

UNDERSTANDING THE NFL

A Beginner's Guide to Football's Basic Rules — Downs, Scoring, and Common Fouls

Name:

Date:

Class:



An NFL game in action — to a newcomer, the sport's rules can look confusing, but they follow a clear, logical structure.

PART 1 — Key Vocabulary

Study these terms carefully. They appear throughout the reading passages and exercises below.

Term	Definition
down	one of four attempts a team is given to advance the ball at least ten yards; failing to do so on the fourth down typically means giving up possession
first down	a fresh set of four downs awarded to the offense once it has advanced the ball at least ten yards from where its current set of downs began
line of scrimmage	the imaginary line, based on the ball's position, across which the offensive and defensive lines face each other before each play begins
touchdown	a score worth six points, awarded when a team legally advances the ball into the opposing end zone
field goal	a score worth three points, earned by kicking the ball through the opposing team's goalposts, typically attempted on fourth down when a touchdown is unlikely
safety	a score worth two points, awarded to the defense when the offensive team is tackled with the ball in its own end zone
touchback	a ruling in which the ball becomes dead in the end zone with no score, resulting in the offense starting its next possession at its own twenty- or twenty-five-yard line
possession	the right of a team to have the ball and attempt to advance it or score, as opposed to playing defense

<i>holding</i>	a penalty called when a player illegally grabs, hooks, or restricts an opponent who does not have the ball, typically resulting in a ten-yard penalty against the offense
<i>pass interference</i>	a penalty called when a defender illegally impedes a receiver's ability to catch a forward pass before the ball arrives, or vice versa for offensive pass interference
<i>false start</i>	a five-yard penalty against the offense when a player moves illegally before the snap, simulating the start of the play prematurely
<i>sack</i>	a play in which the defense tackles the quarterback behind the line of scrimmage before he can throw a pass or hand off the ball

PART 2 — Vocabulary Practice

Match each term on the left to its correct definition on the right.

- | | |
|----------------------|--|
| 1. touchback | A. tackling the quarterback behind the line before he passes |
| 2. safety | B. illegally moving before the snap |
| 3. sack | C. a three-point score kicked through the goalposts |
| 4. false start | D. an imaginary line where offense and defense line up |
| 5. line of scrimmage | E. no score, ball dead in the end zone |
| 6. field goal | F. illegally grabbing an opponent who lacks the ball |
| 7. holding | G. a two-point defensive score from a tackle in the end zone |

Fill in the blank with the correct vocabulary word.

1. When the offense advances the ball ten yards within its four downs, it earns a new _____ and the count resets to one.
2. If a receiver is shoved before the ball arrives, the referee may call _____ against the defense.
3. A team trailing late in the game with limited time might still attempt a _____ to add three points.
4. A jittery offensive lineman who flinches before the snap will likely draw a _____ penalty.
5. When a kickoff sails into the end zone and the returner takes a knee, the officials rule it a _____.
6. A dominant defensive line that repeatedly gets a _____ can completely disrupt an opposing offense's rhythm.

PART 3 — Reading Passage 1: Downs and Moving the Ball



Players line up at the line of scrimmage before the snap — the starting point of every play.

To someone watching American football for the first time, the constant stopping and starting can seem confusing. Unlike sports such as soccer or basketball, where play flows continuously, football is built around discrete units called downs. On any given play, the offensive team — the team with the ball — is trying to advance it toward the opposing end zone. Before each play, both teams line up facing each other at the line of scrimmage, an imaginary boundary determined by where the ball was placed at the end of the previous play. The offense is given four attempts, or downs, to advance the ball at least ten yards from where that set of downs began. If they succeed at any point within those four downs, they earn a first down: a fresh set of four downs, and the ten-yard marker resets further down the field.

This cycle — first down, second down, third down, fourth down — repeats until one of several things happens. The offense might reach the ten-yard marker and earn a new first down, continuing their drive. They might score. Or they might fail to gain ten yards across all four downs, in which case possession of the ball typically transfers to the other team at the spot where the fourth-down play ended. Because turning the ball over is so costly, teams almost never allow a true fourth down to happen without a plan: if they are not close enough to attempt a field goal and do not believe they can convert the needed yardage, they will usually punt — kicking the ball far downfield to the opponent — trading field position for the right to keep possession themselves rather than risk losing the ball on the spot. Deciding whether to punt, attempt a field goal, or "go for it" on fourth down is one of the most closely analyzed strategic decisions in the sport.

Distance matters enormously in this system. A team facing "third and two" — third down, needing two more yards for a first down — is in a much stronger position than a team facing "third and fifteen," and the play-calling for each situation looks completely different. Short-yardage situations often call for a direct running play, while long-yardage situations usually require a passing play that can cover more ground in a single attempt. Understanding the down-and-distance situation is, in many ways, the single most important skill for a new fan learning to follow the flow of a game, since it explains almost every decision a coach makes.

