

The Art of the Discard

How do you feel when declarer starts running a long suit? Do you find it hard to breathe? Do you panic? Or do you confidently discard knowing exactly which cards to save?

DISCARDS: AN IMPORTANT CONCEPT

Ideally, every card a defender plays has a purpose: it wins a trick, it promotes a trick, it conveys information to partner. Although a discard may convey information to partner, defenders who view discards only in this light do not understand the underlying nature of a discard. *A discard is a card that is thrown away.*

- ♠ A discard will never win a trick.
- ♠ A discard cannot guard an honor.
- ♠ A discard cannot prevent declarer from taking a trick to which he or she is not entitled.
- ♠ A discard cannot serve as transportation to the good tricks in partner's hand.

DISCARD WITH A PLAN

As the declarer, we always plan our play at trick one. It's equally important when defending that we **discard with a plan** when declarer—or partner—starts running a long suit.¹ Formulate this plan *before* you play your first discard.

Determine how many discards you must make.

Hand 1.

	♠K7	
	♥KT72	
	♦AT72	
	♣Q93	
♠		♠83
♥		♥J983
♦3		♦J94
♣		♣7642

Auction (South dealer):

1S – Pass – 2D – Pass
2NT – Pass – 3NT – Pass

Partner's opening lead is the ♦3. Declarer plays low from dummy, and you win the ♦9.

You return the ♦J, and declarer wins in dummy with the ♦A.

Declarer now starts to run his presumed five-card spade suit. Before discarding on the third spade, you must think about **all** your discards. Step one in this thinking process: ***How many discards must you make?*** What if declarer surprises you with six spades? How many discards must you make now?

Hand 1. The bidding tells you that declarer has at least five spades; his first rebid suggests he holds *only* five spades. You have only two spades, so you will need to identify three discards. If declarer holds six spades, you'll need to identify four discards.

Identify the cards you must keep.

Step two in this thinking process: ***What cards must I keep?*** You begin this process when you pick up your hand and identify its values. The bidding, dummy, and partner's opening lead will help you

¹ What is a long suit? When determining discards, a long suit is one in which another player holds more cards than you. If you hold a singleton in a suit, a player with two or more cards in that suit holds a long suit.

refine your evaluation. In order of importance, these are the points you must consider when identifying the cards you must keep.

1. **You must keep enough cards in your long suit to match declarer's or dummy's known length.**

In our example hand, the known length is obvious, dummy's four-card heart suit. You must keep as many hearts as dummy. This is your first priority. You cannot discard a heart unless declarer first pitches one of dummy's hearts.

What about your four-card club suit? Is it possible that it might be matching a four-card club suit in declarer's hand? From the bidding, it's likely that declarer's shape is 5-3-2-3, but there is a possibility that it's 5-2-2-4. You can't guard both hearts and clubs, so guard the known threat.

2. **Keep enough cards to guard your key honor(s).**

We don't have any problem guarding key honors in this hand! Other than the already identified heart suit, we don't hold any key honors.

3. **If partner's hand holds a source of tricks, you must keep one entry to those tricks for every entry in your own hand.**

In our example hand, it looks like you have only one possible entry, the ♥J. Partner's source of tricks appears to be the diamond suit, and declarer has left you with one diamond. You want to keep that diamond card as long as possible. What if declarer had taken the third diamond trick, rather than the second?

4. **Try to keep at least one card in every suit, if possible.** The exception to this rule is partner's suit, but only if your hand will take no tricks.

There is nothing more irritating when guarding a key honor, than watching partner discard all their cards in that suit, pinpointing its location for declarer. If we follow this rule, we must keep at least one club, in addition to the cards we've already identified.

Once you've identified all the cards you must keep, any spare cards remaining can be safely discarded. Do you have enough spares? In this hand, we must keep all four hearts, one diamond, and one club. We can safely discard three clubs. Since we only need three discards, we have no problem.

Determine the order in which you will play your discards.

Every card played by the defenders has a purpose. It can take a trick, it can set up a trick, or it can communicate information to partner. A *discard*, by definition, is a card that is thrown away. It cannot take a trick and it cannot set up a trick. It can communicate information to partner, however. The order in which you play your discards will help guide the defense.

