

Defensive Strategies

Here is the full list of topics/sub-topics we started with.

1. Opening Lead
2. Signaling
 - Attitude, count and suit preference, in that order
 - Trump Suit Preference
 - “Present” count and “Present” leads
 - Unusual carding
- 3. Types of defense**
 - **Active**
 - **Neutral**
 - **Passive**
4. Defensive plays:
 - What is the declarer up to?
 - Improve partner’s defense
 - Ducking or holdup plays
 - Cash-out situations
 - Unblockings plays
 - Surrounding plays
 - Discarding
 - Deceptive plays
 - Killing the dummy
 - Frozen suits
5. Winning options and losing options
6. Trump promotion
7. Ruff and discard
8. Unusual or desperate defense

Having covered “Opening Leads” and “Signals”, it is time to talk about overall defensive strategy, and how to communicate that to partner. Opening lead usually sets that strategy but then the sight of dummy and partner’s signals either confirms it or suggests a change.

- Active
- Passive
- Neutral

Defensive Strategies

We discussed opening leads at length without paying too much attention to the overall defense strategy. When the bidding is over, the type of defense most beneficial to your side may manifest itself. What **strategy** should we use to defend this hand is the question you should answer before making the lead, which may depend on that answer.

The rest of the defense remains consistent with that strategy unless what you see in dummy points to an adjustment.

There are three major types: **Active, Passive and Neutral**. After making the opening lead, you hope partner can also figure out what you are trying to do defensively and confirm it after seeing dummy. One thing is for sure, partner is expected to follow through with the type of defense you set with the lead.

How do you decide the overall strategy? Use opponent's bidding and what's in your hand to make that determination; those are usually pretty good indicators.

Some of these defenses are what I call "standard". Similar to what I said about the opening lead, a particular defense is called for on every hand you are going to defend. This is based on the bidding and what you see in your hand. You should stick to that defensive strategy unless you have a very good reason to do something different.

You still have to figure out the how. Sometimes you have to do this without much help from the bidding or your own hand. Sometimes, partner is unable to help you if she has passed throughout. That's OK; just pick a strategy that seems best ("Active" or "Passive" or "Neutral"), and then choose your lead. If not at trick one, the first few tricks should make the type of defense clear to partner.

The type of scoring may also affect your decision. For example, it helps to be aggressive at teams, but play it safe in pairs. Always try to defeat the contract at IMP scoring where overtricks don't matter much. In pairs on the other hand, it is usually best not to give anything away and go with neutral or passive defense.

Some general guidelines are also in order. If in doubt, don't engage in ACTIVE defense. This is the type of defense newer players adopt by default. They try to cash aces and kings for the fear of losing them. Or they get too busy developing suits only to find out they are actually helping the declarer.

Timing may be right on some hands to be active in your defense but the opportunities are less frequent. If you have any doubt about the strategy, choose PASSIVE defense. It is quite safe, especially at pairs, where the last thing you want to do is give up unnecessary overtricks. As your defensive skills improve, you will learn to go passive more often.

Defensive Strategies

Under the category of **ACTIVE** defense, I am going to include these tactics:

1. Trying to develop and/or take all your tricks quickly. Cash-out situations in the middle of the hand (sometimes even on opening lead) are part of this strategy where you cash aces and kings or established winners.
2. Forcing defense where you force declarer's trumps with the intention of gaining trump control.
3. Attack on trumps includes reducing their ruffing power or promoting trump tricks for our side either by an uppercut or forcing one of the enemy hands to ruff high when partner is also going to ruff that trick.

Active defense is also called for when the **declarer is known to be 2-suited**. When that becomes apparent, consider one of these five strategies:

1. Get busy; cash your tricks. Lead an ace in the unbid suit or lead away from a king or a queen.
2. Lead a singleton or doubleton if you have it provided you also have trump control. Otherwise, the declarer can draw your trumps and the defensive ruff you hoped for will no longer be available. On the other hand, if you think partner may have trump control (she has points), leading from shortness is probably the best defensive strategy.
3. Lead a long suit hoping partner is short and will be able to score a ruff or two later. Again, the same trump control and entry considerations become important.
4. Cut down dummy's ruffing power by leading a trump. More on this later.
5. Make declarer ruff in the long trump hand hoping to gain trump control. More on this later.

