

Firing the First Shot: The Opening Lead

The privilege of making the opening lead gives the defenders an advantage in the play of a bridge hand. This class will study the thinking process that determines the best opening lead. Of course, the bidding and the final contract play a part in this thinking process, but the following summary applies to all contracts.

The choice of an opening lead should not be viewed as simply choosing one of thirteen cards. It is a two-step process:

- **First, choose the suit.**
- **Then choose the card in that suit.**

The choice of suit is simple: determine whether to make an *attacking lead* or a *protecting lead*.

- An *attacking lead* is one made with the hope of taking tricks or setting up tricks as quickly as possible. Keep in mind that you and your partner seldom have the majority of honor cards if you are defending a contract. It is not often possible to set a contract immediately.
- A *protecting lead* is made in the hope of preventing the declarer from winning any tricks to which he or she is not entitled. Despite the instinct to win tricks, effective defense most often results when the defenders simply keep declarer from winning tricks, rather than concentrating on winning tricks themselves.

When the lead suit has been chosen, pick the best card in that suit to lead. The card you choose will paint a picture of your hand for your partner.

- **The card will tell your partner whether you have made an attacking or a protecting lead.**
- **The card will suggest the quality of the suit you have led.**
- **The card will suggest the length of that suit.**

Regardless of the contract being defended, keep in mind the following principles.

- A suit containing an *honor sequence*¹ should always be considered for the opening lead. This lead attacks, protects, and informs at the same time. You may decide to lead another suit, but if you have not considered leading the top card in that sequence, you may have made a big mistake.
- The lead of an *unsupported ace*² is almost always wrong, even when defending slam contracts.

Attacking Leads Against a No Trump Contract

Defenders can seldom defeat a no trump contract with high cards alone. You must develop tricks in your long suits to defeat the contract. There is only one *attacking lead* against a no trump contract: the lead of the *longest and strongest suit in your hand and partner's combined*.

- If your partner did not bid, lead your longest and strongest suit.
- If your partner bid, lead partner's suit, *unless*:
 - You bid your own suit and partner raised it.
 - You have a singleton in partner's suit and a long suit of your own.
 - You have a good suit and enough entries to defeat the contract on your own.
- Keep in mind that your honor cards must be reserved to take tricks after your long suit has been

¹ *Honor card sequences*. There are three types of honor card sequences:

- A **solid sequence** contains three or more cards in sequence headed by an honor card; e.g., **KQJ, QJT, T98**.
- An **interrupted** or **broken sequence** contains three cards headed by an honor, the top two being in sequence, a gap separating them from the third card; e.g., **KQT, QJ9, JT8**.
- An **intermediate sequence** contains three cards, the two lower being in sequence with a gap between them and the top card. The middle card must be an honor; e.g., **AQJ, AJT, KJT, QT9**.

² An *unsupported ace* refers to a suit headed by an ace without the king of that suit.

established. It does no good to develop tricks in your hand if you can never win the lead.

- Note also that **longest** usually takes precedence over **strongest**.

You've decided to make an attacking lead and must now choose the exact card to play. **Partner did not bid and you are leading your own long suit.**

- Lead the **top card of a solid sequence**; e.g., **KQJxx**
- Lead the **top card of a broken sequence**; e.g., **QJ9xx**
- Lead the **middle card of an intermediate sequence**; e.g., **KJTxx**

The lead of an honor card always implies the existence of a sequence, indicating to partner the quality of your suit. It tells partner to return your suit, always an indication of an attacking lead. The play of an honor card also develops tricks for your side.

- Lead a **low spot card** from a long suit that contains no honor card sequence.³
The lead of a low spot card indicates the existence of higher cards in that suit in your hand. It tells partner to play a high card in the suit to help develop your tricks and to return that suit when possible. A low spot card also denies the existence of any sequence in that suit.

Partner bid a suit and you are leading partner's suit. If possible, the card you lead should tell partner *how many cards you hold in the suit* and *how good your cards are*.

- With two or more touching honors, **lead the top card**.
- If you hold an intermediate sequence in partner's suit, **lead the middle card of that sequence**.
- If you hold a *doubleton* in partner's suit, **lead the top card**, regardless of rank.
- If you hold three or more cards in partner's suit to one or more *non-touching honors*, **lead a low spot card**.

The lead of a low spot card tells partner you have at least three cards in the suit and implies worthwhile higher cards. Of course, partner may discover that it is the only card you hold in the suit.

- If you hold three or more cards in partner's suit and no honors in that suit:
 - Lead the **highest card** from a three-card holding, unless you and your partner have agreed to play MUD (middle-up-down) or have agreed to always lead low from three or more cards.
 - Lead the **second highest card** from a four-card or longer holding, unless you and your partner have agreed to always lead fourth-best from four or more cards.

Note that the lead of a high spot card always denies the existence of an honor sequence and tends to imply no higher cards in the suit. This information will help partner determine how to play his or her cards in the suit.

