

THE ACID TEST

A quick and reliable guide to your true standard as a bridge player.

Have you ever wondered how good you really are at bridge? Perhaps you are one of the thousands of players who, whatever your results over the years, are still not quite sure. This is almost certainly because you don't know the comparative standard of the other players in your circle.

Duplicate players may like to judge their progress in terms of master points. High stake rubber players can draw some unwelcome conclusions from the shrinking size of their wallets. But unlike chess, where the ranking system is fairly watertight, these criteria at bridge tend to be unreliable. There are many reasons for this. The partnership factor; the unpredictability and wild fluctuation of results in a mixed field; the heavy weighting of master points in favour of time servers; a seemingly endless run of bad cards at rubber and so on.

Why not try the ACID test instead? It will only take ten minutes and will reveal the truth about your bridge ability with surprising accuracy.

It is aimed at serious players, although there is no reason why social or occasional players should not make an attempt if they are interested. This latter group must not be at all disappointed with a failure to score any marks, since they are not expected to. The test is meant to be a tough one. And if they do manage a positive result? Well, perhaps they might like to see how they fare in a stronger game. 'Serious' means that the game itself takes precedence over the social aspect. A serious player is therefore someone who is willing to devote very considerable time and effort to improvement.

Among this group of serious players, it is well known that the large differences that exist between levels of ability tend to narrow as the standard of competition increases, as in any other sport or game. Think of tennis, or the 100 metre sprint, or cryptic crossword puzzles. Diminishing returns set in at quite an early stage. In bridge the difference in the thought processes of an above average and a top player in your club is dramatically greater than that between any bridge expert and a world champion.

So how can a ten minute test prove anything worthwhile? This is absurd, the sceptics will object. Ability at bridge has so many distinct elements. What about bidding judgement; system knowledge and sophistication; length of experience; partnership compatibility; the enormous range of card playing skills; memory; attention; sustained concentration; speed of thought; flair; imagination; psychological insight; table presence? Quite a lot of ground to cover in ten minutes. Is it a hoax? The short answer is - Judge for yourself. If a player's standard is known and generally accepted, the correlation with their test result should convince you. And if their standard is unknown or unclear beforehand, it won't be afterwards. Guaranteed. For those interested, there is a brief account of the logic behind this method of assessment at the end of the second section.

Taking The ACID Test (Aces Can Inhibit Defenders)

Write down as many cases as you can think of, where it is sound play for a defender to underlead an Ace in a suit contract. Ignore no trump contracts.

Some explanatory notes before you start.

1. After reading the following points, take a couple of minutes to think them over. Then allow yourself ten minutes exactly.
2. Underleading an Ace refers to the lead of a small card from an Ace high holding. For the purposes of the test, it is restricted to the first occasion the suit is played, either on opening lead or later; and includes all suits - the side suits and the trump suit itself. It excludes those rare instances where a defender may underlead an Ace high honour sequence, for example AKx(xx) or even AKQx(x).
3. Beginners are taught to keep hold of their aces in order to capture the opponents Kings and Queens. Don't play them out at the first chance, and definitely don't underlead them in suit contracts. The improving player may wonder if there are exceptions to this rule, but is told not to worry about them. The experienced player will realise that there is much more to all this than the question of who's got the King, if you can't see it.

Many factors are at work, among them inferences from the bidding and play, counting of points and distributions, card reading, defence signalling, assessment of risk, assessment of urgency in the defence, awareness of declarer's options, control, communications, timing.

4. No detail is possible in the time allowed and typical answers will be five to ten words or thereabouts. If your answers are carefully phrased, it will be apparent that you could have given actual layout examples, if it weren't for the time limit. However the main objective must be specified. "To put partner in" won't do as an answer. You would need to say why. To help you get the idea of what's wanted, here are some specimen answers to a quite unrelated question. When is it sound play to trump partner's winner? Possible answers: To protect partner from an endplay/To save partner from a guess/When you need to switch from your side of the table/When you can be sure of defeating the contract.
5. 'Sound' play does not imply necessary success; or even the best play; or a play without risk; merely a live option that might reasonably be considered.
6. The results of the ACID test are only valid, if you have been confronted with it for the first time. In the unlikely event that you have been pondering the subject for weeks, please rule yourself out.
7. Now read the ACID Test question once more and start the clock.

THE ACID TEST

Marking, assessment, answers, commentary and summary.

(Please don't open this section until you have done the test. The sight of even one answer will invalidate the result).

