What is a signal?

It is a defensive card that is not played to contribute to the winning of the actual trick. Rather, it is made to convey a message to partner.

The most important signal by far, is the like/dislike, or “Attitude” Signal. By playing an unnecessarily high card, you are saying that you want partner to continue the suit he has led. Playing your lowest card has the opposite meaning.

There are various issues relating to Attitude Signals:

(i) When is my card a signal?
(ii) When should I encourage, and when should I discourage.
(iii) What is “High”, and what is “Low”.

There are other issues but let’s consider the above first.

(i) Your card is an Attitude Signal when partner has led, on the first round of a suit, and you cannot contribute to the winning of the trick.
(ii) You should encourage when you have an equal honour to the honour partner led, or trump, or do not want partner to switch suits.
(iii) It is all relative, not absolute. If partner leads an ace (from ace-king), you will have to play the 3 from Q32, yet the seven from 987. Partner will have to scrutinise the other spot cards in order to interpret the signal accurately.

Let’s look at a deal:-

West led the ace of diamonds against 4♠. Dummy played the two, East the seven, and declarer the five. The seven looked like a “throw high means aye – yes please” signal. Or was it?

West looked closely at the diamond spot cards. Dummy held the 2, 3 & 6; he, himself, held the 4, and declarer followed to Trick One with the 5. The 7 was partner’s lowest card!
So when is your card a signal?

When, on the first round of a suit, you are not contributing to the winning of the trick.

**Dummy**

*Partner leads* ♠ A 8 5  
*You* ♠ 2  
(i) ♠ K 9 4  
(ii) ♠ 10 7 3

If dummy plays low, you must play, in (i), the king, in order to win the trick; in (ii) the ten, in order to force out a higher card from declarer. *These are not signals.*

However if dummy plays the ace, you cannot contribute to the trick in any way. That means that your card is a signal to partner. In (i) you play the nine; in (ii) the three.

What would you signal in the following situations?

**Dummy**

*Partner leads* ♥ 8 5 3  
*You* ♥ A  
(i) ♥ Q 9 2  
(ii) ♥ J 9 2

(i) Assuming that partner is leading ace from ace-king, your queen is an “equal-honour”. You should encourage partner to continue, by playing the nine.

(ii) The jack is not a significant enough high card – it is not equal to the ace-king. Take this layout:

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

Declarer will not make a trick with his queen – unless West continues with the king. To prevent him from doing so, East plays a discouraging two.

“Hilo” signals and doubletons are often associated with one another. This may be right with leads – you should always lead the high card from a doubleton. However it is a dangerous association for signals. You should not always give the “hi-lo” signal when following suit to partner’s lead. Only play hi-lo if you genuinely want partner to continue with his lead; in other words if you want him to give you a third-round ruff. Here are some scenarios where it would be a mistake to signal high with a doubleton: (i) It is no trumps. (ii) You have no trumps. (iii) You do not want a ruff, because it would be at the cost of a natural trump trick (e.g. QJ10).
Unless short and desiring a ruff, you should plan to signal encouragement for partner’s honour lead when you have an equal honour.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Partner’s Lead</th>
<th>Equal Honour(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ace (from ace-king)</td>
<td>Queen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>King (from king-queen)</td>
<td>Ace, Jack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen (from queen-jack)</td>
<td>King, Ten</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Providing a look at dummy’s holding suggests that three rounds of the suit will stand up, the encouraging signal can be essential.

What is “High” and what is “low”?.

Whilst a two, three and four are usually low; and a seven, eight or nine usually high, you must look at the spot cards to see whether all is what it appears.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dummy</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♠ 10 4 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>♠ A K 6 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Declarer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i)♣ 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(ii)♣ 8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In (i) partner’s seven is clearly discouraging: there are no lower spot cards unaccounted for. Perhaps he holds ♠ 987 or ♠ J97. In (ii), partner’s seven is probably encouraging, for it appears that he also holds the three. Perhaps he holds the ♠Q73 or ♠ 73.

The moral is clear: you cannot merely look at the size of partner’s card: you must scrutinise all the other visible spot cards too.

The Motto is:

“Throw high means aye
Throw low means no”
When declarer is leading a suit, it would be pointless to signal your attitude. Who would benefit most? Declarer! However there is a vital message you can give partner: how many cards you hold in that suit, your “count”. By telling partner how many cards you hold in that suit, partner can work out how many cards declarer has in the suit. This could be vital information.

So on when declarer is leading a suit, you play high (a spot card such as 7, 8 or 9) to show an even number; with an odd number of cards, you play your lowest.

**High-even; Low-odd: Helo**

A. **Entryless Dummy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>You</th>
<th>Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>♦ K Q J 10 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(i) ♦ 92 Has ♦A

In (i) you play ♦9 (high-even)

(ii) ♦ 952

In (ii) you play ♦2 (low-odd)

From this partner can work out when to win his ace.

B. **Entryless Dummy**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>You</th>
<th>Partner</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>♦ K Q J 10 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(i) ♦ 92 ♦ A74

In (i) you have shown an even number

(ii) ♦ 952 **Declarer**

In (ii) you have shown an odd number

Leads ♦ 3

So in B (i) above partner knows you have an even number and therefore you are likely to have 2 cards in the suit, which means declarer has three. So partner doesn’t take the ace until the third round of the suit, thus preventing declarer from winning more than 2 tricks in the suit. In B (ii) partner knows you have an odd number odd number of cards the suit, likely to be 3 and so can take the ace on the second round.

By far the most important defensive signal is Attitude (like-dislike). When declarer is leading, however, the recommended signal is “Count”.

