

Lesson Summary for U3ABDa13: Plan the Play

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Welcome!

To help clarify some points in this week's lessons, we're giving you this Lesson Summary. It describes how to come up with a plan to make your contract when you're Declarer, plus some additional hints on playing the hand.

-Ed

Bidding Principles

Weekly summary

A VERY brief overview of each week so far:

1. Open a 12-14 point balanced hand with 1NT. Respond according to your points if you don't have a long (5+) major
2. Respond to partner's 1NT opening bid if you have a long major by using a Red Suit Transfer, then rebid according to your length and strength
3. Open a 12-19 point unbalanced hand with one of your longest suit: 1C, 1D, 1H or 1S. Respond to partner's bid according to your points and shape: support a major if you have 4+, bid your own suit or 1NT or pass
4. Open a 15-19 point balanced hand with one of a suit, planning to rebid 1NT (15-16 points), 2NT (17-18 points) or 3NT (19 points). But if partner raises your suit or bids a suit of their own and there's a suit fit you may change your plan – especially if it's a major suit
5. Open a 12-19 point unbalanced hand with one of your longest suit:
 With a 6-card suit, plan to bid it again (twice).
 With a 5-card suit, plan to bid your second (4+) suit next **if you can**.
 With 12-15 points, your second bid should not be a jump or reverse.
 With 16-19 points, your second bid should be a jump or reverse.
 I say **plan** because partner might pass, or raise your first suit, or bid your second suit, or bid NT giving a point count, or change suit with a jump showing length and strength.
6. When partner opens one of a suit and rebids a second suit without jumping or reversing (showing 12-15 points), you have 4 main options:
 ONE: With an 8-card fit in either suit: raise that suit
 TWO: With no fit, but stops in the unbid suits: bid NT
 THREE: With no fit or stops, but your own 6-card suit: bid your suit again
 FOUR: With no fit, stops or 6-card suit, make a preference bid: choose the better fit
 Choose the level of your response (pass, single raise, jump raise or game) by adding up your total points, assuming partner has the minimum 12
7. When partner opens 1NT and you have a 4-card major (or two) and 11+ HCP, respond 2C (Stayman) to ask them to bid their 4-card major, if they have one; a 2D response says they don't. The, with a 4:4 fit, bid a Game Invitation or Game, depending on total points - assuming partner has 12. With no fit, bid 2NT or 3NT based on total points - assuming partner has 12.
8. Plan The Play - nothing about bidding this week!

Planning the Play

In previous modules you learned lots about bidding and making contracts as Declarer. This week's module pulls that together and adds more details of how to plan your contract, once the Opening Lead has been made and you can see Dummy. Don't rush into battle: polish your armour, sharpen your weapons, check the weather. You need a PLAN!

This Week's Lessons

In this week's module, you learned about:

- Planning the play as Declarer in a NT contract
- Planning the play as Declarer in a Suit contract

How to create a plan, implement your plan, and adapt your plan if necessary.

This is a long document, but please don't be put off; I have given lots of examples and poked around in some dark corners, to try to answer all the questions you might have. Don't expect to absorb everything now, you can come back later.

You'll see good examples of Declarer 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 make more contracts and frustrate more opponents!

We will concentrate for now on coming up with a plan to make your contract, as you should. Later on you can start trying to make overtricks, but that's just icing on the cake. Cake first, icing later.

Advanced topics

Anything that's green (like this section) is an advanced topic that you can ignore for now, unless you're feeling brave!

Why plan the play?

The main purpose of planning the play is to AVOID MISTAKES, to make the tricks you OUGHT to make. It won't help if you are in a bad or impossible contract, although it might on occasion show you how bad it is, and encourage you to take the non-obvious risky path that may - potentially - lead to a surprise victory. If not, well... you tried.