Defensive Strategies

Active or “busy” or “forcing” defense is called for when:

1. Your sure **tricks may disappear** (especially in the “Out” suits). Bidding tells you that either the dummy or the declarer has a running side suit, which can be used to discard losers or it gives them more tricks than they need. Best strategy then is to be aggressive, try to cash your winners, develop tricks quickly before declarer draws trumps and runs that long side suit!
2. **You or your partner has trump length** (four or more trumps). Since trumps are breaking badly, declarer may run into problems if he is in a 5-3 or 4-4 fit. Even a 6-2 or 6-3 fit is not totally safe for the declarer if one defender has most or all the outstanding trumps.

Recommended defense in these situations is to find declarer’s shortness, lead the suit, force him to ruff once (or twice) and shorten his trumps.

Some bridge authors tell you to “Lead as if you are defending a notrump contract”. Granted, 4th best from longest and strongest suit may achieve the same result but me thinks it’s better to lead the suit where declarer is expected to be short. The bidding is usually a good indicator. Dangerous holdings such as AQ10, KJ10 or AJx may turn out to be just fine. Even if you fail to shorten declarer’s trumps, at least you win your tricks.

Forcing defense is even more advantageous when the opponents seem to be playing in a 4-3 fit. If you have four trumps and force the declarer’s 4-trump hand to ruff just once, you achieve trump superiority.

3. When you have trump length and trump control, don’t automatically try to go for ruffs by leading singletons and doubletons.

For one, partner has to have entries to give you ruffs. Two, it is not much of an advantage in scoring ruffs with natural trump tricks. You need extra small trumps. Three, going for ruffs when you have trump length is usually not as good as shortening declarer’s trumps and creating length parity or trump superiority in your hand. This defensive advantage can never be underestimated. It is always good for the defense if the declarer is unable to draw trumps. Even if he could technically, it may be impossible for him to do so for the fear of losing control of the hand.

Declarer has to abandon trumps and cash side suit winners but then you get to score a defensive ruff not otherwise possible. After the ruff, if you still have a trump left, that’s even better; declarer will go down like the Titanic.

Short suit leads are further explained in **6**.

4. **Trump leads** that cut down dummy's ruffing power also fall under "Active" defense although some might call this "Neutral" defense since leading a trump usually amounts to playing it safe. Regardless, cutting down ruffs gains a trick or two for the defense, sometimes it is the only way to defeat the contract. Any other lead may let the contract slip through your fingers. When should you lead a trump?
- There are a few bridge sayings related to the trump suit but it is best not to put too much faith in them or follow these blindly.
 1. "When in doubt, lead a trump"
 2. "Always lead a trump against a grand slam"
 3. "If the only safe lead is a trump, lead it".
 - Dummy has taken a preference to declarer's second suit AND you have length in his first suit and some strength. The same is true if you are short in declarer's first suit increasing the chance that partner has length and strength in that suit. Again, a trump lead is indicated because the declarer has to ruff out the first suit to make the required number of tricks.
 - Bidding suggests dummy is short somewhere and therefore has useful ruffs for the declarer.
 - Dummy is weak or the opponents have bid game on fewer than game points. Declarer probably hopes to score a few tricks by ruffing.
 - The opponents are sacrificing.
 - They are in a grand slam trump contract.
 - All other leads look dangerous.
 - If you start by leading a trump, partner should follow your defense and keep leading trumps unless there is overwhelming need to do something else. Good defensive partnership follows this rule: "If you are not sure what to do, follow partner's line of defense".
 - On the other hand, don't lead a trump if the quality of your trumps suggests partner may be able to over ruff the dummy. Even if you have length and strength in declarer's first suit, some other lead might be better. If declarer tries to ruff out the first suit, partner overruffs to win defensive tricks with her trumps.
5. Two more ways to develop defensive trump tricks are going to be covered in later topics:
- Trump Promotion. This can be performed by just one defender. The idea is to force the declarer to ruff higher than he would like, thereby promoting a trump trick for one defender or the other.
 - Trump Uppercut. This one needs partner's cooperation and hope! General strategy involves one defender ruffing with his highest trump, hoping to weaken declarer's holding and as a result, promoting a trump trick for the other defender.

Defensive Strategies

6. **Lead your shortness** when a forcing defense is not indicated or available. Having trump control is one of the prerequisites for making a short suit lead. If you don't control trumps, maybe partner does especially when you are short in trumps. Partner having entries to give you ruffs is another.

Leading a doubleton (even from an honor) may work out okay in order to obtain a ruff later.