If partner did not bid a suit or raise your suit, do not make an attacking lead if:

- Your long suit is weak and you do not have enough entries to regain the lead after it is established.
- Your long suit does not contain a solid sequence and was bid by declarer or dummy.
- Your longest suit is only four cards in length and contains only one honor or a *tenace*.

Protecting Leads Against a No Trump Contract

When an attacking lead is not a good idea, your goal on opening lead is to avoid giving a trick to declarer that he or she cannot take on his or her own. You must make a **protecting lead**.

- Good protecting leads and the card to choose in that suit are:
 - From a **worthless four-card holding**, lead the second-best card in the suit, unless you and your partner have agreed to always lead the fourth-best card.
 - From a **worthless three-card holding**, lead the top card in the suit, unless you and your partner have agreed to play MUD (middle-up-down) or have agreed to always lead low from three or

³ Many players lead their fourth-best card in this situation. Other possible lead agreements include *attitude leads* and *odd card leads*. All are discussed later in this paper.

more cards. Include three-card suits headed by **JTx** or **T9x** in this category. Lead the top card from these holdings.

- Desperation protecting leads and the card to choose in that suit are:
 - From a **three-card suit headed by two touching honors**, lead the top card in the suit.
 - From a **low doubleton**, lead the top card in the suit. *Do not lead a doubleton headed by an honor unless partner bid the suit!*
- When selecting a protecting lead, avoid leading suits bid by either opponent, especially the declarer.
- Do not lead a singleton against a no trump contract. It cedes the opening lead advantage to declarer.
- **Do not lead an unsupported ace.**

Leading from a Suit Headed by the AK

A special circumstance arises when you choose to lead an unbidden suit headed by the **AK**. As these cards are equal honors and will win the trick, many pairs assign meanings to the play of the ace or the king.⁴

- Playing the ace at trick one asks partner to *give count* in the suit led or unblock their highest honor.
- Playing the king at trick one asks partner to *give attitude on the ace or queen* in the suit led.
- Try to lead from **AKx** only when partner has bid the suit.
- When leading from **AKxx**, consider playing the king at trick one. If partner holds the queen, your next play will be a low spot card to partner's queen.
- When leading from **AKxxx**, it is usually correct to lead a low spot card. You will lose the first trick, but the ace and king may clear the suit, allowing you to win four tricks in this suit.
- When leading from **AKxxxx**, consider playing the ace at trick one. Partner's card at trick one will tell you how the suit is divided.

Lead-directing Conventions against No Trump Contracts

Your partner is going to be on lead against a no trump contract. The use of a **double** is conventional and tells partner what suit to lead to set the contract.

- If your partner bid a suit, *double* to tell partner to lead that suit.
- If you bid a suit, *double* to tell partner to lead your suit.
- If neither you nor partner bid a suit, a double tells partner to lead dummy's first bid suit, *provided it was not raised by declarer or rebid by dummy*.
- If none of the above applies, make your normal lead.

Several *conventional bids* may arise in no trump auctions. Examples include Stayman, Gerber and responses to Gerber, and transfer bids. *The double of a conventional bid tells partner to lead that suit.*

Leading Against a Suit contract

The choice of suit now involves four possibilities: determine whether to make an *attacking lead*, a *protecting lead*, a *ruffing lead*, or a *trump lead*.

- An *attacking lead* is one made with the hope of taking tricks or setting up tricks as quickly as possible. Remember that in a suit contract, declarer may be able to trump your small cards in your long suits; therefore leads from long suits may not be as effective.
- A *protecting lead* is made in the hope of preventing the declarer from winning any tricks to which he or she is not entitled. Despite the instinct to win tricks, effective defense most often results when the defenders simply keep declarer from winning tricks, rather than concentrating on winning tricks themselves.

⁴ Some players reverse this lead convention. Discuss your preference with your partner.

- A *ruffing lead* is the lead of a short suit, usually a singleton, with the hope of trumping partner's return of that suit.
- A *trump lead* is self-explanatory, the opening lead of a trump.

Attacking Leads Against a Suit Contract

If partner bid a suit, lead partner's suit. Partner's bid indicates a good *attacking lead*. There are only two acceptable reasons for not leading partner's suit.

- You hold a void in partner's suit.
- You know you can set the contract with the cards in your own hand. If you don't lead partner's suit, you'd better be right about this.

When leading partner's suit against a suit contract, it is usually most important to choose the card that tells partner *how many cards you hold in the suit*. If possible, try to indicate *how good your cards are* as well.

- With two or more touching honors, **lead the top card**.
- If you hold an intermediate sequence in partner's suit, **lead the middle card of that sequence**.
- If you hold a *doubleton* in partner's suit, **lead the top card**, regardless of rank.
- If you hold three or more cards in partner's suit to one or more *non-touching honors*, **lead a low spot card**. The lead of a low spot card tells partner you have at least three cards in the suit and implies worthwhile higher cards. *If you hold no other honor cards in your hand*, it may be correct to play this honor card at trick one. This will be your only chance to retain the lead and it may be essential that you do so.
- If you hold three or more cards in partner's suit and no honors in that suit, partner needs to know that you have some length in the suit:
 - Lead the **lowest card** from a three-card holding, unless you and your partner have agreed to play MUD (middle-up-down) or have agreed to always lead the *top of nothing* regardless of contract.
 - Lead the **fourth best card** from a four-card or longer holding, unless you and your partner have agreed to play *odd card leads*. If so, you will lead your **third best** or **fifth best card**.
- ***If you hold the ace in partner's suit, lead the ace at trick one, regardless of the remaining cards you hold in that suit.***

If you bid a suit and partner raised your suit, lead that suit. This is an *attacking lead*.

