

Play in Defence Part1- Opening Leads

The opening lead is often crucial in determining whether your defence will succeed, or whether declarer will prevail. You have little to go on, simply the bidding, and your own hand. Dummy hasn't been tabled yet, so you don't have that information to help you. Often you will be faced with a guess, and sometimes it will work out well, sometimes badly.

There is no system on earth that can guarantee your choice of lead will be a good one. What we can do, however, is look at the principles of choosing an opening lead, to make your chances as good as they can be.

This lesson is focused on the opening lead – the first card in the play of a hand. However, the same principles apply on leading to a trick at any stage in the play of a hand – though in later tricks, you will almost always have more information to go on than on trick 1.

General ideas about OPENING LEADS

- The card you lead will provide a signal to partner – what other cards you might hold in the suit you lead, and whether you like the suit and want partner to lead it back if she gains the lead.
- Choice usually depends on whether you are defending against a suit contract, or a NT contract.
- Against a suit contract, if you and your partner have a lot of cards in one suit, you are unlikely to take many tricks in it, as declarer will soon be ruffing in.
- But against NT, establishing your long suit is exactly what you DO want to do, as it's very often how you can defeat the contract.

Let's focus first on defending against **suit contracts**.

Some GENERALLY good opening leads are

- Ace from a suit headed by AK (if you lead an A, partner will place you with the K). This will usually give you a "free" look at dummy, so you can best decide what to lead to trick 2.
- Singleton in an outside suit (ie not trumps) PROVIDED you have some trumps in your hand, so you have the prospect of ruffing further tricks in this suit.
- A trump.
- Top from two touching honours. This is usually fine against a suit contract, but note that against a NT contract, it is generally best to lead an honour only if holding 3 high cards in a 4+ card suit (K from KQJ or KQ10, or top of a broken sequence, ie Q from AQJ).
- If you have nothing else better, lead a highish spot card from a poor suit, one you'd rather partner didn't lead back to you. We use a mnemonic: when **LEADING** a spot card to a trick: *low for like, high for hate*. We will explore that further in Lesson 26.

Why does that matter?

Example: partner leads ♣4 against a 4♥ contract.

	Dummy	
	♣ A J 6 2	
lead ♣4		You (East)
		♣ K 10 5

The ♣2 is played from dummy. What do you play?

You interpret partner's ♣4 as a "low" spot card, so you take her lead to show she holds an honour in clubs. It can only be the Q♣. So, you can safely win the trick with ♣10, and your side can win a second club trick. If you play the K♣, declarer can now finesse against partner's Q♣, and you only take 1 club trick.

Same example, except partner leads ♣7 against a 4♥ contract.

	Dummy	
	♣ A J 6 2	
lead ♣7		You (East)
		♣ K 10 5

The ♣2 is played from dummy. What do you play?

You interpret ♣7 as a "high" spot card, so you take partner's lead to show she holds no high clubs, ie "high for hate". So you know declarer must hold ♣Q.

So playing the ♣10 is no good – declarer will win with ♣Q.

There is nothing to be gained by holding up the ♣K, so you play it. At least you win the 1 club trick available to you. If declarer has a doubleton club, failing to play the ♣K on the first club trick would mean you win no tricks in clubs.

Another example: again, partner leads ♣4, but this time it's against a 3NT contract.

	Dummy	
	♣ Q 8 2	
lead ♣4		You (East)
		♣ K 10 7

The ♣2 is played from dummy. What do you play?

We try to work out the club position.

We will assume partner's ♣4 is 4th highest. As we don't have the ♣3 in our own hand, we know if partner holds it, she has 5 clubs, or declarer holds it and partner has 4 clubs.

We know from **rule of 11** (which I will come on to in a moment) that there are $11-4 = 7$ clubs higher than the ♣4 not in partner's hand.

We can see 5 of them, so declarer holds two clubs higher than the ♣4.

Partner holds the ♣J and /or the ♣A, or would have led a different suit, or a high ♣ for hate.

So we play the ♣10!

It doesn't matter whether declarer holds J or A, she will need to play it to win the trick.

See why signals are crucial to good defence?

