

STANDARD OPENING LEADS – (WHICH CARD)

There are two main aspects to deciding the opening lead; which suit to lead, and which card in that suit. Here we shall only consider ‘which card to lead’ in a specific suit, (although some references are made to the desirability of leading a suit with specific cards). We shall not consider which suit to lead – this is a separate topic in its own right.

We shall consider so called ‘standard’ leads – which provide sound basic principles on which to base your defence. With experience, some pairs adopt alternative non-standard (but defined) leads.

Also, whilst the discussion focuses on the opening lead, in principle the same general conditions apply to any new suit lead throughout the contract (although this can be tempered with the sight of dummy and developments during the play).

The opening lead is very important – that one card can convey so much information to partner, it sets the tone for the whole contract. Look at the normal traveller – it specifically has a column for the lead. This one card can often explain the triumphs or disasters associated with the contract.

The leads against suit contracts and no-trumps are fundamentally different.

Against a suit contract it’s usually the first two rounds of a suit that are important, and consequently it’s often correct to concentrate on the quick trick taking potential of a suit – i.e. honours. Subsequent rounds are less important, since there is a high probability that they are going to be ruffed in any case.

However, against no-trumps you are trying to establish a suit; and part of this process is maintaining communications with partner, so it’s much more of a patient waiting game – less emphasis on the actual lead of an honour, more about trying to eventually benefit from the length of the suit.

Standard leads come with no guarantee that they are the ‘right’ lead. However when you’ve defended against hundreds of hands, they offer the best percentage of success.

(Unless otherwise stated, the ‘10’ should **not** be considered as an honour, unless used in an ‘internal sequence’).

Lead Against SUIT Contracts

1. From any honour sequence always lead the top honour. From an interior honour sequence lead the top of the internal honour sequence - this does include the ‘10’)

e.g **K**Qxxx
 QJxx
 AKxx
 J10xx
 KJ104
 Q1097

(but not 109xx – we are not considering the ‘10’ to be an honour)

(an exception is against a slam: with AK lead K expecting partner to give you ‘count’. You then know whether to continue the suit or switch).

2. From any four or more card honour suit lead 4th. highest, and from any three-card honour suit lead lowest (rare – this really only occurs when leading partner’s suit or an un-bid suit).

	♠ AJ54	
♠ Q863		♠ K102
	♠ 97	

As West, you lead the ♠3, and declarer plays the ♠4 from dummy. Knowing that you lead small from an honour, your partner, East, can safely play the ♠10 (the ♠K would be a wasted card).

(As a personal hate, I try to avoid leading small from a Jack. I usually try to find another suit).

3. But one golden rule of bridge – **on the opening lead never under-lead an ace against a suit contract.**

If you do under-lead an ace, this may enable declarer or dummy to make a singleton king. Also following this rule enables partner to make the correct play in the following situation:

	♠ Q74	
♠ J9652		♠ K103
	♠ A8	

Against a suit contract West leads ♠5 (a low card – implying that he has an honour). Dummy plays ♠4. ‘Knowing’ that your partner would not under-lead the ♠A, you must play ♠10. If instead you played the ♠K, you present declarer with two spade tricks instead of one.

4. Also try to avoid leading the ace without the king – try to find another suit (possible exceptions are when the opponents are in a suit slam; opponents are in 5minor having investigated 3NT and have decided against it; a singleton non-trump ace, hoping for a ruff. But even these exceptions can have their pitfalls).
5. **2nd. Highest From A Non-Honour Suit.**

From a suit **without an honour** (i.e. suits headed by the 10 or less), lead the second highest. This should subsequently be followed by the highest card **as long as it can be afforded**. (With three cards, this is sometimes known as ‘mud’ – middle, up, down).

	♥ AJ54	
♥ 8763		♥ K102
	♥ Q9	

As West, you lead the ♥7, (second highest from a suit without an honour). Your partner, East, can interpret that this is not fourth highest, and must therefore play the ♥K (the ♥10 may cost a trick particularly in a side suit – declarer makes two tricks and can then ruff the suit). On the

next play of the suit you would clarify the situation by then playing the ♥8 (this then shows that the ♥7 was not the top of a doubleton).

If your partner does make this lead, there is much less tendency for you to later return the suit – he doesn't have an honour. For this reason this particular lead is often termed a defensive lead.

6. Top Of A Doubleton

Usually you play the top of a doubleton (either honour or non-honour card), obviously followed by the lower card. Partner can then judge whether to give you a ruff against a suit contract.