Marking and Assessment

1. Check your answers against the short list provided and score a mark for each correct one. Try and be honest, but don't worry about your terminology. As long as you have made at least the key points, it doesn't matter how you have expressed them. If you can't decide whether an answer is valid and worth a mark, you'll have to ask a friendly expert to adjudicate - but only as a last resort!
2. The answers cover the main situations where Ace underleads may be justified, but are certainly not the last word on the subject. If you are confident you have found a genuinely different principle, award yourself an additional bonus mark.
3. The assessment categories below are geared to duplicate players, experienced at both teams and pairs in well established clubs. Rubber bridge players can ascertain their equivalent standard at teams, but if they have little or no experience of the match pointed pairs game, they might expect to do rather less well at this form of bridge than their ranking would suggest.
4. The accompanying commentary gives a very limited and condensed explanation of each case.

Interpreting the results

<u>Marks</u>	<u>Standard of play</u>
Zero	Social, occasional, or small 'friendly' village club player
One	Large, well established clubs - below average standard
Two	Large, well established clubs - average standard
Three	Large, well established clubs - above average standard
Four to Five	Top club player
Six to Seven	Regular county player
Eight to Ten	Top county player
Eleven to Fourteen	Expert/Professional
Fifteen plus	International <u>OR</u> Professional writer and high level analyst
Twenty plus	Very interesting! Own up!

Possible Answers to the ACID test

1. Entry seeking plays
 - 1.1 To find partner's entry for a ruff
 - 1.2 To find partner's entry for a trump promotion
 - 1.3 To find partner's entry for a switch through a high card or tenace
 - 1.4 To find partner's entry for a trump lead
 - 1.5 To find partner's entry for winners to be cashed

2. Taking tricks in the suit
 - 2.1 To put declarer to a guess
 - 2.2 To take tricks without establishing a trick for declarer
 - 2.3 To establish a further trick

3. Communications/Control/Timing
 - 3.1 To retain communications, in order to give partner a ruff
 - 3.2 To give partner a ruff, retaining control of the suit
 - 3.3 To avoid a blockage, when giving partner a ruff
 - 3.4 To avoid a blockage in running the suit
 - 3.5 To ensure correct timing for a trump promotion

4. Prevention/Protection
 - 4.1 To avoid an endplay, by preparing an exit
 - 4.2 To protect partner from an endplay
 - 4.3 To protect partner from a ruffing finesse
 - 4.4 To protect partner's short honour holding
 - 4.5 To protect partner's trump holding
 - 4.6 To prevent an accurate high card count by declarer

5. In the trump suit itself
 - 5.1 To retain communications in a trump attack
 - 5.2 To avoid a crash in a trump attack
 - 5.3 To prevent a ruff by declarer, while retaining control of the trump suit
 - 5.4 From extreme length

6. In Potential Squeeze positions
 - To prevent declarer rectifying the count
 - Or
 - To attack declarers timing
 - Or
 - To adjust the timing in favour of the defence
 - Or (Simply)
 - To prevent a squeeze by declarer

Commentary

South is always declarer. West or East can be on lead, unless stated otherwise.

1. Entry Seeking Plays

Partner is assumed to hold the King of the suit and no other fast entry. This assumption may be justified either as a reasonable inference from the bidding, or by a previous signal, or merely as a necessary holding if the contract is to be set. The risk of presenting declarer, holding the King after all, with an undeserved trick is balanced against the probability of success in the context of the hand.

Dummy will have a singleton, or declarer placed with one, as a precondition in virtually all cases. Just occasionally the play is made from Axx(x), when dummy and declarer have some length. Partner again needs to work out why the Ace has been underled. The ambiguity of leading Ace and another, suggesting a possible ruff in the suit itself is removed, but the inference may still be difficult. Partner may be hard pressed to distinguish example 2.2 for instance.

1.1 To find partner's entry for a ruff:

Self explanatory

1.2 To find partner's entry for a trump promotion:

Here declarer can ruff in front of you, but only at the cost of a trump trick. If declarer holds AKQx in trumps, say, under your Jxx, a high ruff promotes your Jack.

1.3 To find partner's entry for a switch through a high card or tenace:

Here the switch may be necessary to establish an early trick in another suit which cannot be attacked from your side of the table.

1.4 To find partner's entry for a trump lead:

The defence needs to lead or continue trumps but you don't have one.

1.5 To find partner's entry for winners to be cashed:

Obviously you will be void in the suit where partner has winners to cash, or you would have led that suit yourself.

2. Taking tricks in the suit

2.1 To put declarer to a guess:

The most common reason for an Ace underlead is the King/Jack guess for declarer. Who has the Ace? Who has the Queen? North/South hold King and Jack together in one hand, or split in opposite hands. The King is always over the Ace. Unless both King and Jack are in dummy, the location of the missing honour(s) must be assumed by the defender on lead.