- ♠ Your first discard in a suit is an attitude signal and shows partner how you feel about that suit. A high card encourages; a low card discourages. ***When using standard signaling methods, there is no way to show suit preference at the same time.***
 - ♥ If a high card in a suit will not cost your side a trick, play an *encouraging signal* in that suit to let partner know where your strength lies as soon as possible.
 - ♥ Although partners are more likely to notice high cards, sometimes you need to keep all your cards in the suit you want partner to play. Both you and your partner should get into the habit of watching for *discouraging signals*. They are less likely to cost your side a trick.
 - ♥ Discarding an honor card always guarantees the honor immediately below. Be careful not to waste a trick just to get partner's attention.
 - ♥ Don't play false cards unless you know that partner will never win a trick – and you'd better be right!

- ♠ Your second play in a suit, assuming you are not trying to win a trick in that suit, is a *present count signal*, and tells partner how many cards you hold in that suit. A high card indicates an even number of cards; a low card indicates an odd number of cards.

In our example hand, we plan to discard three clubs from our ♣7642 holding. In what order should we play them?

- ♥ Our first discard is the ♣2. We see no source of tricks if partner attacks this suit, and we have no strength in this suit.
- ♥ The second time we play a club, our club holding will be ♣764, an odd number. Therefore, we play the ♣4, a low card. Partner will know we held one, three, or five clubs at that time.

By the time we make our third discard, partner will know how many clubs we started with, and therefore, how many clubs declarer started with. It's likely that partner will now know exactly how the defense should be carried out.

PRACTICE YOUR DISCARDING SKILL

Hand 2.

	♠Q63	
	♥Q2	
	♦AJ96	
	♣KQ32	
♠J		♠54
♥		♥9864
♦		♦KT52
♣		♣A94

Auction (North dealer):

1D –Pass – 1H – Pass
2C –Pass – **3NT**– Pass

Partner's opening lead is the ♠J. Declarer plays low from dummy, you play the ♠4 (Why?), and declarer wins the ♠A.

Declarer next wins the ♥Q in dummy, and leads to his ♥J, won by partner's ♥A.

The play continues with partner leading his ♥T. Declarer *discards* the ♣2 from dummy, and wins this trick with his ♥K. He plays a low spade to the ♠Q, and then leads a low spade from dummy.

The score is four tricks to one in favor of the bad guys.

	♠6	
	♥--	
	♦AJ96	
	♣KQ3	
♠[Jx]		♠--
♥[ATx]		♥9
♦		♦KT52
♣		♣A94
	♠[Ax]	
	♥[KJx]	
	♦	
	♣	

Declarer leads the ♠6 from dummy, and you must discard. What is your discard plan?

♠ **Step one:** How many discards must you make?

Declarer's play suggests a four-card spade suit as well as the known four-card heart suit. If that hypothesis is correct, you will need to find two discards on the spade suit. Do you have two discards?

♠ **Step two:** Identify the cards you must keep.

- ♥ The ♥9 is a winning trick. You *must* keep this card.
- ♥ Dummy's four-card diamond suit is a threat. If possible, you *must* match dummy's diamond length. You may need to discard a diamond eventually, but it shouldn't be your first choice.
- ♥ It would be nice to keep a "get out" card in the club suit.

That leaves us with only one easy discard – a club. Our second discard, if necessary, may depend on declarer's line of play. Remember, declarer will need to discard from dummy. If he discards a diamond, we can safely discard a diamond, too.

♠ **Step three:** We know the first discard suit. What card should we play? Remember that the first discard in each suit is an attitude signal. If partner wins a trick, what suit do we want them to play?

- ♥ We can play the ♣A ourselves, if desired. What we need partner to lead, if partner wins a trick, is the diamond suit. Discard the ♣4 – and hope that partner is not one of those players who assumes all discards are positive signals!

WATCHING PARTNER'S DISCARDS

Good defense demands good partnership communication. You do need to plan your discards, but at the same time, you need to study partner's discards. Note the use of the plural word. ***Every card partner discards is important!*** Don't stop thinking after partner's first discard.

	♠K7	
	♥KT72	
	♦AT72	
	♣Q93	
♠T962		♠
♥Q5		♥
♦KQ53		♦J9
♣AKT		♣

Auction (South dealer):

1S – Pass – 2D – Pass
2NT – Pass – 3NT – Pass

You lead the ♦3.

Declarer plays low from dummy, and partner wins the ♦9.

Partner returns the ♦J, and declarer wins in dummy with the ♦A.

It sounds like you have the best hand at the table, and you have no way to enter the auction! It also sounds like partner will be no help at all. Wonder of wonders, partner's diamond cards have set up four tricks in your hand, if declarer doesn't take nine tricks before you get in.

