



In Defence, Every Card Tells a Story

There are three different stories to tell:

Attitude:

Whether you want partner to continue with this suit (encourage) or to avoid it (discourage);

Count:

How many cards you hold in this suit, limited to hinting whether you have

an odd number of cards: 1, 3, 5 or

an even number: 2,4, 6;

Suit Preference:

Which (other) suit you would like your partner to lead.



When do you signal to partner?

When you are defending

All opening, and other leads contain information for partner, as well as trying to win or establish tricks.

Apart from the times that a defender leads a suit, the defence signal to each other when:

Following suit on opponent's lead

You may be playing to win the trick. You may be playing "third hand high". But otherwise, you often play cards that tell partner how many cards you hold in this suit ("count").

Following suit on partner's lead:

Especially if the lead is an Ace, it is normal to play a card that tells partner whether you like this suit ("attitude"). Often, partners agree to give a count signal on other leads by partner.

Suit Preference Leads

Sometimes, usually not when making the opening lead, you are leading for partner almost certainly to win, you choose the lead card to show partner what suit you want led, or what suit you don't want ("suit preference").

Discarding

your choice of card tells partner what suit you want led, or what suit you don't want ("suit preference").



Attitude

Signaling attitude is done with the choice of number of “pips” on the card you play. You encourage the suit by playing the highest-ranking card that you can spare. Discourage the suit by playing the lowest ranking card you have.

It is usual to make an attitude signal when partner leads an Ace.

High/Low (Petering)

For example, against a Heart contract, partner makes an opening lead of A♠.

This promises either a singleton ace, or that partner holds the K♠.

You hold 10♠ and 2♠.

You play the 10♠. This encourages partner to continue with the promised K♠.

Contract: 2♥

You Hold

Partner Leads:

♠ 10 2

A♠

♥ K 3 2

♦ K Q 8

♣ 10 9 6 2

Now you play the 2♠. This card completes a two-card signal indicating you held an even number of spades. Partner should be able to guess that the even number is two, and not four or six.

This encourages partner to return a third ♠ to be trumped by you.



Count

Showing Count is done by the sequence in which you play your cards. If you have an even number of cards in the suit, select a higher-ranking card, and follow with a lower ranking card. If you have an odd number play the lowest ranking card first.

For example, if declarer plays Clubs for the first time during a No Trumps contract and you hold 10, 8 and 2, you would follow with the 2♣. This immediately tells partner that you hold an odd number of clubs because

Contract: 2NT

You Hold

Declarer Leads:

♠ 10 ~~6~~ 2

A♣

♥ K 4 3 2

♦ K Q 8

♣ 10 8 2

you cannot follow the 2♣ with a lower value club. Looking at his own hand and dummy, partner can probably tell whether you have one, three, or five clubs. This often enables him to guess the rest of your hand.

If declarer plays Clubs for the first time during a No Trumps contract and you hold 10, 8, 7 and 2, you follow with the 7♣. This relatively high-ranking card is probably to be followed by a lower-ranking one. Looking at his own hand and dummy, partner can probably guess whether you held two, four, or even six clubs.



B3 L08 Signals and Discards

NOTES

From these examples, you can see that attitude and count signals can work together, but sometimes they give you tricky choices!

Signal count of Trumps

You can agree to play high-low in trumps to show a third trump.

This can sometimes help partner know what to lead.

Contract: 2♥

Declarer Leads:

A♥

You Hold

♠ 10 2

♥ 8 3 2

♦ K Q 8

♣ 10 9 6 2

Signal Ace-King doubleton

♠ A K

♥ 7 6 4

♦ 10 9 8 2

♣ A 4 3 2

There's one more special count lead. It comes up just occasionally when defending a trump contract. Against a heart contract lead the K followed by the A. This signal a doubleton. Hopefully partner gets the lead and leads you a spade to trump while you still have a trump.



Suit Preference Leads

Occasionally you can use your lead to convey a message about the suit you would like returned.

