

Improve
Your
Declarer Play
In
No Trump Contracts

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After the opening lead has been made, and before you play a card from dummy, it is vital that you take a few seconds to plan the play of the hand.

Work your way down this list.

A	Analyse	the opening lead
B	Bidding	what does it tell you about the defenders hands.
C	Count	your Total Immediate Tricks
D	Deficit	what is it and how will you make it up.
E	Entries	do you have sufficient to make the plays you plan
F	Failure	might be caused by what

A Analyse The Opening Lead

You know the principles of the opening lead.

Apply them to the opening lead on your left and consider what the lead reveals.

Is it:

top of an honour sequence

fourth highest – how many cards is the leader likely to have in the suit led.

top of nothing from an empty suit (one that does not contain an honour)

B Bidding

If one or both of your opponents either intervened in the bidding or passed before the opening bid, this discloses information about the strength and shape of their hands.

Consider what their bids have meant or even what the lack of a bid tells you.

C Count Your Total Immediate Tricks

See Section 2

D Deficit - How Will You Make It Up

What is the deficit and how will you make it up.

In a no trump contract you can establish extra tricks in the following ways

By forcing the defenders to play their high cards in a suit so that the high cards in your hand or in dummy become winners.

By forcing the defenders to play their cards in a suit so that small cards in a long suit in your hand or in dummy become winners.

By taking advantage of how the defenders' cards lie in order to make a trick with a card in your hand or in dummy.

For example by finessing or, stating this more generally, by leading towards high cards.

E Entries

You will need to have entries to your own hand and to dummy in order to:

- cash tricks in suits you have established

- make the plays you have decided on to make your extra tricks

Consider what entries you need to your own hand and to dummy in order to execute the plan you have for the play of the hand.

In particular, consider conserving entries to the hand with a long suit if you need to give up the lead in that suit.

F Failure - What Might Cause The Plan To Fail.

For example you may be hoping to make extra tricks from a long suit.

Will a bad break of the outstanding cards cause a problem and can you counter it.

You may need to give up the lead in a suit more than once to set up long tricks.

Will this allow the defence to establish and run their own long suit?

The most important aspect of the planning process is counting immediate tricks. Immediate tricks in a particular suit are those which you can win without giving up the lead in that suit to either of your opponents.

In counting ITs take into account the high cards you have in your own hand and also in dummy.

For example:

In bridge diagrams declarer is south and dummy is north.

You are playing in 3NT and west leads ♠2.

	♠ 653
	♥ 986
	♦ A75
	♣ K543
♠ 2 led	
	♠ AK4
	♥ AQJ
	♦ K64
	♣ QJ106

Look at each suit in turn.

- Spades** You have the ace and king in your hand.
These will win tricks before the opposition can win a trick in this suit.
You have 2 immediate tricks in spades.
The defender with the queen will win the 3rd round of the suit.
- Hearts** You have the ace in your hand.
This will win a trick.
If you play a second heart one opponent will win with his king.
You have 1 immediate trick in hearts.
- Diamonds** You have the ace and king but this time they are in different hands.
Tricks you win in dummy count towards your total.
Imagine how the suit will play.
Play the ♦A from dummy.
Then play the ♦5 and win in your hand with the ♦K.
You have 2 immediate tricks in diamonds.
If you play a third diamond one defender will win with his queen.
- Clubs** You have the king in dummy and QJ106 in your hand.
However, you do not have the ace.
When you play a club one of your opponents will win with the ace.
You have no immediate tricks in clubs

Your Total Immediate Tricks is 5

Spades : 2 Hearts : 1 Diamonds : 2 Clubs : 0

You are playing in 3NT and need to win 9 tricks

With 5 immediate tricks you need to generate 4 extra tricks.

The deficit is 4 tricks.

Note:

On this hand you will generate 3 extra tricks by forcing out the ♣A.

After the ♣A is played your remaining top honours are then winners.

You will use the ♦A as an entry to dummy to take a simple finesse against the ♥K.

Even if the finesse fails your other heart honour is established as a trick.

This will give you the 4th trick you need to make up the deficit.

If the heart finesse is successful you can repeat the finesse using the ♣K as an entry to dummy.

Since you want to use the ♣K as an entry to dummy you will play high clubs from the south hand first to force out the ♣A.

West has led ♠2.

This is 4th highest from an honour.

West cannot have a lower spade so he has just 4.

West has 4 spades so east has 3.

