

Leads

Often you get a run of cards where the opposition are always declaring the contract. So, you are often called upon to make the opening lead. Don't just sit there and lead the card nearest to your thumb think about your lead. You are not at the table to follow suit to declarer's leads; you are there with an aim to win tricks and defeat declarer. The defence's opening lead is probably the most important card to be played throughout the hand so give it some thought. Defending may be the most difficult aspect of Bridge but it is the most rewarding when it is accomplished correctly.

There are no hard and fast rules to be laid down for leading; however, it is a very important topic. Textbooks rarely cover this topic because it is such an open topic. Even world champions make the wrong lead at times, but they don't get their safety plays wrong. Safety plays like many other topics can be detailed in books because there are only a certain number. Compare these plays with those of leading?

So, what are the main principles to consider when you have to lead?

- Should it be an attacking lead?
- Should it be a passive lead?
- Which suit should it be, a trump suit or a side suit?
- Which card should it be? (2nds from a bad suit, top of nothing, MUD or low from an honour, such as 4th highest)?

At different situations all the above could be right!

There are so many variations to be considered, for example:

- Bidding strengths of certain suits held by the opposition and your partner
- Distributions of your hand and those of the opposition
- Conventions used by you and your partner
- Plus, many other unknowns

It is the unknowns which make leading such a fascinating subject. How many times have you heard a defender or declarer say: "any other lead and the contract cannot be made".

Winning leads lead to winning Bridge.

Let us start of with a lead problem:

What do you lead against 3NT holding:

♠ Q75
♥ Q75
♦ Q75
♣ 9753

Answer:

You should be complaining about lack of information. You can't find a lead unless you know the bidding, and what each bid means!

Example:

After this bidding:

West	North	East	South
			1♠
X		3NT	

What should you lead from the following South hand?

♠ A109754
♥ AQJ10
♦ 73
♣ 7

It might seem attractive to lead a ♠, but just wait a minute and think about the bidding. East has jumped to 3NT, does he have ♠s well stopped or does he not? On a ♠ lead East/West wrap up 10 tricks.

♠ 2	♠ KQJ3
♥ K753	♥ 94
♦ QJ105	♦ K982
♣ AJ86	♣ KQ10

If you lead a ♥, only 8 tricks are available. North/South take three ♥s, the ace of ♦s and the ace of ♠s.

Rule: Each time that you make an opening lead you have to listen to the bidding and decide if it gives any clues (*just like in the last hand*).

The most important bid is that of partner. Has he bid a suit? Has he indicated a suit or suits via a double or a 2-suited overcall? If partner has gone out of his way to suggest a lead, you should make that lead unless you have a very good reason not to make the suggested lead. If you make the suggested lead, partner will not complain if the contract makes. However, if you decide to lead another suit he will not be very tolerant if your lead gives declarer the tempo to make his contract.

If partner has bid, you should follow the following conventions:

From three small cards, lead the middle one (753 lead the 5) - MUD (Middle Up Down) or 2nd highest from bad suits (9753 – lead the 7). From a doubleton, lead the top one (Ax, Kx, Qx, 10x or 73). From three to an honour, lead the lowest one (K73, Q73 or 1073).

Kxx xx
AJ10xx

Qxx

As West, don't lead the king, because the queen can now be developed into a trick. Notice that the correct lead of a small card kills the queen dead if East, correctly, returns the jack.

xx
Qxx A10xxx
KJx

As West, don't lead the queen because declarer will now win two tricks in the suit. Notice that the correct lead of a small card keeps declarer to one trick in the suit.

Exception: Don't lead small from Axx when defending against a suit contract, declarer may have a singleton king.

J10753
A64 Q982
K

General lead rules

- Lead through strength and up to weakness
- Lead your partner's suit before his entry is extracted!

Example: 3NT by East

♠ KQ963
♥ AQ1042
♦ 43
♣ J

♠ A2
♥ 5
♦ AQJ102
♣ A8762

♠ J1085
♥ K983
♦ K7
♣ 943

♠ 74
♥ J76
♦ 9865
♣ KQ105

West	North	East	South
1♦	1♠	1NT	P
2♣	2♥	P	2♠
3♣	P	3NT	P

East bids a pushy 3NT. You must lead your partner's suit, i.e. the ♠7. This lead will hold the contract to 7 tricks. In practice South led his ♣s, and persevered with them when declarer let the king hold.

