



OVERVIEW OF THE RULES MODERNIZATION INITIATIVE: GOALS, CHANGES AND PROCESS FOR IMPLEMENTATION IN 2019 – MARCH 2018 UPDATE

The R&A and the USGA are pleased to announce the final changes to the Rules of Golf for 2019. These changes result from our Rules Modernization Initiative that began in 2012 to bring the Rules up to date to fit the needs of the game today globally. This initiative had two guiding themes:

- Far-reaching Rule changes were open for discussion, but golf's essential principles and character must be preserved.
- Revisions were to be assessed with all golfers in mind, so that the Rules would be easier to understand and apply not only for professionals and elite amateurs, but also for beginners, high-handicappers and typical club and recreational golfers at all levels of play around the world.

We believe the changes to the Rules are a major step forward in achieving the following goals and objectives:

Overall Goals. We want the Rules of Golf to:

- Be more easily understood and applied by all golfers;
- Be more consistent, simple and fair; and
- Reinforce the game's longstanding principles and character.

Specific Objectives for Revising the Substance of the Rules. We want the new Rules to:

- Use concepts, procedures and outcomes that are more intuitive and easier to learn;
- Use a consistent approach for similar situations;
- Avoid unnecessary concepts and exceptions that may create 'penalty traps' for the player; and
- Support broader objectives for the game, such as pace of play and environmental stewardship.

Specific Objectives for How the Rules are Presented. We want the new Rules materials to:

- Be written in a modern, plain style that uses more common words, shorter sentences and explanatory headings, and that ends the use of male-only references;
- Be easier to translate into other languages;
- Make greater use of visual aids such as graphics, photos and videos;
- Clarify the purposes and principles underlying each of the main Rules;



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- Include a version of the Rules that is written from the player's perspective and focuses on what the typical golfer needs to know; and
- Use technology to make it easier to search and review the Rules, both on and off the course.

The new Rules will come into effect on 1 January 2019.

I. The Rules Modernization Initiative

a. How the Rules of Golf are Revised

Ever since the first known written Rules of Golf in 1744, continuous revision and updating of the Rules has been one of the enduring traditions in golf. (See our background paper [A Brief History of Revisions to the Rules of Golf: 1744 to 2016](#)) The USGA and The R&A became the governing bodies for the Rules in the 1890s, and since 1952 we have together produced a single set of Rules for golfers everywhere. Our individual Rules of Golf Committees and our Joint Rules Committee meet several times each year to consider changes. We normally revise the Rules of Golf every four years and the Decisions on the Rules of Golf (our interpretive guidance) every two years. The 2016 editions of the Rules and Decisions are now in effect and will continue to be in effect until 31 December 2018.

These regular processes tend to focus on individual issues, but there also are times when we step back to look at the Rules from a broader perspective. Such fundamental reviews led to the first consolidated Rules code in 1899, a major Rules revision in 1934, the first unified R&A/USGA Rules code in 1952, and a full reorganization of the Rules in 1984. Each fundamental review had its own motivations and goals, but the common thread was that the time had come for a major review and revision of the Rules. This is such a time.

b. Why We are Pursuing a Major Revision Now

Revising the Rules and Decisions in a regular cycle allows us to adapt them in response to the ongoing stream of Rules questions from golfers and officials across the game. But such incremental revisions tend to make the Rules and Decisions more and more complex, especially as concepts and exceptions are added in an effort to give a "fair" answer for every situation. We have heard various concerns about the current Rules, falling into two main categories:

(1) *The Rules are Complicated and Their Purpose isn't Always Clear.* For example:

- The Rule book contains hundreds of rules and sub-rules, along with a 500+ page Decisions book with many "hidden rules" found in 1200 separate Decisions;
- Answers are sometimes hard to find, as they may be in any number of places, such as Definitions, Notes, Exceptions, Appendices or one or more Decisions;



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- The Rule book language is dense and complex, which can make it difficult to understand and creates issues for translation into many languages;
- Some Rule procedures and outcomes are not straightforward or intuitive and their philosophy and approach can seem unclear or inconsistent; and
- Other Rule outcomes are seen as unfair or reflecting a hyper-technical or “hair splitting” approach that may result in penalties for no obvious purpose.

(2) *The Rules Have Limited Relevance to Many Typical Golfers.* These concerns include:

- Many golfers and other followers of the game do not know the Rules well and do not try to learn them in detail because of their complexity;
- The Rules can be intimidating or off-putting, especially to younger golfers and those who are not familiar with the game’s traditions;
- Golf is played all over the world in a wide range of conditions that are not necessarily contemplated or realistically covered by the Rules;
- The Rules are not as supportive as they could be of efforts to address important issues facing the game, such as pace of play.

