GOLF RULES FOR YOUR FIRST ROUNDS

Rules 4.1b, 13, 14.3, 16.1, 17, 18 and 19, Rules of Golf (2023 edition) Last checked Nov 1, 2026

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> **Carry no more than 14 clubs and play the ball as it lies. Most of the rest comes down to four situations, each with a set answer. A lost or out-of-bounds ball costs one stroke and a replay. A ball in a penalty area or an unplayable ball costs one stroke and a drop. Cart paths and other course conditions get a free drop.**

You don't need to know the whole rulebook to play a fair round. These are the situations that come up in almost every beginner's round, and what the rules say to do.

BEFORE YOU TEE OFF

- **No more than 14 clubs.** Carrying more costs two penalty strokes for each hole where it happened, up to four in a round.
- **Put a mark on your ball** so you can tell it apart. Playing someone else's ball by mistake costs two strokes, and you then have to play your own.
- **Tee up between the markers**, and no more than two club-lengths behind them.

PLAY IT AS IT LIES

Hit the ball from where it stops. Don't press down the grass behind it, break branches or move it to a better spot. When the rules let you move it, they also tell you exactly where to put it, as below.

LOST BALL OR OUT OF BOUNDS

White stakes or lines mark **out of bounds**. A ball is **lost** if you can't find it within **3 minutes** of starting to look.

Either way, the answer is **stroke and distance**: add one penalty stroke and play again from where you hit the last shot. Lose your tee shot and you are hitting your third shot, from the tee.

To save the walk back, hit a **provisional ball** as soon as you think your ball might be out of bounds or lost outside a penalty area. Say the word "provisional" before you hit it. If you find the first ball in bounds, keep playing it and pick up the provisional; if not, the provisional becomes your ball, with the penalty stroke counted.

Many courses add a local rule that lets you skip the trip back. You drop near where the ball was lost or went out of bounds, and it costs **two penalty strokes**. Check the scorecard, or ask in the pro shop. More on out of bounds and lost balls and the provisional ball.

PENALTY AREAS: YELLOW AND RED

Water hazards are now **penalty areas**, marked with yellow or red stakes or lines. You may always play the ball as it lies, with no penalty. Or, for **one penalty stroke**:

- **Yellow:** play again from where you last hit, or drop behind the penalty area. To drop behind it, keep the point where your ball last crossed into it between you and the hole, as far back on that line as you like.
- **Red:** the same two choices, plus a drop within **two club-lengths** of where the ball last crossed into the area, no nearer the hole.

More on penalty areas.

UNPLAYABLE BALL

Stuck under a bush? You decide when a ball is unplayable, anywhere except in a penalty area. For **one penalty stroke**, you can:

- play again from where you last hit;
- drop back on a line from the hole through the ball, as far back as you like;
- drop within **two club-lengths** of the ball, no nearer the hole.

In a bunker, the last two choices have to stay in the bunker. For **two penalty strokes** you can drop outside the bunker instead, back on the line from the hole through the ball. More on the unplayable ball.

FREE RELIEF

Cart paths, sprinkler heads, ground under repair, animal holes and puddles that aren't meant to be there all get **free relief**. Find the **nearest point** where the condition no longer gets in the way of your ball or your stance or swing. Then drop within **one club-length** of that point, no nearer the hole. Free relief doesn't apply in a penalty area. More on cart path relief and the embedded ball.

HOW TO DROP

Hold the ball at **knee height** and let it fall straight down. It has to stop inside the area you're dropping in. If it rolls out, drop again. If it rolls out a second time, place it where it first hit the ground on the second drop. More on taking a drop.

ON THE GREEN

- You may **mark, lift and clean** your ball. Put a coin or marker behind it first.
- You may **leave the flagstick in** while you putt. There is no penalty if the ball hits it.
- You may **repair ball marks and spike marks**, but don't build yourself a path to the hole.

KEEP UP THE PACE

Play when you're ready rather than waiting your turn in a casual round, and take no more than about **40 seconds** for a shot. Shout "Fore!" if your ball heads toward anyone. On a hole that's going badly, pick up once you reach net double bogey. That's the most a hole counts for your handicap anyway. More in golf etiquette and golf terms.

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