What you should remember, when leading against a suit contract:

- Leading a suit containing an honour (A, K, Q or J), lead a low card to indicate your honour holding.
- Leading a suit without an honour- lead a high spot card (high for hate).
- But what about the common situation where you hold 3 small cards, eg 8 6 2? The best method is called MUD – middle/up/down. You’d start with the 6, then the 8, then the 2. If you lead the 8, then on the next trick in the suit play the 6, then partner will place you with an even number of cards – usually a doubleton.

We have talked about GOOD Leads against a suit contract. What about leads we should try to avoid making- ones that are likely to turn out badly?

Poor leads against a SUIT contract:

- Away from an Ace: eg leading the 3 from A 9 8 3. **This is ALMOST ALWAYS A CARDINAL SIN!**
- An unsupported Ace: eg leading the A from A 4 3 (though might be best against a slam)
- Away from a King: eg leading the 3 from K 4 3 (but might well be right to lead the 3 if partner has bid the suit)
- An unsupported King: eg leading the K from K 4 3

And leads to be wary of:

- Top of a doubleton. In old-fashioned bridge, was a popular choice, but it doesn’t work out well often enough. But if partner has bid that suit, DO consider that lead.
- A card from a 4-card suit with one honour. Beware of “frozen” suits: a suit where the 4 honours are split, one in each of the 4 hands. The first side to lead a frozen suit will usually give away a trick.

We’ve seen some good and bad leads to make against a suit contract. But what to do when we have a **CHOICE?**

Obviously we can only lead from what we hold in our hand! Say we have a choice between two good leads, or only a choice between two poor leads? How do we decide which is best, or which is least worst?

Let’s try RANKING possible leads by giving them a score- best possible lead gets a score of 10, worst possible lead gets a score of 0.

Against suit contracts, leading a non-trump. Partner has not bid.

Holding	Lead	Score
A K 6 3	A	10
3	3	9
K Q J 4	K	8
K Q 3 2	K	7
Q J 10 2	Q	7
Q J 5 3	Q	6
8 4	8	5
8 6 3	6	4
Q 9 5 3	3	4
J 4	J	3
K 7 5 2	2	2
A 10 7 4	4	0

Notice we rank A from a suit headed by AK as better than leading a singleton.

WHY?

Because leading an A from AK (unless you are VERY unlucky and declarer is void) gives you a free look at dummy, so you can **then** decide what to do next.

Also, partner will place you with the K if you lead A, which is usually very useful information for partner.

Here is an example, South declaring in 4♥, after the simple auction 1♥ – 4♥

	♠ Q 10 3	
	♥ 10 8 4 2	
	♦ A K Q 7	
	♣ K 8	
♠ A K 7 4		♠ 9 8 5 2
♥ J 6 5		♥ -
♦ 3		♦ 10 9 8 6 5
♣ J 9 7 4 2		♣ A Q 6 3
	♠ J 6	
	♥ A K Q 9 7 3	
	♦ J 4 2	
	♣ 10 5	

West, on lead, looked no further than her singleton diamond, and led ♦3.

Declarer won with the ♦J in hand, drew trumps, and cashed ♦A K Q.

An easy 10 tricks.

What should have happened?

West leads ♠A. She can always play her singleton diamond on trick 2, if it looks sensible. Her ♠A wins the trick, East playing a discouraging ♠2. Seeing the strong diamonds in dummy, she switches to a club at trick 2, leading through dummy's ♣K. Partner wins ♣AQ, and leads a spade back to partner's (known) ♠K.

One down.

Let's now look at leading against **NT contracts**

First think about **which SUIT**, then choose which card

- Partner's suit: If partner has bid a suit, you will need a good reason not to lead it.
- Your own good suit: If you have a useful holding – a long suit with the likelihood of being able to access it to cash the long cards – choose that suit.
- Unbid suit: If partner hasn't bid, but opponents have bid some suits but not others, and you have no useful holding in your own hand, choose an unbid suit.
- Sometimes there will be other inferences: eg if they bid 1NT-3NT, there was no Stayman, and so no attempt to find a major suit fit. They probably have minor suit length. If you have a toss up between leading a major or a minor, choose a major!
- Long, poor suit: if you have no good lead – eg you hold honours in short suits, have no information to work out which suit is likely to be partner's best, and have a long suit of rubbish, it will be safer to lead the long suit.

Now, **which card**?

Always do your best to help partner work out what's going on.

