

An Overview of Opening Leads

It would be as well to start by highlighting the two major differences that exist between declaring a contract and defending against the same contract.

(1) When you are declarer you can see your partner's hand (i.e. dummy.) As defender you can see one of the opponents hands, but this is generally not as helpful.

(2) As declarer you have to make more than half of the tricks, so most of the time you (or your dummy) has the lead. As a defender you are trying to make a smaller number of tricks (e.g. five if the contract is 3NT) so you are likely to spend less time actively pursuing your interests and more time waiting passively in the hope that declarer fails.

Possible leads against no-trumps

Active defence

Having said that the defenders will have the lead less often than declarer, of course one defender always has the opening lead. This can be an advantage or a disadvantage. The plus side is the chance to start attacking for tricks before declarer. The minus is that this vital decision must be made before seeing dummy, often with little knowledge of partner's hand.

In this section we start by recapping how West, as declarer, would tackle the suits below. Then we reconsider, but this time South is declarer and West is the defender on lead. Of course West, as declarer, would not be able to see the North/South hands, but we show them to illustrate our point.

(a)	(b)
♠ 875	♠ 87
♠ KJ632	♠ Q4
♠ A109	♠ KJ632
	♠ 954
	♠ AQ10

Playing the spades in (a) West should be conscious of the need to avoid blocking the suit, and so would aim to first take the honours from the short hand. Thus, West would play a low spade to East's ♠Q, and continue spades until South takes the ♠A.

The same sequence is correct for the defenders, but now consider the implications.

(i) West leads a low spade, but this time only hoping East has a spade honour. If East has just small cards in the suit, as in (b), a surprised and grateful declarer will be permitted to win a cheap trick with the ♠10. Nevertheless, leading a small spade will be right more often than not!

One further point. As declarer it wouldn't matter which small card you chose to lead, but as a defender the card chosen carries a message to partner. You don't need yet to know why. Just make a habit of when leading a low card from a four-card or longer suit, lead your fourth highest card of the suit: in this case the ♠3.

(ii) If dummy plays small, East must rise with the ♠Q. Admittedly declarer can almost certainly beat the ♠Q, but East is not wasting the queen! The ♠Q is being sacrificed to drive out the opponents ♠A. This might not help East to take a trick, but it promotes West's ♠K J into winning status. Bridge is a partnership game! Each defender is part of a team. It doesn't matter who takes the tricks as long as one of you does.

This brings us to one of the crucial guidelines of defence namely that if your partner leads a small card, as the third hand to the trick you must play your highest card in an attempt to win the trick (or at least make the fourth hand expend as high a card as possible.)

To summarise:

If partner leads a low card, **THIRD HAND PLAYS HIGH.**

(iii) Perhaps East's ♠Q wins the trick, or alternatively declarer might choose to take the ♠A and East regains the lead later. East should not waste valuable energy wondering what to do next. Unless it is obvious that West's lead has been an unmitigated failure, and East has a good alternative idea, East should return partner's suit.

To understand this vital concept, ask what the defenders are trying to achieve? They are hoping to establish and cash tricks in their longest suit. They will not gain the lead often, and if they fail to collaborate, each defender plugging away at a different suit, the odds are that the defenders will not take length tricks in any suit.

At this stage it is worthwhile for us to summarise a sequence of plays that occurs regularly, particularly when defending against no trumps.

West leads the fourth highest from his longest suit, hoping to set up length winners. East plays 'third hand high', and returns West's suit at the first opportunity.

So if West chooses to lead a long suit, is the fourth highest always correct? Consider layout (c) with West as declarer in a no trump contract. Of course, if West has sufficient entries to dummy West will choose to lead hearts twice from the East hand, but without sufficient entries it will be necessary to start with the ♥K.

<p>(c)</p> <table style="margin-left: 40px;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">♥ 874</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">♥ KQJ32</td> <td style="text-align: center;">♥ 95</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">♥ A106</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	♥ 874			♥ KQJ32	♥ 95		♥ A106			<p>(d)</p> <table style="margin-left: 40px;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">♥ 87</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">♥ KQJ32</td> <td style="text-align: center;">♥ A4</td> <td></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">♥ 10965</td> <td></td> <td></td> </tr> </table>	♥ 87			♥ KQJ32	♥ A4		♥ 10965		
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Now consider the same layout, but South is declarer and West has the opening lead. With so little information West cannot sensibly seek East's entries, so West starts with the ♥K.