Even if defensive ruff is not what you are after, leading a singleton has tactical advantages. It destroys declarer's communication since you are in a position to ruff the second round. It makes it easy for partner to figure out the distribution of the hidden hands. Benito Gorrozo, one of the all-time great players, once famously said, "Always lead a singleton against a trump contract". He thought it's almost always good for the defense.
7. **Lead partner's shortness** (length in your hand) when the position is reversed; you have entries and trump control.
8. Active defense is also called for when you think declarer's second suit is breaking 3-3. You may be looking at three or four small cards or Jxx or Qxx. That suit is a source of tricks for the declarer. It is cash out time for you.
9. If the opponents investigated slam but stopped short, take your tricks! If they reached a slam, take your aces and kings' otherwise, you may lose them.
10. Even against 3NT, make an aggressive lead if you think the opponents have a long running suit. Several different bidding situations point to such a source of tricks for the declarer. Lead an unbid suit even if it looks very risky. Leading away from AQ972 or Ax or KJ9 are aggressive leads.
11. Against gambling 3NT (solid minor on your right hand side), always cash an ace if you have one. You get to see the dummy, watch partner's signal and then decide how to proceed. If you lead something else, dummy may win the trick and 3NT rolls home on the sheer power of the long running minor.
12. Another type of active defense occurs in the middle of the hand when you win a trick and recognize that it is a cash-out situation. Declarer probably has the rest of the tricks. If you don't cash yours, you may lose them.
13. If you think the opponents have stretched to reach game (or slam), an active defense is often called for. You know who these over-bidders are; you should expect to defeat anything they bid and defend aggressively!

Neutral defense

This is the middle-of-the-road strategy for the defense when neither active or passive defense is clearly called for.

1. Start by making a safe lead
2. Go with the statistical odds
3. Make normal leads and plays in the middle of the hand
4. Make safe returns if you win a trick
5. Trust partner's carding and go along
6. Avoid opening up new suits for the declarer. This includes never touching a frozen suit, which by definition is a suit where if you play it, you lose a trick; and the same is true for the declarer. Your goal is to let the opponents tackle it first.

Neutral defense may give you average scores at pairs. You are playing with the field by going with the odds. That's not so bad but "top or bottom" bridge is.

Being neutral is also good for partnership harmony. Nobody can complain if you go with the odds even if it doesn't work out.

Neutral defense is best when the points are evenly divided between you and your partner. Make the lead that is called for based on the bidding. You are making a normal lead that is most likely to succeed. Even if you finesse partner, why is that so bad? Declarer might have taken the finesse himself.

Being neutral also means going along with what partner is doing. If you are not sure what to do; follow partner's signals. Think about every card she has played up to that point. She probably told you what to do. We all need to get into the habit of registering partner's cards!

If partner leads small in the middle of the hand and you win that trick, return the same suit. If she leads a higher looking spot card, she is not asking for that suit. A different safe return is probably best. But first and foremost, it all depends on what is in your hand and what is in the dummy.

Another important technique is to delay winning a trick, if you can afford to do so, when you are not sure what to do next anyway. If you wait, partner's carding on those 2-3 tricks may shed some light.

I am not only taking about positive signals here; a negative inference based on partner's carding is often as valuable.

Defensive Strategies

Passive defense

This is the defensive strategy most overlooked by newer players but it is the one that should be selected more often, especially at pairs. This should be your default strategy. Defenders often moan at the end of the hand that their defense was too busy, meaning it gave away a trick or two.

The main reason is the risk associated with active defense. By cashing your aces and kings give you win quick tricks but it may also establish extra tricks for the declarer.

Being too aggressive also has its downside.

1. Leading away from an honor into the strong hand on your right
2. Leading not-so-strong suits into declarer's tenaces
3. Opening up a new suit for the declarer
4. Doing some of the declarer's work for him

By contrast, passive defense is "safe". You wait for your tricks; you try not to help the declarer in any way. You make the declarer do all the work.

How do you decide? A passive defense is called for when:

1. Dummy does not have a strong side suit (cashable winners)
2. The hand is a misfit; you can tell the key suits are breaking badly
3. You are looking at most of the points; partner is broke. Every time you win a trick, you may be end-played.
4. Bidding tells you that declarer is strong; dummy is weak. Any lead you make is going into the strong hand; all leads look dangerous
5. You really have no good lead other than a trump. It may be the least of all evils. A trump lead may also turn out to be safe if their trump holding is strong or they are in a 9-card or longer fit; etc.
6. You are defending a high level contract such as 6NT or a grand slam. Go totally passive and let the declarer worry about the 12th or 13th trick.

What does being passive mean in bridge?

1. Don't give up a trick that was not otherwise available to the declarer.
2. Find safe leads such as a trump or a worthless suit (major over a minor).
3. Cash an ace to see the dummy, and then decide what to do.
4. In the middle of the hand, win the trick and return the same suit. Or, win a trick and find some other safe play.
5. Don't open up new suits for the declarer. Don't touch frozen suits.
6. If you see that suits are breaking badly for the declarer; don't help him.