Success is guaranteed because you can lose only 2 spades, one club and (possibly) one heart.

Playing in no trumps you can win tricks in two ways.

With high cards

With small cards in long suits

Winning Tricks With High Cards

This may be in a suit where you start with all the high cards.

1.	♣A K Q J 4
	♣6 5 3

2.	♣A Q J 10 4
	♣K 5

The high cards may be all in one hand as in 1.

Or they may be divided between your own hand and dummy as in 2.

If you have no entries to dummy other than in this suit you need to play this suit carefully in 2 to win all your tricks.

If you play the ♣5 and win in dummy and then play from dummy and win in the south hand with the ♣K you will be caught in your own hand with no way of getting to the tricks in dummy.

You are said to have “blocked” the suit.

You should play ♣K first followed by ♣5 and you are then in dummy to enjoy the rest of the suit.

This is a very important principle to follow and is expressed as follows:

Play the high cards from the short hand first

In the club suit above south has 2 cards and north has 5 cards.

South is the short hand so you play ♣K first from south and then ♣5.

The defenders may have some of the high cards in the suit and you may need to drive out these high cards in order to set up or “Establish” your own high cards as winners.

3.	♣Q J 10 9 5
♣A 8	♣K 7 6
	♣4 3 2

4.	♣J 10 9 5 4
♣A K	♣8 7 6
	♣Q 3 2

In 3 you lead twice from the south hand to force the defenders to play their ♣A and K.

You then have three winners in the suit.

You may still need to apply the principle of *high cards short hand first* to ensure you are able to win all the tricks.

You play the queen first to ensure you do not get blocked in the south hand.

Another general principle of card play is:

Lead towards high cards.

	♣Q J 9 8 5	
♣A K 10 2		♣7
	♣6 4 3	

This club suit looks very good but, if you lead from the north hand, no matter how you play the suit, west will win 3 tricks and you will win 2.

If you lead from the south hand west has to decide which card to play before you need to decide which card to play from dummy.

You initially lead from the south hand and play the queen if west plays low.

You return to the south hand in another suit and play another club.

West now has to play a high card and you will win 3 tricks.

There are occasions when the high cards in the short hand prevent you using the suit as an entry to the long hand.

	♣Q J 10 4 2	
♣9 8 7 6		♣5 3
	♣AK	

The suit is said to be blocked.

The ♣A and ♣K in your own hand prevent you running the winners in dummy.

You must play the ♣A and ♣K first to “unblock” the suit whilst retaining an entry to dummy in another suit so that you can run the other three winners which are sitting there.

There may be other occasions when you must consider using a winning high card from the short hand as an entry to winners in the long hand because you have no other entry to the long hand to allow the run of a suit.

	♣K J 10 4 2	
♣9 8 7 6		♣5 3
	♣A Q	

If you have an outside entry to dummy you “unblock” the ace and queen from the south hand and then cross to dummy with the outside entry.

However if you have no other entry to dummy you must play the ♣A and then the ♣Q which you overtake with ♣K to give an entry to dummy to allow you to cash the other winners.

Winning Tricks With Small Cards In Long Suits

	♣A 6 5 4 3 2	
♣8		♣J 10 9
	♣KQ7	

Providing the defenders' cards do not break 4-0 you will win 6 tricks in this suit.

You follow the principle of high cards short hand first.

Play the ♣K and ♣Q from south and then cross to ♣A to exhaust the defenders of their cards.

The ♣6, ♣5 and ♣4 will now win tricks.

You may need to give up tricks in a long suit in order to force out the defenders' high cards so that your small cards become winners.

	♣J 8 5 4 3 2	
♣A 7		♣K 6
	♣Q109	

You initially play the ♣Q and then, after you regain the lead, you play the ♣10 from the south hand. This forces out the defenders' high cards.

You then play the ♣9, win with ♣J and then win tricks with dummy's ♣8, 5 and 4.

Note that we played *high cards short hand first*.

When you are trying to win tricks with small cards in long suits the number of tricks you can win may depend on how the suit is divided between the defenders.

This is said to be ***how the suit breaks***.

Appendix 1 contains some information on this.

Even a suit which looks very poor can yield several tricks if the defenders' cards break favourably.

	♣7 6 5 4 3 2	
♣A Q		♣K J
	♣1098	

You lead the 10 and the 9 and, because the defenders' cards break 2-2, all your cards are winners.

You play the 8 to unblock the suit and then cross to dummy in another suit to cash 3 more winners.

