

GET YOUR SIGNALS STRAIGHT

LEADS ARE NOT SIGNALS although they do convey information about your holding to partner. Leads, whether opening leads or later leads of a new suit, follow specific guidelines for leading in specific situations covered in previous notes. Review those notes and you will see that leads and signals are similar in that different guidelines apply in different situations.

THREE TYPES OF DEFENSIVE SIGNALS, each used under specific conditions:

- Attitude – the most important signal – says you either like or don't like the suit you are playing.*
- Count – the number of cards you have in a suit. *
- Suit Preference – the least common and most often misinterpreted signal.

*If you use Upside Down Count and Attitude [UDCA], reverse standard count and attitude only.

ATTITUDE SIGNALS – used only on the very first card you play in a suit and only when:

- (1) Partner breaks (is the first to lead) and you are third hand but do not have to play third hand high to win the trick because:
 - a) Partner's card is doing as good a job as you could and you have no reason to unblock.
 - b) Second hand (your opponent) wins the trick with a high enough card that there is still a chance that you could have a helping high card in the suit. (If you can't beat a low card, your attitude is already clear and you will give a count signal instead.)
- (2) You are discarding a suit that has not yet been led by anyone during the deal. Discarding a low card denies interest in that suit; discarding a high card shows interest in that suit. (Use the negative message when you can't spare an encouraging card in the suit you like.)

The standard way to show attitude: Play the highest card you can spare to encourage and your lowest card to discourage. (Reverse for Upside Down Count and Attitude users.)

Look for an attitude signal from partner when:

- (1) You lead an honor and partner follows suit with a lower card.
- (2) You lead to a trick and second-hand opponent wins the trick with a queen or higher.
- (3) Partner cannot follow suit and discards a suit that has never been played.

COUNT SIGNALS are given to show the number of cards you hold *when following suit*. Giving count the first time a suit is led is more common when declarer or dummy breaks the suit. Don't give count if your job is to signal attitude or play high to maximize the number of tricks your side wins. (For example when covering an honor, winning a trick, or splitting honors.)

The standard way to give count: Play high-low from an even number of cards like 2 or 4 cards and low-high from an odd number of cards like 3 or 5 cards. (UDCA users reverse these.)

Count signals are commonly used:

- (1) In the "crummy dummy" situation where
 - (a) Declarer is setting up a long suit in a hand with limited entries outside that suit.
 - (b) You have reason to believe or hope that partner has a winner in that suit.
 - (c) You have a reasonable hope to strand good cards in that suit if partner waits to win this trick (holds up) until the shorter hand of declarer and dummy plays their last card in the suit.
- (2) When dummy wins partner's lead with a jack or lower, your attitude is clear so give count.

Look for a count signal from partner when:

- 1) Declarer is setting up a long suit in a hand with limited entries outside that suit and you have a winner in that suit and you hope to strand declarer's or dummy's winners.
- 2) Dummy wins your lead with a jack or lower, making partner's attitude clear.

REMAINING COUNT (PRESENT COUNT) You can expand count signals when following in all suits – including suits led by partner or discarded by you but *only after doing your primary job* – following the guidelines for leading, playing third hand high, signaling attitude when following suit or discarding. This is called giving *remaining count or present count*. If your play could be interpreted as some other type of signal it is not remaining count. (UDCA users reverse remaining count too.)

SUIT PREFERENCE SIGNALS *are used when leading or following to partner's lead when it's clear that partner will have to break a new suit on the next trick.* The suit preference signal is an attempt to suggest the best suit for partner to lead next. (No reason to play suit preference Upside Down.)

Show suit preference by: the size of the card you play to signal. In a suit contract, your suit preference signal never asks for a trump or the suit being played to give the signal. *With a choice between two suits – a high suit and a low suit, signal by playing high to ask for the higher suit and low for the lower suit.* In notrump the suit being played is still excluded. Ideally one other suit will also be excluded (perhaps a suit declarer is working on). On the rare occasions when there is a choice between three suits, an ambiguous middle card can ask for the middle suit (assuming you are dealt the right cards to do this and partner can read your signal).

By partnership agreement, suit preference may be used in the following circumstances:

- (1) Telling partner how to get back to you when leading as suit you expect partner to ruff.
- (2) Showing partner your entry to get back to your hand so you can run your long suit in notrump.
- (3) Suggesting the best suit to switch to when partner leads an ace and dummy hits with a singleton in a suit contract. (Caution! – This use requires really good partnership agreements because you might want to encourage partner to continue despite dummy's shortness.)

SPECIAL LEADS AND SIGNALS

ATTITUDE SIGNAL WITH A QUEEN – When partner leads the ace and you signal with the queen, you are showing one of two things (unless the jack shows up in dummy): a singleton queen or possession of the jack. The special message attached to a queen signal means that you cannot follow high-low to show a doubleton queen (unless the jack is in dummy so partner cannot take you for the jack). In a suit contract, the queen signal shows a sure entry to your hand – either the jack or by ruffing. In notrump, the queen shows the jack unless a singleton is possible.

LEADING AN ACE VERSUS A NOTRUMP GAME OR PARTSCORE – by partnership agreement asks partner to drop an honor to unblock. Lacking the honor, partner gives count. This lead is only made from a long, strong suit that will run once partner drops an honor but might have to be abandoned to await a lead through declarer if partner doesn't have the honor. (Caution – not used in very unusual auctions like Gambling 3NT that shows that declarer is likely to be able to run a long suit. In these auctions it's common to lead an unsupported ace just to see dummy to find the best switch.)

FINAL THOUGHTS

Any signal passes only one message. Only the defenders signal. Declarer's partner is a dummy and can take no action so declarer is free to *falsecard*.

It takes two to tango – one partner gives a signal and the other partner has to receive it. Watch partner's plays closely. There's no point in signaling if your partner doesn't pay attention.

Common Sense beats guidelines. If breaking a guideline feels right when you combine all your knowledge about the deal, do it. Bridge is a thinking game that can't be played entirely by rote.