This play has point when made early on, before declarer can eliminate the guess, either by getting a count on high card points, or by establishing enough tricks elsewhere, or by taking available discards, or where there is no losing option. King and Jack being in opposite hands, with honour doubleton in one hand, declarer will lead to the King if forced to broach the suit, losing only one trick.

The play is sometimes seen on the opening lead where the King is placed with North from the bidding. It can hit the jackpot, especially if East holds Qx (Q, A, ruff). "Diabolical!" is the commentator's favourite cliché. Certainly, but usually confined to abnormal situations - shooting at pairs, for instance, or miracles prayed for at teams.

2.2 To take tricks without establishing a trick for declarer:

Three tricks are needed now before losing the lead. King again with partner; North/South hold Qxx, with Ace and Jack over the Queen, or Ace over the Queen, Jack and 10 with the defenders. Cashing the Ace first would establish the Queen.

2.3 To establish a further trick:

Two tricks wanted from the suit. North/South hold KQx(x) under the Ace. The defence need a suitable back up combination of Jack and 10, or Jack, 10 and 9 between them. Partner will have an outside entry and the third round must stand up. Similar constraints apply to the surrounding plays, normally the preserve of NT contracts, but sometime necessary at suit. For example, East, holding AQ106 over J82 in dummy and K95 with declarer, leads the Queen to set up two tricks, before a loser can be disposed of. This latter example is something of an exception; since in the case of surrounding plays, the underlead will be an honour rather than a small card.

3. Communications/Control/Timing

Communication plays and the subsidiary themes of control and timing crop up in almost every bridge hand in one way or another. The Ace underlead is a less commonly recognised manoeuvre, which can be effective in preserving lines of communication for one's own side, or disrupting those of the opponents.

3.1 To retain communications, in order to give partner a ruff:

Partner is placed with a doubleton in the suit and a fast trump entry, most likely the Ace. If you hold such an entry yourself, then Ace and another is clearly preferable, since two ruffs might be available, in the happy event that partner's 'doubleton' turns out to be a singleton.

- 3.2 To give partner a ruff, retaining control of the suit:
Here is a typical layout:

KQJ10 5 2	
A 7 6 4	-
9 8 3	

West, with no other entry, needs to hold up the Ace later in order to kill the suit in dummy. The underlead restricts declarer to one trick in the suit, rather than two or four.

- 3.3 To avoid a blockage, when giving partner a ruff:
Partner is placed with Kx. Ace first blocks the suit, and unless you have an immediate entry, no ruff will be possible. You cannot expect partner to risk looking silly by unblocking and playing you for the Queen you haven't got, especially when its in dummy!
- 3.4 To avoid a blockage in running the suit:
This is straightforward. Several layouts apply.
- 3.5 To ensure correct timing for a trump promotion:
South is declarer in Two Hearts, after West has opened the bidding with One Diamond.

	S A K 8 2	
	H A K 4 2	
	D Q 5	
	C 6 5 2	
S 6 5		S 10 9 4 3
H J 8 6		H 10 3
D A K J 8 6 3		D 9 2
C A 9		C K J 10 7 3
	S Q J 7	
	H Q 9 7 5	
	D 10 7 4	
	C Q 8 4	

After A, K, J of Diamonds, East echoing and declarer throwing a club from dummy, the defence need to take their remaining side suit winners before declarer can pitch another Club on the fourth Diamond.

In order that the lead should return to West at the right time, CA is underled to CK and the Club return won with the Ace. Now a fourth round of Diamonds uppercuts declarer, East ruffing with H10, and promoting a trick for West's trump holding.

This play sets the contract, the defenders taking three diamonds, two clubs and a trump. Note that if a fourth diamond is played before the two club tricks are cashed, declarer can pitch a second club from dummy, and either ruff low in hand or overruff if East ruffs with H10. South then loses a natural trump trick, but is compensated by the ruff and discard; making three trump tricks in North, a ruff in hand and four spades.

4 Prevention/Protection

In this group, there are two main factors which justify the play. You may need to attack the suit for early tricks, or it may be a situation where leading other suits would cost.

- 4.1 To avoid an endplay, by preparing an exit:
If this play is found at trick one (double dummy apart), it is unlikely to be for the right reason, but it is possible later. The layout for the suit might be:

K 8 3 2

A 9 6

Q J 5 4

10 7

You hold Kx in trumps and the other plain suits are ruled out. If you play Ace and another at once, declarer can extract your last card, and end play you with the King of trumps. The underlead prepares a subsequent exit, which spikes declarer's guns, since the suit cannot be stripped without East gaining the lead.