Making Extra Tricks By Taking Advantage Of How The Defenders' Cards Lie

You can make extra tricks if the defenders' high cards lie favourably.

It is a topic on its own and is dealt with under Section 5 – Finessing.

The first step in planning the play of any type of contract is to analyse the opening lead.

A large amount of information is available about the defenders' hands if you give the lead some thought.

Apply your knowledge of the principles of the opening lead to the card led.

Always keep in mind the opening lead.

Against a no trump contract there are 3 types of lead.

1. Top of a complete, broken or interior honour sequence.

If an honour is led against your no trump contract it will be this type of lead.

You know that the hand leading does not have the honour immediately above that led but they should have the honour immediately below and the honour below that or one removed.

Work out how many points the lead shows.

This information may be useful later in the play.

2. A low card (usually 4th highest) from an unsupported honour.

If a low card is led it is usually this type.

It indicates that your left hand opponent has an honour(s) in the suit and is interested in developing tricks there.

This knowledge can help you to decide whether to play high or low from dummy.

Note also.

If a 2 is led this is 4th highest so LHO has 4 cards in this suit.

You can now work out how many cards RHO has in this suit and this tells you the full distribution of the suit.

If a 3 is led and you can see the 2 in hand or in dummy LHO has led from a 4-card suit.

If a 5 or 6 is led and you think it is 4th highest it is likely that LHO has a 5 or 6-card suit.

3. Top of nothing or 2nd highest from nothing.

If the lead is a high spot card the lead is likely to be from an empty suit (no honour).

You may need to check with RHO opponent whether they lead top of nothing or 2nd highest from an empty suit. Both systems are used by different people.

Knowing that the lead is from an empty suit allows you to place any missing honours in that suit in RHO's hand.

It then helps you to decide how to play to trick 1.

The Rule Of Eleven

Providing the opening lead is fourth highest (4th from the top) you can apply the rule of eleven.

Subtract the card led from 11.

For the suit led, the answer gives the number of cards higher than the card led which are contained in the three hands other than the hand leading.

The following example is given in The Official Encyclopedia Of Bridge.

LHO leads the ♠6 against your 3NT contract.

$$11 - 6 = 5$$

There are 5 spades higher than the ♠6 in the North, East and South hands.

	♠ A Q 9 5 4	
♠ 6 led		♠ 3 played
	♠ 10 7 2	

You can see all five of them between your own hand and dummy.

West has led from ♠ K J 8 6

You know your ♠7 will win the first trick and you can subsequently lead from hand to finesse against west's remaining holding of ♠ K J 8.

A finesse is an attempt by declarer to win a trick with an honour either in his own hand or in dummy, while the defence still hold a higher honour in the suit.

The basis of a finesse is hope.

Declarer hopes that a certain defender holds the higher card and plays the suit in such a way that this defender must play before he himself needs to decide whether or not to play the high card in question. Consider the following.

1.	♠ K 6	
♠ A J 7 3		♠ Q 10 9 5 2
	♠ 8 4	

Declarer hopes to win a trick with dummy's king.

If he leads the king from dummy and the defence play correctly he will not score a trick with it. Whichever defender holds the ace will play it to win the trick.

However, if west has the ace and, if declarer leads from his own hand, west must choose whether or not to play the ace before declarer needs to decide which card to play from dummy.

If west plays low, dummy's king will be played and will win.

If west plays the ace, dummy will play low and the king will subsequently win.

If east has the ace the king will lose but, by playing in this way, declarer has given himself a 50-50 chance of making a trick with the king.

Declarer loses nothing by playing in the recommended way.

This situation is similar.

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

Declarer will always win one trick in this suit but he would like to win two.

To achieve this he leads from the south hand and hopes that the ace is held by west.

In the diagram west has the ace and declarer will make two tricks in this suit.

If west plays the ace, the king and queen are established as winners.

If west plays low the queen will win, declarer will return to his own hand in another suit and repeat the finesse.

Were he to lead from the north hand he would never make more than one trick in this suit.

This follows the important principle:

Lead Toward High Cards

Taking A Finesse Against A King

The situation opposite is not usually thought of as a finesse. It is, in fact, a finesse against an ace.

Most people associate finesses with the situation shown in 3 below where a tenace is involved. A tenace can be thought of as 3 cards in a sequence with the middle one missing. A Q or K J.

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

In 3, dummy's ♠A-Q form a tenace and you would like to win a trick with the queen.

