

Lesson Summary for U3ABD20: Opening Leads

Welcome!

To help clarify some points in this week's lessons, we're giving you this Lesson Summary. It describes how to choose (and interpret) an Opening Lead against a NT contract or a Suit contract, and some additional hints on playing in Defence.

I hope it helps!

-Ed

Recap

In previous modules you learned lots about bidding and making contracts as Declarer. This week's module is all about playing in Defence, where your aim is to defeat the contract. In most cases, you *could* defeat the contract, with good Defence. Much more fun!

This Week's Lessons

In this week's module, you learned about:

- Choosing the opening lead against a NT contract
- Choosing the opening lead against a Suit contract

And how to interpret your Partner's opening lead.

There's a lot more to playing in Defence of course, but the right opening lead is often the key to defeating the contract, so it's a great place to start. Literally.

I will however provide SOME additional guidance here on how to play in Defence, so the third section is:

- Playing in Defence

You'll see good examples of Defence techniques scattered throughout the commentaries for the individual hands. Please read them and try to follow the (sometimes tortuous!) logic; it won't all stick or make sense the first time, but should get you thinking along the right lines to defeating contracts and annoying the heck out of Declarer!

Leading against a NT Contract

A NT contract is usually a race between Declarer and Defence setting up their long suits.

Your aim with the opening lead is to:

- Start setting up tricks for the Defence
- Avoid helping Declarer
- Give Partner helpful information about your hand

Leading against a NT contract is different to leading against a Suit contract. There are two main steps:

1. Choose the right suit
2. Choose the right card in that suit

Step 1: Which suit?

1. If Partner has bid a suit, lead Partner's suit. You can skip the rest of this section!
2. If the opposition has bid suits, you should choose your best suit they have NOT bid
3. If no-one has bid a suit, you should choose your best suit (any suit)

Choosing your best suit:

1. If you have a long (4+) suit with an Honour (A, K, Q, J or 10), lead that suit
2. If you do not have a long suit with an Honour:

- a. You can lead a long suit without an Honour, hoping partner can help establish your suit. This only works if you have entries to get back the lead once your suit has been set up
- b. You can lead a 3+ suit without an Honour - it's safe (unlikely to help Declarer) but passive, less likely to set up tricks
- c. You can lead a 3-card suit with an Honour - this is riskier but more active, more likely to set up tricks
- d. Don't lead from a 1-card or 2-card suit unless it's Partner's suit
- e. Consider leading a short suit, hoping to find partner's long suit!

Step 2: Which card?

Once you've chosen the right suit, the right card is relatively easy, as there are fixed rules for this. These are designed to reduce the risk of giving away a trick and help your Partner work out which cards you have in that suit. Magic?

Remember that the TEN is considered an Honour when choosing a lead.

In decreasing order of "like"

1. Lead the top of a **Perfect Sequence** (3 touching honours).
For example: **K Q J x** or **Q J T x**
2. Lead the top of a **Near Sequence** (two touching Honours, a single gap, and the next card down).
For example: **K Q T x** or **J T 8 x**
3. Lead the top of the touching cards in an **Internal Sequence** (an Honour, a single or double gap, and two touching Honours).
For example: **A J T x** or **K J T x**.
4. Lead from a long (4+) suit:
 - a. If it's headed by an Honour, lead the fourth highest card.
For example: **A T 6 4** or **T 8 6 4 3**
 - b. If it's NOT headed by an Honour, lead the second highest card.
For example: **9 8 6 5** or **8 6 5 3 2**
5. Lead from a 3-card suit:
 - a. If the suit includes an Honour, lead the lowest card
For example: **K 8 6** or **Q 9 3**
 - b. If the suit does NOT include an Honour, lead the middle card (starting the MUD signal):
For example: **8 6 4** or **9 8 7**
6. Lead the higher card from a Doubleton (starting the High-Low signal). ONLY if Partner has bid that suit:
For example: **8 4** or **3 2**
7. Lead a Singleton ONLY if Partner has bid that suit

Interpreting Partner's opening lead

Remember that the TEN is considered an Honour when choosing a lead.

There may be exceptions depending on the exact auction but in general against a No Trump contract:

1. If Partner leads an Honour they have the card below it and don't have the card above it
2. If Partner leads a low card they probably an Honour in that suit
3. If Partner leads a high card (not an Honour) they probably don't have an Honour in that suit

We call cards that aren't Honours (2-9) SPOT CARDS. So how do you tell if a spot card is LOW or HIGH, so we can correctly interpret Partner's lead? Remember that it's the rank within Partner's hand that determines whether it's high or low, whether it's fourth highest or second highest - so a middle value card like a 6 or 7 is hard to classify.

Looking at the other cards in that suit in your hand and in Dummy will often help you decide - or you may need to remember the card and wait for more information to work it out.

But even without that, some spot cards are easy to understand:

- A 2 can't have been lead from a suit with no Honour and can't be top of a doubleton - it can't be second highest from four or the middle card of three, or the higher card from a Doubleton.
- A 9 can't be second highest from a suit with no Honours because all the cards above it are Honours (AKQJT)

If you think your Partner has led fourth highest, apply the **RULE OF 11**. Simply take the value of their lead from 11, and that's the number of higher cards outside Partner's hand. By checking your hand and Dummy, you can work out how many higher cards Declarer has and - quite often - figure out exactly what Partner has.