Comprehension Questions

1. What is the line of scrimmage, and when is it established?
2. How many downs does the offense get, and what must they accomplish to earn a first down?

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3. What typically happens if the offense fails to gain the necessary yards across all four downs?
 4. Why might a team choose to punt on fourth down rather than attempt to gain the needed yardage?
 5. Why does the passage say that "third and two" is a much stronger situation than "third and fifteen"?
 6. According to the passage, why is understanding down-and-distance so useful for a new football fan?
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PART 4 — Reading Passage 2: Scoring the Ball

Football offers several distinct ways to score, each worth a different number of points, and understanding the difference is essential to following the game. The most valuable and celebrated score is the touchdown, worth six points, awarded when a team legally advances the ball into the opposing end zone — whether by running it in, catching a pass there, or recovering a loose ball in the end zone. After every touchdown, the scoring team gets a bonus opportunity: they may attempt an extra point, a short kick through the goalposts worth one additional point, or a two-point conversion, a single play from close range worth two points if successful. Because the two-point conversion is considerably harder to execute than the nearly automatic extra-point kick, most teams choose the safer one-point option except in specific game situations — for example, late in a close game when the exact number of points needed makes the riskier two-point attempt the smarter mathematical choice.

The second most common score is the field goal, worth three points, in which a kicker attempts to send the ball through the uprights of the goalposts, typically on fourth down when the offense believes it can get close enough to make the kick but is unlikely to reach the end zone for a touchdown. Field goals are considered a reliable, if less exciting, way to convert a drive into points rather than walking away with nothing. The rarest score in football is the safety, worth only two points but awarded to the defense rather than the offense. A safety occurs when the offensive team is tackled with the ball in its own end zone, or commits certain penalties there — a result so unusual that many fans go entire seasons without watching one happen live.

One rule that frequently confuses newcomers is the touchback. When a kickoff, punt, or turnover results in the ball becoming dead in the end zone — for instance, when a returner catches a kickoff in the end zone and chooses to kneel rather than attempt a return — the play is ruled a touchback. No points are scored on a touchback; instead, the receiving team simply gets to start its next possession from a set point on the field, typically its own twenty- or twenty-five-yard line, depending on the situation. Touchbacks are a routine, low-drama part of nearly every game, but because they involve no visible action beyond a player kneeling down, new viewers often assume something has gone wrong when in fact the play has proceeded exactly as designed.

True or False

Write T for True or F for False.

1. ____ A touchdown is worth six points before any extra-point attempt.

2. ____ A two-point conversion is generally easier to complete than a one-point extra-point kick.
3. ____ A field goal is worth three points and is usually attempted on fourth down.
4. ____ A safety awards two points to the offensive team.
5. ____ A touchback results in no points being scored.
6. ____ After a touchback, the receiving team typically starts its possession around its own twenty- or twenty-five-yard line.
7. ____ The passage describes the safety as one of the most common scores in football.
8. ____ Teams always attempt a two-point conversion after scoring a touchdown.

Comprehension Questions

1. What are the two options a team has after scoring a touchdown, and how do they differ in risk and reward?

2. Under what circumstances does the passage suggest a team might choose a two-point conversion over an extra point?

3. When is a field goal typically attempted, according to the passage?

4. How is a safety scored, and why does the passage describe it as rare?

5. What is a touchback, and why might it confuse a new viewer?

6. Rank the four scoring plays described in the passage from most to least points.

PART 5 — Fill in the Blank

Use the word bank to complete each sentence. Use each word only once.

down · first down · touchdown · field goal · safety · touchback · possession ·
holding · pass interference · false start · sack · line of scrimmage

1. Losing _____ of the ball on a turnover is one of the most damaging events that can happen to an offense's drive.
2. A referee calling _____ will typically throw a flag if an offensive lineman grabs a defender's jersey to stop a pass rush.
3. With the game tied and time running out, the kicker jogged onto the field to attempt a game-winning _____.
4. A wide receiver who is shoved to the ground before the ball arrives may draw a flag for _____.
5. The quarterback was brought down for a _____ before he could even look downfield.
6. Both teams settled into position at the _____ as the play clock wound down.

PART 6 — Reading Passage 3: Common Fouls Every New Fan Should Know



Plays near the goal line are among the most closely officiated moments in a football game.

