

## Active and Passive leads

What are they?

A passive lead has little or no risk attached to it. It means playing safe and waiting for declarer to go wrong.

An active lead is more risky. It involves trying to make or establish tricks and taking some risks to do so.

What might you lead from this hand against 4♥?

♠ K 8 2

♥ 7 3

♦ Q 9 6 4 3

♣ K 3

You could lead from any suit here.

If you lead a spade, the card to lead is the 2 (low from an honour).

If you lead a heart, the card to lead will depend on partnership agreement. It probably doesn't really matter which one, but perhaps the 3 is better (keeping a slightly higher one for later).

If you lead a diamond, the card to lead is the 4 (4<sup>th</sup> highest from an honour).

If you lead a club, the card to lead is the King.

So here are our possible leads:

♠ K 8 2

♥ 7 3

♦ Q 9 6 4 3

♣ K 3

Some of these leads are more aggressive than others. Some are more risky than others. Some are more likely to establish tricks for us than others. Some are more likely to give the declarer a free ride rather than others.

♠2 may set up a spade trick for us. Partner may have the Ace or the Queen and we will have established trick(s) for our side. On the other hand declarer may have both the Ace and Queen and if we had not led them, then eventually declarer would take the spade finesse and we would win our King. So this lead is quite aggressive, with the potential to set up tricks, but also it is risky. It is an active lead.

♥3 may give declarer a free finesse and damage partner's trump holding. However, if partner has, say, Q 9 4, declarer could always finesse against the Queen anyway, so our lead has not cost anything. Our trump lead will not establish any tricks for our side, but it is also unlikely to cost our side any tricks. It is a passive lead.

♦4 has very similar ideas attached to it as the spade lead. It may establish a trick for our side. It is risky as it may lead into declarer's strength and we might have won a trick with the Queen had we not led the suit. It is an active lead, but it is less risky than the spade lead. The reason is that the Queen naturally wins the third round of a suit and in a suit contract dummy or declarer can probably ruff the third round. It is therefore slightly less likely to cost a trick than a spade lead.

♣K is a very active lead indeed. If you are lucky and partner has the Ace, then you may well establish three tricks for the defence (King, followed by Ace and then a ruff). It is however an extremely risky lead. Partner will not have many points and is therefore unlikely to hold the Ace. So our lead is likely to help the declarer. It is a very desperate lead and one we would not make under normal circumstances.

♠ K 8 2

♥ 7 3

♦ Q 9 6 4 3

♣ K 3

Most passive < - - - - - > Most active

♥3                  ♦4                  ♠2                  ♣K

Least risky < - - - - - > Most risky

When should we be active and when passive?

Now we know what active and passive leads are, we need to know when to use them. In general, when playing 'pairs' it is best to use passive leads. The reason being that we do not want to give anything away, as every trick counts. However if we are playing teams or rubber bridge it is much more important to defeat the contract, and the situation is not so clear. Sometimes an active lead will work well. If we can see that declarer can

cash tricks and make useful discards somewhere, we often need to be more active in setting up our winners.

Active or passive opening lead?

The only thing we have to guide us is the auction. Have the opponents bid confidently or do they sound as though they have only just enough to make their contract?

Consider these auctions to 4♥

East	West
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1♥	2♥
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3♥	4♥
----	----

East	West
------	------

1♥	1♠
----	----

3♦	4♥
----	----

East	West
------	------

1NT	2♣
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2♥	3♥
----	----

4♥	
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East	West
------	------

1NT	2♣
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2♥	4♥
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The two auctions on the left are fairly limited. It looks as though your opponents have only just got enough to be able to bid the game. It is therefore going to be tight and you must not give anything away. Be passive in your opening lead, don't take risks, and wait for the tricks to come your way.

The two auctions on the right are different. Your opponents look like they are going to make game easily - they may have even been considering a slam - and so here it may be best to make a more active lead, to try and set up quick tricks for your side. Be careful though; active leads are often risky and you should not make them without great care.

So, if the opponent look like they might be pushed to make their contract, you should make a very passive lead. If however they look very sure to make, you might consider a more active lead.

Active and passive leads also apply later in the play

As well as the opening lead, you may well have to lead later in the play when the dummy is on show. Active and passive leads apply here too. It is easier to decide now what to do because you have a clearer idea where the cards are.

Suppose the auction, at teams, has gone 1NT - 3NT and this is what you can see:

♠ K Q 5

♥ 7

♦ Q T 7

♣ A K J T 7 3

(dummy)

♠ A 6 4

♥ 8 6 4

♦ K J 9 6

♣ 8 5 2

(you)

Partner leads ♠10. Declarer plays small from dummy. What do you play?

After you win the ♠A you should make a very active lead, if you want to get this contract off. Partner has, at most, 5 points. Normally you would not lead a diamond into the dummy, but here you have to hope that partner has the Ace. Declarer has six club tricks (either with the Queen or by playing for the drop or finessing), with two spades and at least one heart. If partner has the Ace of diamonds you can set the contract with a spade and four diamond tricks. At pairs it may cost a trick, so it may be right to be passive. But at teams you must try a diamond.

Try to avoid opening up a frozen suit - make a passive lead instead.

Consider this layout:

J 8 4

(dummy)

A T 6 3

K 9 2

(you)

Q 7 5

This suit is 'frozen' because neither side can lead it to their advantage. If declarer leads the suit he will take no tricks in it. If you or your partner lead the suit then you will set up a trick for the declarer. So when you obtain the lead, try to make a passive lead in another suit.

E.g.

		♠ 8 7 5	
		♥ A Q T 3	
		♦ J 6 3	
		♣ J 8 7	
		(dummy)	♠ 6 3
South	North		♥ K J 2
1♠	1NT		♦ K 8 7 2
2♠			♣ K 9 4 3
			(you)

Partner leads a passive heart and you win dummy's 10 with your Jack. What do you return?

Here you should make a passive return. If you play a minor suit, declarer may have three to the Queen and you set a trick up for him. A heart is clearly silly, so a trump is best.

		♠ 8 7 5	
		♥ K Q 3	
		♦ A Q J T	
		♣ J 8 7	
		(dummy)	♠ 6 2
South	North		♥ A 7 2
1♠	2♦		♦ 8 7 5 4 2
3♠	4♠		♣ K 9 4
			(you)

Partner leads a passive heart and you win dummy's Queen with your Ace. What do you return?

This time it is better to be active and return a club. The danger now is that if you do not take your clubs tricks now, then declarer will (eventually) discard any losing clubs on the diamonds.