We believe that the changes represent real progress in helping to address many of these concerns.

2. Summary of the Rule Changes

The Rules modernization changes are broad in scope. We looked at the entirety of the Rules, not just the larger issues or particular topics. Many small changes are also included to make things easier to understand, reduce inconsistencies or improve outcomes. The major changes along with the rationale for each change are detailed in [Explanation for Each Major Change in the Rules of Golf for 2019](#).

The major changes are also summarized here below, written in the style of the new Player’s Edition of the Rules – that is, with the focus on ‘you’, the player.

a. When Things Happen to Your Ball in Play

(1) *Ball at Rest Accidentally Moves*

- Accidentally moving your ball while searching for it: There is **no longer a penalty**.
- Accidentally moving your ball or ball-marker when it is on the putting green: There is **no longer a penalty**.



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- New standard for deciding if you caused your ball to move: You will be found to have caused your ball to move only if that is **known or virtually certain** (that is, it is at least 95% likely that you were the cause).

(2) Replacing a Moved or Lifted Ball

- New procedure when you don't know the exact spot where your ball was at rest: You must **replace the ball on its estimated original spot** (rather than drop the ball at that spot); and if the estimated spot was on, under or against growing, attached or fixed objects (such as grass), you must **replace the ball on, under or against those objects**.

(3) Ball in Motion Accidentally Deflected

- Your ball in motion accidentally hits you, your equipment, your caddie, someone attending the flagstick for you or a removed or attended flagstick: There is **no longer a penalty** (such as when your ball bounces off a bunker face and hits you).

(4) Ball is Struck More Than Once

- Accidentally hitting your ball more than once during a stroke: There is **no longer a penalty**.

b. Taking Relief

(1) Dropping a Ball in a Defined Relief Area

- New dropping procedure: You must drop the ball from knee height.
- Defined relief area: The ball needs to be dropped in and played from a **single required relief area** (whereas today, although you are required to drop a ball in one area, it can roll outside that area and the Rules may require it to be played from outside the area).
- Longest club is used to measure the relief area: You use the longest club in your bag, other than a putter, to measure the relief area.

(2) Lost Ball

- Reduced time for ball search: A ball is lost if not found in **three minutes** (rather than the current five minutes) after you begin searching for it.

(3) Embedded Ball

- Relief for embedded ball in the general area: **You may take relief if your ball is embedded anywhere (except in sand) in the general area** (which is the new



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term for “through the green”), except where a Local Rule restricts relief to the fairway or similar areas (this reverses the default position in the current Rules).

(4) Ball to Use in Taking Relief

- Substituting another ball: You may continue to use the original ball or another ball, whenever you take **either free relief or penalty relief** under a Rule.

c. Specific Rules for Specific Areas of the Course

(1) Putting Green

- Putting with flagstick left in the hole: There is **no longer a penalty** if you play a ball from the putting green and it hits the unattended flagstick in the hole.
- Repairing damage on the putting green: You may repair **almost all damage (including shoe damage, such as spike marks, and animal damage)** on the putting green (rather than being limited to repairing only ball-marks or old hole plugs).
- Touching your line of putt or touching the putting green in pointing out target: There is **no longer a penalty** if you or your caddie does either of these things, so long as doing so does not improve the conditions affecting your stroke.
- Replacing your ball if it moves only after you had already marked, lifted and replaced it: Any time this happens on the putting green, you replace the ball on its spot – **even if it was blown by the wind or moved for no clear reason**.
- Your caddie marks and lifts your ball on the putting green: There is **no longer a penalty** if your caddie does this without your specific authorization to do so.

(2) Penalty Areas

- Penalty areas expanded beyond water hazards: Red- and yellow-marked “penalty areas” may now cover **areas the Committee decides to mark** for this purpose (such as **deserts, jungles, or lava rock fields**), in addition to areas of water.
- Expanded use of red penalty areas: Committees are given the discretion to **mark all penalty areas as red so that lateral relief is always allowed** (but they may still mark penalty areas as yellow where they consider it appropriate).
- Elimination of opposite side relief option: You are no longer allowed to take relief from a red penalty area on the **opposite side from where the ball last entered the penalty area** (unless a Committee adopts a Local Rule allowing it).
- Removal of all special restrictions on moving or touching things in a penalty area: There is **no longer a penalty** if you touch or move loose impediments (such as



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leaves, stones and sticks) or touch the ground or water with your hand or your club in a penalty area.

