose quality of life has been made worse by the game and the lifestyle that usually comes with it.

I've found that poker seems to attract a different class of losers than other kinds of gambling: more intelligent losers, maybe, who are more capable of creating convincing self-delusions. It's easy to say that poker is a game of skill, like chess, and therefore people know what they're getting themselves into. But in reality, most people completely underestimate the complexity of the game and can't understand how bad they actually are.

For example, there are a lot of players who think they are experts because they can beat lower-stakes games, but who don't realize they are very outmatched when they move up to bigger games. These players are smart, and technically could be winning players

against most of the population, but their delusion is in overestimating their own strength and in underestimating the many factors that better players are taking into account at the higher levels. These players can get stuck in ruts of accumulating money and then going broke, over and over again, all while convinced that they are just unlucky.

Poker is full of its own desperate ambience—different from the pit games, more stoic and intellectual, but still often low and tragic.

So, even if you don't know much about poker, or if you've only been playing a year or two, you could benefit from this book. I want to show you how much you could be outmatched by your more serious opponents. There are good players who are watching you and who know how to read you. Even if you don't care about becoming an expert at poker psychology, if you're going to play this game you should learn that it's important to be as unreadable as possible.

Good players might say, "Don't tap the glass!" I know, I know. But the truth is, it doesn't matter how much you tap the glass. The fish will always be there.

Common Criticisms of Using Poker Tells

In Dan Harrington's book, *How to Win at No Limit Hold'em Money Games Volume II*, he devotes a chapter to the importance of tells. It's a great strategy book, as most of Harrington's books are, but I think he does a disservice to the art of reading tells. I think his arguments as to why tells are not important are some of the most commonly repeated ones—and I think his arguments are mostly wrong.

Harrington, in his Evaluating Tells chapter, says he takes a "contrarian approach to the business of tells" and that he's going to argue that "the whole science of spotting tells is more difficult and less useful than people suppose." He says reading tells is "the icing on the cake" (which I agree with) and that it can get you that "last fraction of a percent of vigorish." I disagree with that: I think being good at reading players can increase your live win rate a lot.

Here are Harrington's arguments as to why reading physical tells is unimportant, accompanied with my arguments as to why he's wrong:

Problem #1 - Finding tells is difficult.

The first problem he presents is that finding a tell is difficult. He says spotting tells isn't easy, that sometimes people fold and you can't see their hand, that you have to match people's actions in specific situations to their actions in specific situations later, and that there are lots of people you're supposed to be watching. He says "it's a daunting task."

I agree that reading tells is not easy. Poker is full of daunting tasks. This is just another one. Since when is the fact that something is difficult a reason to not study it?

In the course of even an hour of play, you can see many situations that allow you to correlate a player's body language in certain situations to their relative hand strength.

Also, live play can be extremely slow, especially in no-limit. There are plenty of opportunities to study your opponents when you are not in a hand, and studying them at this time will not often take away from other important fundamental observations about their play.

Problem #2: It's hard to tell whether a tell is real or random.

Continuing with the same “it’s hard” argument, Harrington points out that it can be difficult to tell whether someone’s movement or gesture indicates something about the hand or just something random that they did.

Again, I agree it can be difficult to study people. Most poker players give up when faced with the difficulty of studying people. Does that mean it’s a bad idea to study people?

Problem #3: Is the tell real or deception?

Harrington points out that some opponents will actively send out false signals. This is basically another “it’s hard” argument. He says “you may have to observe someone for quite a while before you can sort things out.”

This is true; against decent players you’ll have to correlate their behavior to their hand strength a few times before you find tells that are reliable.

But you should remember: no one forces you to act on a tell. A tell’s importance should be weighted based on how reliable you think it is. If you feel, either because you’ve no prior knowledge of an opponent, or because you’ve seen him act several contradictory ways when in similar situations, that the player’s body language isn’t reliable, then you’ll simply discount it. When in doubt, just forget about it and play with your best fundamental strategy.

Problem #4 - It's hard to tell what a tell means.