If you have at least three of the top five honours in a suit, including at least two touching, it usually pays to lead an honour. It is then correct, for information purposes, to lead the top of your sequence of touching honours

Thus the ♥K tells partner you don't have the ♥A, but that you possess the ♥Q and either the ♥J or the ♥10.

Please note that this strategy is correct only in as far as it works more often than not! Seeing all four hands in layout (d) it is obvious that West must start with a low heart, but nobody could possibly blame West for leading the ♥K, even though it fatally blocks the suit. Defending is difficult, and the secret of a successful partnership is the realisation that nobody always gets it right. Partner is trying hard!!

Passive Defence

Clearly leading the ♥K from ♥K Q J 3 2 is ideal against no trumps, in that you combine the attacking threat of setting winners, with considerable safety. Unfortunately most suits are not as solid as this, and you have already seen that leading from ♥K J 6 3 2 can give away a cheap trick if partner has no honour in the suit.

Sadly, there are many bridge players who religiously always lead the 'fourth highest of their longest and strongest suit' even when there are ample clues that it won't work. Sometimes it's best to lead a short suit with no honours. This can work in two main ways.

- (i) It is unlikely to do much damage, in terms of giving away a cheap trick that declarer wasn't entitled to.
- (ii) You might just stumble on partner's long suit.

Possible leads against a suit contract

(1) If you are defending against no trumps an attacking lead from a suit like ♥ K J 6 4 3 might gain you several length tricks if it works. However if your opponents have chosen a sensible trump suit it is most unlikely that there will be more than two heart tricks before declarer or dummy can trump, and the equation of risk against potential reward has now turned against you. Therefore risky fourth highest leads are to be avoided. There are also a few combinations when you might lead a different card from the suit. From

♥K Q 6 5 3 you need help (an honour) from partner to fulfil your objective against no trumps, namely to set up length winners, so you lead the ♥5. Against a suit contract your objective will be more modest: to establish one winner and maybe give partner a ruff. You don't need partner to hold an honour, so lead the ♥K.

(2) You almost never under lead aces against a suit contract, or for that matter cash an unsupported ace. The purpose of your ace is to kill an honour in declarer's hand. If declarer has ♥ K 7 5 in the closed hand and ♥Q 6 4 in dummy either leading, or under leading your ♥A will concede a second heart trick that declarer could not have generated without your help.

(3) You have a new type of attacking lead, from a short suit. If you lead a singleton (very attractive) or the top card from a doubleton (fairly attractive), partner may be able to give you an early ruff before declarer can draw trumps.

(4) A trump lead, especially from a holding of two or three small cards, is usually safe, and can prevent declarer from ruffing losers in dummy, or cross ruffing. Sometimes you might lead a trump because you can think of nothing better. At other times the bidding will suggest that declarer may well want to cross-ruff the hand. As you gain experience you will learn to interpret the bidding to recognise such situations.

What might make you change your mind?

(1) If your partner has bid, you should normally lead that suit. Partner might well enter the bidding just to help you find the best lead.

(2) If the opponents have bid your suit your chances of establishing it are much reduced. Unless it is very solid, choose something else! You may not do much harm by leading dummy's suit if your holding is weak.

(1)	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
♠ 9 7	South North	South North	South North	South North
♥ K 10 4 3 2	1NT 3NT	1♥ 1♠	1♥	1♥ 1♠
♦ 9 7 3		1NT 3NT	2♣ 2♦	2♦ 2♠
♣ A Q 2			3NT	2NT 3NT

(a) Lead ♥3. Fourth highest of your longest and strongest suit.

(b) Lead ♦7. MUD (Middle up down) from a weak 3 card suit. South's heart bid has put you off a heart lead.

(c) Lead ♠9. The unbid suit.

(d) Lead ♠9. North has a weak hand with 6 spades but declarer has at most one spade. ♠9 should be passive.

(2)	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
♠ A 8 7	South North	South North	South North	South North
♥ 7	1NT 3NT	1NT 6NT	1♠ 3♠	1♥ 4♥
♦ K Q 2				
♣ 9 7 6 4 3 2				

(a) Lead a club, from your longest suit.

(b) Lead ♦K, setting up a second trick to go with ♠A.

(c) Lead ♥7, a singleton, hoping for a ruff.

(d) Lead a passive ♣4.