Leading against a Suit Contract

Your priority against a Suit contract is usually to set up and make top tricks before Declarer sets up a long suit to discard their losers on. You may also have a chance to ruff or even cross-ruff in Defence. It's rare that you will be able to set up a long suit, as Declarer has trumps!

Which suit?

1. If you have enough top tricks to defeat the contract, cash them in! This means Aces and Kings and maybe Queens. It's that simple, but doesn't happen often.
2. If you have AK in any suit, it's usually a good idea to lead the Ace; this lets you see Dummy, shows Partner you have the King, and is unlikely to lose a trick
3. If you have a singleton or doubleton, you can lead from that suit to try to get a ruff
4. If you have sequence of high cards, lead that
5. If Partner has bid, lead their suit
6. Don't bother trying to set up a long suit!
7. Try not to lead a suit that Declarer has bid
8. Try not to lead a suit that Dummy has bid
9. Sometimes, you just need to make a safe lead that doesn't give away a trick - often a trump

It's better to lead through strength (in Dummy) than lead up to it (in Declarer's hand).

Which card?

OK, you've decided which suit to lead, but which card? Here are some more simple rules, in descending order of priority:

1. If you have AK in a suit, lead the Ace - this tells Partner you have the King
2. If you have a singleton, lead it to try to get a ruff
3. If you have a doubleton, lead the higher card to try to get a ruff; this is the start of the high-low signal.
4. If leading from a sequence of 3 or more high cards (Ace - Ten), lead the highest one - even if there's a 1-card gap in the sequence. For example: lead the K from KQJx or KJTx
5. If leading from a sequence of 3 or more high cards with a 2-card gap, lead the highest touching card, the one below the gap. For example: lead the T from KT9x. (This is called an Internal Sequence.)
6. If leading a long suit that includes an Honour, lead your fourth highest card. If your suit does not include an Honour, lead your second-highest card. This lead (fourth highest from a long suit) is much less useful in a Suit contract.
7. If leading from 3 small cards, lead the middle one; this is the start of the MUD signal
8. If leading Partner's suit, lead your highest card to help them set up their suit and unblock

Some leads just make sense tactically, while other leads are signals, designed to give Partner information.

Notice that it's generally a bad idea to lead away from Honours, in a Suit contract, it can give away a trick! You want to use them to beat Declarer's Honours. This is very unlike NT play!

Playing in Defence

Defence is a big part of playing Bridge! Here are a few tips to get you started.

Analysing Partner's lead

Why did Partner lead that suit, that card - and not some other suit or card? It might be obvious, but sometimes a bit of thought will help you spot your Partner's plan and help you support it.

The simplest example of this is the opening lead against a NT contract: this will usually be from their longest suit, and should be fourth highest (if they have an Honour) or second highest (if they don't) - decide which and you may be able to work out which Honour they have. You usually play high to help flush out the Declarer's stops in this suit - and lead it back to Partner when you get a chance.

Simple Signals

WARNING: Signals are visible to both Partner AND Declarer, so may help the Defence or hinder it, and are often unclear.

Fourth highest: this is a convention that you lead your fourth highest card from a long suit if your suit includes an Honour. This will sometimes allow Partner to calculate which Honour you hold, by counting up their own cards and the cards they can see in Dummy. It will also indicate that you have an Honour in that suit. This doesn't always work and it isn't always obvious that you have lead fourth highest; it might be the middle card from three (MUD) or even the top card from a doubleton (high-low signal).

Fourth highest: the second part of this convention is that you lead your second highest card from a long suit if you don't have an Honour in it. This can tell Partner that you haven't got an Honour, and reduce the risk of giving away a trick - but it's quite hard to spot this signal.

High-low (or petering): this is a simple convention where you lead or play the top card from a Doubleton first, so that on the next round, when you play a lower card, Partner knows you had two. This is useful if Partner needs to count cards in a suit (typically in No Trumps) or in a Suit contract when you want Partner to lead the suit again to give you a ruff. This works fairly well as long as the higher card isn't an Honour; you don't usually lead an unsupported (say Q from Qx) as it's likely to give away a trick - and you might well play a high card third in hand, you cover a card from Dummy.

MUD: this is a simple convention where, if you have three small cards (not Honours) you play the middle one, then the upper one, and then the lower (down) one; M-U-D. This is useful if Partner needs to count the cards in a suit (typically in No Trumps) but isn't always sensible or possible.

Encouraging and discouraging: this is a simple convention where the size of the card you play when following a suit indicates whether you do or do not like a suit. Play a high card (7-9) when following if you like a suit; play a low card (2-6) if you don't like a suit. This may help Partner choose whether to continue playing a suit, but isn't always available or sensible e.g. you may not have a spare high card.

Suit preference signals: there are several conventions where the card you play when following or discarding indicates which suit you want Partner to lead, but we suggest you ignore these for now!

Finessing against Dummy

If you can see a low Honour in Dummy, sometimes it makes sense to hold on to your higher Honour rather than playing it immediately, waiting so you can play your higher Honour when Declarer plays Dummy's Honour. This is quite hard to judge, but you'll see some mentions of it in the commentary.