

Signals

As defender's you need to pass information between yourselves. Each card you play can send a message to partner. Declarer can also look for the signals and discards and make good use of them. But the defenders need the information more.

The basic signal

When partner leads a card; you play a relatively high one to say that you like that lead, carry on leading that suit please partner. The second card that you play will be a lower one to confirm that the first card was an encouragement signal. If you are sitting with 1087 the seven may appear to be encouraging but when you next follow with the eight partner will realise your problem.

♠ Q63

♠ KJ872

Partner leads the ace. You want to encourage him to continue the suit so you should play the 8. If your suit had been J872, you would want to discourage so you would have played the 2.

Signals at Trick 1

If partner makes an opening lead and you are not trying to win the first trick, you usually want to indicate whether you would like partner to lead the suit again. You do this by means of an attitude signal: you play a high card to encourage (the highest card you can afford) and your lowest card to discourage. Normally your holding in the suit led determines your correct course of action.

♥ Q J 9 5 ♥ A 6 4 ♥ K 8 2
 ♥ 10 7 3

West leads the queen; say that declarer plays the ace from dummy. Holding the king, East should encourage with the eight – if West gets in again, the defence have two tricks to take. Similarly:

♥ Q J 9 5 ♥ A 6 4 ♥ 10 7 2
 ♥ K 8 3

Again West leads the queen and the ace wins from dummy. Holding the ten, East knows that West can safely continue the suit, so encourages with the seven. As the lead of the queen promises the jack, both the king (the card above) and the ten (the card below) are useful cards for the leader's partner to hold.

♥ Q J 9 5 ♥ A 6 4 ♥ 8 7 2
 ♥ K 10 3

Here East has no reason to suppose that a further ♥ lead will work and rightly plays the two under the ace. This warns West that declarer has the king and ten. Knowing this, West will,

after regaining the lead, switch to a different suit.

Further Considerations

Everything I have said up until now applies equally to suit and no-trump contracts. However, in a suit contract, the prospect of scoring a ruff means that you may wish to encourage a continuation without any honours.

♠ xxxx
♥ xxx
♦ KJx
♣ KJx

♠ xxx
♥ 73
♦ A32
♣ 109752

Partner leads the ♥A against 4♠; what card would you play?

You should encourage with the ♥7 because partner is likely to have the ♥K. He should be able to work out that you have a doubleton and want to ruff the third round. (If you had a holding of ♥742, you would play the ♥2.)

♦ A K 8 7 ♦ 10 9 4 ♦ 6 2
 ♦ Q J 5 3

When West leads the ace (showing the king), East envisages a third-round ruff. Accordingly East plays the six and South follows with the three. West cannot be sure that the six is a high card (declarer might be concealing the two) but it is safe enough to continue with the king. When East plays the two next, completing a 'high-low' signal, West knows to try a third round.

♦ A K Q 7 ♦ 10 9 4 ♦ 8 6 2
 ♦ J 5 3

Of course, the leader may continue a suit whatever partner does. Your holding need to be sufficiently robust to cope with the possibility that declarer has any missing high cards. Here West has no need of help and may continue with a second and third round (and a fourth at no-trumps) even though East plays the two on the first. Equally, you must take care not to encourage just because you have something useful in the suit led. An encouraging signal tells partner that in your opinion, based on the information available to you, that it is probably best to continue the suit.

♠ K 10 4
♥ 10 7 3
♦ A K Q J 5

♣ 9 4

♠ A Q J 3
 ♥ Q 8 2
 ♦ 9 3
 ♣ 10 8 6 2

North	South
1♦	2♣
2♦	3♣
End	

West leads the ace of ♥s. Do you play the eight or the two?

Normally you would encourage holding the queen, but here you are keen to have a ♠ switch. The presence of the ten of ♠s in dummy means that partner will need to lead the suit twice for you to stand a chance of collecting three ♠ tricks, so you want an immediate switch and play the two of ♥s. You intend to win the first ♠ cheaply, put partner back in with the king of ♥s and have another ♠ led through dummy.