Once again, if you lead the high card (queen), it will never win a trick against correct defence. Correct play is to lead towards the queen hoping west holds the king and forcing him to decide whether or not to play it before you have to decide whether to play the queen.

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

The situation in 4 is similar.

You should play the ace and then lead towards the queen hoping west has the king. The ace is played first to cover the (very slim) possibility that east has a singleton king.

In 3 and 4 you can only ever hope to make two tricks.

In 5 you would like to make three tricks.

In order to do this you need to repeat the finesse.

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

You lead low from the south hand planning to play the jack from dummy if west plays low.

If the finesse is successful you return to the south hand in another suit and repeat the finesse.

Leading An Honour For A Finesse

Can you ever afford to lead an honour when planning to take a finesse?

Only if you are happy for it to be covered.

Modify 5 slightly.

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

If declarer leads the jack, west will cover.

This follows the rule for play by 2nd hand – 2nd hand covers an isolated honour with an honour.

Dummy will win with the ace and his queen will win the second round of the suit.

However; east's 10 will be promoted to winning status and will win the third round of the suit.

Only when you have a strong sequence of lower honours can afford to lead a high card for a finesse.

Modify 6 slightly by moving the ten from east to south.

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

Now declarer can afford to lead the jack.

He is happy to have it covered because the ten in his own hand will be promoted to winning status if west covers the jack with the king.

The advantage of leading the jack in this situation is that, if the finesse is successful, declarer retains the lead in his own hand and does not need to waste an entry to return to hand to repeat the finesse.

Sometimes the correct way to play a finesse depends on how many tricks you need to win in the suit.

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

In 8:

If you need to win two tricks quickly without giving up the lead, you would lead the queen from hand hoping that west has the king.

As above the queen would lose to the king, but the jack is immediately established as a winner.

If you need to win three tricks you would play the ace and then lead towards the queen hoping east has the king.

The following card combination is often played wrongly.

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

If you need two tricks quickly it is correct to lead the jack for the finesse.

The jack may be covered or may lose to the king.

Either way the queen in dummy is established as a winner.

However, on correct defence, this play is unlikely to give three tricks because, if west has the king, he will cover.

Correct play for three tricks is to hope that east has the king and to finesse against his king by first playing the ace and then leading small towards the jack.

Taking A Finesse Against A Queen

There are many occasions when the success of a contract depends on a missing queen well placed. Often, when planning a finesse against the queen and when holding the ace and king, there can be a slight advantage in postponing the finesse until the second round of the suit.

10.	♠AK106
♠8753	♠Q
	♠J942

11.	♠AKJ
♠Q943	♠1082
	♠765

In 10, the ♠A is played first to cater for a singleton queen in either hand.

This is a very slim possibility but it costs nothing just in case.

As the cards lie the ♠Q appears from east so all declarer's cards are good.

In 11, the ♠A is again played first to cater for a singleton queen in either hand.

The south hand is then entered in another suit and the ♠6 is led intending to play the ♠J if west plays small.

As the cards lie, with west holding ♠Q943, the play of the ♠A makes no difference but, by playing the finesse, declarer will make 3 tricks.

If east had ♠Qx(x) declarer would win only 2 tricks but he gave himself the best chance of 3 tricks.

By looking carefully at the cards you hold sometimes you can determine that it is wrong to lead an honour first.

12.	♠AKJ1053
♠Q986	♠7
	♠42

13.	♠AK653
♠Q842	♠7
	♠J109

In 12 your suit seems strong.

However, if you look closely, you can see that, if one defender holds four cards headed by the queen, there could be a problem.

If it is east you can do nothing about it.

However, if it is west, if you initially lead the ace and then finesse, west will win a trick with his queen. Providing you do not start with a top honour, you can win all the tricks by finessing twice.

13 is more difficult to see.

If you play the ace and then enter the south hand and play the jack, west will cover it and will eventually win a trick with his eight.

The following are two situations where you can reap benefits by playing the top cards correctly. You want to win three tricks.

14.	♠AK43
♠98	♠Q1072
	♠J65

15.	♠AK4
♠Q8	♠10973
	♠J652

In 14 you play the ace and then lead low towards the jack intending to play it if east plays low.

This gives you three tricks whenever east has the queen, when either defender has a singleton queen and whenever the suit breaks 3-3.

In 15 you play the ace and king and then lead low towards the jack.

This gives you three tricks whenever east has the queen, when either defender has a singleton or doubleton queen and whenever the suit breaks 3-3.