(3) Bunkers

- Removal of special restrictions on moving loose impediments: There is **no longer a penalty** if you touch or move loose impediments in a bunker.
- Relaxed restrictions on touching the sand with your hand or club when your ball is in a bunker: You are now prohibited only from touching the sand (1) with your hand or club to **test the condition of the bunker**, (2) with your club in **the area right behind or in front of the ball** or (3) when **making a practice swing or the backswing** for your stroke.
- New unplayable ball relief option: For **two penalty strokes**, you may take **relief outside the bunker** by dropping a ball back on the line from the hole through where your ball was at rest in the bunker.

d. Equipment You are Allowed to Use

(1) Damaged Clubs

- Use of damaged clubs: **You may keep using any club that is damaged** during the round, no matter how it happens (for example, even if you damaged it in anger).
- Replacement of damaged clubs: **You may not replace a damaged club**, unless you were not responsible for causing the damage.

(2) Damaged Ball

- Substituting another ball for a cut or cracked ball: You may substitute another ball if your ball in play on a hole has become cut or cracked while playing that hole; but you are **no longer allowed to change balls solely because the ball has become “out of shape”**.

(3) Distance-Measuring Devices

- DMDs allowed: **You may use DMDs** to measure distance, except when prohibited by Local Rule (this reverses the default position in the current Rules).

e. How You Prepare for and Make a Stroke

- Expanded restriction on caddie help with alignment: Your caddie is **not allowed to stand on a line behind you** from the time you begin taking your stance until you have made your stroke.



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f. Promoting Faster Pace of Play

- Encouraging you to play promptly: It is recommended that you make each stroke in **no more than 40 seconds** – and **usually more quickly** than that – once it's your turn to play.
- Playing out of turn in stroke play (“ready golf”): This has always been allowed without penalty, and now you are **affirmatively encouraged** to do so in a **safe and responsible way for convenience or to save time**.
- New alternative form of stroke play: The Rules recognize a new “Maximum Score” form of stroke play, where **your score for a hole is capped at a maximum** (such as double par or triple bogey) set by the Committee, so that you can pick up and move to the next hole when your score will be at or above the maximum.
- Other changes to help pace of play: Reduced time to search for a ball, allowing committees to designate “penalty areas” (currently called water hazards) for areas that don't contain water and to mark all penalty areas as red (so that lateral relief is always allowed) if they choose to do so, the simplified dropping procedure, and the option to leave the flagstick in the hole when putting.

g. Insisting on High Standards of Conduct and Trusting Player Integrity

- Playing in the spirit of the game: New provisions are added to reinforce the **high standards of conduct** expected from all players on the course and the Committee's discretion to disqualify players for **serious misconduct**.
- Code of player conduct: Committees are given authority to adopt their own code of player conduct and to set **penalties for the breach of standards in that code**.
- Elimination of need to announce intent to lift ball: When you have good reason to lift your ball to identify it, to see if it is cut or cracked or to see if you are entitled to relief (such as to see if the ball is embedded), you are **no longer required first to announce** to another player or your marker that you intend to do so or to give that person an opportunity to observe the process.
- Reasonable judgment standard: When you need to **estimate or measure** a spot, point, line, area or other location under a Rule, **your reasonable judgment will not be second-guessed** based on later evidence (such as video review) **if you did all that could reasonably be expected under the circumstances** to estimate or measure accurately.



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3. Limitations in Revising the Rules

Taken together, these and the other changes will help achieve our Rules Modernization goals and objectives by:

- Eliminating many restrictions (and thus eliminating many penalties) that have been perceived as unfair or unnecessary and/or that have required close and controversial judgments to be made;
- Making various procedures easier to use, such as how to take relief and what to do when a club is damaged during play;
- Using the Rules affirmatively to help address the pressing issue of pace of play; and
- Reinforcing the game's traditional emphasis on both expecting high standards of conduct from all players and trusting them to act honestly and reasonably.

But we know that there are limits in trying to achieve all of our goals and objectives, especially at the same time. This is for two reasons. First, golf is an inherently complicated sport. It is played outdoors in all types of weather, on non-standardized fields of play found in almost every type of landscape and human environment on the planet, and with people, animals, vehicles and a great many other objects regularly in the way. The game's bedrock principles are simple – you are to play a ball from the tee until it ends up in the hole, and to play the ball as it lies and the course as you find it. But the number and range of things that can happen to a golf ball and a golfer during play are almost infinite. The result is a need for many reasonable exceptions to these principles and for procedures telling the player what can or must be done in a wide range of situations that inevitably arise. This leads to longer and more detailed Rules, as players understandably expect answers to all such situations.