Knock out entries from dummy before a long suit can be established.

This is common practice against a no-trump contract.

Example: East plays in 3NT

♠ 93	♠ 865	
♥ A6	♥ J432	
♦ AJ10763	♦ Q54	
♣ 873	♣ 1094	
		♠ QJ104
		♥ Q985
		♦ K9
		♣ AKJ
	♠ AK72	
	♥ K107	
	♦ 82	
	♣ Q652	

West	North	East	South
		1♥	
2♦		2NT	
3NT			

South cashes the ♠A to view dummy. What should be the continuation? The king of ♥s has to be sacrificed to kill dummy's only entry before the ♦s are set up.

Leading against NT contracts

Generally, it is best to lead your longest suit (4th best from the top) without further information. Against no-trumps you need to **establish** long suits before declarer can win sufficient tricks for his contract.

Using 4th highest leads, your partner can work out, at trick 1, how many higher cards declarer has in that suit using 'The Rule of 11'. For example:

West leads the 5 against a no-trump contract.

J106

(5) A73

Once the dummy has been displayed, East knows that South has only one card higher than the 5 in the suit led! To work this out East uses a very common *rule* known as *The Rule of Eleven*. East deducts the number of the low card led from eleven. The answer is the number of cards held in the other three hands (dummy's, declarer's and his own hand). Since East can see his own hand and that of dummy, he can work out how many cards declarer has.

Going back to the example; dummy has 3 cards higher and East has 2 cards higher, therefore declarer has $11 - (5) - (3 + 2) = 1$.

Note you only lead your 4th highest from disjointed suits (that is, K10752). You would not

lead 4th highest from KQJ93. You may give declarer an extra trick if you were to lead the 9. Declarer may hold A102.

From KQ10x you would lead the K.

From KQxx you would lead the 4th highest.

From QJ9x you would lead the Q.

From J109x you would lead the J.

From QJxx you would lead the 4th highest (but occasionally the Q dependant on auction).

If you have no other outside entry, it may be better to try and find your partner's suit, especially when your hand is weak. For you to do this you must study the bidding carefully to infer the weaknesses of the opposition's cards. Often the weakness will be a major suit. It is not unusual to find the best lead from something like 852 of ♠s. If you make the wrong lead, Declarer will often have the tempo to establish an extra trick (or tricks). The right lead will often cause declarer to fail where another lead would allow him to get one step in front in the race to set up tricks. Usually, it is not the tricks which are immediately obtainable but those which need to be set up which win match-points, matches and rubbers.

What do you lead:

- ♠ 105
- ♥ J54
- ♦ Q864
- ♣ 9864

After the following bidding:

West	North	East	South
	1♥		2♣
	2♥		3NT

Partner must have spades plus most of the defensive points, so lead ♠10.

After listening to the bidding carefully, you need to decide whether an attacking lead is called for or a passive lead which gives nothing away. If the opposition sound as if they have stretched to get to their contract and you don't have an obvious lead to make, then a lead which gives nothing away is often best.

Declarer then must open up a suit which is already weak. This approach will often work while a risky lead may give declarer the extra trick that he needs.

Leading against suit contracts

Although much of the above is true, it is usually better to take your tricks earlier than later. In no-trumps you are trying to set up long suits whilst keeping control of another suit, in suit contracts you rarely have this opportunity. By the time that you have established a long suit, Declarer has ruffed in, taken out your outstanding trumps and is reeling off his long suit discarding losers in the other hand.

Bad leads - when leading against a suit contract

The following are **don'ts** when leading against a suit contract:

- Never lead away from a tenace (KJx or AQxx)

KJ7	A43	10652
	Q98	

To lead away from the West hand will allow declarer to win 2 tricks in the suit instead of one by letting the lead come around to the queen.

