

Avoiding danger

What is the danger hand?

It is often essential to prevent one hand gaining the lead. This hand is called the *danger hand*. The other defender holds what is called the *safe hand*.

Recognising the danger hand

Q J 4	K 8 6	A 10 9 2
	7 5 3	

West is the danger hand. If West gets the lead, it means three tricks are lost straightaway if the queen is led. If East is on lead, only one trick can be taken immediately. So East is the safe hand.

K 9 7 5	8 6 4	J 10 7 2
	A Q	

No tricks can be lost straightaway but East is the danger hand. A lead of the suit through the A Q sets up three winners for the defence. West is the safe hand as a lead allows the queen to win a trick.

Examples of some plays to stop the danger hand gaining the lead

There is a whole range of plays to keep one hand off lead. You have already met the hold up, for example, but the term avoidance play is often used to describe a play involving something unusual, that keeps the danger hand off lead. For example:

A K 4 3 2	Q 9
-----------	-----

If five tricks are needed, you play off the top winners and hope the suit breaks 3-3. If you need only four tricks, you just play off the top winners if you didn't mind who gains the lead. But if North is the danger hand, lead the two and play the nine unless North puts up an honour. You lose this trick but make the rest with a 4-2 break.

Q 8 7 6 4 2	A 9 3
-------------	-------

This is the trump suit that you hope to play for one loser without South gaining the lead. Play small win, from the long hand but, if North unexpectedly produces the king, don't leap on it thankfully with the ace; Let the king hold since South must have J 10 5.

A K 4 3 2	7 6 5
-----------	-------

If you want to keep North from the lead, and entries allow, play small twice from the short hand. If South comes up with the queen either time, allow it to win.

A K 4 3 2	J 10 8	7 6 5
	Q 7	

This is the layout where that last play works. If South plays the queen on the first round let it hold. If South plays small win, re-enter East and play the suit again. Now South must play the queen and you duck.

A J 10 9 8	K 7 6 5
------------	---------

Normally with nine cards, you would not take a finesse. It is better odds to play for the queen to drop singleton or doubleton.

But if South is the danger hand, first play the king. On the second round, play the jack if South plays low. The danger of playing for the drop is that South has queen to three.

If North is the danger hand, play the ace first. Then lead the jack and play low if North plays low. The danger of playing for the drop is that North has queen to three.

Loser on loser

It costs nothing, and can often gain, to discard a certain loser in hand on a certain loser in dummy, or vice versa. There are several reasons why this can be good technique; one can be to prevent the danger hand gaining the lead.

<p style="text-align: center;">♠ 4 ♥ A K 7 6 5 ♦ 9 8 4 ♣ A Q 7 2</p> <p>♠ A K 7 6 5 3 2 ♥ 8 ♦ 7 5 ♣ K 8 4</p> <p style="text-align: center;">♠ 10 9 ♥ J 10 9 4 ♦ K 6 3 2 ♣ J 10 9</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">♠ Q J 8 ♥ Q 3 2 ♦ A Q J 10 ♣ 6 5 3</p>
---	---

West	North	East	South
	1♥	pass	2♥
2♠	pass	4♠	all pass

North leads ♥A and switches to ♦8 at trick two. The danger hand is South who will lead clubs through West's king. There's a neat solution: win East's ♦A at trick two, lead ♥Q and discard the diamond from the West hand leaving the safe hand on lead. Subsequently, take a ruffing finesse to pick up ♦K. and discard two clubs on the diamonds. Seeing all four hands, North should have switched to a club at trick 2: two club tricks will beat 4♠.

Lessons from the deal: it does not cost a trick to swap one loser for another, but it can be useful to do so to keep the danger hand off lead.

Blocking

10 5 3 2	A J 9 8 7
K Q	4 3

Both the defence and declarer sometimes suffer the annoyance that winners cannot be taken because of a blockage in the suit. In this example, in no trumps only three tricks can be taken if East has no outside entry.

Sometimes declarer can arrange a blockage in the suit led by the defence, giving time to establish another suit.