- Lead the ace in the suit if you hold it.
- Lead the top card in an honor sequence.
- Lead your **length card** (fourth best or odd card) if none of the above applies.

If neither you nor your partner has bid, an attacking lead may be dangerous. Make an *attacking lead* only from these holdings.

- If you hold a **four-card or longer suit** headed by the AK, *lead the ace or king*, as you and partner have agreed.
- If you hold a **four-card or longer suit** headed by a solid sequence or an interrupted sequence, *lead the top card in the sequence*.
- Lead a **three-card suit** headed by a solid sequence or an interrupted sequence only when the opponents have not bid the suit. Lead the top card in the sequence.
- Lead a **three-card suit** headed by the AK only when the opponents have not bid the suit or when partner is known to be short in the suit. Lead the ace or king in accord with partnership agreement.
- Lead a **four-card or longer suit** headed by two touching honors only when no other suitable lead exists. Lead the higher of the two honors.
- **Avoid leading a suit headed by only one honor, a tenace, or an intermediate sequence.**
- ***Do not lead a suit headed by an unsupported ace.***

Ruffing Leads Against a Suit Contract

The lead of a singleton in the hopes of setting the contract with ruffs in your hand is called a **ruffing lead**. This is a type of *attacking lead* as it is designed to win tricks quickly. ***This should not be an automatic lead against a suit contract.*** Several conditions should be met if a ruffing lead is to succeed.

- You must have some hope that partner has values and will win an early trick. If partner has not bid, a ruffing lead is not likely to succeed.
- Lead a singleton in the suit partner bid if you hold *extra trumps*. If your trump holding is *QJT, you have no extra trumps. You will always win a trump trick. A ruffing lead gains only when partner can take two early tricks. On the other hand, if your trump holding is *A4, you hold one extra trump; if the holding is *853, all your trumps are extra trumps. Any ruff gives your side an extra trick.
- Lead a singleton in a suit partner did not bid only when all these conditions exist.
 - Your partner did bid indicating the possibility of a quick trick in his hand.
 - You hold a *trump stopper* so declarer cannot pull all your trumps before partner wins a trick.
 - You hold at least one *extra trump*.
- **Do not lead a singleton if you hold four or more trumps.** You will almost always take more tricks if you make the lead you would have made against a no trump contract.
- The lead of a singleton when you hold only one trump as well is a desperation lead against a slam contract. Otherwise, avoid it.

Trump Leads Against a Suit Contract

The lead of a trump is usually called for when the bidding suggests that declarer's best chance to make the contract is to win trump tricks separately.

- Lead a trump when dummy has shown a short side suit in the bidding. Clues to this holding:
 - Declarer opened one of a major and dummy went directly to game in that major. Dummy has shown long trumps, a singleton or void, and a weak hand. Declarer may need to crossruff to make the contract.
 - Declarer has bid two suits and dummy has supported one suit but not the other. Declarer may set up his second suit by ruffing losers with dummy's short trumps.
- Lead a trump if partner passes your takeout double converting it to penalties.

Avoid a trump lead if you hold a singleton trump or four or more trumps. From the other three suits, pick the suit you would have led against a no trump contract. You hope to *shorten declarer's trumps* by making him ruff your long suit.

Protecting Leads Against a Suit Contract

Defenders always want to take their tricks quickly, but if you and your partner have not bid during the auction, an attacking lead against a suit contract is usually a mistake.

When partner has not bid and you do not hold a leadable honor sequence, make a protecting lead.

Your goal is to keep declarer from winning any tricks to which he is not entitled. Good protecting leads and the card to choose in that suit are:

- Lead the **top card of a low doubleton**. This is not likely to cost your side a trick and you may even be able to ruff the suit. ***Do not lead a doubleton headed by an honor.***
- From a **worthless three-card holding**, lead the top card in the suit, unless you and your partner have agreed to play MUD (middle-up-down) or have agreed to always lead low from three or more cards. Include three-card suits headed by **JTx** or **T9x** in this category. Lead the top card from these holdings.
- From a **worthless four-card holding**, lead the second-best card in the suit, unless you and your partner have agreed to always lead the fourth-best card. Lead the top card of touching honors.

Acceptable protecting leads and the card to choose in that suit are:

- From a **three-card suit headed by two touching honors**, lead the top card in the suit.
- **Lead trumps** if you hold two or three small trumps. Avoid leading trumps if you hold a singleton trump, four or more trumps, or if you risk losing a trump honor.