So far, all your signals have been with spot cards, and normally these are all you can afford. If, however, you have a sequence of honours, you may be able to share the good news with partner.

	♥ A 9 6	
♥ 7 5		♥ K Q J 4 3 2
	♥ 10 8	

West leads the seven and the ace goes up from dummy. You could play the four, hoping partner will notice that the two and three are missing, but you should issue a much clearer signal: throw the king under the ace. Partner will know you must have a great holding in the suit if you can afford to part with the king. You are more likely to be able to signal with an honour when partner has already shown strength in the suit:

	♥ 10 8 4	
♥ A K 7 5 3		♥ Q J 2
	♥ 9 6	

West leads the ace and what card do you think East should play? Playing the two would discourage ♥s and playing the jack would be misleading. The jack would deny the queen and suggest Jx (it cannot be showing the ten as this is in dummy). The correct card is the queen, which shows the jack (unless the queen is a singleton). West can then underlead the king on the second round to put East in if necessary.

♠ Q J 4
 ♥ 9 8 4
 ♦ A K Q J
 ♣ J 7 4

♠ K 8 2	♠ 3
♥ A K 7 5 3	♥ Q J 2
♦ 10 6 4	♦ 9 8 7 3 2
♣ K 3	♣ 10 9 8 2
♠ A 10 9 7 6 5	
♥ 10 6	
♦ 5	
♣ A Q 6 5	

North	South
1NT	4♠
Pass	

West leads the ace of ♥s and if East mistakenly plays the two or the jack, then the contract will make. If East plays the two, West will probably cash the ♥ king next and then switch to the king of ♣s, playing East for the queen of ♣s (counting South for five ♠ tricks, four ♦s and the ♣ ace, West would not defend passively). If instead East played the jack, West would continue with the king and another ♥ expecting East to ruff. The way to beat the contract is for West to lead a low ♥ at trick *two*, allowing East to play a ♣ before trumps are drawn. Under-leading the king of ♥s may seem brave but if East has played the queen, promising the jack, there is nothing to it. If East unexpectedly has a singleton ♥, this is not a problem: the ♥ ruff will be the setting trick.

Different Messages – showing count

If you really want to, you can use only attitude signals on partner's lead, but you will be missing a wealth of opportunities if you do. The objective of any communication is to convey information that is not already available, so if partner can work out whether you like the suit anyway, it makes sense for a signal to convey a different message:

♦ A K 8 6 5	♦ Q J 9	♦ 10 4 3 2
	♦ 7	

West leads the ace (against a suit contract); assuming West would rarely (if ever) lead an unsupported ace, it is clear that East can have no useful high ♦s. What West really wants to know is whether East has three ♦s, when the king will stand up, or four, when South will ruff the second round. Accordingly, East should give a *count* signal, playing *high* from an *even* number and *low* from an *odd*. Accepted wisdom is to play second highest from a four - or six-card suit, here the four, and highest from a doubleton. To show an odd number you play your lowest card.

♦ Q J 8 6 5	♦ A 10 4	♦ K 9 3
	♦ 7 2	

West leads the queen and dummy's ace wins. If you think about it, the position of the king is obvious. With the king in hand, declarer would capture the queen with the king, preserving the ace-ten in dummy as a tenace over the jack. Therefore, again East should give a count signal, this time the three to denote an odd number.

♦ A J 10 7 6 ♦ Q 8
 ♦ K 2 ♦ 9 5 4 3

We return to no-trumps and West leads the jack, dummy playing the queen. East would cover with the ace or king if able so to do, thus West will know the location of all the cards down to at least the ten whatever low card East plays. What West cannot easily figure out (in the absence of a signal) is whether declarer's king will drop under the ace. So, East plays the five, second-highest from a four-card suit.

Suit preference signals

Finally, if you can live with one more complexity, the layout of the suit led may be such that the defenders evidently cannot score any more tricks in the suit (perhaps dummy is void after first trick). In this situation, neither an attitude nor a count signal will serve much purpose. The opening leader is likely to want to switch, so will want to know which suit to switch to. In this situation the player in third seat should play a *high* card to ask for the *higher-ranking* non-trump suit and a *low* card to ask for the *lower-ranking* non-trump suit.