(3)	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
♠ Q J 10 9	South North	South North	South North	South North
♥ 8 5 4	INT 3NT	1NT 2♣	1♠ 4♠	1♥ 4♥
♦ A 8 6 4 3		2♠ 3NT		
♣ 2				

- (a) Lead ♠Q. ♦4 isn't wrong either but the spades are so solid!
 (b) Lead ♠Q. Yes, they have bid them but with a solid suit that shouldn't bother you.
 (c) Lead ♠Q. Cut down cross ruffing. You don't particularly want a club ruff!
 (d) Lead ♣2 (aiming for ruff) or ♠Q.

(4)	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
♠ 9 5 4	South North	South North	South North	South North
♥ A K 9 5 4	1NT 3NT	1NT 2♣	1♠ 4♠	1♠ 1NT
♦ 10 3		2♠ 3NT		3♥ 4♠
♣ 9 7 4				

- (a) Lead ♥5. Keep communications open with partner.
 (b) Lead ♣7. North has 4 hearts (otherwise he wouldn't use 2♣ **Stayman**) so you won't set up the hearts.
 (c) Lead ♥A. Hope to cash ♥A K and give partner a ruff.
 (d) Lead ♠4, a trump. Try to stop heart ruffs in dummy and hope your heart holding causes declarer problems.

(5)	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)
♠ 8 7	South North	South North	S W N E	South North
♥ Q 7 6 3 2	1NT 1♠	1NT 1♥	1NT 1♥ 1♠	1♥ 1♣
♦ A 10 5				1NT
♣ 9 7 3				

- (a) Lead ♥3, hoping to set the suit up.
 (b) Lead a passive ♣7. North has bid hearts.
 (c) Lead ♠8, your partner's suit.
 (d) Lead something passive: maybe ♠8 or ♣7.

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|-----|-------------------------------------|---------------------|--------------|--|
| (1) | ♠ 942
♥ KJ732
♦ A53
♣ 62 | South
1NT | North
3NT | Lead ♥3. Partner plays ♥Q (Third hand high from Q 9) Declarer ducks with ♥A 10 4. Partner returns heart. You later win ♦A and cash hearts. |
| (2) | ♠ A42
♥ KJ732
♦ A53
♣ 62 | South
1NT | North
3NT | Lead ♥3. Partner plays ♥10 (Third hand high from ♥10 6). Declarer has ♥A Q 4 and wins ♥Q. When you get lead continue with ♥K. |
| (3) | ♠ 942
♥ KQJ32
♦ A53
♣ 62 | South
1NT | North
3NT | Lead ♥K from solid sequence. Declarer has ♥A 10 4 and lets you win ♥K. Persevere with hearts and you will later take ♦A and cash hearts. |
| (4) | ♠ J1092
♥ J1032
♦ 876
♣ 95 | South
1NT | North
3NT | Lead ♠J because spades are stronger than hearts. Dummy has ♠Q 4 and declarer has ♠A 6 5. You make 3 spades and your partner's ♦A and ♣A. |
| (5) | ♠ J103
♥ A8632
♦ 83
♣ 832 | South
1NT | North
3NT | Lead ♥3, the fourth best of your longest and strongest. Partner has ♥K Q 4 and you take the first 5 tricks. |
| (6) | ♠ J103
♥ A8632
♦ 83
♣ 832 | South
1NT
3NT | North
3♥ | Don't lead hearts now that North has bid them. Lead the ♠J. You are lucky, North has ♠K 5 4 and partner has ♠A Q 9 6. You take 4 spade tricks. On the fourth spade discard ♥8, asking partner to lead a heart. |
| (7) | ♠ 986
♥ 4
♦ Q7432
♣ AQ43 | South
1♠
4♠ | North
3♠ | Lead your singleton. Partner wins ♥A and gives you a ruff. Later on declarer has to try club finesses and you make ♣A Q. |
| (8) | ♠ 943
♥ A754
♦ A43
♣ A62 | South
1♠ | North
3♠ | Don't start by cashing or underleading unsupported aces. Lead a trump and be totally passive. Every time declarer leads a suit, lead it back. |

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|-----|------------------------------------|---------------------------------|--|
| (9) | ♠ 943
♥ AK532
♦ 832
♣ 106 | South North
1♠ 4♠ | Cash ♥A K. Declarer and dummy each have 3 hearts. Partner signals his doubleton by Petering (playing high-low). You give him a ruff and his ♦A defeats the contract. |
| 10) | ♠ 943
♥ AK532
♦ 832
♣ 106 | South North
1NT 3NT | Lead ♥3. Partner has ♥6 4 so declarer, who has 3 hearts in each hand, wins cheaply. Partner later wins ♦A and returns a heart, so you make 4 heart tricks. |