This is four times out of five.

Taking A Finesse Against A Jack

16.	♠Q108
♠AJ42	♠K75
	♠963

17.	♠Q76
♠A94	♠J83
	♠K1052

In 16 you hope west has the jack.

You play small from the south hand and, if west plays low, you play the eight.

If east plays the king you later return to hand in another suit and take another finesse against the jack.

In 17 you initially play a finesse against the ace by leading small towards the queen.

Whether or not the queen wins you later lead a small card from dummy intending to play the ten and finesse against the jack with east

Should You Take A Finesse Or Play For The Drop

When you are missing an honour in a suit you often need to decide whether to play a finesse or to lead your high cards hoping the honour will drop.

The correct play depends on which honour you are missing and on how many cards you have in the suit between your own hand and dummy.

Missing A King

18. ♠AQ9652
 ♠? ♠?
 ♠J1074

19. ♠AQ9652
 ♠? ♠?
 ♠J10743

In 18:

You have 10 cards in the suit.

Take a first round finesse against the king.

In 19:

You have 11 cards in the suit.

There is a slight advantage in playing for the drop.

Missing A Queen

20. ♠KJ1063
 ♠? ♠?
 ♠A75

21. ♠KJ1063
 ♠? ♠?
 ♠A75 4

In 20:

You have 8 cards in the suit.

Initially lead the ace and then take a second round finesse against the queen.

In 21:

You have 9 cards in the suit.

There is a slight advantage in leading the ace and king to play for the queen to drop.

Hence the expression:

Eight Ever – Nine Never

When you have A K J and are missing the queen in a suit:

With eight cards in the suit – **ever** play the finesse

With nine cards in the suit – **never** play the finesse – play for the drop

However, in the latter case, the advantage in playing for the drop is slight.

If there is any information that suggests you should finesse then do so.

Missing A Jack

22. ♠AQ104

♠? ♠?

♠K6

23. ♠AQ104

♠? ♠?

♠K65

In 22:

You have only six cards in the suit.

Lead the king and take a second round finesse against the jack.

In 23:

You have a seventh card in the suit.

Lead the top cards and play for the jack to drop.

Double Finesses

When you are missing two or more high cards in a suit a finesse is often the best way of tackling the suit to ensure you win the maximum number of tricks.

24.	♠AK10	
♠QJ82		♠964
	♠753	

25.	♠AQ10	
♠K63		♠J974
	♠852	

In 24 you will always make 2 tricks.

If you need three tricks you should lead from the south hand and cover an honour from west or play small if no honour appears.

If necessary return to hand and repeat the finesse.

This approach has about a 1 in 4 chance of generating a third trick (when west holds the ♠Q and J).

In 24 the missing honours are equals but, in 25, they are not.

Where the missing honours are not equals it is usually correct to finesse first against the lower honour.

In 25 you would like to give yourself the best chance of making 2 tricks or even 3.

The correct play is to lead small from the south hand and just cover any honour which west might play but play the ten if no honour appears.

If the ten loses to the jack, return to hand and plan to finesse against the king.

This approach gives you the best chance of making 2 tricks with this combination (3 times out of 4)

In both examples you are missing 2 high cards.

In 24 you are missing the Q and J.

Considering 24 the missing cards can divide in 4 ways:

	W	E	
1.	QJ	-	You make 3 tricks
2.	Q	J	You make 2 tricks
3.	J	Q	You make 2 tricks
4.	-	QJ	You make 2 tricks

There are always 2 tricks but, by playing as described, you have a 1 in 4 chance of making 3 tricks.

In 25 you are missing the K and J.

Considering 25 the missing cards can divide in 4 ways:

	W	E	
1.	KJ	-	You make 3 tricks
2.	K	J	You make 2 tricks
3.	J	K	You make 2 tricks
4.	-	KJ	You make 1 trick

By playing in the recommended way you have 3 chances in 4 of making at least 2 tricks.

You have a 1 in 4 chance of making 3 tricks.

Consider the spade suit in the deal below.

1.	♠ 10 8 7		
	♥ 10 4 3 2		
	♦ Q 8		
	♣ A K 8 6		
♠ K Q 9 3 2	N		♠ J 4
♥ 7 5	W	E	♥ A J 9 8
♦ 10 9 7			♦ J 6 5 3
♣ 4 3 2	S		♣ 10 7 5
	♠ A 6 5		
	♥ K Q 6		
	♦ A K 4 2		
	♣ Q J 9		

You are south and west leads ♠3 against your contract of 3NT.

