

Good defense is probably the hardest part of bridge! Having good basic agreements will help enormously if you and partner follow them. (Having an agreement and not following it is almost worse than having none at all. To paraphrase Will Rogers – “It’s not what you don’t know that kills you, it’s what you do know that isn’t so!”.) On average you will be on defense on half the hands in a session – improvements in basic defense will do more to improve your results than any fancy new bidding gadget.



By: Don Rogers

General Guidelines for Defense

DO's

- It is always a good idea to take the setting trick!
- Always try to see what declarers plan is to make the contract, and then see how you can frustrate that.
- Unless you have a strong reason not to do so, lead the suit partner bid.
- Unless it is clear a switch is called for, when you gain the lead return the suit that partner made on the opening lead.
- When dummy has an honor card and you have a superior honor card, keep your honor card to play on dummies card (unless you think declarer might have a singleton).
- Play 2nd hand low, 3rd Hand high (see below)
- Cover an honor with an honor (see below)
- When dummy has a long side suit that declarer can probably set up, cash side suit winners.
- When dummy is balanced, avoid breaking new suits for declarer and be more passive.
- Particularly when sitting behind dummy, when discarding try to keep equal length with the dummy to prevent them making a low card good.

DON'Ts

- Don't under lead Aces (against suit contracts)
- Don't lead unsupported Aces. (There are exceptions to every rule. This one is right about 99% of the time. Pretty good odds.)
- It is generally a bad idea to lead declarers' second suit, or a suit in which dummy has 5 or more cards.
- Be careful about setting up minor honors in your suit in dummy (we'll discuss this later)

Reasons for 2nd hand low, 3rd hand high

| | | |
|-----|-------|---------|
| | Dummy | |
| | KJxx | |
| You | | Partner |
| Qxx | | ?? |

Declarer leads a small card.

Play low to give declarer a guess. If you play the queen he can't miss. If you play low in tempo he may misguess the suit.

Reasons for Cover an Honor with an Honor

| | | | |
|---------|----------|-----|-----|
| | Dummy | | |
| | Qxxx | | |
| Partner | | | You |
| 10xx | | Kxx | |
| | Declarer | | |
| | AJx | | |

Declarer leads queen from dummy. If you cover the Q with your K, Partner's ten wins the third trick in the suit. If you duck, declarer takes all four tricks in the suit.



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Opening Leads

Usually it is best to decide what suit to lead, and then decide which card to lead. If the auction does not favor a particular suit, then one usually picks the suit with the most attractive card combination, or the suit that avoids leading away from a tenace.

If the opponents have bid confidently, then a more aggressive lead is indicated. If they have just crawled into their contract (indicating they have little strength to spare) then a passive lead that does not give anything away is probably better. Many times, the best opening lead is the one that gives nothing away!

What Suit to Lead?

This is usually directed by the auction. The following are in rough order of preference.

- If partner has bid a suit, you should lead it unless you know looking at your hand something else is better.
- Leading long suits is less likely to give away a length trick, because you know that declarer is unlikely to have length. Leading from a long suit is particularly attractive at NT, and also good at suit because it may force declarer to ruff in his hand. Also, partner may be short and able to ruff at some point.
- A trump lead is often indicated when opponents have not shown a fit, and responder has taken a preference back to declarer's first suit. This usually means that responder has at most two of the trump suit, and one or two of declarer's second suit. Declarer is likely to use dummy's trumps to ruff his small cards in his second suit if you let him. Leading a trump cuts down dummy's ruffing power. BUT – Trump leads are rarely helpful if responder has freely supported declarer's suit.
- Leading a trump may be best if leading any other suit would likely give away a trick.
- It is usually wrong to lead declarer's second suit. Leading dummy's suit may be OK, because you are leading through strength, and because responders often bid bad 4 card suits (particularly majors).

Example of an auction indicating a trump lead.

| Opener | Responder |
|--------|-----------|
| 1D | 1H |
| 2C | 2D |

Responder has fewer clubs than diamonds, and may have only 2 diamonds and one club. Leading a trump (diamonds) may prevent declarer from making his small trumps in dummy by ruffing losing clubs.

What Card to Lead?

General Rules

- Lead of a low spot card indicates an honor or a tenace, but not touching honors.
- Lead of a high spot card tends to deny an honor in that suit.

With touching honors, lead the highest touching honor. In each case below, the correct lead is underlined.