5 led by North	A 2
10 8 6 4	

Against no trumps, North leads the five, a problem if it is from a 5-card suit. The suit cannot be headed by K Q J, so South must have an honour, which will win if East's

two is played. A second round will get rid of the ace. If North, with the remaining honours gets the lead, he will make three more tricks. The play of the ace, at trick one, blocks the suit. It doesn't gain a trick but it buys time. The lead can safely be lost to North with no danger that the suit can be run immediately. Put out the cards to see how this works.

This is another example:

<p>♠ A K Q ♥ J 7 4 ♦ 4 3 2 ♣ K 8 4 3</p>	<p>♠ J 10 4 ♥ A 6 2 ♦ K Q 8 7 6 ♣ A 7</p>
--	---

West	North	East	South
1NT	2♥	3NT	all pass

North leads ♥10 from what must be a five or six card suit

For his bid, North is likely to hold ♦A. North would lead ♥K holding ♥K Q 10 9 x, not the ten. On the

inference that South holds ♥K or ♥Q, East's ace must be played at trick one so that the suit is blocked when North wins ♦A.

Lessons from the deal: When the lead is made, ask yourself from what holding that lead could be made. You will normally be able to rule out hands with strong honour combinations. Having done that and realised the other defender must have an honour, making the blocking play is easier to find.

Safety plays

Safety plays, as the name implies, are precautions that can be taken in case the unexpected happens. They usually involve giving up the possibility of an overtrick to have an extra chance of making the contract. They are made more often at teams or rubber bridge than at pairs.

Establishing tricks in a long suit

You have seen the hand below before. How would you play in 3NT after the lead of $\spadesuit Q$? Would it make any difference if you were playing a pairs duplicate or a team match?

\spadesuit 5 4 2 \heartsuit 6 3 2 \diamondsuit 7 5 \clubsuit A K Q 3 2	North 2 \clubsuit pass	East pass pass	South 1 \spadesuit 3NT	West pass pass	West leads the $\spadesuit Q$: eight tricks on top and two chances for the extra trick. We have seven cards in both spades and
---	---------------------------------------	-----------------------------	---------------------------------------	-----------------------------	---

clubs, which means the opposition have only six cards in those suits. Because our clubs are split 5-2, we can make an extra trick if the opposition's clubs break 4-2. To make the extra trick in spades, we need the opposition's spades to break 3-3. This is less likely.

Assuming the opponents clubs do break 4-2, we make our extra trick in clubs by ducking the first round of clubs, that is playing small cards from each hand. We win whatever the opposition return and lead our second club, playing the ace from dummy. We now play the king and then the queen, by which time the opposition will have run out of clubs if they divided 4-2, and we are in the right hand to play the last, winning club.

Whilst ducking a club is 100% correct at teams, at pairs you might try a different line. Win the diamond, cash the clubs from the top. If they break 3-3 take your club winners. If clubs fail to break, duck a spade and hope they break 3-3. It is not such good odds, but it makes more tricks when it works!

When your side has seven cards in a suit, the six cards held by your opponents are more likely to divide 4-2 (48% of the time) than 3-3 (35% of the time). This assumes that the break is not 6-0 or 5-1, both of which are unlikely (about 17% of the time).

In the previous hand, the safety play catered for something that was likely to happen. Normally a safety play caters for something that is a distinct possibility, but not the most likely happening. For example:

West \spadesuit A K 3 \heartsuit J 8 3 2 \diamondsuit 9 8 \clubsuit A K 3 2	East \spadesuit J 5 4 \heartsuit 10 9 \diamondsuit A K Q 4 3 2 \clubsuit 9 8	West North East South 1 \heartsuit pass 2 \diamondsuit pass 2NT pass 3NT all pass North leads $\clubsuit Q$. At pairs, you will cash $\spadesuit A K Q$ because, despite the fact that East has no outside entry, the odds favour a 3-2 break over 4-1. At teams, you should duck a diamond to
--	---	--

cater for that 4-1 break. You need only five tricks from the suit and can afford to lose one. Only a 5-0 break can stop you making nine tricks.