- 4.2 To protect partner from an endplay:
You need two tricks now. Partner holds Kx (yet again!) and would be end played unless the King is taken first. The same outcome might occur if North/South each hold doubletons, irrespective of partners length (Ruff and discard).
- 4.3 To protect partner from a ruffing finesse:
You, West on lead, need your trick before it disappears. Declarer has a singleton and North something like QJx(x). Cashing the Ace gives declarer a ruffing finesse position against East. The same applies, of course, with East on lead and the North/South holdings reversed.

- 4.4 To protect partner's short honour holding:
Similar considerations to the above. When partner holds Kx(x), the King might be ruffed out, establishing North or South's Queen.
- 4.5 To protect partner's trump holding:
This is a special case. It is a semi-deceptive play, risky and rather flashy and peculiarly irritating for declarer when it succeeds. Typical holdings might be: Declarer with the King this time; dummy with two trumps, and void in the suit led; East with Kxx in trumps. West is on lead and aims to shorten dummy's trumps, in order to prevent East's trump holding being picked up. If declarer cannot afford to lose the trick, he will ruff and play East for Kx in trumps. That said, declarer may smell a rat and let the lead run for an undeserved plain suit trick, thank you very much. As so often, risk v. reward.
- 4.6 To prevent an accurate high card count by declarer:
There are many possibilities here for deception or concealment. A simple example might be when partner wins the King and switches. Declarer is likely to place the Ace wrongly, and this may affect his line of play. Make sure you can argue the post mortem though, when declarer turns up with the King, since partner is sure to find your excuse lamentable.

5 In the trump suit itself

- 5.1 To retain communications in a trump attack:
Typically from Axx, partner holding xx and the first defensive entry. A second and third round of trumps can then be played without interruption.
- 5.2 To avoid a crash in a trump attack:
From Axxx to guard against crashing partners singleton honour, either the King or a lesser honour where you also hold good intermediates. However a forcing defence is more often indicated with such a trump holding.
- 5.3 To prevent a ruff by declarer, while retaining control of the trump suit:
Yet another special case. On opening lead, small from Ax. Tough to find, again at least for the right reason. Here is an illustrative hand. The contract is Four Spades by South.

8

S 5 4
H 8
D A K Q 8 2
C 9 8 7 3 2

S A 3
H K J 7 5
D 9 6 4 3
C Q 10 6

S 9 8
H A Q 10 8 4
D J 10
C K J 5 4

S K Q J 10 6 4 2
H 6 3 2
D 7 5
C A

The low trump lead presents declarer with a type of triple fork; three losing options. Trumps cannot be played without losing a trump and three heart tricks. An attempt to ruff a heart meets the same fate, West cashing the trump Ace when in. Playing to discard a heart on the third diamond also fails, East ruffing.

On any other lead declarer has the timing to duck a heart and ruff one if necessary.

5.4 From extreme length:

This is more of a bridge tip than anything else. From A to 5+ in the trump suit, it is likely to prove the most flexible and effective start for the defence.

6 In potential squeeze positions

Arguably beyond the scope of the ACID test, a generalised description is difficult, since plays here occur in specific, complex and unrelated endings.

Nevertheless if you have come up with anything like the suggested answers, revise your score upwards by an extra well deserved bonus mark.

Just one possible layout:

K 9 4

A J 8 2

Q 7 6

10 5 3

The suit must be broached, other suits frozen for whatever reason. Ace and then small gives declarer the squeeze timing, rectifying the loser count. The underlead equates to ducking the Ace, had declarer attacked the suit first. If a low card is led, declarer must rise with the King, but is then unable to lose a trick in the suit, without incurring a second unaffordable loser in the process.

Summing Up: Why does the ACID test work?

It seems strange that a ten minute exercise which focuses on one relatively unimportant aspect of card play can produce a more accurate appraisal of bridge ability than, for example, a standard quiz on bidding, declarer play and defence; particularly when such a quiz may take an hour or more to tackle. Surely, the more extensive the questions, the more information will be elicited, to provide a basis for assessment?

The answer to this apparent paradox runs along the following lines. In a bridge quiz, the participant moves from the general to the particular, drawing on known principles and applying them to specific situations. In the ACID test, the reverse is the case. Here the participant is asked to frame general propositions derived from particular instances, previously encountered, or developed by using some imagination. This is a much tougher and more revealing assignment, especially for those who are not used to carrying around bridge layouts in their head. Pro-active rather than re-active might be the fashionable, if odious, description of such an approach. It's not so much what you know, it's more how you think that matters. And it's how you think that provides the better insight into your overall ability.