Risks

Try to spot risks that you can do something about. There are various types of risk to look out for:

- How likely is a play to fail? For example: you can either take a simple finesse (lead a low card towards AQ) - which has a 50% risk of failure, or you can play for the drop which works if 5 cards split 3:2 - which has a 32% chance of failure. Choose the option that's more likely to succeed: play for the drop.
- How dangerous is a play? For example: you have to take a finesse, but can take it in either direction (AJx in one hand, KTx in the other). If the finesse fails, an opponent will get the lead, so choose the finesse that puts the less dangerous opponent on lead if it fails.
- Can you avoid a risk entirely? For example: rather than take a finesse through AQ with a 50% chance of winning, can you get an opponent to lead towards your AQ, for a 100% chance of winning? Be patient.
- Develop good, risk-averse habits! In a suit contract draw trumps ASAP unless you have a good reason not to. In a NT contract set up your long suit ASAP, while you have stops in the other suits. Don't lead an unsupported Honour, lead towards it. Don't expect every finesse to make! Lose the lead when it suits you.
- Ignore small risks. If trumps split 6:0, you're in trouble. While there might be a way to cope with that, a 6:0 is very rare (less than 5%). Focus on the likely, not the unlikely.

Identify the risks that might defeat your contract, risks that you can do something about, to come up with a less risky plan.

Planning - an Overview

Some hands are easy to plan, you can immediately see what to do. Some hands aren't!

NT contracts are usually easier to plan than Suit contracts, because you don't have to worry about (and use) trumps. Planning Suit contracts often takes a bit longer and has to be a bit more flexible.

You can't always create a detailed plan for all possibilities from the opening lead; start simple. Don't disappear down the rabbit hole. (I do that so often I should change my name to *Alice*.)

It's easier to plan a hand where you are strong, because the weaker you are, the less you control and the more you will lose the lead, and each time you lose the lead your opponents are in control and you don't know what they will do next! So planning a 1-level contract is often the hardest.

And finally: You can't plan too well until you are in control, until you have the lead. So if you see the opening lead and realise that you aren't going to take this first trick - your opponents will remain in control and you don't know what they will do next. Delay most of your planning until you DO get the lead. But make sure you play sensibly to that first trick or two too, even though you can't win them! Don't panic, despair, lose interest or sulk...

Planning a NT Contract

Four simple steps!

Step 1: Count your top winners

In a NT contract, count your top winners. A TOP WINNER is a card that will make a trick without losing the lead, once you have the lead. For example, the following two hands have 7 top winners between them:

North: AKxx Kxx Jxx Qxx

South: xxx AQx AKx Kxx

The AK, AKQ, and AK are your top winners. If you don't have the Ace in a suit, you can't count the King, Queen or Jack in that suit as a top winner; they might well make tricks eventually (through promotion) but they aren't top winners.

Notice that you can't control the play until you have the lead, you can only react to (and hopefully defeat) the cards played by your opponents. You will usually try to get the lead as soon as you can, so you can implement your plan.

If you have enough top winners to make your contract, you don't need to do anything fancy, you don't need to find extra tricks and can skip STEP TWO and go straight to STEP THREE.

Usually, you will need some extra tricks and must proceed to STEP TWO.

Step 2: Find extra tricks

Once you've counted your top winners, you will usually find you need some more to make your contract. You need to find some EXTRA TRICKS. In a NT contract, you will usually find extra tricks by:

- Promoting high cards
- Establishing a long suit
- Finessing high cards

Promoting high cards

You can PROMOTE your high cards by forcing your opponents to play their higher cards. Promotion is a very reliable way of finding extra tricks. For example:

- You have KQJ in a suit. You can promote the Queen and Jack by leading the King; when an opponent plays their Ace on your King, it will lose the trick and lead (boo) but promote your Queen and Jack to winners - once you get the lead back. This is sometimes referred to as KNOCKING OUT the Ace. So you can plan to win two extra tricks with KQJ by promotion. Not three!

If your opponent HOLDS UP their Ace - doesn't play it on your King - you win the trick and can lead the Queen. If they play the Ace now, your Jack is promoted to a winner, once you get the lead again. If they hold up their Ace a second time, you have now won your two extra tricks - no need to lead the Jack, indeed it would probably be a bad idea.

Your opponents may help you out by leading their high cards, but you can't rely on it. Assume you will have to force them out. So if you have KQJx in a suit, you could make 3 tricks if your opponent leads the Ace, but must assume you will have to force it out by leading your Honours, so assume you will make TWO extra tricks, not three.