♣ K Q 9 6 ♣ 5 ♣ A 10 8 7 4 3
 ♣ J 2

West leads the king of ♣s and ♠s are trumps. East can play the three to signal strength in ♦s (or possibly the ability to ruff the suit), the ten to ask for a ♥ and the seven with no particular preference. East might also play the neutral seven to request a ♣ continuation, but with this particular layout overtaking with the ace would be a surer way of ensuring this. It may take a while for all this to sink in, but do not worry. When you first learn to drive, changing gear and turning a corner seem complicated maneuvers, but because you do them every time you go out in the car, you soon become familiar with them. It is just like this with defence in bridge. You defend every second hand, so the opportunity to give and look for the signals I have described will come up regularly.

A Short Quiz

It might help if we end with a short quiz. In each of the examples below, think what card to play at trick one and why.

Problem 1

♠ A Q 8 5	
♥ 9 8 7 2	
♦ A 6	
♣ 7 6 5	
	♠ 10 7 4 2
	♥ 5 3
	♦ K 10 5 4 3
	♣ Q 2

North	South
	1♥
3♥	4♥
End	

West leads the two of ♦s and dummy's ace wins.

Problem 2

♠ K 10 7 5	
♥ K 9 7	
♦ K 7 6	
♣ K 7 6	
	♠ A Q 2
	♥ 5
	♦ Q J 5 4
	♣ A 10 9 5 2

West	North	East	S
		1♣	1♥
Pass	2♣ ¹	Pass	3♥
Pass	4♥		

1. Shows ♥ support and defensive values.

West leads the queen of ♣s and dummy plays low.

Problem 3

♠ A 10 7 5
♥ K Q 10
♦ 8 7 6
♣ 8 7 6

♠ 3 2
♥ J 5 3 2
♦ A J 9 4
♣ 9 5 2

West	North	East	S
1♥	Pass	2♥	2♠
Pass	3♠	Pass	4♠

West leads the ace of ♥s and dummy plays low.

Quiz Answers

Answer 1

You should play the ten of ♦s, to encourage a ♦ continuation when in. Since West has led the two, you know declarer has another ♦ and you would like to have partner put you in so that you can attack ♣s from your side of the table. If you failed to make a clear encouraging signal, then partner might, after gaining the lead with the king of ♥s, switch to the jack of ♣s: if you had the doubleton king of ♣s and no ♦ entry, that would be the right thing to do. This is the full deal:

	♠ A Q 8 5	
	♥ 9 8 7 2	
	♦ A 6	
	♣ 7 6 5	
♠ 6 3		♠ 10 7 4 2
♥ K 6		♥ 5 3
♦ Q 9 7 2		♦ K <u>10</u> 5 4 3
♣ A J 10 9 3		♣ Q 2
	♠ K J 9	
	♥ A Q J 10 4	
	♦ J 8	
	♣ K 8 4	

Answer 2

You will be marked with the ace of ♣s when declarer fails to win the trick and the position of the ten of ♣s is almost certainly irrelevant (if declarer had it, it would be singleton or at most doubleton), so this is a situation where you want to give count. Therefore, you play the two. You hope partner will continue the suit with only three, and perhaps switch to a ♦ if declarer has a singleton. This is the full deal:

	♠ K 10 7 5	
	♥ K 9 7	
	♦ K 7 6	
	♣ K 7 6	
♠ 8 6 3		♠ A Q 2
♥ 8 6 4		♥ 5
♦ 10 9 2		♦ Q J 5 4
♣ Q J 8 3		♣ A 10 9 5 2
	♠ J 9 4	
	♥ A Q J 10 3 2	
	♦ A 8 3	
	♣ 4	

Answer 3

The defending side cannot make any more ♥ tricks, so East should give a suit-preference signal. An observant partner might read the five of ♥s as a high card but there is no need to take any chances. To justify leading an unsupported ace (albeit in a suit you raised) West must have an awkward holding in the minors. So, with the king and queen of ♥s set up to provide declarer with discards, it is vital to ensure partner knows that you want a ♦ switch, and you should play the jack of ♥s.

