



Topics In Defensive Play

The Opening Lead



1. Aims In Making The Opening Lead

Your aims in making the opening lead are as follows:

1.1. To avoid giving declarer a trick which he is not entitled to win by his own efforts.

For example; if you lead a suit headed by A-Q and declarer holds the K he will make a trick with it.

He is not entitled to this trick.

Declarer's king would lose to your ace if anyone else leads the suit.

	9 8 3	
A Q 4 2		J 10 7
	K 6 5	

declarer

1.2. To Set up tricks for the defence.

For example; if you hold K - Q in a side suit against a suit contract lead the King.

This may lose to declarer's or dummy's ace but the queen is set up immediately for a trick which you hope to cash before declarer can get rid of his losers in this suit.

Against no trumps generally lead the suit you consider to be your side's longest and strongest.

You may lose an early trick or tricks but you hope to set up tricks with the long cards in your suit after you have exhausted declarer of his high cards in the suit.

Leading partner's suit

If partner has overcalled a suit, one of the reasons was to indicate a lead.

You need a very good reason not to lead a suit in which partner has overcalled.

If partner opened the bidding with one of a suit there is less of an imperative to lead the suit.

1.3. To give partner an indication of your holding in the suit

Having decided which suit to lead, the card you lead gives partner an indication of the texture of your suit.

A high spot card says you have no honour in the suit and have no ambition to develop tricks.

A low spot card says you have an honour in the suit and hence some interest in developing tricks.

From a 4+ card suit headed by an isolated honour lead the 4th highest.

The lead of an honour promises the honour immediately below and denies the honour immediately above.

2. Choosing The Suit To Lead

When trying to decide on the suit to lead you have 3 sources of information on which to base your decision.

2.1. The Bidding.

As the bidding proceeds you should be analysing what it means.

What are the shapes of the opposing hands ?

What is their strength ?

Where does this strength lie ?

How good is their fit ?

Has partner bid ?

What have the opposition failed to bid ? (often very revealing)

What has partner failed to bid ?

Does the bidding give you a hint as to how declarer will play the contract?

For example:

In a suit contract has dummy indicated a strong side suit which may be a source of tricks?

If so the defence need to cash their own strong suit before declarer discards his losers in that suit on dummy's strong side suit.

Has declarer bid two suits and dummy has preferred the second?

Dummy will be short in the first suit.

Declarer will try to dispose of his losers in this suit by ruffing in dummy.

Limit his ability to do this by leading a trump.

Have the opposition bid confidently to their contract?

e.g. 1NT – 3NT

An attacking lead possibly with some risk is necessary to try to defeat the contract.

This is called an Active Lead.

Or have they staggered to their contract?

e.g. 1NT – 2NT – 3NT

Declarer may be one trick short of his contract.

Do not give him the extra trick needed with your lead.

A safe defensive lead is necessary - for example top of an honour sequence.

The top card from a suit with no honour can be safer than leading from an unsupported honour.

This is called a Passive Lead.

2. Choosing The Suit To Lead

Partner has bid

If partner has bid a suit it usually makes sense to lead it.

There are two reasons.

It is usually better to have suits led up to rather than away from.

You lead up to partner's suit rather than him having to lead away from it.

The psychology is right.

If you lead partner's suit and things go wrong you are hard to blame.

If you don't lead it and things go wrong you will always be at fault.

But consider.

If partner has opened the bidding with a bid of one of a suit he will have a strong hand but not necessarily a strong suit.

If partner has overcalled a suit he may have a weaker hand but should have a strong suit.

One of his purposes in overcalling was to indicate a lead.

If partner has overcalled a suit, it will generally be correct to lead it.

If partner opened the bidding with one of a suit you could be excused for not leading it if you have a good alternative lead yourself.

2. Choosing The Suit To Lead

How are the points distributed

What does the bidding tell you about the distribution of the points between the four hands ?