Establishing a long suit

You can ESTABLISH low cards in a long suit even if you don't have many (or all) Honours by playing the suit several times, until the opponents have none left. Establishing a long suit is useful, but is less reliable than promotion, as the suit may split so badly that you never get rid of the opponents' cards. You may need to count the suit and try something else if your plan starts to go wrong.

For example:

- You have AKQ2 in hand and 543 in Dummy, so the opponents have six cards. If you lead the A, K and Q and everybody follows all three times, 12 cards have been played and your 2 has been established as a winner, because the suit split 3-3
- You have AK62 in hand and 543 in Dummy, so the opponents have six cards. If you lead the A and K and everybody follows both times, 8 cards have been played and you have 3 left. You could lead the 6 hoping that the suit is split 3-3 so once you have lost the trick, your 2 will be established as a winner - but if the suit splits 4-2, your opponent wins the two tricks and your 2 is worthless.

Finessing high cards

A FINESSE is a simple technique where you lead towards a high card hoping that the cards that can beat it are before it rather than after it! A simple finesse works 50% of the time, so one finesse is worth HALF a trick when you're planning. If you need an extra trick from finessing, assume you will need TWO finesses to make that one extra trick. Not quite true!

Finessing odds are simple mathematics, but **GUARANTEE NOTHING**. They help though:

Finesses	Make one trick?	Make two tricks?	Make three tricks?
One	50%	0%	0%
Two	75%	25%	0%
Three	87.5%	75%	12.5%

Simple summary: **don't rely on finesses!**

Your opponents can see Dummy but can only guess what's in your own hand. Keep them guessing! So if, for example, you lead a Queen from your (hidden) hand towards an Ace in Dummy, they don't know if you are leading from top of a sequence (QJT) or bluffing (unless they hold some of those "hidden" cards). If you lead a low card from Dummy towards your (hidden) hand, they don't know if you've got a finessing holding like AQ or Kx.

Here are a few examples.

A simple finesse:

Suit: Spades
North: Kx
East:
South: xxx
West

Declarer leads a low Spade from South towards the Kx in the North hand, hoping that the missing Ace is in West's hand. If West plays low they play the King. If they're right, the King makes a trick, the finesse has worked; if they're wrong, East plays their Ace on the King and they lose the trick - and the lead. Finesses like this work 50% of the time.

Leading away from the K is not a finesse and is hardly ever a good idea.

A typical finesse:

Suit: Spades
North: AQxx
East:
South: xxx
West

Declarer leads a low Spade from South towards the AQ in the North hand, hoping that the missing King is in West's hand. If West plays low, they play the Queen. If they're right, the Queen makes a trick, the finesse has worked; if they're wrong, East plays their King on the Queen and they lose the trick - and the lead. Finesses like this work 50% of the time.

Leading away from the AQ is not a finesse and is hardly ever a good idea.

Another typical finesse:

Suit: Spades
North: KJxx
East:
South: xxx
West

Declarer leads a low Spade from South towards the KJ in the North hand, hoping that the missing Spade honours (A&Q) are in West's hand. If West plays the Ace, this promotes Declarer's King; if West plays the Queen, Declarer covers it with the King, to either make the trick or promote their Jack. But if West plays low, Declarer might play the Jack or the King; it's a guessing game, as West might have the Ace, or the Queen, or both and duck. If East has both honours, Declarer will always lose both tricks. Finesses like this work less often, as you're doing more hoping and guessing!

A split finesse:

Suit: Spades
North: Axxx
East:
South: QJTxx
West

Declarer leads the Queen, Jack or Ten of Spades towards the Ace in the North hand, hoping that the missing King of Spades is in West's hand, and DUCKS (plays a low card) unless West plays the King. If they're right, the Queen makes a trick, the finesse has worked; if they're wrong, East plays their King on the Queen and you lose the trick - and the lead. Finesses like this work 50% of the time.

If West has the King, they will usually play it on the Queen, to stop Declarer getting a cheap trick. However, they might not for several different reasons:

- They didn't notice it was a finesse
- They suspect (or know) Declarer is leading from the top a sequence, so it's pointless
- They want to call Declarer's bluff, see if they are going through with the finesse
- They want to preserve an entry or mess up your entries

When you lead from a sequence like this, if the finesse succeeds, you can repeat it, by leading the Jack and then the Ten.