AK KQx KQJ QJ

With a sequence and an unconnected higher honor, lead the top of the sequence (usually at NT only):

AJ109 KJ109 Q109 K109 etc.

Note that the lead of an honor denies the next higher honor.

Difference between NT and suit leads.

In general, when leading a suit with two touching honors, at a suit contract lead the top honor, but at NT lead the fourth best. If you have a sequence of three honors, or two with a very long suit, lead the top honor at NT also.

When you lead the A at NT you are asking partner to drop the Q or J if he has it. Don't lead the A from a four-card suit unless you have AKQ!

What to lead at NT from a 6 or 7 card suit heading by the AK? Answer – it depends! Do you have an outside entry? Probably best to lead low. With a seven card suit and no outside entry, it may work out best to play A and K, and hope for a 7-2-2-2 distribution of the suit.



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Leading from AKxxx at a Suit Contract

It is often the case that you are on lead holding AKxxx (or AKxxxx) in your suit. The lead of the A is a natural and excellent lead (against a suit contract). But then dummy comes down and you see Qxx of your suit. Now you have a problem of what to do at trick 2. Leading your K makes the Q good, and if declarer started with a singleton then disaster – he ruffs your king and makes his queen good, which he could never do on his own. On the other hand, if partner has 2 of your suit you can lead the king, then lead a third one for partner to ruff (Yay!). How do you know what to do?

The key is to know how many of your suit partner and declarer each started with. (If you can count partner's holding, then you also know declarer's.) The key to solving this is for partner to give count, and for you to pay attention to partner's count.

Note: If you bid this suit and partner raised, you should assume that he has three (or more) in the suit.

When you lead the Ace, partner should give count by either starting a high/low (for an even number) or playing a small spot card (indicating one or three). Sometimes you may need to make deductions from the bidding and the other cards you can see to tell which it is. Of course declarer, if they are good, will attempt to fool you by concealing a card that would help you tell what partner has.

Case 1

Dummy has Qxx and partner follows to the first trick with a low spot card. Partner probably has three, and leading the K will establish the queen. Unless dummy has a long running suit for discards and you need to grab your tricks off the top, better to switch if a safe switch is available.

Case 2

Dummy has Qxxx and partner follows to the first trick with a low spot card. Partner probably has three, and declarer started with only one! Better to switch and hope partner can later lead the suit for you, which forces declarer to either ruff or concede your K.

Case 3

Dummy has Qxx and partner follows to the first trick with a high spot card. Partner probably has two, and declarer the remaining three. Now it is probably best to lead the K and another so that partner can ruff the third round and ruin the Q. However, it is possible that partner has 4, and declarer a singleton.

The bidding should allow you to tell.

This is all good when partner has a doubleton with a high and low card, or three with a low card to play. What happens when partner has two with the 4 & 3, or three cards of the 9,8,7? Sometimes you can't really tell, but sometimes you can guess by looking at the cards in your hand and the dummy. For example, if you lead the A and partner plays the 4, and you don't see the 3 or the 2, it is more likely that he is starting a high low (but no guarantees!).



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Third Hand Play to Opening Lead

Partner has made the opening lead and you can see the dummy. Now you need to evaluate the hand, how the defense is likely to work, and help partner by giving him information by the card you play to this trick.

If partner has led a low card, he probably has an honor in the suit. If you have an honor as well you should probably play it (third hand high, remember), unless you can tell from the dummy that partner does not have an honor.

For example:

Partner leads the 2, dummy has Jxx, and you have the Q. Play the queen, and if it holds, lead back the suit. If declarer plays the A, partner's K is now good.

Partner leads the 4, dummy has AQxx, and you have KJ10x. Cover the queen if it is played, otherwise the 10.

Always play the **lower(est)** of touching honors. (This is the opposite of the opening leaders card choice. For some reason this seems to cause enormous confusion even for players who are not exactly new.) The reason for this is that it allows partner to infer the situation in the suit from what declarer plays to win the trick (if they can). For example, you lead fourth best from Jxxx, dummy has two small, and partner plays the Q. If declarer plays small, it is a reasonable (although not certain deduction) that partner also has the K (and maybe the A). But suppose that partner does hold the KQ, and plays the K on trick 1. Now you have to assume that declarer has the Q, because the play of the K denies a touching lower honor. (Partner might have the A – when following to partner's lead, play the lowest of touching honors.)