For example, suppose you are on opening lead against a 4♥ contract and you hold: ♠ A K 8 2. You lead the ♠A, partner follows with the ♠9, an encouraging card! You play the ♠K and partner follows with ♠3, a definite count signal. It looks like

Contract: 4♥

You Hold

Partner Follows:

♠ A K 8 2

♠ 9

♥ 8 3 2

♦ A 9 8

♣ 10 9 6 2

partner had two spades and is now void. You expect your next spade lead to be trumped by partner. You also hold ♦K and ♦Q. You would like partner to lead you a diamond. By leading the ♠8 next, you signal that you like the higher ranking of the other two side suits. Partner hopefully sees the signal and returns a diamond.



Suit Preference Discards

When you must play a card, and cannot follow suit, for example when declarer is clearing trumps and you have no more, you can use your choice of card to tell partner of a suit you would like led to you, should partner be on lead later in the hand.

Discard systems are agreements between the partners as to the meaning of any given discard. There are many in common use and they change over time. Several examples are given below. Choose one that is suitable for the level of memory and interpretation required. More complex systems can give more choices or information, but they are no use if you and partner don't remember how they work during play. Agreeing at least a simple system is highly recommended as a successful defence often relies on a suit preference signal.



Discards - A recommendation

You can use a simple system very like the "Attitude" signals above:

High to **E**ncourage, **L**ow to **D**iscourage often called "**HELD**".

On trick 4, in a Heart contract, declarer is still clearing trumps and leads one and you are holding:

If you discard the 10♠, your partner will know that you want a spade returned. If you play a small♠, partner will believe that you are not interested in spades.

♠	A 10 4 3
♥	- -
♦	10 9 8 2
♣	J 3 -

Generally, a low card is 2-5, and a high card is 7 upwards. I recommend a useful agreement that the discard of a 6 shows no preference.

All discard systems rely on the player having suitable cards to use, and sometimes they just don't! Remember that when partner signals something that just doesn't make sense it may be best to ignore it.

Other discard systems

You may want to use a more sophisticated system, or your opponents may use another system. When you are declarer, you are entitled to know what system the defence are using, and what any individual card means. You can ask the partner of the discarder what he/she understands by the card. Here are notes about other discard systems.



Other simple systems include:

Wastepaper Basket: or no system, the defence have agreed they simply discard the least valuable cards and there is no other meaning.

Reverse Attitude: this means that a high card discourages, and a low card encourages, the suit bid.

This avoids the problem with HELD that you may need to discard good cards in your good suit to use it!

More complex systems

Some discard systems avoid playing a card in the suit that is being requested.

This can be important when defending a No Trumps contract.

It is very likely that you want your partner to lead a suit where you have length and hope to make lots of tricks.

You don't want to discard a card in this suit and possibly reduce the number of tricks you take with it.



The McKenney System

On trick 4, in a Heart contract, declarer is still clearing trumps and leads one and you hold the hand opposite. You want partner to lead a spade when/if they get the lead.

If you discard the 10♦, your partner will consider the suits that have neither been led, nor discarded. Hearts were led, and Diamonds discarded. The two possible suits wanted are Spades and Clubs. The fact that the discarded card is high ranking indicates that the higher-ranking suit is required, in this case that you want a spade returned. A low-ranking diamond, for example the 2, would signal a request for a club lead.

♠	A 10 4 3
♥	- -
♦	10 9 8 2
♣	J 3 -

Lavinthal is an American term for McKenney.

The revolving discard system

Again, the suit discarded is not wanted. This time the rank of the discarded card is used to indicate whether the required card is "above" or "below" the rank of the discard. A discard of the 2♣ would indicate the rank of the required suit is "lower" than Clubs. The "revolving" part is that since there is no lower ranking suit, the choice returns to the top of the list and the required suit is Spades.



“Odds and Evens” and DODDS

These systems signal by the choice of a card with an odd number of pips, e.g. 3♠, 5♥ or 7♦ versus an even number of pips e.g. 2♣ or 6♥.

Using the Odds and Evens system an even card may encourage the suit discarded, and an odd card may encourage the other suit of the same colour. DODDS is generally the reverse.

There are local variations of these, so, as declarer, you may need to enquire carefully about the meaning of any given discard.

“Roman” or “Italian”

is based on a mixture of the “odds and evens” idea, and McKenney.

An odd card discarded shows a preference for that suit, but an even value card is a McKenney signal, showing preference for the higher ranking of the other two suits if a higher value card, and vice versa.