Leading an Unsupported Ace Against a Suit Contract

There is only one time when it is imperative to lead an unsupported ace against a suit contract. *When the bidding has shown that dummy's hand will be strong and declarer's hand is weak but distributional, lead an ace.* This may be your best chance to see dummy, watch partner's card, and determine the tricks you and your partner may take. If you have two aces, tend to lead from the shorter suit first.

Leads against Slam Contracts

The defense only needs one trick to set a grand slam and two to set a small slam. The setting trick must be taken before declarer can develop his or her winning tricks. Therefore, don't expect to defeat slam contracts, whether trump or no trump, by developing tricks in your long suits.

Possible attacking leads:

- A lead that establishes a second round winner, such as the top of a sequence headed by **KQJ** is a good *attacking lead*, but it will be effective only when you or your partner has a probable entry.
- The lead of an ace may be a good *attacking lead*, but it will be effective against a small slam only when you or your partner has a probable second trick, such as a trump trick.
- Avoid an attacking lead against a 6NT contract or against a grand slam.
- Review the bidding carefully before leading an ace against a grand slam suit contract. It will almost always be trumped and you will usually be setting up tricks for the declarer.

Protecting leads are usually best against grand slams and frequently best against small slams.

- Protecting leads against slams are the same as those against game contracts.
- Trump leads should usually be avoided.

Desperation leads against a six-level suit contract:

- Lead a singleton against a suit contract. You may be lucky.
- Lead low from an unbid suit containing the king or queen. Partner may have an honor to help out.
- *Do not make desperation leads against a grand slam contract or a no trump slam.* Make a protecting lead.

The Lightner Double

When partner doubles a slam contract, he or she is telling you to ***make an unusual lead***. Of course, partner hopes to defeat the contract.

Partner doubled a trump slam contract.

- Do not lead a suit you or your partner bid.
- Do not lead trumps.
- If dummy has bid a suit, lead dummy's suit. If dummy bid two suits, lead the suit he bid first.
- If dummy did not bid a side suit, but declarer did, lead declarer's side suit.
- If none of the above applies, lead your longest suit. Partner probably has a void.

Partner doubled a no trump slam contract.

- Lead dummy's first bid suit.

Other Lead-directing Doubles

In addition to the Lightner double, remember that the double of a conventional bid also tells partner to lead that suit. Be alert for the responses to Blackwood or Gerber. You may be able to slip in a lead-directing double.

Remember: Before you make the opening lead, review the bidding and visualize declarer's hand, dummy, and your partner's hand. The probable distribution of the cards will give you more information on the best opening lead than any number of memorized rules. You will recognize the exceptions to the rules only when you visualize all four hands before choosing your lead.

Analyzing Partner's Opening Lead

Your partner has put the opening lead on the table, but the work is not over. It is your job to read the clues provided by that opening lead and continue the defense of the hand. First determine whether your partner has made an *attacking lead* or a *protecting lead*. Then analyze what partner's card tells you about the suit led and determine partner's probable plan for the defense.

Analyzing Partner's Opening Lead: No Trump Contracts

You bid a suit and partner has led that suit.

Partner is leading what is probably the longest and strongest suit in your two hands combined. This is an *attacking lead*. The card partner has led will indicate both the length and strength of partner's holding in your suit.

- A high spot card will tell you partner holds no honor cards in your suit and probably has a doubleton.
- A low spot card should guarantee at least three cards in your suit. If your partnership agreement is to always lead the *top of nothing* against a no trump contract, regardless of length, a low spot card lead will also guarantee an honor card in the suit.
- The lead of an honor card shows either an honor doubleton or the top card of two or more touching honors. Partner's play at trick two will confirm the exact holding.

You bid a suit and partner *did not* lead your suit.

A good attacking lead, if it exists, is always preferable to a protecting lead. Your suit bid indicated a likely attacking lead. If partner leads a different suit, assume this is also an *attacking lead*. Your partner may have a strong suit of his own and a singleton in your suit, or a strong suit and enough entries to set the contract on his own.

- A low spot card lead should indicate a long suit. In fact, partner thinks the suit he is leading is longer than your partnership's combined holding in your bid suit. Try to win the trick and return partner's suit.
- An honor card lead shows a long suit headed by an honor sequence. If partner is leading a suit bid by dummy or declarer, this should be a solid sequence. Don't forget to unblock your holding in partner's suit!
- A high spot card lead is normally a *protecting lead*. If partner leads a high spot card in a suit you did not bid, one of two possibilities exists.
 - First, partner has ***no cards in your suit*** and cannot lead his own long suit.
 - Second, partner was sleeping during the bidding and has no idea that you bid a suit.

Partner bid a suit and led that suit. This is an *attacking lead*.

- A low spot card in the suit indicates length in the suit but denies an honor card sequence. Try to win the trick and return partner's suit.
- An honor card lead shows a long suit headed by an honor sequence. Don't forget to unblock if necessary!

Partner bid a suit, but *did not lead that suit*.

