

FINESSING

How to do it - how not to When to do it - when not to

Glossary

Finessing *a technique that can help you, as declarer, win a trick even when you hold a lower card than your opponents. For example, you hold Q while the opponents hold K.*

Finessing is one of the first techniques people come across when learning bridge. It is so useful that players of all standards and experience use it on a regular basis.

Why do it? It give you the chance of an extra trick (or tricks) when you are declarer.

The simple finesse: how to do it

The principle is illustrated by the example below. Assume that...

- (1) you, declarer, have just won the last trick from your hand so it's now your lead.
- (2) the opposition are holding the K, but you don't know whether it is W or E

EXAMPLE 1

	Dummy	
(any suit)	A Q x	
West		East
	Declarer (you)	
(same suit as dummy)	x x x	

Proceed as follows:

Lead a low card (x) from your hand.

- You've just made life very difficult for W, if they happen to be holding the K.
If they play the K you can take it with the A and your Q wins with the next trick.
If W plays x (low), you play and win with the Q, and then play the A for the next trick.
Result: Either way, it's 2 tricks to you.
- If E has the K, you still play the Q. Assuming E hasn't fallen asleep he'll now take your Q with his K. Your A wins later on.
Result: 1 trick each.

If, however, you had chosen to play the A *first*, before the Q, you will win just 1 trick, no matter who holds the K, E or W.

So, by using a finesse you increase the chances of making 2 tricks rather than just 1. Its success depends on the opposition's higher card (K in this example) being held by the player **preceding** your lower card (Q in this example). In other words, in Example 1, success depends on W holding the card you are trying to **finesse**.

Variations on a theme

To see more examples of finessing try the following website:

<http://www.dummies.com/how-to/content/the-essentials-of-finessing-in-bridge.html>

I found that one simple, clear, and straightforward. For something more advanced, try:

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Finesse>

How not to

Example 2 illustrates a very common error. Everything is much the same as before except that the Q is now in your hand:

EXAMPLE 2

	Dummy	
(any suit)	A x x	
West		East
	Declarer (you)	
(same suit as dummy)	Q x x	

The mistake is to lead the Q.

If W has the K this time, he will play it, so you'll have to play the A to win the trick.

If, however, E has the K, he will take your Q anyway.

So either way all you make is 1 trick. There is a better way....

A better way to play the arrangement of cards shown in Example 2 is to lead x from dummy towards the Q.

- If E holds the K and plays low, your Q wins. If E plays the K, your Q will win later on.
Result: together with your A, you will win 2 tricks
- If W holds K, it's likely to end up taking your Q whenever/however you play it. Of course your A still wins.
Result: 1 trick each.

As with Example 1, the success of a finesse depends on the opposition's higher card being held by the player *preceding* your lower one. Thus, in example 2, success depends on E (holding the K) playing a card *before* it's declarer's turn to play the Q.

When to do it

- There is a bridge saying "**8 ever, 9 never**". Let's start with **8 ever**:
It means that if you hold 8 cards in a suit, then the opposition will hold 5. Statistically, the most likely split of the opposition's 5 cards is 3:2 and generally speaking a finesse will be your best bet. Example 3 illustrates such a situation:

Example 3

A K J x



x x x x

- So you need to try to play a low card from your hand and then the J from dummy.
- Sometimes it is worth risking a finesse early in the game, for example when it helps you to establish and play off a long suit. However, if the finesse fails and the opposition gains the lead they may run off a whole string of tricks themselves. Result: complete catastrophe. If possible, guard against this by ensuring you have cards in other suits to recapture the lead if the finesse fails. If you don't have enough top cards to do this it may be better to delay the risky finesse for as long as possible and hope the opposition make some helpful mistake in the meantime!

Caution: regard the advice given here (and in the next section) as a guide, not as hard-and-fast, watertight rules. Randomly dealt cards don't know about rules. There will always be exceptions.

When not to

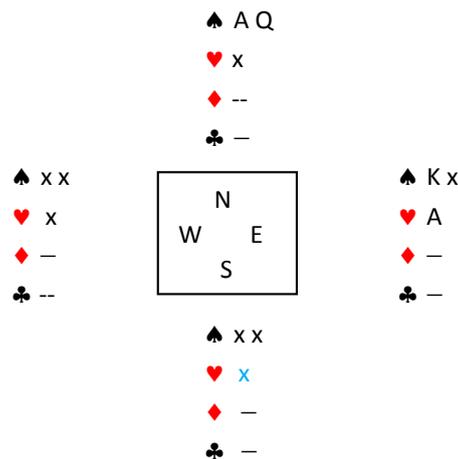
- When you're holding 9 (or more) top cards in a suit: "8 ever, **9 never**"
If you hold 9 cards then the opposition will only hold 4. In general it will pay you to hope that these 4 cards will drop in two rounds, so you start by just playing off your high cards starting with the A: see example 4.

Example 4



- A finesse gives you a 50:50 chance of making an extra trick (or more). Sometimes you can guarantee 100% the chance of an extra trick by avoiding a finesse altogether and adopting a technique called **endplay**: see example 5.

Example 5



Suppose declarer (S) needs two more tricks to make the contract. The board looks almost exactly like Example 1 but with this arrangement of the cards the finesse is doomed because the K is on the wrong side. It's actually very different from Example 1, because here the play is much later in the game: there are only 3 cards left.

And actually you can make the contract without a risking finesse at all.

To do this, play the ♥ x from your hand and give the lead over to the opposition (deliberately lose the trick). This apparent act of generosity on your part puts E into an impossible position. Whatever E now leads will result in dummy taking the last two tricks, so you make the contract.

What made this, the **endplay**, work? The key point is that you deliberately give the lead to the person (E in this example) holding the high card (K). Of course it's trickier than a simple finesse.....

- (a) you need to have a good idea about who's holding the high card
- (b) you need to give them the lead at a time when they can't possibly lead any suit other than the one with the high card in it.

....yes, it's harder than a simple finesse, but very satisfying when you pull it off!