Note that you need a 3-card sequence (possibly split across both hands) for this to work reliably. If you lead from QJxx, say, and West play the King on your Queen (as they should), you may end up promoting the opponent's Ten.

Another split finesse

Suit: Spades
North: AJxx
East:
South: QTxx
West

This operates much the same, even though the sequence is split across the two hands. Declarer leads the Queen from the South hand, and then the Ten, and then a low Spade towards the Jack in North's hand, and finally the Ace

Improving your odds

Finessing odds are typically quite bad, 50% or less, but you can improve them by working out what cards the opponents have, from the bidding, counting points, watching what they lead and discard. So it's often a good idea to delay finessing until you have a better idea of what they have. For example:

- If an opponent doesn't follow suit, they can't have that missing Honour

- If an opponent has been discarding a suit, they are less likely to have high cards in it
- If an opponent didn't open but has played 9 points, they are very unlikely to have that missing Ace or King
- An opponent might even make a friendly lead - giving you a risk-free finesse (see *Bad finesses*, below)

Step 3: Check for risks

If you can make enough tricks for your contract by playing top winners (Step 1) and winning extra tricks (Step 2), all you need to worry about is WHAT CAN GO WRONG to defeat you - how likely is that to happen, and can you stop that happening, or at least reduce the risk it will happen?

You can make a plan to reduce the risk of things going wrong, and reduce the impact of things going wrong, but stuff happens.

You might get stuck in the wrong hand

When you have top winners in both hands, be careful or you may get stuck in the wrong hand, unable to cash the winners in the other hand. This can be avoided by following a few simple rules.

RULE ONE: Play the winners from the SHORT hand first. For example:

North: K5
South: AQJ3

Assuming neither hand has other entries, you have 4 top winners here, but only if you play them in the correct order. Play the King from North's hand, then the five to the AQJ. If you play the Ace, Queen or Jack from South's hand first, you can only make 2 or 3 tricks.

If both hands have entries, the order is less important. But another name for an entry is a STOP. Don't waste them!

RULE TWO: Preserve your key entries. For example:

Suit: Spades Hearts
North: AK Axx
South: QJ53 Kxx

You can make all four top tricks in Spades, but only if you can get to them. Assuming the opening lead is the Queen of Hearts, make sure you play the Ace from North's hand, not the King from South's hand, to PRESERVE South's King as an entry. Next, play the Ace and King of Spades to UNBLOCK the suit, then play a low Heart to South's King (the entry you preserved on the first trick), then play the Queen and Jack of Spades from South. Six tricks are better than four.

RULE THREE: You can OVERTAKE a high card (play a winner on a winner) to switch hands. This looks wasteful but may be your only option. For example:

Suit: Spades
North: AKJ
South: QT7653

If South has no other entries, to make all six tricks in Spades, play the Ace, King, and Jack from North - and play South's Queen on the Jack; overtake it. This is safe, because the opponents only have 4 Spades and you have the top 5 Spades, so can afford to "waste" one of them.

Sometimes it's not quite that clear-cut! You may have to guess how a suit is going to split to decide if you should overtake. For example:

Suit: Spades
North: AQ
South: KT76532

If South has no other entries, you MIGHT be able to make all seven tricks in Spades by overtaking the Queen. You have nine Spades, your opponents have four. Assuming everybody plays low to the Ace on the first round, you lead the Queen and East plays low, there is just one Spade left, the Jack, but who has it? The original split could be 2-2, or 1-3. Should you overtake? If West has it, you make 7 tricks straight off; if East has it, you make just 2 tricks, and set up a trick for East. 4 cards will more often split 3-1 than 2-2 (see *Bad Splits*), but I'd try it. Seven tricks is a lot better than two.

Of course if South has an entry, the correct play is to play low on the Queen, then use that entry to get to South and win all seven Spades.

A suit might split badly

A long suit may split badly, so instead of establishing winners for yourself, you establish winners for your opponents. Count the cards as they are played and you can often tell if you're OK, but not always. If only you could tell how many cards each opponent has in a suit...

While there isn't a rule that tells you for certain, there are three simple rules that help:

RULE ONE: An odd number of cards will more often split evenly. So if you're missing 5 cards, assume they split 3-2 rather than 4-1. If you're missing 3 cards, they are more likely to split 2-1 than 3-0.