West \spadesuit A K Q J \heartsuit A 8 3 2 \diamondsuit 9 8 \clubsuit A K 3	East \spadesuit 6 5 4 \heartsuit 10 9 \diamondsuit A K Q 4 3 2 \clubsuit 9 8	West North East South 2NT pass 6NT all pass On $\clubsuit Q$ lead, you are in a good contract, which others may miss. At teams you should duck a diamond to be sure of 6NT (unless diamonds break 5-0).
--	---	---

Lessons from the deal: Play as safely as you can for your contract at teams, even if you make a trick fewer than you might have done.

Rejecting a finesse, as a safety play

West	East	West	North	East	South
♠ 10 7 6	♠ A 9 3	1NT	pass	3NT	all pass
♥ K 8 3	♥ A 4				
♦ A Q 7 2	♦ J 10 9 6 3				
♣ A 5 3	♣ K 7 2				

North leads ♠4 to South's ♠J. Declarer holds up, and again when South continues with ♠8. North overtakes with ♠K and continues with ♠2, South discarding a heart. There's a small clue that

South holds ♦K since, if North had it, he might have exited with a higher spade (remember suit preference signals?). At pairs it is probably right to finesse for South to hold ♦K and make an overtrick if it works. At teams it is a 'must' to play ♦A, if South fails to cover ♦J. North may have ♦K singleton, and only four diamonds are required to make the contract.

As a general principle, you would only make this kind of safety play at pairs if you were in a good contract, particularly a slam, which the rest of the room was unlikely to bid. This will come only with experience, as will recognition of some of the many safety plays that can restrict the loss to one affordable trick. Some of these might more properly be called 'sensible' plays since they are right whether or not you can afford to lose a trick in the suit. A very simple example is:

A 10 9 7	K J 8 6
----------	---------

The better chance of making four tricks is a finesse but having decided which way to take it, cash a top honour first in case there is a singleton queen.

Here is another, which is not so obvious:

K 9 6 3 2	A J 5 4
-----------	---------

You want five tricks in the suit and intend to play for the queen to drop in one or two rounds. Play the ace first rather than the king. If either defender shows out, at least you are certain to

make four tricks in the suit. Put out the cards to check how to play the suit if either opponent shows out.

West	East
♠ A 7 6	♠ J 9 3 2
♥ A 8 3	♥ K 7 4
♦ A 9 6 3 2	♦ K J 4
♣ A 10 6	♣ K 7 2

Here is a hand on the same theme. North leads ♥Q against 3NT.

You need four diamond tricks not five. A 3-2 diamond break is the most likely but at teams you should think about what could go wrong if diamonds break 4-1.

Win the ♥K, cash the ♦K, cross to the ♣A and lead a small diamond. If North has ♦Q10xx, the ♦J must win a trick. If South has ♦Q10xx, the ♦J will lose to the queen but you can now finesse against the ♦10. Put out the cards and you will see that however the diamonds lie, you must make four tricks in the suit.

Lessons from the deals: How a hand is played can differ from pairs to teams or rubber bridge. You do not have to learn a list of safety plays by heart, though there are some books which publish such lists! A safety play can be worked out at the table when you have identified what might go wrong.

Not all safety plays cost a trick; some can only gain. What this means is that you work out the best way of playing the suit combination when you see it.

Quiz on the danger hand

You are playing West (declarer). Identify which hand is the danger hand (the one you want to keep out of the lead) and why. What can you do with this information when playing the hand?

