



In Defence, Every Card Tells a Story

The Opening Lead is probably the most important, but every other card should tell a story too:

- Following suit on partner's lead, especially if the lead is an Ace, it is normal to play a card that tells partner whether or not you like this suit ("attitude").
- Following suit on opponent's lead, you usually play cards that tell partner how many cards you hold in this suit ("count").
- When you cannot follow suit ("discarding") your discard usually tells partner what suit you want led, or what suit you don't want ("suit preference").
- Sometimes, usually not when making the opening lead, you are leading for partner almost certainly to win, you choose the card to show partner what suit you want led, or what suit you don't want ("suit preference").



Suit Preference Discards

When you have to 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.

There are many discard systems and they change over time. Some players will play one discard system against trump contracts and a different system against no trumps.

A recommendation

Start with a simple system very like "Attitude" signals:



High to Encourage, Low to Discourage often called "HELD".

For example:

On trick 4, in a Heart contract, declarer won a first trick in clubs and then cleared trumps for two rounds and led another heart. You have played your two hearts and you are now holding:

♠ A 10 4 3
♥ - -
♦ 10 9 8 2
♣ J 3 -

Discard the 10♠, and partner understands that you want a spade returned. Play 3♠, partner will understand that you are not interested in spades.

Generally, a low card is 2-5, and a high card is 7 upwards. It can be useful to agree 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 because there is no suitable card in the hand to signal the right message.



Other discard systems

It's important to have some idea about other discard systems because:

- you may want to try out a more sophisticated system, or
- your opponents may use another system.

Sometimes, when you are declarer, you may be wondering which of the defence hands holds an important honour.

The defence may discard, and you would like to know if there is any clue for you in that discard.

You are entitled to know what discard system the defence are using, and what any individual card means.

At your turn to play, you can ask the partner of the discarder what he/she understands by the card.

Note that although the defence must inform you of their agreement, they are not legally obliged to follow it. "False" carding is a legal tactic and they may use it to hide where that important card is!



Other "simple" systems include:

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

Don't use, or accept, the word "natural" to describe a system. It may mean "waste paper basket", or it may mean "HELD", which many players think of as natural.

"Reverse HELD", this means that a high card discourages, and a low card encourages, the suit bid. This avoids the problem with HELD that you need to discard good cards in your good suit to use it!

"Odds and Evens" or DODDS, relies on the distinction between cards with a "odd" number of "pips", i.e. 3, 5, 7, 9 or an "even" number of "pips", i.e. 4, 6, 8, 10.

An even card may encourage the suit discarded, and an odd card may encourage the other suit of the same colour. **OR THE REVERSE.**

There are local variations of this, so, as declarer, you may need to enquire carefully about the meaning of any given discard if it's important.



More complex systems

Some systems avoid using a card from the requested suit. This can be best against No Trumps contracts where the defence tries to establish a long suit.

The McKenney System

In a No Trumps contract, declarer takes a trick in clubs and then plays his long heart suit. He leads another. You hold:

♠ A 10 4 3
♥ - -
♦ 10 9 8 2
♣ J 3 -

If you discard the 10♦, your partner conducts a process of elimination:

1. The suit being requested will not be the suit led; and
2. It will not be the suit discarded.
3. Out of the other two suits, the “pip” value indicates whether the higher ranking, or the lower ranking is being requested. Hearts were led, and Diamonds discarded. The two possible suits wanted are Spades and Clubs. The fact that the discarded card has a high “pip” count indicates that the higher-ranking suit is required, in this case that you want a spade returned.

This is a very good system against No Trump contracts.



The "Revolving" discard system

Again, the suit discarded is not wanted.

This time the "pip" value 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.

"Roman" or "Italian"

This is becoming more widely used amongst top players.

This is based on the "odds and evens" idea, but combines it with other systems.

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.



Suit Preference (McKenney) leads

Occasionally you can use your lead to partner 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 3
♥ 4 3 2
♦ A 9 8 2
♣ 5 3

- You lead the ♠A, partner follows with the ♠9, an encouraging card!
- You play the ♠K and partner follows with ♠2.
- It looks like partner had two spades and is now void. You expect your next spade lead to be trumped by partner.
- You also hold A♦ 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 suits.
- Partner hopefully sees the signal and returns a diamond for you to win with the ace.

Who knows, your partner may be able to trump a second spade trick. Contr