The full deal is shown below.

	♠ A 10 7 5	
	♥ K Q 10	
	♦ 8 7 6	
	♣ 8 7 6	
♠ Q		♠ 3 2
♥ A 9 8 7 4		♥ J 5 3 2
♦ K 10 2		♦ A J 9 4
♣ K 10 4 3		♣ 9 5 2
	♠ K J 9 8 6 4	
	♥ 6	
	♦ Q 5 3	
	♣ A Q J	

The Trump Peter

The signals to following in trumps have a completely different meaning.

To follow high-low to the first two rounds of trumps signifies that you have a *third* trump to ruff a side suit with. If partner wins the second round of trumps, or declarer only takes two rounds and your partner gains the lead, he should look to lead the suit which you are likely to be able to ruff.

With three or more trumps and no wish to ruff a side suit, you should follow trumps in an ascending order.

Practice at signalling

Dir North

	♠ AK	
	♥ AJ104	
	♦ K32	
	♣ J974	
♠ 975		♠ 432
♥ 853		♥ 976
♦ Q986		♦ J5
♣ Q83		♣ AK1062
	♠ QJ1086	
	♥ KQ2	
	♦ A1074	
	♣ 5	

West	North	East	S
	1♥	P	1♠
Pass	1NT	Pass	3♦
Pass	3NT		

North is declarer in 3NT. Partner leads the ♣ ace. You encourage with the 8 and partner plays small to your queen. When you return the suit partner takes another three tricks. Without the ♣ continuation declarer makes 11 tricks.

Moving on

Now that we have the basics, let us look how we can make maximum use of all possible signals:

1. Giving Partner some information when he leads an honour

Against a **suit** contract you should give the following information to Pard:

- Pard leads an **ace** or **queen**: give **attitude** (high encourage, low discourage)
- Pard leads a **king**: give **count** (low shows **odd** number of cards in that suit. **High** card shows **even** number of cards in that suit.

Advice: When leading you will occasionally have AK combinations and sometimes you will want to know the length of Pard's suit so you know how many tricks you can cash, and other times you will want to know which suit to attack. Knowing length will more often crop up after a competitive auction where Declarer is distributional. Knowing whether to continue a suit (after attitude signal) or switch is more often necessary in lower contracts. Even without these AK combinations you should still want to know information about a suit when you have: Axxx, or QJ10x or KQxx combinations.

Against a **NT** contract you should give the following information to Pard:

- Pard leads an **ace** or **queen**: give **attitude** (high encourage, low discourage)
- Pard leads a **king**: **unblock** or else give **count** (low shows odd number of cards in that suit. High card shows even number of cards in that suit.

Pard will only lead a king from a very good suit, else he should lead the queen!

KQ1094 J75

Play the J

KQ1094 A75

Play the A and lead the suit back. If you, as East, only play 5 or 7 then the suit will be blocked if West continues.

If West leads the K from KQ1094 and Pard doesn't play ace or jack, the leader knows Declarer is sitting with AJx and waiting for Leader to continue into the jaws of AJ.

2. Discarding (see Discarding doc)

The most natural system is a natural system where:

High card is encouraging, and low card is discouraging (HELD).

You will often just want to play low from a poor suit but occasionally, especially towards the end of play you will need to get Pard's attention:

KQ94 discard the 9

KQJ5 discard the K which shows cards directly below that card discarded

3. Showing count on Declarer's leads

Whenever Declarer leads a suit both defenders should show count. This helps the defence to get a count of Declarer's length in that suit and helps to get a complete count of all suits; this is particularly important to early tricks. **However:**

Holding: QJ96 playing the 9 may give a trick away, so now play the 6. But Pard will probably only hold poor cards in the suit so will tell you his count; now the guy with the honours will know the distribution around the table.

An important situation:

Example 1: The auction goes: 2NT – 3NT, and West leads some suit. Dummy (North) holds:

♠ 543
♥ 42
♦ KQJ109
♣ 543

And the defender's cards in the ♦ suit are:

Declarer leads towards the ♦ suit, should East win the 1st trick or wait? And if he waits, when should he take the ace?