It is likely that partner's suit is headed by a high *tenace* and he wishes to protect that suit. In other words, partner is probably making a *protecting lead*. Unless dummy and the bidding indicate a different point of attack, remember to lead partner's bid suit when you win a trick.

- A high spot card is a sure indicator of a protecting lead in this situation. Partner holds no honors in this suit and wants you to lead **his bid suit** if you take a trick.
- An honor card lead is probably the top of a sequence, but may be the top of touching honors in a three or four card holding. Unless this lead sets up sufficient tricks in your hand to set the contract, lead **partner's bid suit** when you win a trick.
- A low spot card lead is probably from a second suit of four or more cards headed by one honor. This could be a second point of attack, depending on your holding and dummy's holding in this second suit. Keep in mind that it could also be a protecting lead from a three-card suit headed by one honor. If you win a trick, think carefully before returning either this suit or partner's bid suit.

Neither you nor your partner has bid and *partner leads an honor card*.

- Partner is leading from a long suit headed by an honor sequence. This is an *attacking lead*.
- Partner is leading from a three-card suit headed by an honor sequence or two touching honors. This is a *protecting lead*. Dummy, the bidding, and your own holding in the suit should help you tell the difference.

Neither you nor your partner has bid and *partner leads a low spot card*.

- In all probability, partner is leading from a long suit headed by one honor or tenace. This is an *attacking lead*. Try to win the trick and return partner's suit, but don't forget that you may need to guard an honor card in dummy.

Neither you nor your partner has bid and *partner leads a high spot card*.

- Partner is making a *protecting lead*. Think about the bidding, study the dummy, and try to find the suit partner would like to have **you** attack. Partner will not be pleased if you return the suit he led.

Analyzing Partner's Long Suit Lead

If partner is making an attacking lead from a long suit *not headed by an honor sequence*, he or she will lead a low spot card. Depending on your partnership agreements, that spot card may give you additional information about partner's suit.

The most common spot card lead from a long suit is the **fourth best**. When you and your partner have agreed to lead fourth best from long suits not headed by an honor sequence, use the **Rule of 11** to find out more about your partner's suit.

- Subtract your partner's spot card from 11. The resulting number is the number of cards left which are higher than partner's spot card. Examples:
 1. Partner leads the ♠3. $11-3 = 8$ spades left *higher* than partner's ♠3. You hold the ♠8, 4, 2; dummy holds the ♠Q, T, 7, 5. *How many spades does declarer hold higher than partner's ♠3?* You can see six cards higher and know that there are eight; therefore, declarer holds two spades higher than the ♠3.

- 2. Partner leads the ♥7. $11-7 = 4$ hearts left higher than partner's ♥7. Your hearts are the ♥Q, J, 5, 3; dummy's hearts are the ♥K, 9, 8, 4. You can see **five hearts higher** than partner's ♥7. *Partner is not leading his fourth best heart. The ♥7 is a protecting lead.*
- Some partnerships lead the third or fifth card from a long suit. The third card is led from an even number of cards; the fifth from an odd number of cards. Partnerships using this lead use a **Rule of 10** or **Rule of 12** as their equivalent to the Rule of 11. Do you see why?
- Some partnerships make *attitude leads* against no trump. The lower the card they lead, the more they want that suit returned.

Remember, when leading from a long suit headed by an honor sequence, lead the top card of touching honors.

Partner Led an Ace or a King

You have a special responsibility if partner leads an ace or king at trick one against a no trump contract.

- The lead of the ace at trick one asks you to *give count* in the suit led or to unblock your highest honor. Partner should have a long suit headed by at least the ace and king, or a nearly solid suit missing only one honor. If you have an even number of cards in the suit, play your highest card, followed by a lower card. If you have an odd number of cards in the suit, play your lowest card and follow it with a higher card. Rarely, you will hold an honor in this suit. If you do, play it at trick one, regardless of your length in the suit.
- Playing the king at trick one asks partner to *give attitude on the ace or queen* in the suit led. If you hold the ace or queen, play the highest card you can afford in the suit. If not, play the lowest card you hold, regardless of length.

Analyzing Partner's Opening Lead: Suit Contracts

Your opponents have reached a suit contract and your partner has made the opening lead. You must now think about that lead and continue the defense of the hand. Don't expect partner to do all the work! As always, your defensive plans are based on whether partner has made an **attacking lead** or a **protecting lead**.

You bid a suit and partner has led that suit.

The lead of a suit you have bid is considered an *attacking lead*. The card partner has led will indicate both the length and strength of partner's holding in your suit.

- A high spot card will tell you partner holds no honor cards in your suit and probably has a doubleton.
- The lead of an honor card shows either an honor doubleton or the top card of two or more touching honors. Partner's play at trick two will confirm the exact holding.
- A low spot card should guarantee at least three cards in your suit.
 - If your partner raised your suit, a low spot card also indicates an honor in your suit. If partner has shown three or more cards in the suit in the bidding, he or she should lead a high spot card to show no honors in the suit.
 - If partner *did not* raise your suit, this low spot card simply indicates length; partner may not hold an honor.
- If partner did not lead the Ace in your suit, partner doesn't have it.
- Always remember that partner's holding in your suit could be a singleton. The bidding and cards in dummy should help confirm this.