Normally lead 4th highest from your best suit (of which more in a minute), but if you've chosen to lead a short suit -for example because you've chosen to lead partner's bid suit, or a suit you've worked out is likely to be partner's best (eg an unbid suit):

- With 2 cards, lead higher first (high-low = peter)
- With 3 cards including one honour (A, K, Q or J) lead small
- With 3 small cards lead middle-up-down (MUD)
- If you've chosen to lead a long, poor suit, lead a high spot card (high for hate). Partner will usually be able to work out it's not "4th highest" of a good suit (eg using Rule of 11).

A quick digression – **what is Rule of 11?**

It is a very useful way, specially in defending against a NT contract, to work out where the high cards lie in a suit- it helps you decide how best to play that suit. It depends on the assumption that the lead is 4th highest. It says: subtract the card led from 11, and that's the number of cards higher than the card led, in the 3 hands other than the hand making the lead.

So, for example, partner leads the ♣8. If it were the 4th highest, there would be exactly 3 clubs higher than the 8 not in partner's hand. If you can see more than 3 clubs in in dummy and in your own hand higher than the ♣8, the ♣8 was not 4th highest- it MUST be high from rubbish.

But say partner leads the ♣5: you work on the assumption there are 6 cards higher than the ♣5 not in partner's hand. If you can see 5 of those in dummy and your own hand, declarer has only 1 card higher than the ♣5 in her own hand. See how useful that knowledge can be!

Returning now to **which card to lead** in the suit you've chosen to lead, against a NT contract; say it's a good long suit of your own (4+ cards, with one or more high cards):

The usual choice will be 4th highest. Look at these possible suits

♦ K 9 7 5 3

♦ Q 10 6 4 3

♦ A 9 5 4 2 (Yes, it's perfectly OK to underlead an A or a K against NT. It is only a no-no against a suit contract.)

In each case, you will lead the 4th highest. It helps partner work out the lie of the suit and how best to play it, using Rule of 11.

But what about honour leads – where you hold more than one high card in the suit? Which card to lead?

I want us to consider here BOTH suit contracts AND NT contracts

The general guidelines are

Against a suit contract:

lead top of two touching honours (eg ♥K from ♥K Q 6 4 2, ♥Q from ♥Q J 7 5 3)

lead top of an interior sequence (eg ♣J from ♣K J 10 5 2)

BUT against a NT contract, you want to hold 3 “high” cards in the suit to lead a high card. With only two high cards, it is usually better to lead 4th highest. Note that “high” cards here can include the 10 and the 9.

Let’s look at some examples

	against a suit contract	against a NT contract
♥K Q J 6 3	♥K	♥K
♣K Q 6 3 2	♣K	♣3
♦K Q 10 3 2	♦K	♦K
♠Q J 9 7 2	♠Q	♠Q
	against a suit contract	against a NT contract
♥K J 9 3 2	♥3	♥3
♣Q J 7 5 2	♣Q	♣5
♦K J 10 3 2	♦J	♦J
♠A J 10 6 2	♠A??	♠J

In that spade suit, against a suit contract, NEVER anything but the A, and then only in special circumstances eg against a slam. Choose a different suit to lead. If you lead the Jack you **100%** do NOT hold the Ace.

One of the few rules never (almost) to break: **do not underlead an A against a suit contract.**

Now, here are a few challenges to think about:

You are North, on lead against 3NT. You hold

- ♠Q J 9 7 2
- ♥J 4
- ♦8 5
- ♣Q 6 4 2

What to lead?

With no more information, you’d pick your longest strongest suit, the spades. You have 3 “high” cards (Q J 9), so would lead the ♠Q.

BUT now I’ll show you the bidding (your side has passed throughout)

West	East
1♠	2♣
2♦	3♦
3NT	

Have you changed your mind from a spade lead?

There’s an unbid suit - hearts. West has shown 5-4 in spades and diamonds. East has at least 4 clubs, and diamond support for partner. So, it’s a virtual certainty that neither opposition has more than 3 hearts. So partner has at least 5 hearts. So rather than lead up to declarer’s 5 spades, lead to partner’s long suit (even though she hasn’t bid!)

Lead ♥J. You’ll have a very happy partner! (“How did you know to lead to my hearts?”)

Next example: you are North, on lead against 3NT. You hold

- ♠9 8 4 3 2
- ♥J 6
- ♦J 10 4
- ♣J 10 5

With no more information, you’d pick your long suit, the spades. You have no honours, so would lead the ♠9 (or ♠8, depending on your partnership agreement) – high for hate. You realise there is little chance of an entry to cash long spades.