West plays the 2 on the first trick and East has to guess whether it is singleton or trebleton. If it is a singleton there is now hurry to win the trick. If you decide trebleton (perhaps from information gained from previous tricks) then East knows Declarer has 2 ♦s. So needs to win the 2nd round ie ducking trick 1 only, and hence killing the ♦ suit.

Example 2: The auction goes: 2NT – 3NT, and West leads some suit. Dummy (North) holds:

♠ 543
♥ 42
♦ KQJ109
♣ 543

And the defender's cards in the ♦ suit are:

82 A43

Declarer leads towards the ♦ suit, should East win the 1st trick or wait? And if he waits, when should he take the ace?

West plays the 8 on the first trick and East has to guess whether it is singleton or doubleton. He you decide doubleton the East knows Declarer has 3 ♦s. So, needs to win the 3rd round ie ducking tricks 1 & 2. If it turns out to be a singleton, East has to duck three times. Of course, he will know the distribution when West plays to the 2nd round of the suit.

4. Showing preference for a suit when giving Pard a ruff (obviously in a trump contract)

When you give Pard a ruff, you can show a preference for one of the **other** two suits depending on which card you lead for Pard to ruff:

Example 1: North plays in 2♣ after a 1♠ – 2♣ auction and you are on lead:

♦ K10

♠ 97	♠ 76
♥ 8	♥ AK92
♦ QJ9875	♦ A3
♣ 10987	♣ 65432

♦ 642

After cashing the ♥AK East leads the 9 asking for the **higher** (higher card) of the two **other** suits (♣s and ♦s). West ruffs the 3rd round and plays the ♦Q pinning Declarer's king. So East gains the lead again and can give West another ruff. So, the defence get 2 ♥ tricks, 2 ruffs and 2 ♦s to defeat the contract. If a ♣ is returned after the first ruff, Declarer makes his contract.

Example 3:

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

	♠ KQ109	
	♥ J1065	
	♦ KQJ	
	♣ KQ	
♠ 875		♠ 64
♥ 2		♥ A9743
♦ 952		♦ A1064
♣ J98765		♣ 102
	♠ AJ32	
	♥ KQ8	
	♦ 873	
	♣ A43	

West leads the ♥2, and East works out that it must be a singleton. So, he returns a high card (9 or 7) asking for the return of the higher other suit (♦). East gets the lead again and gives West a 2nd ruff. So, the Defenders beat a 31 HCP game contract.

5. Holding 3 or more trumps and an ability to make a ruff

There are occasions when one Defender has a chance of a ruff if Pard is able to work out what to do. Normally you just follow small when Declarer starts to play on trumps, but if you have 3 or more trumps and an ability to make a ruff you should play hi-lo (964 play the 6 followed by the 4). Now if Declarer fails to take a 3rd round or if Pard wins a 2nd round of trumps he should consider where you are maybe able to obtain a ruff.

6. Keeping length in suits owned by Dummy or Declarer

Sometimes the only way Declarer can make his contract is when the Defenders discard wrongly. The defenders should try to keep the same length as a secondary suit that Declarer owns. This is easiest when you are sitting over Dummy and can discard **after** dummy, it is more difficult if you are sitting in front of Dummy – this is often where a squeeze occurs.

Declarer plays in 7♠ and the layout is:

	♠ 2	
	♥ 8754	
	♦ J987	
	♣ J984	
♠ KQJ		♠ A10987
♥ A2		♥ 63
♦ KQ32		♦ A65
♣ KQ53		♣ A76
	♠ 6543	
	♥ KQJ109	
	♦ 104	
	♣ 102	

South leads ♥K.

Declarer wins and plays 4 rounds of trumps (throwing a ♥), what has north discarded. If he has discarded a minor card, then Declarer will make his contract. However,

if he discards his ♥s, keeping the same length in the minors as Dummy then Declarer will have a loser. All Declarer needed was to make either a 4th ♦ or 4th ♣.