RULE TWO: An even number of cards will more often split oddly. So if you're missing 4 cards, assume they split 3-1 rather than 2-2. (2 cards are an exception, slightly more likely to split 2-0 than 1-1 despite being even, but there's not much in it.)

RULE THREE: 4-0 and 5-0 splits are quite rare.

Good to know. A bit better than a guess.

Finesses might fail

Finesses are unreliable, will fail 50% of the time. Losing a finesse not only loses a trick, but loses the lead to your opponents, so if you must take a finesse, **REDUCE THE RISK** by taking it early on, while you still have high cards to get control back again.

The ideal finesse is one that works 100% of the time - when an opponent leads into it. For example:

Suit: Spades
North: AQxx
East:
South: xxx
West

If you can get East to lead a Spade, you get what is known as a **FREE FINESSE**. You are bound to make both the Ace and Queen, no matter who has the King of Spades.

You can sometimes engineer this, but it's a bit complicated (via techniques like throw-ins) so let's just hope, for now.

If you have a choice of **FINESSING DIRECTION**, choose the direction that's **LESS RISKY**, that puts the less dangerous opponent on lead if it fails. For example:

Suit: Spades
North: AJxx
South: KT9x

You could finesse against the Queen in either direction, so without any clues from the bidding or play so far, how do you choose? Assuming that the finesse fails, which opponent would you rather have the lead? Or which opponent would you rather did NOT have the lead?

Let's assume that East has set up a long Heart suit but West has no Hearts left (a typical scenario). You **REALLY** do not want East to get the lead, so you assume that they have the Queen and finesse against them. If you're right, you make 3 or 4 tricks and East does not get to lead their long suit. If West has the Queen, they take that trick but can't lead a Heart to partner's long suit. So the way to play this is:

1. Play the Ace from North; the Queen might be a singleton in either hand and drop
2. Play the Jack from North and play low from South unless East covers it with the Queen
3. Play a low Spade from North and play the Ten from South unless East covers it with the Queen
4. Finally, play the King of Spades from South to make 4 tricks

However, if you don't want either opponent to get the lead (maybe West has a Heart left) then you have no choice but to **PLAY FOR THE DROP**, hoping that the Queen of Spades falls. You could just lead the Ace and King of Spades, fingers crossed - but you can improve your odds slightly by pretending you're taking a finesse:

1. Play the Ace from North; the Queen might be a singleton in either hand and drop
2. Play the Jack from North, hoping to bluff East into covering it (they don't know you are playing for the drop). Whatever they play, play your King
3. If the Queen drops, you've got 4 tricks in Spades and still have the lead. If it doesn't, well, you've got your health...

Step 4: Put it all together

Once you have the elements of your plan, you just need to put them together in the right order to make your plan - and implement it. Note that the order in which I've described them (Step 1, Step 2, Step 3) is **NOT** the order in which you implement them in your plan!

In general, you take your necessary risks early on, while you still have high cards to get the lead back if you lose it.

DO NOT play all your top tricks first and then hope your finesse will work, for example; if the finesse fails and you lose the lead, your opponents will - quite often - play their long suit that you have so kindly established for them, taking you down.

So, let's say you are in 3NT, the opening lead is the Queen of Spades, and you have:

- Six top tricks (Spades: AK, Hearts: A, Diamonds: AKQ)
- A long Club suit (Clubs: KQJT) to establish. It's just missing the Ace, so should yield 3 tricks
- A finesse (the Q of Hearts) that might (50% chance) yield an extra trick

You need nine tricks. Risky bits first. Is there any point taking the finesse? Not really, it can only give you one extra trick, and 6+1 is not nine. So, attack that long Club suit immediately, while you still have high cards in the other suits. Knock out that Ace.

So the plan is:

1. Take the first trick with the Ace of Spades
2. Lead Clubs until you knock out the Ace
3. Take the next trick with one of top winners
4. Play the remaining Club winners
5. Play the remaining top tricks to make the contract
6. Now you can lead towards the Queen of Hearts, hoping the right opponent has the King, so you can make an overtrick. That's safe now that the contract is in the bag!