Harrington then thinks up the scenario where you have a sure tell on a player named Transparent Ted. You know when Ted stares at you after he bets that he’s got a good hand (this is not the tell used in Harrington’s book; just a more realistic one). Harrington then describes a river card that makes Ted bet and then perform his tell: i.e., stare at you.

But the board has a possible straight, a possible flush, and a possible full house. You have the lowest full house possible.

Harrington makes the observation that because your opponent could consider himself strong with a wide range of hands (some of which you beat, some of which you don’t) the tell has become meaningless. This point, although presented well, doesn’t hold much water. Sure, in this specific situation, the tell doesn’t help us reach a good conclusion. But for every situation with this amount of uncertainty, you’ll probably have five more where an opponent’s tell (if reliable) will more surely clue you into what they have and more surely decide your action. Not many boards are going to have a lot of huge hands

possible, and the number of possible hands is even lower when you factor in being able to eliminate unlikely hands based on a player's range.

Harrington accurately describes the process of finding a reliable tell: "It's passed all the tests—you spotted it, it's not random, and you're sure [the player's] oblivious to the tell, so it's not deceptive."

The funny thing is that Harrington concedes that it is possible to have such a tell on an opponent, but he still goes out of his way to present an unlikely hand to illustrate to us that tells are not that useful.

I think it's pretty apparent that it's easier to imagine scenarios where a reliable tell is important than it is to imagine scenarios where a tell doesn't help at all. I don't think it's necessary to point out all the different ways where knowing when an opponent considers himself strong or weak might come in handy.

Even for tells that are not as reliable as the one Harrington describes, there is a lot of value. There are plenty of poker situations where the correct choice is not readily apparent from a purely logical perspective. There are often situations where two opposite actions can seem to have equal expected value. Reading a potential physical tell, even if it is only slightly reliable, means you have additional information that is not available to other players. Even if you're right only a little bit more than you're wrong in these potentially break-even situations, you're adding to your bottom line substantially by making more-informed plays. A little bit of information can go a long way.

I think Harrington's apathy to tells is a common misconception amongst winning players who concentrate solely on fundamentals. When you've had a lot of success at something, it is hard to imagine that someone else may know something you don't already know. It's easy to believe that because you've succeeded, your growth as a player has reached its highest point. Harrington's success does support the idea that you don't have to be good at reading tells to be a big winner at poker. What I'm saying is that I believe he'd be an even bigger winner if he was better at reading and using poker tells.

I picked Dan Harrington's arguments because they were the best arguments I could find against tells, and because I think they represent many people's thoughts on the subject. I think when examined logically, it's easy to see that there is a lot of value in learning how to read tells, even if they are the "icing on the cake."

Tips on using tells

These are just a few miscellaneous tips on observing tells that I couldn't easily fit into other sections.

- When you first sit down, you should make it a habit to study the loosest players for tells first. Because they are in more pots, you'll have plenty of opportunity to study them and chances to play with them.

- Study your own tells to learn about other people's tells. Notice what you do when you bluff. Notice how you act when you value-bet. I have learned the most about tells by studying myself.
- The importance of intuition is over-rated by beginners. Good players primarily base their reads and actions off of information they've observed and correlated to specific situations. If you "go with your gut", it should be in very close situations, where there is no solid information for or against a decision.
- Even in situations where you are certain you are going to call your opponent's last bet, it can be advantageous to study your opponent for a moment or two. It's a good chance to study the player's post-bet behavior and correlate it immediately with his hand strength. (Don't take too long to call with a lock, though, or you risk pissing someone off.)
- The real value of sunglasses is not because they cover up your own tells. Their real value is that they hide the direction of your gaze. Wearing sunglasses allows you to study people as much as you want, without cluing them in to how much you are watching them. If they don't know they are being watched, they are less likely to "raise their shields" against you.
- In games with very annoying people, you can wear headphones with the music turned off. This lets you get away with not talking to people, and you'll still be able to listen to the conversation around you. You'll also find that people will be more loose with their words when they think you can't hear what they're saying.

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