Second, there is often a tension between pursuing simplicity (which may lead towards having absolute rules that are easy to apply but may produce outcomes that sometimes seem wrong or unfair) versus trying to achieve “fair” and “right” results (which may lead towards having exceptions and more complicated doctrines so that slightly different factual scenarios can have different outcomes). Some changes (such as elimination of certain prohibitions and penalties) may help achieve both objectives, but other changes necessarily go in one direction or the other. Our overriding goals in balancing these considerations were to do what seems best from the standpoint of all golfers and to preserve the fundamental challenge and essence of the game.

4. Our New Approach to Writing and Presenting the Rules

We are also revising how the Rules are written and presented. This is described separately in [A Revised Approach to Writing and Presenting the Rules of Golf for 2019](#). To summarize:



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a. New Writing Style and Format

In preparing the new Rules:

- We have used a plain writing style;
- We have tried to help golfers understand the Rules better by including a statement of each Rule's purpose and adding examples to explain what key concepts mean and why they are in the Rules;
- We will make greater use of visual tools to explain key concepts and procedures; and
- We will further embrace technology by additional use of links, videos and search capabilities to give fast and efficient access to answers under the Rules.

b. Reorganizing the Rule Book

The revised Rule book has been changed in many respects, such as:

- The Rule book focuses on what the player needs to know, with Committee-related provisions being moved to a separate "Committee Procedures" document that will form part of "The Official Guide to the Rules of Golf";
- The number of Rules has been reduced from 34 to 24, with the basic Rules for individual match play and individual stroke play covered in Rules 1-20;
- To address the problem of "hidden rules" that are found only in the Decisions book, we have moved the contents of more than 300 Decisions into the body of the new Rules. This will allow the reader to look for all Rule answers in a single document; and
- The Decisions book will be replaced with "The Official Guide to the Rules of Golf" that will include the following:
 - Interpretations: Statements of interpretive guidance rather than question and answer "decisions" on individual Rules issues being used as the sole means of giving guidance on applying the Rules.
 - Committee Procedures: This will guide the Committee in how to organize a competition and set up a course in a way that is consistent with the Rules of Golf. It will also include a full list of available Model Local Rules.
 - The Modified Rules of Golf for Players with Disabilities.

c. The Player's Edition



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There will be a shorter “Player’s Edition” of the Rules for use by golfers. A sample Rule in the style of the Player’s Edition is available to view – see [Draft Player’s Edition Rule 16 for 2019](#). It is written from the perspective of “you” the golfer. It will be an actual Rule book (not merely a summary) covering the most commonly used Rules while also telling you where to find any other answers in the full Rules of Golf publication when needed. This will be widely circulated to golfers worldwide, as is intended to be the version of the Rules that golfers use to find answers to the questions that arise on the course.

5. Our Process for Developing the New Rules

In 2012, a working group of USGA and R&A Rules staff, committee members, professional tour officials, and other Rules experts was set up to examine both the substance of the Rules and how they are written. (This review did not encompass specifications for clubs and balls, which are handled in our separate Equipment Standards process.) The final changes are the culmination of six years of work and have been approved by both of our Rules of Golf Committees and our respective boards.

As work progressed on this initiative, we talked with many different people and organizations to alert them and to get their preliminary reactions, including:

- Leaders and rules officials from organizations with key roles in professional or amateur golf, such as the PGA Tour, European Tour, LPGA, Ladies’ European Tour, PGA of America, Augusta National Golf Club, and national, regional and state golf associations, and
- Golfers at all levels of the game (both individually and in focus groups), including professionals and elite amateurs, long-time regular golfers and beginners.

On 1 March 2017, details of the proposed changes, including a full draft of the proposed Rules of Golf were made public. This was the first time that the golfing public had been given the opportunity to provide views on proposed changes to the Rules of Golf, and they were encouraged to do so via a feedback survey.

Since 1 March 2017, we have listened to the feedback received, while refining the proposals and continuing to talk with leaders and rules officials from golfing organizations worldwide.

These discussions assisted us in finalizing the Rules of Golf for 2019.

6. Implementation of the New Rules in 2019

The new Rules will go into effect on 1 January 2019. The anticipated process and schedule between now and then is as follows:



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- Publish the Rules of Golf, complete and publish the Player's Edition, The Official Guide to the Rules of Golf, The Modified Rules of Golf for Players with Disabilities and other materials;
- Facilitate the translation of these materials;
- Finish work on a new Rules app and other means of electronic delivery; and
- Educate golfers and officials at all levels of the game.
- Golfers will continue to play by the current Rules until the new Rules take effect on 1 January 2019 when all the necessary supporting materials will be available.