You decide this is 4th highest from an honour and that west could have five spades.

You have 8 immediate tricks.

Spades	1	hearts	0	diamonds	3	clubs	4
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Your ninth trick will come from hearts after forcing out the ace.

You have only one stop in the spade suit (♠A).

A stop is a card which prevents the opposition running their tricks in that suit.

You need to give up the lead to the ♥A in order to establish the extra trick you need for your contract.

If west holds that card your contract will fail if he started with 5 spades.

When you play a heart he will win the ♥A and then cash 4 spade tricks to defeat your contract.

However, if east holds ♥A, you have a chance.

When east wins with ♥A, he will normally return a spade which his partner will win.

You will then lose 4 spade tricks and your contract will fail.

However, if east cannot return a spade when he wins the ♥A your contract is safe.

You can manipulate the situation so that this occurs.

You let east win the first trick with ♠J.

He will return his ♠4 and you win this trick with your ♠A.

East is now void of spades and, when he later wins with the ♥A he cannot lead a spade.

You avoid losing four spade tricks.

This is called a "Hold Up Play".

You "Hold Up" your stopper in a suit in order to exhaust one of your opponents of his cards in that suit and so break the communication between the two defensive hands.

The Rule Of Seven

It is not automatic to hold up.

Your decision whether or not to hold-up depends on the following factors.

How you propose to play the hand

Whether, if you hold up, a damaging switch may be made.

If you are satisfied that there is no danger in holding up you can apply the Rule Of 7.

Add together the number of cards in the danger suit contained in your own hand and in dummy.

Subtract the result from 7.

This tells you the number of times you should hold up with a single stopper.

When It Is Wrong To Hold Up

2.	♠ 8 5		
	♥ K 9 3		
	♦ J 9 8 5 3		
	♣ 8 5 2		
♠ K Q 9 7 3	N		♠ J 4 2
♥ 8 5	W	E	♥ 10 6 4
♦ 10 4			♦ Q 6
♣ A 9 7 3	S		♣ K J 10 4
	♠ A 10 6		
	♥ A Q J 2		
	♦ A K 7 2		
	♣ Q 6		

South is in 3NT. West leads ♠7 and east plays the ♠J.

Declarer has 7 immediate tricks – 1 spade, 4 hearts, 2 diamonds, 0 clubs.

Taking the spade suit in isolation it may seem reasonable to hold up the ♠A for 2 rounds. But look a little further.

If declarer holds up the ♠A there is no guarantee that west will continue spades.

He may switch to a club and, in this suit, declarer is exposed. The defence could take 4 and possibly 5 club tricks.

In addition, the purpose of a hold up play is to cut communication.

If south holds up ♠A and exhausts east of spades east may gain the lead in diamonds and he can probably switch to a club to give west the lead to cash his spades or he might cash several clubs himself.

When the defence could make a damaging switch it is wrong to hold up.

On the hand above declarer should play ♠A at trick 1 and then cash 4 heart tricks.

He should then play ♦A and ♦K hoping that the ♦Q drops to allow him cash 3 further diamond tricks. (eight ever – nine never)

As the cards lie above he is successful.

3.	♠ 9 7 5 ♥ 9 6 4 ♦ A 9 5 4 3 ♣ A 6		
♠ 8 6 2 ♥ K J 7 2 ♦ 7 2 ♣ 9 8 5 2	N W S	E	♠ K Q J 3 ♥ Q 10 3 ♦ K 6 ♣ J 10 4 3
	♠ A 10 4 ♥ A 8 5 ♦ Q J 10 8 ♣ K Q 7		

South is in 3NT. west leads ♥2 and east plays the ♥Q.

Declarer has 6 immediate tricks – 1 spade, 1 heart, 1 diamond, 3 clubs and needs to set up the diamond suit via a finesse to provide the extra tricks.

The diamond finesse is into the east hand and it is tempting to hold up the ♥A in order to exhaust east of hearts.

However; having won the ♥Q, east may switch to a spade.

There is then a danger that the defence may win 1 heart, 3 spades and 1 diamond.

Looking more deeply; west has led the ♥2.

This is his 4th highest so he should have only 4 hearts.

Declarer can, therefore, win trick 1 with ♥A and take the diamond finesse.

If it loses and east returns a heart the defence will win only 3 hearts and a diamond.