Consider how your side's strength is divided between you and partner.
The opposition have bid as follows:

W	N	E	S
1NT	pass	3NT	pass

You have to make the opening lead with the following hands.

♠ 9 5
♥ J 6 3
♦ 9 7 3
♣ 9 6 4 3 2

Your hand is worthless.

There is no point in leading your clubs since you can never set them up.

Partner has all of your side's assets so try to help him.

Lead the ♠9.

East did not use Stayman so probably has no more than 3 spades.

West may have 4 spades but probably does not have 5.

Opponents should have no more than 7 spades between them.

♠ K J 6
♥ A Q 9 7
♦ K J 8 3
♣ J 5

Partner must have nothing. So you try to set up your own hand.

You have a good chance of defeating the contract from your own hand so avoid giving away a trick.

The top three suits are headed by tenaces and are likely to give a trick away.

Lead the ♣J.

What is the shape of the opponents' hands

What does the bidding tell you about the shape of the opponent's hands ?

Think about where your side's strength may lie.

Try to make a lead which starts to develop your side's assets.

Does dummy have a long suit on which declarer may be able to discard winners?

You need to take your winners quickly.

Against a suit contract, does dummy have a shortage in declarer's side suit?

You may need to lead a trump to restrict declarer's ability to ruff his losers in dummy.

Could partner get a ruff.

W	N	E	S
			1♠
pass	2♣	pass	3♣
pass	4♣	end	

What is the shape of south's hand?

Your clubs are A 7 5 2

How do the clubs split ?

Partner has, at most, a single club.

The lead of ♣A will draw this and partner can ruff the next.

2. Choosing The Suit To Lead

2.2. The contract you are leading to

Are you leading to a no trump contract or to a suit contract ?

Your approach to the two types of contract is different.

The play of no trump contracts is often referred to as “The battle of the tempos”.

Can the defence make sufficient tricks to defeat the contract
before

Declarer makes enough tricks to make his contract.

When making the opening lead against a no trump contract you will usually try to set up tricks for small cards in your side’s longest and strongest suit.

For this reason, you normally lead this suit.

You follow certain conventions regarding the card to lead from your suit.

These are described later.

- Against a suit contract the small cards in your long suit will be ruffed.
You therefore try to set up tricks quickly before declarer can get rid of his losers in your strong suit.

Consider this holding in a particular suit:

A Q 8 5 2

Against a no trump contract you would be happy to lead the suit.

By convention you would lead the 5 (4th highest).

You are risking giving up a trick initially but you hope that you then have four tricks established.

Against a suit contract you would almost certainly not lead this suit.

Declarer may have the king and, if you lead this suit, he will make a trick with it.

However, if partner can gain the lead in another suit, you hope he will lead this suit through declarer and you then have two tricks

Consider this holding in a particular suit: K Q 8 5 2

Against a no trump contract you would lead the 5 hoping that partner can force out declarer’s stop in the suit and you may then make 4 tricks.

Against a suit contract you would lead the king to ensure you set up a trick for the queen.

- If opponents have a holding in a major you usually hear about it.
If you have a close choice between leading a major or a minor suit against a no trump contract the major will often be better.

2. Choosing The Suit To Lead

2.3. The Cards In Your Hand

The texture of some of the suits you hold may discourage you from leading them.

eg from a tenace.

Alternatively, your cards in a particular suit may draw you to lead that suit.

eg if you hold an honour sequence.

The lead of a singleton against a suit contract in the hope of a ruff is often a good lead.

However, you must consider its merits in light of the bidding.

If there is no way into partner's hand to give you the ruff there is no point.

A singleton lead is a shot in the dark and could give away a trick or tricks.

If you compromise one of partner's honours in the suit and you only get one ruff you have not gained anything.

Even if you find partner's ace, if he can't recognise your lead as a singleton you have taken a risk for nothing.

If, however, you hold the ace of trumps, you will get a second attempt to find a route into partner's hand and in this situation the lead may be worthwhile.