What could go wrong with this plan? Just one weakness: If the hand with the KQJT of Clubs (say, North) has no entries by the time it's established, and South has just 3 Clubs, if the opponent with the Ace ducks and plays it on the third round, you can't get back to play the remaining winning Club; you "lose" a winner. If South only has 2 Clubs, you can "lose" two winners. Is there anything you can do about this?

- Firstly, try to preserve any entries that North has.
- Secondly, lead the King rather than the Ten, as players are more likely to put their Ace on a King than a Ten!
- Hold onto your stranded Club winners and hope your opponents (eventually) lead a Club!

Planning a Suit Contract

Five simple steps! Planning a suit contract is similar to planning a NT contract, but there are some extra steps.

Step 1: Count your top winners and trump winners

In a suit contract:

- First: Count your top winners just like in NT, but ignore the winners in your trump suit for now.
- Second: Count your certain winners in your trump suit. These don't have to be top winners, as trumps have a kind of magic, they cannot be denied. For example: in a suit contract, if you have the last trump it will ALWAYS make a trick; in a NT contract the last card in a suit will only make a trick if you can lead it! So, for example: if you have AKJTx, you have 3 trump winners; you might make more, but never make less.
- Third: Add these two counts together. If that's enough to make your contract, you don't need to do anything fancy, don't need extra tricks, and can skip STEP TWO; go straight to STEP THREE.

Usually, you will need some extra tricks and must proceed to STEP TWO.

Step 2: Find extra tricks

In a suit contract, you can use the same three techniques to take extra tricks as in a NT contract, but now there are TRUMPS that you can use to make extra tricks - but your opponents have trumps too. So there's an extra weapon for you to use - and an extra risk to consider.

Promoting high cards

In a suit contract you can promote high cards to winners by forcing out higher cards held by your opponents, just as in a NT contract - but run the risk of those promoted cards being trumped by your opponents. So, in general, you draw trumps FIRST, before promoting high cards, to stop this happening. See **Step 3: Draw Trumps** for details.

Establishing a long suit

In a suit contract you can establish the low cards in a long suit by forcing out all the cards in that suit held by your opponents, just as in a NT contract, but if your opponents have any trumps, they will trump those established winners - with glee! So, in general, you draw trumps FIRST, before establishing a long suit, to stop this happening. See **Step 3: Draw Trumps** for details.

Finessing high cards

In a suit contract you can finesse high cards to make extra tricks just like in a NT contract, but run an increasing risk of being trumped as you play 1, 2, or 3 rounds of a suit. So, in general, you draw trumps FIRST, before taking finesses, to stop this happening. See **Step 3: Draw Trumps** for details.

Ruffing from the short hand

Trumps are powerful, will beat any other card (apart from a higher trump). If conditions are right, you can make extra tricks by using them - carefully.

The simplest way to use trumps is to lead them like any other suit, taking top tricks, promoting and finessing, to remove the trumps from your opponents' hands so they can't trump your winners in the other suits. This is called DRAWING TRUMPS. You will usually draw trumps as soon as you can - but not always. See **Step 3: Draw Trumps**.

Anyway, for now, let's assume you're in a 4S contract. You have played two rounds of trumps (leading the Ace and King), the opponents have none left, and you are Declarer sitting South, with these hands:

Suit:	Spades	Hearts	Diamonds	Clubs
North:	xx	x	xxxxx	xxx
East:				
South:	QJx	Axx		AKxx
West:				

You could continue leading trumps, then cash your top tricks to make 5 Spade tricks (AKQJx), the Ace of Hearts and the Ace and King of Clubs: eight tricks. But you need two more. Instead of playing trumps, you can make them ruffing the two losing Hearts with Dummy's little Spades. The three Spades in South's hand will still make, but now you're making the two Spades in North's hand separately.

You might be tempted to ruff North's little Diamonds with South's three Spades. That's OK but it doesn't add any extra tricks. In general, ruffing from the hand with fewer trumps will ADD extra tricks - leave the trumps in the longer hand, they will always make. RUFF FROM THE SHORT HAND i.e. the hand with fewer trumps.

Usually, Declarer's hand has more trumps so Dummy is the short hand, but if both hands have the same number, you can choose either as the short hand and use it to ruff - and draw trumps from the other hand once that's done.