	West hand	East hand	Auction				Play
1	♠ K 7 4 ♥ A Q 3 ♦ A J 4 2 ♣ 10 3 2	♠ Q 3 ♥ K 7 4 ♦ K 6 5 3 ♣ A K J 5	West 1NT pass	North pass	East 3NT	South all	North leads ♠5 to East's ♠Q and South's ♠A. South continues with ♠10. West holds up ♠K, a third spade is led. South follows, West wins the ♠K
2	♠ A K 10 ♥ Q 3 2 ♦ A 10 6 ♣ 8 6 4 3	♠ 7 6 ♥ A K 7 ♦ K J 5 2 ♣ K Q 7 2	West 1NT pass	North pass	East 3NT	South all	North leads ♠3 to South's ♠Q and West wins. What now?
3	♠ A J 10 4 2 ♥ A 4 ♦ A 10 6 4 ♣ K 3	♠ K Q 6 3 ♥ 9 7 3 2 ♦ Q J 9 ♣ 9 7	West 1♠ 3♦ pass	North pass pass	East 2♠ 4♠	South pass all	North leads the ♥Q. South plays the ♥8.
4	♠ A 4 ♥ K Q 4 ♦ A J 2 ♣ 8 6 4 3 2	♠ K 7 6 ♥ A J 10 ♦ K 10 4 3 ♣ K Q 10	West 1NT pass	North pass	East 3NT	South all	North leads ♠5 to East's ♠6, South's ♠Q and West's ♠4. South continues with ♠10 to ♠A and North's ♠3.
5	♠ A K Q 5 4 3 ♥ 4 ♦ 7 6 3 ♣ K 8 6	♠ J 10 6 2 ♥ A 7 ♦ A K 8 4 ♣ 7 4 2	West 1♠ pass	North 2♥	East 4♠	South all	North leads ♥K.
6	♠ A K 8 7 4 ♥ J 6 2 ♦ 4 ♣ K 8 6 5	♠ Q 5 3 ♥ 8 7 5 ♦ A Q J 10 ♣ 7 4 2	West 1♠ pass	North 2♥	East 2♠	South all	North leads ♥ A K Q and then ♠J.
7	♠ A J 8 ♥ Q 3 2 ♦ A 10 9 ♣ 8 6 4 3	♠ 6 5 ♥ A K 7 ♦ K J 8 7 2 ♣ A K 7	West pass 2NT pass	North pass pass	East 1♦ 3NT	South pass all	North leads ♠3 to South's ♠Q. West wins ♠A.
8	♠ A 8 2 ♥ Q 3 2 ♦ A K 4 3 ♣ 8 6 4	♠ 6 5 ♥ A K 7 ♦ 8 7 6 2 ♣ A K 7 3	West 1NT pass	North pass	East 3NT	South all	North leads ♠Q to East's ♠5, South's ♠9. West holds up ♠A until the third round, discarding ♦2 from dummy.

Quiz on the danger hand

Answers

	Hand		Danger hand? Why?	Action
1	♠ K 7 4 ♥ A Q 3 ♦ A J 4 2 ♣ 10 3 2	♠ Q 3 ♥ K 7 4 ♦ K 6 5 3 ♣ A K J 5	North North may have two established spades to cash if he gets in.	Finesse the club into South's hand. South hasn't got a spade left to play.
2	♠ A K 10 ♥ Q 3 2 ♦ A 10 6 ♣ 8 6 4 3	♠ 7 6 ♥ A K 7 ♦ K J 5 2 ♣ K Q 7 2	South North cannot lead another spade without giving a trick but a second spade from South will set up spade winners for North.	Cross to dummy with a heart and finesse the ♦10. If it wins play a club towards dummy. If it loses, North is on lead.
3	♠ A J 10 4 2 ♥ A 4 ♦ A 10 6 4 ♣ K 3	♠ K Q 6 3 ♥ 9 7 3 2 ♦ Q J 9 ♣ 9 7	South West's club holding is vulnerable if South gets the lead.	Duck the ♥Q. When you finesse the diamond, if it loses, South has an entry with the ♥K unless you have ducked trick one.
4	♠ A 4 ♥ K Q 4 ♦ A J 2 ♣ 8 6 4 3 2	♠ K 7 6 ♥ A J 10 ♦ K 10 4 3 ♣ K Q 10	North If North started with five spades he must be prevented from getting the lead - twice, once to drive out ♠K and then again to cash the spade winners.	Play a club towards dummy. If it loses to South's ♣A and spades are cleared, play a diamond and finesse dummy's ten to keep North off lead.
5	♠ A K Q 5 4 3 ♥ 4 ♦ 7 6 3 ♣ K 8 6	♠ J 10 6 2 ♥ A 7 ♦ A K 8 4 ♣ 7 4 2	South Once again, West's club suit is vulnerable if South gets the lead.	Duck the ♥K. After drawing trumps, throw a diamond on the ♥A. Play ♦A and K and ruff a diamond, hoping they are 3-3.
6	♠ A K 8 7 4 ♥ J 6 2 ♦ 4 ♣ K 8 6 5	♠ Q 5 3 ♥ 8 7 5 ♦ A Q J 10 ♣ 7 4 2	South Yet again declarer does not want South to lead clubs.	Win the spade. Play a diamond to the ace and lead ♦Q. Take a ruffing finesse, throwing clubs from hand.
7	♠ A J 8 ♥ Q 3 2 ♦ A 10 9 ♣ 8 6 4 3	♠ 6 5 ♥ A K 7 ♦ K J 8 7 2 ♣ A K 7	South The spade suit is safe from attack by North but not by South.	Play a heart to the king and a diamond to the ten. Losing to north won't hurt. If it wins, cross back to dummy and repeat the finesse of ♦9.
8	♠ A 8 2 ♥ Q 3 2 ♦ A K 4 3 ♣ 8 6 4	♠ 6 5 ♥ A K 7 ♦ 8 7 6 2 ♣ A K 7 3	North North will have winning spades to cash if he gets in.	Play ♥2 to ♥A and lead ♦2. If South plays the ♦Q duck. Else win ♦A, cross back to ♣A and play ♦6. Now ♦Q from South, win the ♦K and play third diamond hoping South has three.