♠K 6 4 2 ♥A 4 2 ♦10 6 4 3 2 ♣7

Declarer is in 4♥ and partner has bid spades.

You may be tempted to lead the ♠2.

But consider; lead the ♣7

You will later gain the lead with the ♥A.

You can then hope to enter partner's hand with a spade and partner may ask himself why you did not lead a spade in the first place.

He should return a club for you to ruff.

Similar considerations apply to doubleton leads.

Doubleton leads are generally not as good as inexperienced players believe.

Do you have a suit that will be a source of tricks ?

The lead of a trump may restrict declarer's opportunities to ruff your suit and allow you to win tricks later.

This is referred to as a forcing defence.

2. Choosing The Suit To Lead

The effectiveness of leads against suit contracts is shown in the table below.

The lead card is underlined bold.

Holding	Effectiveness
<u>A</u> K 7 4	10
<u>3</u>	9
<u>K</u> Q J 6	9
<u>K</u> Q 7 6	8
<u>Q</u> J 10 4	8
<u>Q</u> J 5 2	7
<u>8</u> 3	5
<u>8</u> 5 2	4
Q 9 5 <u>2</u>	4
<u>J</u> 4	2
K 7 5 <u>2</u>	2
K J 5 <u>3</u>	2
A 10 7 <u>4</u>	0

Note how this parallels the broad principles above.

Note also how low down the list leads from isolated honours fall.

3. Choosing The Card To Lead

Having decided on the suit to lead, your choice of card from that suit follows certain conventions designed to give partner an indication of the texture of your suit.

Your approach differs slightly according to whether you are leading to a suit contract or to a no trump contract.

So far as the opening lead is concerned suits fall broadly into two categories.

- suits headed by an honour or honours - there are several categories.
- suits not headed by an honour

Broad principles in selecting the card to lead from the suit you have chosen are;

Lead the top of honour sequences.

The sequence can be 2+ cards against a suit contract

K Q x (x)

But should be 3+ cards against a NT contract

K Q J (x)

K Q 10 (x)

Q J 10 (x)

Lead low from a suit you like i.e. headed by an isolated honour(s)

K x x x x

Lead a high spot card from a suit you hate

i.e. no honour 9 7 5

Against a no trump contract your priority is to show you have no interest in this suit.

Lead as high as you can to get this message across.

Against a suit contract you are also trying to indicate how many cards you hold in the suit.

Usually lead 2nd highest and then play:

Middle-Up-Down if you started with 3 cards

3rd highest if you started with 4+

Lead top of a doubleton (usually a suit partner has bid)

H x

x x

You may find that your choice of suit to lead is influenced by the quality of your suits.

3. Choosing The Card To Lead

Leads from suits headed by honours

If you have decided to lead a suit which is headed by an honour or honours, the card you lead will indicate to partner
whether you have honours in sequence
whether you have an unsupported honour

By following the conventions below you are indicating to partner the texture of your suit.
The card to lead is highlighted.

Suits headed by complete honour sequences

A complete honour sequence comprises three cards the top one being an honour.

If the suit is headed by a complete honour sequence you lead the top card of the sequence.

eg **A** K Q : K Q J : Q J 10 : **10** 9 8

When you lead an honour, partner will assume you hold the card immediately below it but you do not hold the honour immediately above.

Suits headed by broken honour sequences

If the suit is headed by a broken honour sequence you lead the top card of the broken sequence.

A broken honour sequence looks like this – notice the card missing between the second and third cards.

eg **A** K J : K Q 10 : Q J 9

Again, when you lead an honour, partner will assume you hold the card immediately below it but you do not hold the honour immediately above.

Suits headed by interior honour sequences

If the suit is headed by an interior sequence you lead the top card of the interior sequence.

An interior sequence looks like this – notice that, this time, the missing card or cards lie between the first and second cards.

eg **A** Q J : A J 10 9 : K 10 9 8 : Q **10** 9

Leading from this type of holding is less safe.