- Never lead away from an ace against a suit contract - (Axx)

Leading a low card will allow declarer's singleton king to win. You will never make your ace later

- *Never* (well usually) lead a singleton trump

You will probably be giving declarer a free finesse of partner's trumps. If Pard has something like Qxx then Declarer may take the wrong decision if left to his own devises

Good leads - when leading against a suit contract

If you methodically go through your hand suit by suit, you will be able to eliminate certain suits. Finally, you will come across a logical lead. For example:

- Top of touching honours
 - QJ103 lead the Q – don't confuse Pard by leading another card
 - AK53 - Many players use ace to ask for encourage/discourage, and a king to ask for distribution. Leading the king is very useful, especially when you want to know how many tricks you can cash before Declarer ruffs in. Note: Pard needs to give you the **correct** signal

- A singleton, hoping to get a ruff

This lead is especially good from a worthless hand. Partner may have a couple of tricks, so you must endeavour to get your share. However the more tricks that you hold, the worse a singleton lead becomes

- 4th highest from an unbid suit
- A worthless doubleton (75) lead the 7
- 2nds from poor suits (8642) lead the 6 followed by the 4

Partner will recognise the lead because he will wonder where the 2 is.

Often this elimination will leave you with only the trump suit to lead. This may stop declarer getting ruffs in dummy's hand (the short suit).

Reasons to lead trumps

1. To protect your side's high cards
 - When partner has shown a strong, balanced hand
 - When they have sacrificed - be careful of 2-suiters
2. To reduce ruffs
 - Opponent has a 3-suiter or partial 3-suiter
 - They have bid three suits, but play in the 4th - the 4th suit may be their weakness
 - Opponents have removed 3NT to a suit game
 - Opponent has pulled their penalty double
 - Declarer is left in his second suit, especially if second suit is a minor
 - They are playing in their third suit
 - Dummy has exactly 3 trumps
 - When you have a good holding in Declarer's other suit – you don't want Declarer ruffing these losers in Dummy
- 3 To draw trumps yourself (defensive hand)
 - Partner has passed your take-out or Sputnik (negative) double
 - Partner has not balanced although marked with strength
 - You have 5 trumps - weak or strong
- 4 A passive defence is clearly indicated
 - All side suit leads are dangerous (odd honour in each) say Qxxx
 - Opponents have struggled to get to game – don't give them a free finesse
- 5 If you want to make a deceptive trump lead

For example;

♠ QJx
♥ Axx

♦ QJxx
♣ Kxx

Lead the ♠J against a 4♠ contract – let declarer work it out! Pard is not expected to have any honours so you are not causing him any problems.

Reasons not to lead trumps

1. You have a useful trump holding - Q1094
2. You have a singleton trump - you may damage partner's trump holding
3. You want to score ruffs in your own hand, or partner's hand, or both! Leading side suit singletons or doubletons work well
4. An attacking lead is needed before declarer can take discards on dummy's good side suit
5. Forcing defence is indicated because you, or partner, holds four trumps

Remember - Good non-trump leads outnumber good trump leads

Attacking leads

An attacking lead would be the suit suggested by partner (discussed above).

Generally, an attacking lead is needed against a freely bid 3NT. It is often a race between declarer setting up 9 tricks and the defenders taking their 5 tricks. However, there is one situation when a passive lead may succeed. That is where 3NT is obviously a tricky contract for declarer. For example, after the following auction:

1NT - 2NT or

1♣ - 1♦
3NT

1NT - 2NT
3NT

There are no spare values, so the defenders must not set up declarer's ninth trick. A major suit lead from QJ109 would be the perfect lead; it does not give any chance of promoting an extra trick for declarer. (Passive leads are dealt with below.)

When should you attack?

Look for an attacking lead against a small slam (even leading small from a king will gain more often than it will fail).

When the opposition have bid to a comfortable game and the suits appear to split kindly, then an attacking lead may be best.

	♠ A1075	
	♥ A8	
	♦ Q5	
	♣ AQJ92	
♠ 63		♠ K8
♥ J76542		♥ 103
♦ K8		♦ A107432
♣ K73		♣ 864
	♠ QJ942	
	♥ KQ9	
	♦ J96	
	♣ 105	

West	North	East	South
	1♣		1♠
	3♠		4♠

What should West lead? The ♣ king appears to be badly situated, trumps are breaking kindly, and ♥s don't look encouraging, so lead the ♦K (desperation)!

The defenders can now take two ♦ tricks, a ♦ ruff and a natural trump trick. On any other lead, declarer has the tempo to discard a ♦ loser on the ♥s. (Note: you should expect to get some bad scores with desperation leads though!