You bid a suit and partner *did not* lead your suit.

Because your suit bid indicates a likely attacking lead, partner's lead of a different suit should be an

attacking lead.

- An honor card lead shows a strong honor sequence. If partner is leading his suit in preference to yours, the sequence should be headed by the ace or king. *Give partner count in that suit*, but don't forget to unblock if necessary.
- A spot card lead is likely to be a singleton. Partner has a sure trump trick and will lead your suit at the first opportunity. *Return the original suit to give partner a ruff*. Don't forget to give partner a suit preference signal.
- A high spot card lead is normally a *protecting lead*. If partner leads a high spot card in a suit you did not bid, consider these possibilities.
 - The card is a singleton and partner is hoping to ruff this suit.
 - Partner has **no cards in your suit** and no good attacking lead to make.
 - Partner was sleeping during the bidding and has no idea that you bid a suit.

Partner bid a suit and led that suit. This should be considered an *attacking lead*.

- An honor card lead shows a long suit headed by an honor sequence. Don't forget to unblock if necessary!
- A low spot card in the suit indicates length in the suit but denies an honor card sequence. Against a suit contract, this is usually not the best lead *unless you have supported partner's suit* and the bidding suggests you may hold one of partner's missing honors.

Partner bid a suit, but *did not lead that suit*.

It is likely that partner's suit is headed by a high *tenace* and he wishes to protect that suit. In other words, partner is probably making a *protecting lead*. Unless dummy and the bidding indicate a different point of attack, remember to lead partner's bid suit when you win a trick.

- A high spot card should be a protecting lead in this situation. Partner holds no honors in this suit and wants you to lead **his bid suit** if you take a trick; but consider the possibility that the card was a singleton first.
- An honor card lead is probably the top of a sequence, but may be the top of touching honors in a three- or four-card holding. Unless this lead sets up sufficient tricks in your hand to set the contract, lead **partner's bid suit** when you win a trick.
- If partner leads a low spot card, consider the possibility that it is a singleton or is led from a second suit headed by only one honor. The bidding and cards in dummy should help you decide whether to return this suit or partner's bid suit when you are on lead.

Neither you nor your partner has bid and partner leads an honor card.

- Partner may be leading from a long suit headed by an honor sequence. This is an *attacking lead*. Don't forget to unblock and return partner's lead unless you have a better line of attack.
- Partner may be leading from a three card suit headed by an honor sequence or two touching honors. This is a *protecting lead*. Dummy, the bidding, and your own holding in the suit should help you tell the difference.
 - Return this suit if all indications say that *passive defense* is the best chance to set the contract.
 - Return this suit if your own holding makes this lead an attacking lead.

Neither you nor your partner has bid and partner leads a low spot card.

A low spot card lead is usually some form of *attacking lead*. Rely on the bidding to help you decide what type of holding partner has in the suit he is leading.

- Partner may be leading from a three-card or longer holding headed by one honor or tenace. The suit should be an unbid suit and partner is hoping you have an honor card that will take a trick. Try to win the trick and return partner's suit, but don't forget that you may need to guard an honor card in

dummy.

- Partner may be leading a singleton. Consider at your holding in the suit, dummy's holding, and the bidding to see if this is likely.
- Partner may be leading the top card of a small doubleton. Again, **look closely at all visible cards** to see if this is likely. If partner's card was the 2, *he or she is not leading a doubleton.*

Neither you nor your partner has bid and partner leads a high spot card.

This is probably a *protecting lead*. Think about the bidding, study the dummy, and try to find the suit partner would like to have **you** attack. Partner will not be pleased if you return the suit he led.

- Partner may be leading the top card of a worthless three-card suit.
- Partner may be leading the top card of a doubleton. Although this lead is a protecting lead, if you hold the right cards, it may be turned into an *attacking lead*. Hopefully, partner will have the trump holding necessary to make this a good lead.
- Partner may be leading a singleton. Look at your holding in the suit, dummy's holding, and the bidding to see if this is likely.

Neither you nor your partner has bid and partner leads a trump.

- If the bidding has indicated that declarer will be crossruffing the hand or ruffing a side suit in dummy, partner has made an *attacking lead*. Both you and partner should plan to lead trumps at every opportunity.
- If the bidding has not called for a trump lead, partner is probably making a *protecting lead*.
 - Examine the dummy and review the bidding to determine the suit partner would like you to attack.
 - If dummy is short in a side suit in which you hold good cards, leading trumps when you win a trick is probably a good idea. Partner's protecting lead may have been the best attacking lead for your side.

Neither you nor partner has bid and partner leads an ace.

Partner may have led an ace from several holdings and for many reasons, but you will expect partner to hold this trick. The card you play should give partner information about your hand.