Defensive Strategies

Hand D1 Here is an example of passive defense. Declarer bids hearts twice but responder passes. 2♥ becomes the final contract.

<u>East (You)</u>	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><u>N</u></td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><u>E</u></td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><u>S</u></td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><u>W</u></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">1♥</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">1♠</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">2♥</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> </tr> </table>	<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>	1♥	P	1♠	P	2♥	P	P	P
<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>										
1♥	P	1♠	P										
2♥	P	P	P										
♠ Q 10 8 7 2													
♥ 4													
♦ 8 7 5													
♣ K J 9 7													

Both opponents have shown minimum hands and you have spades covered. Since you are looking at singleton heart, you hope partner has 4 or 5. This is an example of a “total misfit”, for them. You also know partner has some high cards. Go passive and lead something that will not give anything away, the ♦8 and let the declarer struggle to make 8 tricks.

Hand D2 In a 2-over-1 auction, North bids 2NT to show extras but South jumps to 4♥, which becomes the final contract. Active defense is called for.

<u>West (Partner)</u>	<u>East (You)</u>	<table style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100%; text-align: center;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><u>S</u></td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><u>W</u></td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><u>N</u></td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;"><u>E</u></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">1♥</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">2♣</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">2♦</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">2N</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">4♥</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> <td style="padding: 2px 10px;">P</td> </tr> </table>	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	1♥	P	2♣	P	2♦	P	2N	P	4♥	P	P	P
<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>	<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>															
1♥	P	2♣	P															
2♦	P	2N	P															
4♥	P	P	P															
♠ A 8 7 2	♠ 10 9 5 3																	
♥ 10	♥ 6 5 4																	
♦ A 10 9 7 2	♦ 6																	
♣ 8 7 6	♣ 10 9 5 4 3																	

South should be 6-4 in the red suits (or longer hearts) with a normal opening bid, no extras.

Partner in the West seat is on lead. She correctly infers that you are likely to be short in diamonds (indicated by the 2♦ bid by North and 2NT by South). She goes for an aggressive defense of ace and another diamond.

Dummy (North) comes down with ♠KQJ, ♥K93, ♦K54, ♣KQJ2.

Sure enough your yarbrough wins a trick as you ruff the second diamond but then what? Hope you noticed the spot card partner played at trick two for you to ruff. It was the ♦10, a clear suit preference signal for spades, asking for the higher of the two remaining suits, spades and clubs.

You return a spade and score a second defensive ruff to defeat 4♥ even though the opponents have a total of 32 points!

Declarer (South) has: ♠64, ♥AQJ872, ♦QJ83, ♣A

As it often happens, North was right to offer 3NT as an option; South should have accepted. There are no ruffs for either side in 3NT but the contract cannot be defeated. The hand plays like notrump anyway. In fact, 11 tricks are available in 3NT, declarer losing only the two missing aces.

Defensive Strategies

Hand D3 Attacking lead: Responder takes a preference for declarer's second suit, hearts, which suggests a trump lead. Don't be afraid!

East (You)
♠ A Q 9 5 2
♥ Q 7
♦ J 10 9 4
♣ 10 9

<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>
1♠	P	1N	P
2♥	P	P	P

When leading from Q7 of trumps, the right card is the 7. It is not as bad as it looks on paper. Later in the play, declarer may even finesse into your stiff Q! He would never expect a trump lead away from the queen. He is most likely to consider you to be a serious bridge player that deserves respect.

Whenever you are contemplating such leads, it pays not to fidget for a long time; it may give the show away.

Hand D4 Sitting East, you preempt 3♠ but they still get to 4♥. You are on lead. What are your thoughts?

East (You)
♠ A K J 9 5 4 2
♥ 7 4
♦ 8
♣ 10 9 4

<u>N</u>	<u>E</u>	<u>S</u>	<u>W</u>
1♥	3♠	4♥	P
P	P		

Obvious lead is ♠A (Ace from AK) but ♦8 is not bad either. In fact, you should assume the opponents are ready for your spade lead. One of the opponents is likely to be short, and it may even be a void.

But the main reason is that nobody made a move towards slam, which suggests partner has points. She may have ♦A but if not, she may have ♥A. Regardless, leading ♦8 is a better shot. Try for a diamond ruff, and only then cash as many spade tricks as you can.

If you lead ♠A and it gets ruffed, you don't have enough trumps to score a diamond ruff later. Declarer may draw both your trumps before partner gets in.