It may tend to give declarer a trick which he was not naturally entitled to.

Suits headed by unsupported honours

An unsupported honour is an honour card on its own with only low cards with it.

With 3+ cards in the suit, lead low from unsupported honours.

Normally you would lead the 4th highest card.

Sometimes you are obliged to lead a 3-card suit and you lead the lowest.

eg K 8 4 **2** : Q 9 **3** : K 10 6 **4**

Unless this is a suit partner has bid, leads from unsupported honours are poor and risk giving away tricks.

With 2 cards in the suit, lead the honour.

You are unlikely to lead from a doubleton honour unless partner has bid the suit.

3. Choosing The Card To Lead

Leads from suits not headed by honours

The approach is different for leads against suit contracts and no trump contracts.

Against a no trump contract

When the suit contains no honours, generally lead the highest card.

This is referred to as "Top of nothing"

But remember, 9s (and occasionally 8s) in long suits may win tricks.

Essentially lead the highest card you feel you can afford.

It gives the clearest message to partner that you have no interest in the suit and suggests that partner should look for your strength in another suit.

Against a suit contract

In leading from suits not headed by honours you indicate to partner;

That you are not interested in developing tricks in the suit.

Partner can then look elsewhere to find your strength.

The number of cards you hold in the suit

You will hold 2, 3, 4 or 5 small cards and you attempt to indicate to partner which it is.

This allows partner to determine the layout of the suit.

From 2 small lead the top card and then, the next time you play the suit, you play the lower.

From 3 small first play the middle card, and then, the next time you play the suit, play the highest card.

This is known as M-U-D

Middle – Up – Down.

From 4 or more small first play the 2nd highest...
....the next time you play the suit, play the original third highest card.

In each case your initial lead may only give partner an indication of how many cards you hold.

However, your subsequent play in the same suit will complete the message.

Partner, by looking at dummy and from your play of the cards should be able to resolve any ambiguity.

If you play low – high you have 3 small cards.

If you play high – low you could have 2, 4 or 5 small cards.

Hopefully partner can work out which from a view of dummy and the cards he holds himself.

Keep in mind that you lead low from an unsupported honour.

You need to be careful that, if you hold 2, 3, 4 or 5 small cards your lead is not such as to indicate that you hold an honour.

These leads depend on the initial card being intermediate.

3. Choosing The Card To Lead

Leads from suits headed by the unsupported ace

Against no trump contracts your aces will almost always win tricks.

You are happy to lead the fourth highest card in a suit headed by an ace in the hope that partner has some high cards in your suit that will then help to set up your long cards.

You are said to be “Under leading” your ace or “Leading away from it”.

When leading to a suit contract, if you lead away from an ace, it may later be ruffed.

There are few absolutes in the game of bridge but....

One is....

Do not underlead a side suit ace at trick 1 against a suit contract.

Avoid leading side suits which are headed by an ace.

If you absolutely must lead the suit lead the ace - for example if it is a suit partner has bid.

But remember; aces are for beating kings – if you lead an ace it will beat only thin air.

Later in the play of the hand when you have a better picture of the lie of the cards you can underlead an ace.

For example when you know partner has a specific king and you need to put him on lead quickly.

However, against a suit contract, if you have a side suit headed by A-K, lead the ace.

This gets you a risk-free look at dummy.

Leads From Suits Headed By Tenaces

A tenace comprises two cards with the card between them missing.

Leads away from tenaces are likely to give away a trick.

A Q 4 2 K J 5 are poor suits to lead from

	9 8 3	
A Q 4 2		J 10 7
	K 6 5	

If, as west, you lead this suit, declarer will make a trick with the K.

If any other hand leads the suit declarer makes no tricks.