Passive leads

Passive leads are *generally* recommended in the following situations:

- Against no-trumps when you have no worthwhile values

If the opposition has not attempted to obtain a major fit, then perhaps partner has a major suit and has outside values to obtain the lead later in the play so that he can run his suit.

♠ 92
♥ KQ62

♠ 75
 ♥ J1043
 ♦ 10753
 ♣ Q83

♦ 962
 ♣ J975

♠ KQJ643
 ♥ 9
 ♦ J4
 ♣ A1064

♠ A108
 ♥ A875
 ♦ AKQ8
 ♣ K2

West	North	East	South
			2NT
	3NT		

The inspired lead of the ♠7 sets partner's suit up. Partner had to come to the ace of ♣s when the ♥ suit broke badly.

Remember the least cards you have in the suit; the more cards partner must have.

- When the opposition have bid a game in a solid looking trump suit, and you don't want to open up the other suits due to your holdings; so lead trumps. However, if you lead from a short trump holding (singleton or doubleton), you may be finessing your partner's honour which might normally win a trick.

♠ Q8654
 ♥ 93
 ♦ AK7
 ♣ 987

♠ 932
 ♥ AJ2
 ♦ J986
 ♣ A102

♠ 7
 ♥ Q875
 ♦ Q10542
 ♣ Q63

♠ AKJ10
 ♥ K1064
 ♦ 3
 ♣ KJ54

Contract: 4♠ by South.

West should lead the ♠2, saving the aces to take care of the kings

- When all suits appear to be breaking badly for declarer (go passive)

♠ Q984
 ♥ 10975

♦ K752
♣ 4

West	North	East	South
	1♣		1♠
	2♠		2NT
	4♠		

The opponents have nothing to spare. Both North and South have limited their hands. You know that trumps are breaking badly, and that partner will have a ♣ suit sitting over North's suit. Now is the time for a passive lead, so lead the ♥10

- When by a process of elimination, you decide the suit to lead by finding a reason for not leading the other three suits.

	♠ Q10 ♥ KQ ♦ J108654 ♣ A73	
♠ 875 ♥ A97642 ♦ 732 ♣ 8	♠ A64 ♥ J105 ♦ AK ♣ KQ654	♠ KJ932 ♥ 83 ♦ Q9 ♣ J1092

West	North	East	South
	1♦		3♣
	3NT		4♣
	5♣		

To lead the ace of ♥s might set up declarer's king; to lead the singleton trump might give declarer a free finesse of partner's honour and leading a ♦ might help to set up North's suit. Therefore a ♠ it must be.

Conclusions:

Typically lead:

- Partner's suit
- Top of touching honours (QJ105)
- Low from honours (4th highest)
- 2nd highest from bad suits
- Singletons/doubletons against suit contracts

Listen to the auction – What has partner bid? What have the opposition bid? What have the opposition **not** bid?

Last example to see if you are listening to the bidding:

You are South and hear:

West	North	East	South
		1NT	
2♣*		2♦	
2NT		3NT	

2♣ is Stayman, and East denies a major. West makes a limited invitational bid of 2NT and East bids 3NT. You are on lead with:

♠ 963
♥ 107
♦ 9754
♣ 9643

What do you lead?

- How many points has partner?
- How many hearts has partner?

Could this be how the heart suit is distributed?

♥ Qxx ♥ KJxxxx ♥ Ax
 ♥ 107

Partner will have at least 4-hearts and may have 5 or even six!

Partner has all the defenders' points and will not be able to lead hearts constructively from his hand. In fact, he will have given the opposition the contract by the time he gets in to cash his heart winners unless you find the heart lead at Trick 1.

Leading trumps to take away ruffing opportunities when you have a good holding in one of the Opposition's suits.

You hold:

♠ AQ109
♥ 1093
♦ K74
♣ 652

And hear the following bidding:

West	North	East	South
			1♣
P	1♥	P	1♠
P	3♣	P	3♠
P	4♣	P	5♣

You want to stop declarer ruffing his spade losers in dummy, so lead a club and another when you get in with a spade.

Partner doubles a non-competitive 3NT contract

You hold:

♠ 84
♥ 752
♦ AQ742
♣ J73

And hear the following bidding:

West	North	East	South
			1♥
P	1♠	P	2NT
P	3NT	X	P
P	P		

In this case the double asks you to lead Dummy's first bid suit (spades). Typically, Pard will hold something like: ♠ AKQ106