

The Fine Art of Discarding

The term discarding in the game of bridge generally refers to one's attempt to communicate information to partner when defending. To discard is to fail to follow to the suit that declarer has led and thereby playing a card from another suit....but not a trump. There are many types of discards.... most of which are intended to convey information to your partner. Is the ideal discard system out there?

It's always best to remember that while keeping partner informed or clued in with special kinds of discards, declarer has the advantage of seeing them also. Thus there is a continuing hunt for a discarding method that may not be as clear to the declarer as it is to your partner. But also remember that the opponents are entitled to know what discarding methods you use. When asked you must explain your methods but by no means do you have to explain a particular card.

Let's examine a few methods to see how each method works and can be used.

Attitude discards are the simplest system of signaling. If you use standard signals a high card in the suit discarded encourages that suit and a low card discourages it. If you use upside-down signals a low card in the suit discarded encourages that suit while a high card discourages it. The upside-down or reverse attitude signals tend to work best as you do not need to throw potentially useful cards to encourage a suit.

Playing standard Count discards a high-low in a suit shows an even number and playing low-high shows an odd number of cards. It's possible to reverse this and play reverse count or upside down count in which case high-low shows an odd number of cards in the suit and low-high shows an even number of cards. Count discards are often unclear to partner in the early defense of a hand but tend to become more helpful as the play progresses. Count is perhaps a more useful method for discards after the first one. For example many good pairs play the first discard is attitude and then subsequent discards show count.

Lavinthal discards are one of the most widespread and easiest to use methods. In Europe they are often referred to as suit preference discards. The discard of a low card in one suit suggests interest in the lower of the other suits. Similarly a high card suggests interest in the higher of the other suits. For example, discarding a low diamond on a spade would suggest a club (the lower suit), while discarding a high diamond would suggest a heart (the higher suit). There is at least one problem with Lavinthal discards and that is the inability to make a neutral card

which carries no meaning. When you have no particular preference for a switch, there is no card in your hand which does not carry a message; however, some players overcome this problem by keeping the discard of a 5 or 6 (7 too if you like) as a neutral card which conveys no positive message to partner.

Roman or Odd-Even (Italian) discards give different meanings to odd and even cards. This allows you to combine attitude and suit preference signals. An odd card encourages that suit while an even card is Lavinthal or suit preference. The problem with this system is that sometimes you don't hold the odd cards needed to encourage or the even cards needed for the proper suit preference signal. A similar disadvantage is that defenders who are unlucky enough to hold the wrong cards for signaling often take undue time trying to figure out what to do.....thus conveying to partner (and declarer) that they have a problem. This is the major reason that the ACBL allows an Odd/Even discard only once per deal and that is on a defender's first opportunity to discard.

Revolving discards are not revolting but are instead a simple and effective system that is relatively easy to remember. A high card shows interest in the next suit up, while a low card shows interest in the suit down. For example a low heart asks for diamond, a low club asks for a spade, and a high spade asks for a club. While this system takes some getting used to, it seems to have merit.

A little used system is that of Dodds discards which is similar to Odd-Even or Italian. Even cards are encouraging while odd discards are discouraging and ask for the suit of the same color. This is little used because there is quite a high frequency of hands where you have no useful discard and you end up misleading partner.

There is no right answer to choosing a discard system. Some work well on one hand but not on another. Sometimes it is more useful to know the shape of partner's hand (count) so that you can cash the right number of winners before switching. On the other hand it is often more useful to know which suit partner would like for you to lead. Whichever method you are playing make sure that partner is on the same wave length. As with so much in bridge, effective signaling and discards are a partnership concern.