Football is a fast, physical sport, and a large part of officiating it involves enforcing rules designed to keep the game safe and fair while still allowing for legal contact. For a new fan, the sheer number of possible penalties can feel overwhelming, but a handful of fouls account for the vast majority of flags thrown during a typical broadcast. Understanding just five or six of them covers most situations a viewer is likely to encounter. The most frequently called penalty is holding, which occurs when a player illegally grabs, hooks, or restricts an opponent who does not have the ball. Offensive holding, usually committed by linemen trying to protect their quarterback, results in a ten-yard penalty against the offense — a significant setback that can turn a promising down-and-distance situation into a difficult one. Defensive holding is also possible, though called less frequently, and results in a smaller penalty along with an automatic first down for the offense.

Pass interference is another penalty that frequently changes the outcome of a game, and one of the few fouls in football whose penalty yardage is not fixed. When a defender illegally impedes a receiver's ability to catch a forward pass before the ball arrives — through excessive contact, grabbing, or

blocking the receiver's path — the penalty is enforced at the spot of the foul, which can result in a substantial gain for the offense if the interference happened deep downfield. Offensive players can also be called for pass interference if they push off a defender to create separation, though this is called less often. Because pass interference calls can swing an entire game with a single flag, they are also among the most heavily scrutinized and debated calls in football, and coaches will frequently challenge close pass interference rulings using instant replay.

Several other common fouls are worth knowing. A false start occurs when an offensive player moves illegally before the snap, essentially jumping the gun and simulating the start of the play too early; it results in a five-yard penalty and is one of the most common calls in the entire sport, since it only requires a single lineman to flinch. Encroachment and offside are similar concepts applied to the defense, penalizing a defensive player who crosses the line of scrimmage before the snap. Unsportsmanlike conduct, a fifteen-yard penalty, covers a wide range of behavior the league considers excessive or inappropriate, from taunting an opponent to a particularly aggressive hit after a play has already ended. Together, these core fouls — holding, pass interference, false start, offside, and unsportsmanlike conduct — account for the overwhelming majority of penalty flags a new viewer will see thrown during any given broadcast.

Comprehension Questions

1. What is holding, and what penalty does it typically carry when committed by the offense?

2. Why does the passage describe pass interference as unusual compared to most other penalties?

3. What is a false start, and why does the passage say it is one of the most common penalties?

4. What is the defensive equivalent of a false start, according to the passage?

5. What kinds of behavior can result in an unsportsmanlike conduct penalty?

PART 7 — Discussion Questions

Discuss with a partner or your class. There are no wrong answers — support your view with reasoning and examples.

1. Why do you think football uses a system of downs and yardage instead of continuous play like soccer or basketball?
2. Pass interference penalties can dramatically change the outcome of a game with a single call. Do you think this makes the rule fair or unfair to the teams involved?
3. Why might a coach choose to punt on fourth down instead of trying to gain the yardage needed for a first down, even if the team is behind in the score?
4. The passage says a false start only requires one player to flinch. Do you think a five-yard penalty is a fair punishment for such a small mistake?

5. Why do you think many new fans find touchbacks confusing, even though nothing unusual is actually happening on the play?
6. If you were designing a sport from scratch, would you include a scoring system with as many different point values (six, three, two, one) as football does, or would you simplify it? Why?

PART 8 — Opinion Essay

Prompt: American football has one of the most complex rulebooks of any major sport, with detailed systems for downs, scoring, and penalties. Using evidence from the passages above, write an essay arguing whether football's complexity makes it a better or more difficult sport to follow for new fans compared to simpler sports. Write at least three paragraphs: an introduction with a clear thesis, at least one body paragraph drawing on specific details from the passages, and a conclusion that addresses at least one counterargument to your position.

Sources

NFL.com, "Official Playing Rules of the National Football League" · NFL Football Operations, "Rules of the Game" · ESPN, "NFL Rules Explained: A Beginner's Guide" · Wikipedia, "American football rules," "Penalty (gridiron football)," and "Down (gridiron football)" · BAFRA, "Referee Signals"

ANSWER KEY — UNDERSTANDING THE NFL

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Part 2 — Vocabulary Matching

1. E — no score, ball dead in the end zone
2. G — a two-point defensive score from a tackle in the end zone
3. A — tackling the quarterback behind the line before he passes
4. B — illegally moving before the snap
5. D — an imaginary line where offense and defense line up
6. C — a three-point score kicked through the goalposts
7. F — illegally grabbing an opponent who lacks the ball

Part 2 — Fill in the Blank

- | | |
|----------------------|----------------|
| 1. first down | 4. false start |
| 2. pass interference | 5. touchback |
| 3. field goal | 6. sack |

Part 3 — Comprehension: Passage 1

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. An imaginary line based on the ball's position, established at the end of the previous play. | 4. To trade field position for keeping possession rather than risk losing the ball on the spot. |
| 2. Four downs; they must advance the ball at least ten yards to earn a first down. | 5. Because needing only two yards is much easier to gain than needing fifteen. |
| 3. Possession typically transfers to the other team at the spot of the fourth-down play. | 6. It explains almost every play-calling decision a coach makes during a game. |