A few examples:

Partner leads the 4, dummy has AQxx, and you have KJ109. Cover the queen if it is played, otherwise the 9. (Playing the J would deny having the 10.) When your 9 holds the trick, partner will know declarer does not have any hearts higher than the 8.

Partner leads a small card, and you have QJ10x. Unless dummy plays the A or K, play

the 10. Partner should at least suspect that you have the J and maybe the Q also.

Partner leads a small card, dummy plays small, and you have KQx. Play the Q. Playing the K would deny possession of the Q.

Partner leads a small card, dummy plays small, and you have AKx. Play the K, which denies possession of the Q. Playing the A would deny possession of the K.

If you do not have an honor, and cannot beat the card that dummy plays, then you need to send partner a signal by the card you choose to play. There are three types of signals:

- Attitude (would I like this suit to be continued?)
- Count (how many cards in the suit do I have?)
- Suit Preference (which suit would I like to see you switch to?)

But how do you and partner know which kind of signal it is? **The rule is that attitude comes first, then count, and only if neither attitude nor count make sense, then suit preference.** In other words, if the situation allows the signal to be attitude, partner will assume it is. Only if it is clear that an attitude signal is impossible should partner interpret the signal as count. Only if neither of these is possible should your card to the first trick be considered suit preference.

Some examples will help clarify this.

1. Partner leads the 4 (implying an honor) dummy plays the ten, and you have 9,6,3. You play the three as attitude (I have nothing in this suit, partner). Your play of the three does not say anything about count, because it can be (and is) attitude.

2. Partner leads the 4 (implying an honor), dummy plays the A, and you have Q 9 3. You play the 9 to show interest in the suit. Your play of the 9 is attitude, not count.

3. Partner leads the A (promising the K also) and dummy shows the Qxx, and you have 9,6 in the suit. You play the 9 to show count. How does partner know it is count and not attitude? Because he can see the A, K, & Q, so you cannot possibly have a good holding in the suit. Therefore, your signal must be count, because it cannot be attitude. Remember that with an even number of cards in the suit, you play high-low, and with an odd number of cards you play the lowest one first to show count.

4. Dummy

S-KQxx H-x D-Qxxx C-xxxx Contract is 4 Spades

| | | | |
|---------------|-------|-------|--------------|
| Partner | | | You |
| Leads Heart A | S-xxx | H-963 | D-AKJx C-xxx |

Clearly there can be no point in continuing hearts, because dummy will ruff. Partner cannot possibly care about your attitude or count with respect to hearts. It is clear a switch is required, but partner needs your help to decide which of the remaining 2 suits you want him to lead. You really want a diamond lead (the higher ranking of the two remaining suits, so you play the 9 on the A of heart lead.

Similarly, with the same dummy and lead as before, you have:

S-xxx H-963 D-xxxx C-AKx
Now you really want a club lead, so you play the 3 to indicate that you want partner to lead the lower ranking of the remaining two suits.

Finally, if you have:
S-Axx H-963 D-xxxx C-xxx

Now you don't care which suit is led, so you play the 6 to say you have no preference, and partner should do whatever he thinks best.

Of course, you will not always have the perfect cards to send a clear signal. If you are dealt the 4,3,2, you will have to play the 4 if you want the higher-ranking side suit and hope that partner can figure it out. Similarly if you have the 3,2, and want to give count, you have to play the 3 and hope partner will notice the 2 is missing. If you have been dealt the 9,8,7 of a suit and want to discourage, the seven is the best you can do. With luck partner can see the 6,5,4,3,2 and realize it is your lowest card.

| | |
|------|------|
| West | East |
| Axx | 963 |

Declarer
xx

Declarer leads a small card. West must play low on the first trick allow partner to show count. East plays the three on trick 1, so West knows he has an odd number (one or three, since West can see the 2 in the dummy). Now West knows that he can safely take his Ace on trick 2, and declarer will be blocked. (Note that if East has a singleton, it doesn't matter when West takes the Ace because declarer has four cards and can always set up the suit.)

But, if the situation is:

| | | |
|------|-------|------|
| | Dummy | |
| | KQJxx | |
| West | | East |
| Axx | | 96 |

Declarer
xxx

Now East plays the 9 on the first trick, and West knows East has an even number in the suit, giving declarer three cards. Now West must hold up his Ace until the third round to prevent declarer from making 4 tricks.

Exception: If the contract is NT, and you have a set up suit, of course you take your ace at first opportunity and run your suit to beat the contract!