Step 3: Draw trumps

Trumps are powerful, a kind of super-powered nuclear hand grenade. So you don't want anybody else to have them, they might trump your winners and ruin your day. So your first step in a suit contract, once you get the lead, is USUALLY to draw all of the opponents' trumps, leaving you with the last remaining ones. You usually have more trumps than your opponents; drawing trumps is tricky if you don't.

When to draw trumps

The simple answer is: draw trumps as soon as possible, as soon as you get the lead. But you might need to delay drawing some or all of the trumps - see *When to delay drawing trumps*.

How many trumps should you draw?

Again, there's a simple answer: draw ALL the opponents' trumps, don't leave them with any nasty surprises.

But the better answer is to draw as many trumps as you can afford. Sometimes, you can't draw them all, and sometimes you don't want to:

- If they split very badly. If you have a 4-4 fit in trumps and they split 5-0, you literally cannot draw them all
- If they split quite badly. If you have a 4-4 fit in trumps and they split 4-1, you probably don't want to play the hand without any trumps - as a NT hand! So would usually just draw three rounds to retain some control
- If the last trump is higher than yours! You might prefer to let the opponent keep it, as it can only make one trick - why "waste" two of yours to draw it?
- If you need trumps to ruff (from the short hand, remember) but you won't have any left if you draw all the trumps first! See *When to delay drawing trumps*

When to delay drawing trumps

If you need to make extra tricks by ruffing from the short hand and you've only got a few, delay drawing trumps until you have used the trumps in the short hand to ruff. You might need to delay drawing trumps completely, or draw some of the trumps, ruff, and then draw the remaining trumps.

You might also delay drawing trumps if it will lose the lead, and the opponents could then take advantage. For example: if you have a losing card that you want to throw away on a top winner, you might do that before drawing trumps, to avoid losing that trick. For example, assuming that South is Declarer and North is Dummy, and West led the Queen of Diamonds:

Suit:	Spades	Hearts	Diamonds	Clubs
North:	AQTxx	Axxx	xx	Ax
East:				
South:	J9xx		Ax	xxxxxxx
West:				

You would take the trick in Hand with the Ace of Diamonds, but what next? Should you draw trumps by taking the Spade finesse? If it loses, East will probably lead a Diamond and you will lose TWO tricks. Better to lead a Club to Dummy's Ace, then play the Ace of Hearts so you can throw South's losing Diamond on it. You can then ruff North's second Diamond (or Heart) in hand and try the Spade finesse.

When not to draw trumps

In an extreme situation, you might not draw trumps at all. Look at this hand:

Suit:	Spades	Hearts	Diamonds	Clubs
North:	AKTx	xxxx	xxxxx	
East:				
South:	QJ9x	xxxx		xxxxx
West:				

If you play 4 rounds of Spades you will draw trumps, but you won't be able to ruff from the short hand (North) at all, so you will make just four trump tricks. Forget about drawing trumps and cross-ruff Clubs and Diamonds to make eight tricks! Assuming North is Dummy:

1. Lead a Club from your hand and ruff it in Dummy
2. Lead a Diamond from Dummy and ruff it in your hand.
3. Lead a Heart from your hand... until you run out of trumps!

Cross-ruffing like this allows you to make each trump separately, for twice the tricks. To start cross-ruffing you need:

- Voids in both hands
- Trumps in both hands - ideally high ones, so you can't be over-ruffed

Step 4: Check for risks

In addition to the risks already described for a NT contract:

- Getting stuck in the wrong hand
- Bad splits
- Bad finesses

In a suit contract you can:

- Be over-ruffed
- Run out of trumps
- Have trumps split badly

You might be over-ruffed

If you ruff a trick, you don't really want an opponent to win the trick by playing a higher trump! The most obvious way to reduce the risk of this happening is to draw trumps AS SOON AS YOU CAN - provided you have enough trumps to do that and THEN ruff the tricks that you need to. If you don't, you may have to delay drawing trumps - as described above. (See *When to delay drawing trumps*.)

You might run out of trumps

If you're relying on ruffing in the short hand to deliver extra tricks, you need to make sure you have enough trumps to do that. To avoid running out, you may have to delay drawing trumps, or only drawing some of them; see *When to delay drawing trumps*.

Even if you're not relying on ruffing to deliver extra tricks, you may need to hold on to some trumps so you can get the lead back.