- When partner will win trick one, your card should show *attitude*: play a high card if you want partner to continue the suit and a low card if you want partner *to make the obvious switch*.
- If dummy has a singleton in partner's suit, your card should show *suit preference*. Play a low card to tell partner to switch to the lower of the outside suits. Play a high card to tell partner to consider switching to the higher of the outside suits or continue the suit despite the fact that dummy will be able to ruff.
- If the auction showed that declarer holds a weak hand with long trumps, partner may be looking for information on possible tricks in your hand. You will be giving an *attitude signal*, but consider the tricks in dummy when you choose your card.
- Partner may be leading a singleton. The bidding should tell you if this is possible. Your card should be a *suit preference signal* if you think this is the case.

You believe that partner has led a short suit (singleton or doubleton). Determining whether partner's suit is a singleton or doubleton may be critical to the defense.

- If you have the ace in the suit and *no outside entry*,
 - Win this first trick and return the suit **if you think partner's card is a singleton**.
 - Duck this first trick **if you think partner's card is the top of a doubleton**. Hopefully, partner will win a trump trick and continue the suit to you. Win the second lead of the suit and return the suit for partner to ruff.
- If you have the ace in the suit *and you have an outside entry*,

- Win this first trick and return the suit **if you think partner's card is a singleton**. The card you lead should be a *suit preference signal*. Lead a high card if your entry is in the higher of the two outside suits; lead a low card if the entry is in the lower of those suits.
- It may still be best to duck this first trick if you think partner's card is the top of a doubleton. However, you now have more flexibility. If you take the first trick, make sure that the card you return is a *suit preference signal*. You are counting on partner winning a trump trick and leading to your outside entry. The outside entry had better be a sure thing.
- When returning a suit you believe partner will ruff, lead a high card if you want partner to lead the higher of the two outside suits. Lead a low card to tell partner to lead the lower of those suits; lead a middle card to tell partner you have no outside entry.

Before you return partner's opening lead suit, review the bidding, study the dummy, and visualize your partner's hand. The defense doesn't get the chance to win many tricks, so make them count. Your next play should be based on careful thought, not on adages or memorization of even the best rules.

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Firing the First Shot: The Opening Lead – Exercises

Problem 1.

Dummy: ♠?
♥?
♦?
You: ♣? Partner:
♠532
♥AK642
♦64
♣754

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
1NT – P – 2C – P
2D – P – 3NT – P→

Neither you nor partner bid. How many HCPs do you think partner has? What is the longest suit in your hand and partner's hand combined? *What do you lead?*

Problem 2.

Dummy: ♠?
♥?
♦?
You: ♣? Partner:
♠T4
♥T3
♦KT9752
♣QT8

Auction: North – Partner – South – You
1S – 2H – 2NT – P
3NT – P – P – P

What are your thoughts on this hand? Partner bid a suit, but declarer bid no trump – and you have a six-card suit. *What do you lead?*

Problem 3.

Dummy: ♠?
♥?
♦?
You: ♣? Partner:
♠KT94
♥JT8
♦AT
♣K854

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
1H – P – 3H – P
4H – P – P – P

Is an attacking lead indicated in this auction? How many HCPs does partner have? *What do you lead?*

Problem 4.

Dummy: ♠?
♥?
♦?
You: ♣? Partner:
♠3
♥9874
♦J876
♣AQ96

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
3S – P – 4S – P
P – P – P

The safe suit to lead is the heart suit, but you need to think about the bidding first. Most of the points probably sit in dummy's hand, and that hand may also have a good source of tricks. Taking your side's tricks may need to be done quickly. *What do you lead?*

Problem 5.

Dummy: ♠?
♥?
♦?
You: ♣? Partner:
♠Q862
♥AJT9
♦J
♣QJT2

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
1S – P – 2S – P
4D – P – 4S – P→

Should you make an attacking lead or a protecting lead? What about leading your singleton ♦J? Where are the majority of the HCPs? What do you know that declarer doesn't know? *What do you lead?*

Problem 6.

Dummy: ♠?
♥?
♦?
You: ♣? Partner:
♠65432
♥K9
♦A53
♣A72

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
1H – P – 2C – P
3C – P – 4H – P→

You know a lot about the opponents' hands, and your side needs at least four tricks to set the contract. If you identify those tricks, you'll be able to answer this question. *What do you lead?*

Problem 7.

Dummy: ♠Q5
♥AK5
♦Q62

Partner: ♣T9853 You:
♠? ♠JT962
♥? ♥T64
♦4 ♦KT5
♣? ♣76

Auction: South – Partner – North – You
1NT – P – 3NT – P
P – P

Partner led the ♦4 and declarer played the ♦2 from dummy. What does partner's lead tell you about his diamond suit? What card do you play to this trick? If you win another trick, what is your plan?

Problem 8.

Dummy: ♠KQJ8
♥KJ
♦T73

Partner: ♣KJ72 You:
♠? ♠2
♥? ♥98763
♦4 ♦A975
♣? ♣A93

Auction: South – Partner – North – You
1S – P – 2C – P
2D – P – 3S – P
4S – P – P – P

Partner led the ♦4. What kind of lead is this? Explain your answer. Declarer played the ♦3 from dummy. What do you do? What is your plan?

Problem 9.