BUT here is the bidding:

West

1♥

2NT

East

2♣

3NT

What to lead, now we have the information from the bidding?

There are two unbid suits, spades and diamonds. Which is likely to be partners' best suit? You've guessed it – DIAMONDS!

So you lead ♦ J.

And finally, when to lead **aggressively** – to take a risk with a “non-standard” lead,

and when to lead **passively**, ie trying to minimise the chances of giving away a trick.

Say the opposition have bid strongly to game, and your side hasn't bid at all. You're on opening lead, and your hand doesn't look promising.

Here, NS have bid strongly to 4♥, south is declaring, and North's bidding has shown a strong hand with very good (probably solid) spades.

You are West, on lead, and hold

♠ 9 7 3

♥ Q 6

♦ K J 6 3

♣ J 10 9 5

What might partner hold that gives you a chance for quick tricks, before South gains the lead, draws trumps, and ditches losers on North's presumed solid spades?

A club is likely to be too slow. You need to try an **AGGRESSIVE** lead.

Play for partner to hold A♦!! If she doesn't, possibly you'll concede an extra overtrick, but if she does, you're in with a shout to defeat declarer.

Lead 3♦

Here is the full deal, South declaring 4♥

♠ A K Q 6 4 2

♥ 9 4

♦ 8 5 4

♣ A Q

♠ 9 7 3

♥ Q 6

♦ K J 6 3

♣ J 10 9 5

♠ 10 8

♥ J 7

♦ A 9 7

♣ K 8 7 4 3 2

♠ J 5

♥ A K 10 8 5 3 2

♦ Q 10 2

♣ 6

West leads ♦ 3.

East wins ♦ A and returns ♦ 9.

West beats ♦ 10 with ♦ J, cashes ♦ K, and then, the Coup de Grace, leads ♦ 6.

East alertly trumps with ♥ J and, even though declarer can overruff with ♥ K, West's ♥ Q is promoted. Down one.

Any other lead, and declarer makes easily.

Here's another example. In both cases you're on lead against 3NT, but the auctions were different:

(a) 1♦ - 1♥ - 2♠ - 3NT

(b) 1♣ - 1♠ - 1NT - 2NT - 3NT

In (a), the opposition have bid confidently to 3NT, and are likely to have values to spare. Your only chance is to try to attack and hope to find a weak suit, or they will coast home.

In (b), the opposition have crept up to 3NT, and are probably going to be tight to make the contract. Your best lead is one that has the least chance of giving away a trick, so you should choose a passive, "safe", lead, not a risky one.

Here is the full deal in (b), South declaring 3NT

♠ Q 9 4 2	
♥ A 3 2	
♦ K 8 6	
♣ 7 6 3	
♠ 10 7	♠ K J 6 5
♥ J 10 8	♥ Q 9 7 5
♦ A Q 9 7	♦ 10 4 2
♣ 10 8 5 2	♣ Q 9
♠ A 8 3	
♥ K 6 4	
♦ J 5 3	
♣ A K J 4	

The auction went 1♣ - 1♠ - 1NT - 2NT - 3NT

West didn't think beyond "4th highest of longest and strongest suit" and led ♦ 7.

This is a risky lead, and stands a good chance of giving a free extra trick to declarer.

If you play through the hand, you will find that there are only two opening leads that allow declarer a chance to scrape home: the ♦ 7 and the ♦ 9.

South made 9 tricks for 3NT.

Any other lead, and declarer cannot succeed.

What to remember:

Lead **aggressively** against a confidently bid contract- be prepared to make a risky lead. OK, you *might* give a trick away, but it might be your only chance to defeat the contract. Imagine what card partner will need to hold to give you the best chance and play for her to hold that card.

Lead **passively** against a contract which is likely to be tough to make. Avoid a lead which could give a trick away – that extra trick could be crucial to let declarer get home.

Health warning:

Things won't always work out as neatly as those examples. No system of rules to guide your opening lead is infallible.

There will always be occasional hands where you follow the system, yet your lead turns out to be disastrous. If that happens, console yourself with the thought that if you keep following the guidance on what leads are best, over the long term you will get good results.

Stick with it, and your partnership will flourish.