Part 4 — True or False

- | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|
| 1. T | 2. F | 3. T | 4. F |
| 5. T | 6. T | 7. F | 8. F |

Part 4 — Comprehension: Passage 2

- | | |
|--|--|
| 1. Extra point (safer, 1 pt kick) or two-point conversion (riskier, 2 pts from a single play). | 4. Tackled with the ball in own end zone; rare — many fans go seasons without seeing one. |
| 2. Late in a close game when the exact points needed make the 2-pt attempt the smarter choice. | 5. Ball dead in end zone, no score; confusing since nothing visibly happens beyond a kneel-down. |
| 3. On fourth down, when a team is close enough to kick but unlikely to reach the end zone. | 6. Touchdown (6) greater than field goal (3) greater than safety (2) greater than extra point (1). |

Part 5 — Fill in the Blank

- | | |
|---------------|----------------------|
| 1. possession | 4. pass interference |
| 2. holding | 5. sack |
| 3. field goal | 6. line of scrimmage |

Part 6 — Comprehension: Passage 3

- | | |
|----|----|
| 1. | 4. |
|----|----|

Illegally grabbing/restricting an opponent without the ball; a 10-yard penalty for the offense.

Offside/encroachment — a defender crossing the line of scrimmage before the snap.

2. Its penalty yardage isn't fixed — it's enforced at the spot of the foul, which can be a big gain.

5. Taunting an opponent or an aggressive hit after the play has already ended.

3. An offensive player moving illegally before the snap; common since it only takes one flinch.

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STUDENT ANSWER SHEET

Understanding the NFL — Downs, Scoring, and Common Fouls

Name:

Date:

Class:

Record all answers below. For Parts 7 and 8, use the space on your main worksheet.

PART 2A — Vocabulary Matching (write the letter)

1.		2.		3.		4.		5.		6.		7.	
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PART 2B — Fill in the Blank

1.		4.	
2.		5.	
3.		6.	

PART 3 — Comprehension: Passage 1

1.		4.	
2.		5.	
3.		6.	

PART 4 — True or False

1.	T / F	2.	T / F	3.	T / F	4.	T / F
5.	T / F	6.	T / F	7.	T / F	8.	T / F

PART 4 — Comprehension: Passage 2

1.		4.	
2.		5.	
3.		6.	

PART 5 — Fill in the Blank

1.		4.	
2.		5.	
3.		6.	

PART 6 — Comprehension: Passage 3

1.		4.	
2.		5.	
3.			

Parts 7 and 8 — use the space provided in the main worksheet · Tahric Teaches · tahricteaches.com

ANSWER SHEET — ANSWER KEY

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PART 2A — Matching

1. **E** 2. **G** 3. **A** 4. **B** 5. **D** 6. **C** 7. **F**

PART 2B — Fill in the Blank

1. first down	4. false start
2. pass interference	5. touchback
3. field goal	6. sack

PART 3 — Comprehension: Passage 1

1. An imaginary line based on the ball's position, set at the end of the previous play.	4. To trade field position for keeping possession rather than risk losing the ball on the spot.
2. Four downs; must advance the ball ten yards to earn a first down.	5. Because needing two yards is much easier than needing fifteen.
3. Possession transfers to the other team at the spot of the fourth-down play.	6. It explains nearly every play-calling decision a coach makes.

PART 4 — True or False

1. **T** 2. **F** 3. **T** 4. **F** 5. **T** 6. **T** 7. **F** 8. **F**

PART 4 — Comprehension: Passage 2

1. Extra point (safer, 1 pt) or two-point conversion (riskier, 2 pts from one play).	4. Tackled with the ball in own end zone; rare — many fans go seasons without seeing one.
2. Late in a close game when the exact points needed favor the 2-pt attempt.	5. Ball dead in end zone, no score; confusing since nothing visible happens beyond a knee.
3. On fourth down, close enough to kick but unlikely to reach the end zone.	6. Touchdown (6) greater than field goal (3) greater than safety (2) greater than extra point (1).

PART 5 — Fill in the Blank

1. possession	4. pass interference
2. holding	5. sack
3. field goal	6. line of scrimmage

PART 6 — Comprehension: Passage 3

1. Illegally grabbing/restricting an opponent without the ball; 10-yard penalty for the offense.	4. Offside/encroachment — a defender crossing the line before the snap.
2. Its yardage isn't fixed — enforced at the spot of the foul, a potentially big gain.	5. Taunting an opponent or an aggressive hit after the play has ended.
3. An offensive player moving illegally before the snap; common since it takes one flinch.	