♠ How many discards must partner make on declarer's five spades? You only need to make one, but partner must make three discards. Those discards will tell you partner's distribution and where partner's strength, if any, lies.

- ♥ Partner's first discard is the ♣2. We already knew partner couldn't hold much in clubs.
- ♥ Partner's second discard is the ♣4. That's the lowest outstanding club, so it's likely that partner held an odd number of clubs when he made this discard, probably three. In that case, partner started with four clubs, so declarer started with three clubs.

- ♥ Partner's third discard is another club. We now know that partner's strength lies in the heart suit. How do we know this? Values are something you keep, and partner hasn't discarded a single heart card. **Don't watch discards only.** Cards that are kept tell a story, too.
- ♠ What card will you throw away? The ♣T is your only extra card. Just in case you need a second discard, partner's discards told you that the ♥5 would be safe.

SIGNALING VARIATIONS

Bridge players experiment with signaling variations just as they experiment with bidding systems and conventions. One of the most common variations is known as **upside-down count and attitude**. Pairs using this signaling agreement simply reverse standard signaling methods. Some partnerships also add **upside-down suit preference** to their methods. Others retain standard suit preference signals. While experts do claim that there is a slight advantage in using the upside-down count and attitude signals, it is not the type of signals you use that is important. What is most important in good defense is that you and your partner use signals.

- ♠ When showing attitude, a low card followed by a high card is a *positive* signal; high followed by low is a *negative* signal.
- ♠ When giving count, a low card followed by a high card shows an *even number of cards*; high followed by low shows an *odd number of cards*.

Signals and the first discard

In standard signaling, the first discard in a suit is an *attitude signal*. Some pairs redefine the first discard using one of the following methods. *Note that the following signal variations are allowed only on the first discard.*

- ♠ **Lavinthal discards** combine both attitude and suit preference signals in one card. The first discard by either defender *denies interest in the discard suit* and the rank indicates suit preference for the higher or lower of the two remaining suits.

Example: Declarer is leading hearts. The first discard by one defender is the ♣9. This defender denies interest in the club suit and shows preference for the higher of the remaining suits: spades. Defender's partner first discards ♠2. This play denies interest in spades and shows interest in the lower of the remaining suits: clubs.

- ♠ **Odd-even discards** also combine attitude and suit preference signals. If the first discard is an odd card, defender shows interest in the suit being discarded. If the first discard is an even card, defender denies interest in the discarded suit. The rank of that card *may show suit preference*.

Example: Declarer is leading hearts. The first discard by one defender is the ♣3. This is an odd card and shows interest in the club suit. Assume the first discard is ♣2. This even numbered card denies interest in the club suit and tends to show interest in the lower ranking outside suit: diamonds. If the first discard were the ♣8, the defender might be showing interest in the higher ranking outside suit: spades.

SUMMARY

Discarding is much less stressful if you remember to **discard with a plan**.

1. Determine how many discards you must make.
2. Identify the cards you need to keep.
3. Discard the remainder in the order that communicates most effectively to your partner—but does not cost your side a trick. **Good bridge always takes precedence over signaling!**

A BRIEF EXERCISE

	♠84	
	♥AK53	
	♦AQJT72	
	♣9	
♠K962		♠
♥64		♥J
♦53		♦
♣Q8642		♣7

Auction (South dealer):

1NT – Pass – 2C – Pass

2S – Pass – **6NT** – Pass

6D is a great contract, but where's the fun in that? You lead the ♥6, hoping for a miracle.

Declarer plays low from dummy, and partner wins the ♥J, declarer following with the ♥8.

Partner returns the ♣7, and declarer wins in hand with the ♣A.

Things don't look good for your side. The stress will be high as declarer plays that six-card diamond suit! Think about how declarer will play this hand. If you and partner discard well, declarer cannot make this contract.

♠ **Determine how many discards you must make.**²

♠ **Identify the cards you must keep.**³

♠ **Determine the order in which you will play your discards.**⁴

If partner guards the heart suit and carefully preserves at least one card in the spade suit, you can calmly set this contract by discarding with a plan, not squirming in your seat each time a discard is necessary.

² You need four discards when declarer runs his six-card diamond suit and one discard when declarer plays the ♥AK – five discards in all. Four are easy, two spades and two clubs, but the fifth will depend on declarer's discards.

³ Your spade suit guards declarer's known four-card suit. You must keep one card to guard your club queen. That takes care of the cards you must keep.