Playing safe!

You are playing teams.

Dealer West, love all. North/South pass throughout the auction.

West	East	West	East
♠ K Q 7 2	♠ A 5	1♠	2♦
♥ K J 6	♥ 9 2	2NT	3NT
♦ K 8	♦ A 9 7 4 3		
♣ K 7 3 2	♣ A J 10 6		

1) East/West arrive in 3NT played by West.

North leads ♥5 to South's ♥10 and declarer wins with the ♥J.

Plan the play. In particular, think about what might go wrong and how you can guard against it happening.

2) Same contract but this time South wins the ♥A and returns the ♥8. West tries the ♥J but it loses to the ♥Q and a third heart clears the suit.

How do you play now?

3) Same contract but this time South plays the ♥Q and West wins the ♥K.

How do you play now?

Playing safe!

Answers

1.) Declarer can see eight top tricks – three spades, two diamonds, two clubs and a heart trick on the lead. A ninth trick is certain to be developed in clubs and there is also the possibility of setting up diamond tricks. It all seems quite straightforward!

However, think about the heart suit. It looks as if North has good hearts, with the ♥A and ♥Q sitting over your king. If South gains the lead they are certain to lead a heart through your king and you could easily lose four or five heart tricks to go with whatever allowed South on lead. In other words, South is the danger hand. If North gains the lead and continues hearts they will just give you another heart trick. North is the safe hand. The important thing with this hand is to organise the play so that South never gains the lead.

It is impossible to set up extra tricks in diamonds without losing the lead and no way to guarantee that the lead is lost to North. So, forget about extra tricks in diamonds.

The usual way to play the clubs would be to play the king first, to drop the queen if it is a singleton, then lead small towards East's AJ10. If North has the queen, you make an overtrick. If South has the queen, you lose a trick but set up a club trick for the contract. With this hand, you cannot risk playing this way because you might lose to South.

What you have to do is play the ace first and then play the jack. This secures the contract while ensuring South will not gain the lead.

Another point to note is that you must play the clubs early so that you can win whatever North returns, should he turn out to have the ♣Q. It would be silly to play the clubs so carefully only to find North can lead a suit that South can win and then lead a heart. In other words, **don't** take the ♦A and ♦K first! The complete deal was:

	♠ 10 9 6	
	♥ A Q 8 5 3	
	♦ 10 5 2	
	♣ 5 4	
♠ K Q 7 2		♠ A 5
♥ K J 6		♥ 9 2
♦ K 8		♦ A 9 7 4 3
♣ K 7 3 2		♣ A J 10 6
	♠ J 8 4 3	
	♥ 10 7 4	
	♦ Q J 6	
	♣ Q 9 8	

2.) Now North is the danger hand. Play clubs by leading the king first and finessing into the South hand. If South has a heart to lead, the suit has broken 4-4.

3) This is exactly the same position as the first one. Play the same way: South is still the danger hand.