Declarer has set up the diamonds while he still has a spade stop.

Consider the following deal.

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

West leads the ♠K against south's contract of 3NT.

Total immediate tricks is 7.

spades	1	hearts	4	diamonds	1	clubs	1
--------	---	--------	---	----------	---	-------	---

The two extra tricks needed could come from a finesse in diamonds or clubs.

In each suit, even if the finesse fails, two extra tricks are generated.

Which finesse should south take.

Considering the hand from declarer's (south) viewpoint:

West's lead of ♠K is from a complete or broken honour sequence so his suit is strong.

Also he could have 5 spades.

If the club finesse is taken and fails, west will win the ♣K and may then cash 4 spade tricks to defeat the contract.

If the diamond finesse is taken and it fails east will win the trick.

However, if when east wins this trick, he does not have a spade to return the contract is assured.

West is designated as the Danger Hand because he could have long spades with which to defeat the contract.

East is designated as the Safe Hand because, if declarer can contrive that he does not have a spade when he wins the diamond trick the contract is assured.

The diamond finesse is said to be "into the safe hand".

The club finesse is said to be "into the danger hand".

South will therefore take the diamond finesse but will first arrange that east does not have a spade to return if the finesse fails.

To achieve this he makes a "hold up" play before he plays the finesse into the safe hand.

South plays the hand as follows:

He is not concerned about a damaging switch so he holds up ♠A for 2 rounds and plays it on the third spade.

This ensures that east has no more spades and cannot return a spade if the diamond finesse fails.

After winning the ♠A declarer takes the diamond finesse.

The finesse fails.

However, east cannot return a spade and the contract is safe.

Note that if, after winning the ♦K, east still had a spade to lead the spades would have split 4-4 and west could win only one more spade.

The contract remains safe with the losers being 3 spades and 1 diamond.

It is not necessarily the hand with a long suit which presents a danger.

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

You are south in 3NT and west leads a passive ♠9.

This is top of an empty suit saying he has no interest in developing tricks in this suit (top of nothing).

Total immediate tricks is 8.

spades	4	hearts	0	diamonds	1	clubs	3
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The best chance of an extra trick lies with the club suit.

If the suit breaks no worse than 4-2 a small club can be developed as a winner.

But consider the heart suit.

If east gains the lead and switches to a heart declarer will lose 4 heart tricks together with the trick east had already won.

East is the danger hand.

South could play for the 3-3 break of the clubs but this is against the odds.

As the cards lie he will fail. East will win the fourth club and will switch to a heart to defeat the contract.

A better play is for south to enter dummy with a spade and lead a club planning to just cover whatever east plays. This ensures that, if the finesse fails, west is on lead.

If west then plays a heart declarer's ♥K becomes the ninth trick.

If not declarer's ninth trick comes from clubs.

As well as finessing into the safe hand there are other techniques for keeping the danger hand off lead.

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

You are south in 3NT and west leads ♠K.

This is top of a broken honour sequence and west could have 5 spades.

Total immediate tricks is 8.

spades	1	hearts	3	diamonds	2	clubs	2
--------	---	--------	---	----------	---	-------	---

The extra trick is unlikely to come from clubs where a 3-3 break is required.

However, with eight diamonds, there is a reasonable chance of an extra trick there.

West is the danger hand because of his long spades.

Declarer will hold up ♠A for 2 rounds to cut the defensive communication and prevent east leading a spade.

However, he must then prevent west gaining the lead to cash his winning spades.

To achieve this declarer plays the diamonds in such a way that he keeps west off lead.

He plays a small diamond from hand.

He plays the ♦9 if west plays low or he will play the ♦A if west plays the ♦Q.

This technique is referred to as “ducking into the safe hand”

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

You are south and west leads ♥6 against your contract of 3NT.
This is 4th highest from an honour.

You have 7 immediate tricks.

Spades 1 hearts 2 diamonds 2 clubs 2

The most likely source of the 2 extra tricks you need to make up the deficit is the diamond suit.

You need the suit to break 3-2 to give you the extra 2 tricks. This break occurs 2 times out of 3.
Even with a 3-2 break you need to give up one trick in the suit to set up your winners.

Consider what would happen if you played ♦A and ♦K and then gave up a diamond trick.
The suit would be set up for two extra tricks but you have no entry to reach the winners.

If you consider your entries as part of the planning process you can easily deal with this situation.

You have to give up one trick in the suit so do it on the first round of the suit.