Trumps might split badly

When you draw trumps, you usually hope (and expect) that they will split nicely, so you only have to play two or three rounds to draw trumps. But sometimes, inevitably, they will split badly. For example: if you have 4 trumps in each hand, you're missing 5 trumps. If they split 3-2 or 4-1 you can draw all the trumps, but if they split 5-0 you can't!

If the trumps do split badly, there's very little you can do about it - but to reduce the impact, attempt to draw trumps as soon as possible, so you still have top winners in the other suits to get the lead back even if you can't trump in.

Step 5: Put it all together

Once you have the elements of your plan, you just need to put them together in the right order to make your plan - and implement it. Note that the order in which I've described them (Step 1, Step 2, Step 3) is **NOT** the order in which you implement them in your plan!

In general, take necessary risks early on, while you still have high cards to get the lead back if you lose it.

DRAW TRUMPS as soon as you can, unless you need to delay, to use trumps in the short hand to deliver extra tricks.

DO NOT play all your top tricks first and then hope your finesses will work, for example. If a finesse fails you lose the lead and your opponents can play their long suit that you have so kindly established for them, taking you down.

An example plan

So, let's say you are in 4H, and the opening lead is the Queen of Spades. You have:

Suit:	Spades	Hearts	Diamonds	Clubs
North:	Axx	653	Kxx	x
East:				
South:	Kxx	AKJT2	Ax	Axx
West:				

So you can see:

- 5 top tricks outside trumps (A&K of Spades, A&K of Diamonds, A of Clubs)
- 3, 4, or 5 tricks in trumps (depending on how they split and who has the Queen)
- 2 extra tricks by ruffing Clubs from the short hand (North)
- A 50% chance of an extra trick by finessing the Queen of Hearts

Risks? The trump suit!

If you lead the Ace and King of trumps (play for the drop) and they split 3-2 or 4-1, you will make 4 trump tricks but you still need an extra trick. If the missing Queen drops, or if you take the finesse instead of leading Ace and King and it works you will make all 5 trumps and you don't need an extra trick. Should you play for the drop or finesse?

What if the trumps split 5-0? If you lead the Ace and King of trumps, you will only make 3 tricks and can't make your contract. If you take the finesse and West has the missing Q9874, you will still only make 3 trump tricks; if East has the missing Q9874, you can make 4 trump tricks, but you need to lead Hearts from Dummy 3 times - and you can't! Dummy only has 2 entries.

So... you need an extra trick or two however you play trumps, unless the Queen drops, which is not very likely.

So should you take the finesse? NO! The safer bet is to ruff Clubs twice for TWO extra tricks, as long as you aren't over-ruffed. This is unlikely, as your opponents have 9 Clubs, but you can reduce the risk of it happening, by drawing one round of trumps at the start.

So my plan is:

1. Take the first trick with the Ace of Spades in Dummy
2. Lead a low Heart to the Ace in hand to draw some trumps. If the Queen drops, you can make 5 trump tricks, so play those now, followed by your other top winners to make your contract - easy. Otherwise...
3. Lead the Ace of Clubs.
4. Lead a low Club and ruff in Dummy.
5. Lead a low Diamond to the Ace in your hand.
6. Lead another low Club and ruff in Dummy.
7. Lead a low Spade to the King in your hand.
8. Draw trumps, expecting to lose to the Queen.
9. Lead a low Diamond to the King in Dummy - and make your contract

This works even if the trumps split 5-0. The main risk is an over-ruff on the third round of Clubs.

A simpler plan, which is also pretty good:

1. Take the first trick with the Ace of Spades in Dummy
2. Draw 2 rounds of trumps, playing the Ace and King.
3. If the Queen drops... you can make all 5 trump tricks, so play those now, followed by your other top winners to make your contract - easy.
4. If the Queen does NOT drop...
 - a. Lead the Ace of Clubs.
 - b. Lead a low Club and ruff it in Dummy with their last Heart.
 - c. Lead a low Diamond to the Ace in your hand.
 - d. Lead the Jack of Hearts to flush out the Queen.
 - e. You will eventually make the King of Spades, the King of Diamonds, and another trump - and make your contract. This works as long as the trumps don't split 5-0.