

What are Standard Leads and Standard Carding Agreements?

By Neil H. Timm

You have won the bridge contract and the opponent places his lead on the table FACE down and asks are there any questions, partner says no, and declarer replies with the question: What are your leads and carding agreements?

You often hear the response “standard”! What follows is the meaning of that response according to the ACBL.

A standard lead, according to the ACBL, typically involves leading the top of a sequence or the fourth-best card from a suit, with specific conventions for honor and spot cards.

Examples of ACBL Standard Leads are:

- **From Hxx:** Lead the high card (H) to show strength and encourage partner
- **From xxx:** Lead smallest card
- **From Hxxx or Hxxxx:** Lead the fourth-best card to indicate suit length.
- **From a sequence like K–Q–J:** Lead the top of the sequence (King)
- **From a doubleton:** Lead the higher card (Ace or King)

ACBL Standard Carding

Primary Signal to Partner: Attitude (encouraging or discouraging: H-L) is the primary signal, with count and suit preference used when attitude signals are not applicable.

Notes from Larry Cohen’s (LC) BBO Vugraph on March 14, 2021, on his LC Standard Leads.

Lesson Notes: Opening Lead Basics

1) THE MOST DESIRABLE LEADS ARE:

- Top of a 3+ card sequence (KQJ, QJ10, J109, 1098) [A or K from A-K] (A 2-card sequence is okay, but not perfect).

- Partner's suit (lead same card that you would in any other suit). We no longer lead high from K75 (for example).

2) SPOT-CARD LEADS

When leading a spot-card, lead **fourth best** against notrump. Lead the 2 from K762. Lead the 5 from K7652. Against suits the most popular method is also fourth best (some people use "3rd and 5th"). Lead high from **doubletons**. Leading from **three small** is a matter of personal preference.

3) LEADING FROM KINGS or ACES:

It is aggressive to lead from a king but called for when the auction tells you that your side might need to take tricks quickly. Never lead (or underlead) an ace against a suit contract.

Against notrump, usually lead 4th from your longest and strongest (unless you have 4+ cards and a sequence to lead the top card from). So, against notrump, you often will lead from an ace or king.

4) WHEN LEADING AN UNBID SUIT:

Prefer majors to minors. Listen to the opponents (did they use Stayman, do they have a long suit, etc.?)

5) SHORT-SUIT LEADS IN SUIT CONTRACTS:

- Doubletons are overrated leads, especially with one honor.
- Trump control is a big plus. The best holding is Axx.
- Avoid short suit leads when your trump holding doesn't need a ruff.
- Avoid short suit leads with trump length (or sure trump tricks).

6) LEADING TRUMP

- Usually this is a passive lead (you don't want to blow a trick).
- In general, don't lead a singleton trump
- Called for when declarer is playing in his second suit.

His comments on Defensive carding follow.

Defensive Carding

Signals of count are standard (hi-lo=2 or 4 or 6).

Signals of attitude are standard (hi=encouraging, lo=discouraging).

On partner's lead of a suit (if you can't beat dummy) give attitude.

On declarer's lead of a suit, give count if you think it is important.

When you discard, it is an attitude signal (followed by current count).

Experienced players may wish to change and to use upside down (count or attitude or both) instead of standard.

Note: In many countries outside the U.S., what I refer to as standard is upside down -- and vice versa.

Another fun tool to add is odd-even discards. Smith Echo is not marked (but should be used by experienced players). It is used only against notrump. If we play hi-lo in the suit declarer first attacks, it means we like (relevant to the entire deal) the suit which our side led at trick one. Both defenders use Smith Echo. If count is deemed to be more important (dummy has a long suit with no entry), then that takes precedence.

Hi-lo in trumps means either you want a ruff, or you are trying to stress something in the highest suit.

For more on Leads and Carding follow the link:

<https://www.bridgewebs.com/ocala/Leads%20and%20Carding.pdf>

3rd and 5th Leads are often used by more advanced players, a humorous summary follows.

<https://www.bridgewebs.com/centralcoastclubs/56%20-%203rd%20and%205th%20Leads.pdf>

In Europe a popular agreement is to use 2nd and 4th Leads. What are their meaning?

In bridge, the 2nd and 4th leads method involves leading the second highest card from a suit without an honor and the fourth highest from a suit with an honor, providing strategic information to your partner.

What are 2nd and 4th Leads?

- **2nd Lead:** When leading from a suit that does not contain any honors (like A, K, Q), you lead the **second highest card**. For example, if you have a suit like 9-7-5-3, you will lead the 7. This method helps convey to your partner that you are leading from a weak suit without high cards.
- **4th Lead:** When leading from a suit that contains an honor (like A, K, Q), you lead the **fourth highest card**. For instance, if you have K-J-10-8-4, you will lead the 8. This indicates to your partner that you have a strong suit and are trying to establish it

Strategic Implications

- **Communication:** The 2nd and 4th leads method helps establish a clear communication system between partners. By following this method, you can inform your partner about the strength and nature of your hand without needing to verbally communicate
- **Defensive Play:** This leading strategy is particularly useful in defensive play against both suit contracts and no-trump contracts. It allows your partner to make informed decisions based on the information conveyed by your lead

Variations and Considerations

- Some players may treat the 10 as an honor, which can affect how they apply the 2nd and 4th lead strategy. For example, leading from a suit like Q-10-9-5 might involve leading the 10 instead of the 9, depending on partnership agreements.
- The method can vary by region and partnership agreements, so it's essential to discuss and agree on the specific conventions with your partner before playing. By understanding and applying the 2nd and 4th leads method, players can enhance their defensive strategies and improve communication with their partners during bridge games.

More on Lead Types and Carding

<https://www.bridgewebs.com/ocala/Def.pdf>