Dummy: ♠J82
♥KQT6
♦AKJ5

Partner: ♣43 You:
♠? ♠94
♥? ♥84
♦? ♦T643
♣J ♣A8752

Auction: South – Partner – North – You
1H – 1S – 3H – P
4H – P – P – P

After this auction, partner led the ♣J. What kind of lead is this? Do you win this trick? When you win a trick, what do you do? Why?

Firing the First Shot: The Opening Lead – Answers

Problem 1.

Dummy:	♠AJ97	
	♥T97	
	♦K52	
You:	♣QT8	Partner:
♠532		♠K64
♥AK642		♥83
♦64		♦T98
♣754		♣A9632

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
1NT – P – 2C – P
2D – P – 3NT – P→

What do you lead? Assuming you and your partner lead fourth best from long suits, lead the ♥4. Your best chance to set the contract is four hearts and a trick from partner. You don't expect to win this trick, but you hope partner will win a trick and return your suit.

Problem 2.

Dummy:	♠AK986	
	♥54	
	♦AQ8	
You:	♣974	Partner:
♠T4		♠Q532
♥T3		♥AQJ86
♦KT9752		♦43
♣QT8		♣K6

Auction: North – Partner – South – You
1S – 2H – 2NT – P
3NT – P – P – P

Partner's bid suggests an attacking lead, so a protecting lead is not your best choice. Do you lead your six-card suit or partner's suit? Partner has the probable side entries, so lead partner's suit. Lead the ♥T.

Problem 3.

Dummy:	♠AJ85	
	♥AQ72	
	♦92	
You:	♣632	Partner:
♠KT94		♠632
♥JT8		♥9
♦AT		♦QJ8753
♣K854		♣JT9

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
1H – P – 3H – P
4H – P – P – P

You have so many HCPs that partner is not likely to take many tricks. It doesn't look like you have a safe attacking lead. Do you have a good protecting lead? Leading a trump is your only safe choice. Lead the ♥J.

Problem 4.

Dummy:	♠A85	
	♥AKQJ	
	♦K52	
You:	♣542	Partner:
♠3		♠76
♥9874		♥T32
♦J876		♦AQT
♣AQ96		♣JT873

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
3S – P – 4S – P
P – P – P

This auction says, “Grab your tricks!”
Play the ♣A. After looking at dummy,
what card will you play next? You hope
partner can take three diamond tricks, so
play the ♦J at trick two.

Problem 5.

Dummy:	♠J43	
	♥K742	
	♦765	
You:	♣K96	Partner:
♠Q862		♠9
♥AJT9		♥86
♦J		♦9843
♣QJT2		♣A87543

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
1S – P – 2S – P
4D – P – 4S – P→

You have four trumps, so a singleton –
especially one in declarer’s second suit
– is probably not a good idea. You have
a great protecting lead in the ♣Q. Try
to shorten declarer’s trumps. He may be
in for a big surprise.

Problem 6.

Dummy:	♠A	
	♥J84	
	♦KQ74	
You:	♣QJT98	Partner:
♠65432		♠JT87
♥K9		♥632
♦A53		♦T982
♣A72		♣43

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
1H – P – 2C – P
3C – P – 4H – P→

You have two side suit aces and a probable
trick with the trump king. Partner
probably doesn’t have many HCPs, but
partner does have known shortness! It
sounds like partner may have a doubleton
club. Break the rules and lead a club. The
♣A is best if you think partner might have
a singleton, but you can underlead it safely
in this auction.

Problem 7.

Dummy:	♠Q5	
	♥AK5	
	♦Q62	
Partner:	♣T9853	You:
♠?		♠JT962
♥?		♥T64
♦4		♦KT5
♣?		♣76

Auction: South – Partner – North – You
1NT – P – 3NT – P
P – P

The ♦4 suggests a fourth-best lead. If this is true, declarer has only two cards higher. Play the ♦T. If it holds, return the ♣7. Save the ♦K to guard dummy's ♦Q.

Problem 8.

Dummy:	♠KQJ8	
	♥KJ	
	♦T73	
Partner:	♣KJ72	You:
♠?		♠2
♥?		♥98763
♦4		♦A975
♣?		♣A93

Auction: South – Partner – North – You
1S – P – 2C – P
2D – P – 3S – P
4S – P – P – P

You don't know where the ♦2 is, but that's the only diamond card in question. It looks like partner's leading a singleton. Win this trick and return the ♦5 for partner to trump. This low card tells partner to return a club to your ♣A. One more ruff sets the contract.

Problem 9.

Dummy:	♠J82	
	♥KQT6	
	♦AKJ5	
Partner:	♣43	You:
♠?		♠94
♥?		♥84
♦?		♦T643
♣J		♣A8752

Auction: South – Partner – North – You
1H – 1S – 3H – P
4H – P – P – P

Partner bid spades, but partner led the ♣J, a protecting lead. It's probably a good idea to win this trick and return partner's bid suit. Return the ♠9, which suggests a doubleton. Hopefully, partner holds ♠AQ and a ruff in your hand will set this contract.