4. Summary Of Opening Leads

1. Leads From Suits Headed By Honour Sequences

Holding	Card To Lead		
	Vs NT	Vs Suit	
A K Q 3	A	A	Suits headed by a Complete Honour Sequence Lead the top card. This is the best lead of all. It is a safe lead – it cannot give away a trick. Also partner can judge the texture of your suit. You have the honour immediately below the card led. You do not have the honour immediately above.
K Q J 3	K	K	
Q J 10 3	Q	Q	
J 10 9 3	J	J	
A K J 3	A	A	Suits headed by a Broken Honour Sequence Lead the top card. A safe lead – it cannot give away a trick. This again indicates the texture of your suit.
K Q 10 3	K	K	
Q J 9 3	Q	Q	
A J 10 3	avoid	avoid	Top of an Interior Sequence Less desirable. The lead from a 4-card suit is very unattractive since it is likely to give away a trick. However, against no trumps, the lead from the 5-card suit is more attractive since you give up one trick hoping to make four.
K J 10 3	avoid	avoid	
K 10 9 3	avoid	avoid	
A J 10 5 2	J	avoid	
K J 10 5 2	J	avoid	
K 10 9 5 2	10	avoid	
A K 7 2	2	A	
A K 7 3 2	3	A	
K Q 7 2	2	K	
K Q 7 3 2	3	K	

4. Summary Of Opening Leads

2. Leads From Suits Headed By An Unsupported Honour

Unless it is a suit bid by partner, leads from unsupported honours are very risky.

Holding	Vs NT	Vs Suit	
A 7 3 2	2	avoid (A)	Do not underlead side suit aces at trick 1 against suit contracts. If you must lead the suit then lead the ace. But remember; aces are for beating kings and queens and they beat only small cards if they are led.
K 7 3 2	2	2	If you must lead from an unsupported honour lead low when the suit contains 3 or more cards. If the suit is 4+ cards you lead the 4 th highest.
Q 7 3 2	2	2	
K 7 2	2	2	
Q 7 2	2	2	
K 3	avoid (K)	avoid (K)	A very unattractive lead unless it is a suit partner has bid. If you lead the suit lead the top card.
Q 3	avoid (Q)	avoid (Q)	You follow the usual principle of leading high low with a doubleton.

4. Summary Of Opening Leads

3. Leads From Suits Not Headed By An Honour

Holding	Vs NT	Vs Suit	
9 3	no (9)	9	An unattractive lead unless it is a suit partner has bid. A doubleton lead so lead the top card. When you play high-low partner knows you have a doubleton. Inexperienced players think this is a good lead against suit contracts. Doubleton leads are rarely successful unless it is a suit partner has bid.
9 7 3	9 (7)	7	You are trying to indicate you have no interest in this suit. Against a suit contract you can also indicate that you have 3 small cards. Lead the middle card. Subsequently play the top card (whether this be leading the suit again or following when someone else leads it. This is known as Middle-Up-Down (M-U-D) This informs partner that you have a 3-card suit containing no honour and you, therefore, have no interest in that suit. Against a no trump contract lead the top card. This is known as Top Of Nothing and gives you the best chance of indicating your lack of interest to partner.
9 7 5 3	9 (7)	7	Against a suit contract, with four small cards, lead second highest. The next time you play to this suit, play the third highest. This informs partner that you have no honour in the suit and, therefore, no interest in that suit. Partner has to decide whether you have led from a 2-card suit or a 4-card suit but a look at dummy generally makes it clear. Against a no trump contract lead the top card. This is known as Top Of Nothing and gives you the best chance of indicating your lack of interest to partner. If the second highest card is high enough to show no interest lead that.
9 7 5 3 2	9 (7)	7	With five small cards play as if it is a 4-card suit. Partner will know you have no interest in the suit.

9s occasionally win tricks.

Your aim in leading a high spot card is to say you have no interest in the suit.

When leading an empty 4 or 5 card suit against no trumps, if your top card is a 9 and your 2nd highest card is high enough to carry the relevant message, then lead the 2nd highest.

It would not be wrong to lead the 7 in the last 3 examples above.