Avoid leading **K**x, or **Q**x (unless this is partner's suit), but if you have to, do lead the honour. An exception is where both cards in the doubleton are touching honours eg. A**K**, or Q**J**. It is standard practise to lead the lower card, followed by the higher one. This distinguishes this lead from a 'touching honour lead' (see (1) above).

Leads Against NO-TRUMP Contracts

(we shall consider the '10' as an honour only in a J10... sequence).

7. From **any three card honour** sequence always lead the **highest** card, e.g. **K**QJ64; **Q**J1062; **J**10942.

8. From a sequence of **two honours with one card exactly two below the lowest honour**, lead the **highest** card, (sometimes referred to as a 2½ honour sequence) e.g. **K**Q1043 - the 10 is two below the Q; **Q**J97 - the 9 is two below the J; **J**1087 - the 8 is two below the 10. The idea of this is that you are hoping to 'trap' an honour in declarer's hidden hand.

	♦ A5	
♦ KQ1062		♦ 843
	♦ J97	

Here you must lead the ♦**K**. The diamond is taken and if partner gets the lead he can come through declarer's ♦J. If you had led small (fourth highest), declarer would make both the ♦A and ♦J.

- see also point (12) – unblocking play.

9. Leads From Interior Sequences

When you hold three honours with the lower two touching (including the '10'), you should lead the higher of the touching cards – i.e. the top of the 'interior' sequence. eg. K**J**1052; A**Q**J54 (arguments often arise with a suit Q109xx. I personally prefer the 10 – partner now knows that it is either this situation (top of an internal sequence), or a doubleton).

	♣ Q64	
♣ K J 1073		♣ A82
	♣ 95	

When you (West) lead the **J♣**, if declarer plays the Q♣ from dummy, partner covers and can return the suit with no loss for the defence; if declarer ducks, the defence still make all the tricks. If however you had led the fourth highest (7♣), dummy plays low and partner's ace is wasted – declarer makes one trick in the suit.

This approach is useful in defining the '10' lead – it is either from an interior sequence or from a doubleton.

- 10 . From **any other honour sequence or from a single honour, lead 4th. highest**, eg. KQ9**3**...; QJ7**6**...; AK10**8**...; K75**4**2; Q87**5**3.

Unlike the lead against a suit contract, it is now perfectly acceptable to under-lead an ace. Another reason not to lead the top honour in this situation against no-trumps is that you may 'block' the suit.

	♠ 964	
♠ KQ732		♠ A8
	♠ J105	

If you lead the ♠K the suit will be blocked (assuming you have no other side suit entry). Partner can't overtake with the ♠A – this will give a trick away.

(However against a suit contract the blockage is not as important – partner can overtake with the ♠A, return a small one, and then await the ruff).

The above situation highlights the big difference in leading against no-trumps compared to leading against a suit.

Having led 4th. highest from a 5-card suit, if you intend to play a non-honour on the next round it is important that you play the lowest card – partner will now know that you started with five.

	♠ AK3	
	♥ J7	
	♦ K7642	
	♣ K85	
♠ Q102		♠ 9864
♥ A9642		♥ K83
♦ 105		♦ 93
♣ 1072		♣ AJ63
	♠ J75	
	♥ Q105	
	♦ AQJ8	
	♣ Q94	

With South in 3NT, West leads his fourth highest heart – the ♥4. East wins the ♥K and returns the ♥8, which West correctly ducks – playing the ♥2 (confirming that he started with five). Declarer (in dummy), tries to sneak through a club, but East has the full picture. He goes up with the Ace, and confidently returns his heart – one off (if partner had only shown four hearts he would duck the club in order to probably save the overtrick).

11. 2nd. Highest From A Non-Honour Suit – same as for suit contracts.

12. Unblocking Plays (only consider when more experienced)

In situations where you hold for example AKJ10x..., or KQ10xx..., having led the honour, you need to know whether to continue the suit. In these situations lead the **King**. Partner must do one of two things to assist you in your decision:

- if he has an honour he must play it (usually the ace or the jack) , unless he sees say Jxx in dummy.
- without an honour he should give ‘count’ in the normal way (high to indicate an even number; low to indicate an odd number).

a)

♣ KQ1072	♣ 64	♣ 983
	♣ AJ5	

- partner shows an odd number by playing ♣3. If South holds up, West now knows **not** to continue the suit.

b)

♣ KQ1072	♣ 64	♣ J83
	♣ A95	

- partner must play the ♣J under King. West now knows it is safe to continue.

c)

♣ KQ1072	♣ 64	♣ A83
	♣ J95	

- partner overtakes your King with the Ace and returns the suit.