You win trick 1 and play a small diamond from hand and "duck" it in dummy.

You win the next trick and then play a small diamond from hand.

Dummy's ♦A and ♦K will take care of the outstanding cards and the lead is in dummy to enjoy the two winners.

You apply the same technique when your holding in the suit looks like this and, again, you have no outside entry.

	♠ AKQ32	
♠ J1094		♠ 65
	♠ 54	

If you need 5 tricks from this suit you have no choice but to play A, K and Q and hope the suit breaks 3-3. But this happens only one time in three.

However, if you need only 4 tricks, you can take out an insurance policy.

Duck the first round of the suit.

The suit itself then provides the entry to dummy and the ♠A, K and Q take care of the defenders' remaining cards.

When you play a weak no trump you find yourself having to play in a 1NT contract quite often. You may be fortunate in having seven immediate tricks but, more often than not, you will need to establish one or two extra tricks to make your contract.

Both you and the defence may have 6 tricks and it may be a battle to see who can establish the seventh. This can make 1NT difficult to play and technique differs significantly from the play in 2NT or 3NT. It is often quite difficult to work out what will happen and this means the play may be relatively inexact. You may need to disguise where your strength lies or to let the defence have the lead in the hope that they will make a mistake and give you your extra trick.

You can afford to lose two more tricks than in 3NT and this means that the play is less of a rush to establish your tricks because, needing only seven tricks, your opponents' suit is less of a threat. However, with both sides striving for the seventh trick, it is important to avoid giving away that trick. Patience becomes more important as well as avoiding giving away information about your hand.

The basic planning remains the same and in particular:

- count your immediate tricks
- work out how to make up the deficit
- check your entries

Key strategies are shown opposite:

Plan

Establish your plan.

Be prepared for the defence to try to set up one suit but avoid giving them the chance to set up a second suit.

Avoid opening up "Frozen suits".

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

A frozen suit is one where there is a medium honour in each hand.

Whichever side opens up the suit above they will give away a trick.

If the initial lead in this suit is from the north or south hand N / S will win 2 tricks and E / W will win 2 tricks.

If the initial lead is from east or west N / S will win 3 tricks and E / W will win 1 trick.

It is easy for declarer to diagnose a frozen suit but less easy for the defence.

Do not rush to open up this type of suit yourself but give the defence plenty of scope to do so.

Another example.

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

Give The Defence The Tricks They Are Entitled To

Providing it does not give away the contract, note what tricks the defence should have, let them have these and, in so doing, you allow them scope to open up suits for you.

Be Patient

See the note above about frozen suits.

You may also need to take a finesse.

As usual, don't rush to do so.

Give your opponents plenty of scope to lead the suit and take the finesse for you.

Recognise where your opponents' tricks lie and let them have these.

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

On the likely heart lead declarer has 6 immediate tricks and needs one more.

There may be a temptation to try for a 3-3 break in either black suit.

However, look at the diamond suit.

The defence are entitled to 3 tricks in diamonds but, after they have taken these, the ♦9 is declarer's seventh trick.

Count Your Losers

Playing in 3NT your preoccupation lies with establishing 9 tricks.

When playing in 1NT you may find yourself seeking tricks from slim chances – 3-3 breaks and finesses.

Maintain awareness of how many losers you may have if your line of play fails.

Cards Missing	Division	%	Chances
2	1 – 1	52	1 in 2
	2 – 0	48	1 in 2
3	2 – 1	78	4 in 5
	3 – 0	22	1 in 5
4	3 – 1	50	1 in 2
	2 – 2	40	4 in 10
	4 – 0	10	1 in 10
5	3 – 2	68	2 in 3
	4 – 1	28	1 in 4
	5 – 0	4	1 in 20
6	4 – 2	48	1 in 2
	3 – 3	36	1 in 3
	5 – 1	15	1 in 6
	6 – 0	1.5	1 in 100
7	4 – 3	62	2 in 3
	5 – 2	31	1 in 3
	6 – 1	7	1 in 15
	7 – 0	0.5	1 in 200
8	5 – 3	47	1 in 2
	4 – 4	33	1 in 3
	6 – 2	17	1 in 6
	7 – 1	3	3 in 100
	8 – 0	0.2	1 in 500

You will notice:

Missing an odd number of cards you can expect them to split as evenly as possible between your two opponents' hands.

Missing an even number of cards you should not expect them to split evenly.

So:

An odd number of cards will split evenly

An even number of cards will split oddly

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