⁴ Communicating to your partner is irrelevant. If either one of you wins another trick, the contract is set. Your discards should encourage declarer to make a mistake. *Declarer can no longer take the club finesse*, so guarding your club queen is more important than matching declarer's spade length. Although unnecessary in this hand, it may be necessary in future hands to encourage declarer to make a losing play. Declarer *can* take the spade finesse. Discard two small spades, then two small clubs. This implies that you hold the club honor, but don't care about spades. Like you, declarer will need to discard on the diamonds. He has discarded two small spades, one small heart, and one small club. Declarer follows suit to the second heart, but must discard on the third. If declarer pitches a club, you pitch a club. If declarer pitches a spade, you pitch a spade.

THE ART OF THE DISCARD—HANDS

<p>Board 1 ♠ A Q J 6 5 North Deals ♥ 8 4 None Vul ♦ 9 6 2 ♣ K Q 6</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 30%;">♠ 10 7 2</td> <td style="width: 40%; text-align: center;"> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">W</div> <div style="text-align: center;">N E</div> <div style="text-align: center;">S</div> </div> </td> <td style="width: 30%;">♠ 8 3 ♥ K 10 9 2 ♦ 8 7 4 ♣ J 10 5 4</td> </tr> <tr> <td>♥ A J 7 6 3</td> <td></td> <td>♠ K 9 4 ♥ Q 5 ♦ A 10 5 3 ♣ A 9 8 2</td> </tr> <tr> <td>♦ K Q J</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td>♣ 7 3</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table> <p>NS 3♠; NS 2N; EW 2♥; NS 3♦; NS 2♣; Par +140</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: left;">West</th> <th style="text-align: left;">North</th> <th style="text-align: left;">East</th> <th style="text-align: left;">South</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td>1♠</td> <td>Pass</td> <td>2♦</td> </tr> <tr> <td>2♥</td> <td>Pass</td> <td>Pass¹</td> <td>4♠</td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>All pass² 1. East might raise partner's heart overcall, but I made him Pass. 2. Set the contract. 4♠ by North Lead: ♥ 10</p>	♠ 10 7 2	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">W</div> <div style="text-align: center;">N E</div> <div style="text-align: center;">S</div> </div>	♠ 8 3 ♥ K 10 9 2 ♦ 8 7 4 ♣ J 10 5 4	♥ A J 7 6 3		♠ K 9 4 ♥ Q 5 ♦ A 10 5 3 ♣ A 9 8 2	♦ K Q J			♣ 7 3			West	North	East	South		1♠	Pass	2♦	2♥	Pass	Pass ¹	4♠	<p>Board 2 ♠ 9 7 6 4 3 East Deals ♥ Q 8 7 N-S Vul ♦ J 10 2 ♣ Q 3</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <tr> <td style="width: 30%;">♠ 8 ♥ 4 3 ♦ A K 8 7 5 ♣ A J 10 7 2</td> <td style="width: 40%; text-align: center;"> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">W</div> <div style="text-align: center;">N E</div> <div style="text-align: center;">S</div> </div> </td> <td style="width: 30%;">♠ A K Q 2 ♥ A J 5 ♦ Q 9 4 ♣ 9 5 4</td> </tr> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td>♠ J 10 5 ♥ K 10 9 6 2 ♦ 6 3 ♣ K 8 6</td> </tr> </table> <p>EW 6♦; EW 6♣; EW 4N; EW 3♠; EW 1♥; Par -920</p> <table style="width: 100%; border: none;"> <thead> <tr> <th style="text-align: left;">West</th> <th style="text-align: left;">North</th> <th style="text-align: left;">East</th> <th style="text-align: left;">South</th> </tr> </thead> <tbody> <tr> <td></td> <td></td> <td>1N</td> <td>Pass</td> </tr> <tr> <td>3N¹</td> <td>All pass²</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </tbody> </table> <p>1. There are many conventions to show a strong hand with both minors opposite an opening NT. I didn't choose any. 2. Hold declarer to ten tricks. 3N by East Lead: ♥ 6</p>	♠ 8 ♥ 4 3 ♦ A K 8 7 5 ♣ A J 10 7 2	<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-around; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;">W</div> <div style="text-align: center;">N E</div> <div style="text-align: center;">S</div> </div>	♠ A K Q 2 ♥ A J 5 ♦ Q 9 4 ♣ 9 5 4			♠ J 10 5 ♥ K 10 9 6 2 ♦ 6 3 ♣ K 8 6	West	North	East	South			1N	Pass	3N ¹	All pass ²								
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