Problems (only consider when more experienced)

Above we have stated that you lead the J from J109xx, and also from KJ10xx, but playing ‘Standard Leads’ this can cause a problem.

♠ 86

♥ AQJ

♦ AKQ1074

♣ 92

♠ A752

♥ 973

♦ 8

♣ J??

♠ QJ104

♥ 10865

♦ 53

♣ A52

Against 3NT, West leads ♣J, East winning the ace. What next (remember that East cannot accurately get a count on South's hand at this stage)? If West started with ♣KJxxx, it's important to return the club. However, if West had led from ♣J10xxx the only way to probably defeat the contract is to play on spades.

East has no solution playing 'Standard Leads'. It is for precisely this situation that more experienced pairs play 'Strong 10' leads, whereby the lead of the 10 guarantees the jack, **and** the ace or the king (there are even more sophisticated versions). However, delay this refinement until you are confident on the basics.

General

The above leads are relevant in all situations – even if partner has bid the suit (it is wrong to automatically always lead 'top of partner's suit').

If you decide to lead the trump suit, licence can be given to variations in an attempt to confuse declarer (but it will be your fault if you do happen to confuse partner). In fact more experienced partnerships develop special leads in the trump suit.

If you know you don't have most of the points (e.g. 15 points when the opposition have bid 1NT – 3NT, consider an un-orthodox lead. This may fool both declarer and partner – but partner will be passive in any case.

Summary – lead of the '10' shows doubleton, or H109xx (where H is any honour excluding the jack (until you possibly consider 'Strong 10 leads)).

The above points should be adopted by most partnerships (improver and expert). Most expert pairings still adhere (in principle) to the above, but some adopt some refinements. Lead styles you may come across are 3rd. and 5th.; Roman leads; trump suit-preference.

12. Table Of 'Standard' Leads (H = honour) – (excludes reference to 'strong 10's')

v. Suit	v. No-Trumps	Comments
<u>A</u> xxx...	Axx <u>x</u> ...	Never under-lead 'A' against a suit. 4 th . highest against NT.
Hxx <u>x</u> ...	Hxx <u>x</u> ...	4 th . highest
Hx <u>x</u>	Hx <u>x</u>	"

x <u>x</u> xx...	x <u>x</u> xx...	2 nd . highest from a poor suit
x <u>x</u> x	x <u>x</u> x	“
10 <u>x</u> x..	10 <u>x</u> x..	“ (even if the second highest card is the ‘9’)
<u>H</u> x	<u>H</u> x	Top of a doubleton (but avoid <u>K</u> x, <u>Q</u> x leads)
<u>x</u> x	<u>x</u> x	“
A <u>K</u>	A <u>K</u>	Lower of doubleton honour sequence against a suit.
K <u>Q</u>	K <u>Q</u>	“
Q <u>J</u>	Q <u>J</u>	“
<u>A</u> KQx..	<u>A</u> KQx..	Top of three card honour sequence
<u>K</u> QJx..	<u>K</u> QJx..	“
<u>Q</u> J10x..	<u>Q</u> J10x..	“
<u>J</u> 109x..	<u>J</u> 109x..	“
<u>A</u> KJx..	<u>A</u> KJx..	Top of ‘2½’ card honour sequence
<u>K</u> Q10x..	<u>K</u> Q10x..	“ (partner must unblock or give count)
<u>Q</u> J9x..	<u>Q</u> J9x..	“
<u>A</u> Kxx..	AKx <u>x</u> ..	Top of two card sequence against suit. 4 th . highest against NT
<u>K</u> Qxx..	KQx <u>x</u> ..	“
<u>Q</u> Jxx..	QJx <u>x</u> ..	“
<u>A</u> J10x..	A <u>J</u> 10x..	Ace against a suit. Top of internal honour sequence against NT.
K <u>J</u> 10x..	K <u>J</u> 10x..	Top of internal honour sequence
Q <u>10</u> 9x..	Q <u>10</u> 9x..	“
	A <u>K</u> J10...	Requests partner to ‘unblock’ with Q; if not give count.

If playing ‘strong 10’s’ the following should also be adopted.

	AJ <u>10</u> x...	Strong ten
KJ <u>10</u> x...	AKJ <u>10</u> ..	Strong ten