**The Count Signal**: Showing partner how many cards you have in the suit led.

**When?** Use when declarer leads a suit, and you think partner needs to know.

**Why?** Knowing how many cards partner holds in the suit, tells you how many cards declarer holds.

**How?** “HELO”. HE stands for High-Even number; LO stands for Low-Odd number.

Telling partner how many cards you hold may be vital.

Think of attitude as your primary defensive signal and count as the secondary one.
The third – and – last basic signal is Suit Preference Signal. As the name suggests, this signal directs partner to a particular suit: a low spot card calls for the lower-ranking other suit; a high card calls for the higher-ranking suit.

The message of the Suit Preference Signal will potentially conflict with the other types of signal, so it is vital the partnership know which signal is being sent. The key is to remember that SPS is only effective when you cannot desire the suit which is actually being used for the signal.

The most important use for SPS is when leading a suit for partner to trump. Clearly you cannot be sending a message about the suit led – because partner has none. Instead you are indicating to partner which other suit (ignoring trumps) you would like returned, with a view to winning a lead of that suit and giving partner another ruff.

**Exercise:** Hearts are trumps. You hold ♣ A108642, win partner’s ♣3 lead with the ♣A, and must return the right spot card for part for partner to ruff.

1. You have ♦A.
2. You have ♠A. Which club do you return in each case?

   1. ♠2. Asks for the lower-ranking of the remaining suits, diamonds.
   2. ♠8. Requesting the higher-ranking outside suit, spades.

The most common use for SPS is leading a suit for partner to trump. However, if the attitude (like/dislike), and count (suit length), is known, SPS can be used in other situations.

Here are two:

(a) Indicating where you have an entry, useful in notrumps when you have established a suit.
(b) When dummy has no losers in the suit partner has led (in a trump contract), making a continuation implausible.

So in summary:

A. **Attitude – Like/Dislike:** “Throw low means no, throw high means aye”.
B. **Count – Suit Length:** “HELO” – High=Even number; Low=Odd Number.
C. **Suit Preference – a request for the lower/higher ranking other suit.**

There is one aspect that is common to all three: it is the RELATIVE size of the card.

Remember 2, 3, 4 or 5 are commonly low and 7, 8 and 9 high.

It is important to start with Attitude and then adopt Count, lastly adding SPS to your armoury.
DISCARDING

Discarding means throwing away when you cannot follow to the suit led. You have 2 goals:

(a) Telling partner which suit you like (and want led).
(b) Keeping the right cards, to avoid declarer making more than his due.

So focusing on (a), there are several discarding methods on the market, including Dodds, Revolving and McKenney. These are all similar in nature.

Here are some reasons why I don't recommend an artificial system such as those above, preferring a natural, attitude-based approach:

(i) A natural method is easier to remember, and put into practice.
(ii) What do you do when you cannot spare (or do not have) the right spot card in artificial methods. So a natural method is more flexible.
(iii) Is your discard a command, or merely a suggestion? A natural method enables you to both suggest and command.

Playing a simple attitude-based discarding style is just like signalling when following suit.

“Throw high means aye – Throw low means no”

If you want a particular suit to be led, you throw away a high card in that suit (assuming you can afford to). This is the most clear-cut, simple-to-read, way of attracting partner’s attention to a particular suit. However if you cannot afford to release a high card for fear of costing a trick (this will be especially true in notrumps), then throw away a low card of another suit, relying on partner to work out what you do want. Bear in mind that only the first discard within a given suit sends a message; and the first discard of all sends the strongest message by far.

Repeating (a) & (b) at the top of this page:

(a) Sending the right message to partner.
This is usually of primary importance when partner is on lead, with the first discard sending the strongest message.

(b) Keeping the right cards.
This is usually the more important of the two jobs when declarer is on lead, and also after your first attitude-based discard.

A very good tip for keeping the right cards is to “keep equal length with dummy” – provided your highest card is higher than dummy’s lowest card.
Against opponents 3NT contract you lead the king of spades, followed by the queen when declarer ducks the king. Declarer takes the queen with the ace and plays 4 rounds of diamonds and on the fourth round you have to discard. It would be easy to discard a small heart but knowing you can beat the fourth heart of dummy's you must discard the jack of clubs.

These tips should help, when deciding which cards to keep, and which to let go.

(i) Keep suits that partner is throwing away.
(ii) Keep suits in which partner is known to have fewer cards.
(iii) Keep equal length with dummy.
(iv) Keep four-card lengths.

As a general principle, your first discard will send a message to partner. Subsequent discards are more concerned with letting go what you don’t need, and retaining what you do need.

A. Keep equal length with dummy (and declarer – if you can deduce how many cards he holds). Particularly when dummy has four cards. Be reluctant to discard from four cards down to three unless:
   (i) All of dummy’s cards are higher than yours. or
   (ii) You think partner has all four cards, enabling him to guard the suit.

B. Throw from long, weak suits.
   (i) Don’t bother to keep length winners in a trump contract – they will rarely make tricks (unless declarer is running out of trumps).
   (ii) Don’t keep length winners – even in notrumps – if you have no entry card.
   (iii) As a rough guide it is better to throw from a 5-card suit than a 3-card suit; but better to discard from a 3-card suit than a 4-card suit.

C. Plan your discards.
   If dummy is running a long suit, you know how many discards you will have to make. Do your thinking at the beginning, and try to discard in an order (and tempo) that will be as unhelpful as possible to declarer. If you take undue time, declarer will deduce that you have the key card(s). {NB; you cannot pause with nothing to think about – to deliberately mislead}