



Declarer Play

Making a plan, counting, and the techniques that turn the count into tricks

Notrump first · then trump contracts · then endplays and squeezes

Sight is not the advantage — control is

Declarer sees twenty-six cards. So does each defender. What declarer has is both hands under one mind.

You know exactly what sits in your hand and in dummy, and you can plan them together. The defenders coordinate two hands that neither of them can see at once, and they never get to compare notes.



Stop before you play to trick one

Nothing else in this lesson matters as much as the pause before the first card.

The lead is made and dummy is down, so you will never know less about the deal than you do now — but you will never have as many options open either. Every trick played without a plan spends one of them.

The plan is three questions: how many do I need, how many are certain, and where do the rest come from?

Count winners, suit by suit

A winner is a trick you can take right now, without giving up the lead.

Count only what will actually cash. Two things spoil the count: length that is not established yet, and a suit blocked by its own honours.

♠A K 4 3 2 opposite ♠7 6 5 is two winners today — not five. The other three arrive only after the opponents' spades are gone, and only if you can still reach them.

Seven on top, nine needed

In 3NT, count what cashes and then look for the gap.

Suit	You	Dummy	Winners
♠	A K 4	7 6 3	2
♥	8 5 2	A Q 6	1 — the queen is a finesse, not a winner
♦	K J 9 7 4	A 5	2 now, more if the suit behaves
♣	A 6	K 8 4 3	2

Seven certain, nine needed. The plan is the answer to where the other two come from — here, the diamonds.

Where extra tricks come from

Four sources. The plan is usually a choice between them.

PROMOTION

Force out the higher cards so yours become good. Costs one trick and the lead.

LENGTH

Play a long suit until they have none. Costs the tricks it takes — and needs an entry afterwards.

THE FINESSE

Win with a card while a higher one sits in front of it. About half the time, instead of never.

RUFFING

Trump contracts only. A small trump beats any card of a side suit.

Between two lines that both work, prefer the one that gives up the lead fewer times.

How the missing cards divide

Most notrump contracts are made by establishing a long suit, so these numbers are worth knowing.

Missing	Most likely	Chance	Next	Chance
2	1-1	52%	2-0	48%
3	2-1	78%	3-0	22%
4	3-1	50%	2-2	41%
5	3-2	68%	4-1	28%
6	4-2	48%	3-3	36%

An odd number of missing cards splits as evenly as it can; an even number splits unevenly. Eight cards between the hands — five missing — break 3-2 two times in three.



Count your entries before you start

A long suit you cannot reach is worth nothing at all.

Dummy's $\spadesuit$ Q J 10 9 3 with no other high card will take three tricks — for somebody else — unless you keep a way in. Establishing a suit and reaching it are two separate problems, and the second one is the one people forget.



Lead toward the card you hope will win

Dummy holds ♠A Q and you hold ♠4 3. Lead from your hand — never from dummy.

Led from your side, the king is trapped: if it is on your left it never scores. Cash the ace first and lead the queen instead, and the king simply covers it. The direction is more than half of playing a suit correctly.

About 50%, and it costs nothing to try.



The repeated finesse

♥A Q 10 opposite ♥5 4 3 — finesse the ten first, then the queen.

You need only one of the king and the jack to be onside for two tricks: three times in four. Both onside gives you all three, one time in four. Two missing honours means two separate chances.

The ruffing finesse

Dummy holds ♣A Q J and you are void. Cash the ace, then lead the queen.

If the king appears you ruff it. If it does not, your loser goes away on the jack. You no longer need the king in a particular hand — only that it is not played, and you hold a trump to punish it if it is.

Trump contracts only, and one of the few finesses that does not care where the missing card sits.



The auction has often decided it for you

An opponent who opened the bidding holds the missing king far more often than their partner does.

Finessing into the hand that cannot hold the card is a wasted trick. Read the auction before you read the spot cards — and if the choice of direction is yours, take the one the bidding points at.

And do not take a finesse you do not need: half a chance is a poor trade for a certainty.



Eight ever, nine never

You hold the ace and king and are missing the queen. Finesse, or cash and hope it falls?

Cards you hold	Missing	Play for the drop	Finesse
Eight	5, including the queen	about 33%	about 50% — ever finesse
Nine	4, including the queen	about 52%	about 50% — never finesse

Two points in it, so it is a tiebreaker and not a law. A preempt, a shown long suit or a count you have taken all beat the couplet.



The question is not "most tricks"

A safety play is a deliberate loss that guards against a break you could not otherwise survive.

It answers "which line takes the tricks I actually need" — a different question from "which line takes the most", and often with a different answer.

Needing four from ♠A K J 3 2 opposite ♠10 9 8 7: cash the ace first. The finesse is still there next round, so it costs nothing — and it wins the case where the queen is singleton offside.



Three cautions

They have to be worked out suit by suit. Cashing a top honour first preserves the finesse in one holding and destroys it in another.

They cost tricks. At matchpoints, where overtricks are the currency, the arithmetic can reverse.

They need a spare trick. You can only give one away if the count says so — which means doing the count first.

Some suits are worth more when they lead them

A tenace gains a trick when the suit is led into it, and loses one when you lead away from it.

♠A Q opposite ♠4 3 is one trick if you must play it and two if your left-hand opponent does. ♥A J 3 opposite ♥K 10 2 is three tricks with no guess at all if either defender opens the suit.

So cash your certainties and run your long suits first, and leave the gussy holdings alone as long as you can.

They have been telling you things

And unlike your own hand, you did not have to pay for any of it.

What they bid — an opening places points, a preempt places seven cards, an overcall places a suit.

What they did not bid — a defender silent all auction is unlikely to hold the king you are missing.

The opening lead — their agreements are information: top of a sequence, fourth-highest, a low card denying the ace.

Their signals to each other — count and attitude are given to partner and read by you.

Who shows out — the moment a defender cannot follow, that suit is settled exactly, for good.

The Rule of 11 works for declarer too: subtract the card led from 11, and you can see two of the three hands it counts.



Count the hand and the guess disappears

When three suits are known, the fourth is arithmetic.

A defender marked with five spades, four hearts and two diamonds holds exactly two clubs. The queen you were about to guess for is now a two-in-eleven shot in one hand and nine-in-eleven in the other — so you play the other defender for it, and there is nothing left to guess.

The hold-up breaks their communication

Refuse to win early, so the hand with the long suit runs out of ways to reach it.

The Rule of Seven gives the number: seven minus the cards you and dummy hold in the suit is how many rounds to duck. With five between the hands, duck twice.

Wrong when the danger is a switch to something worse, and wrong when the entry sits in the leader's own hand.

Name the danger hand, then keep it off lead

Usually only one defender can hurt you. The other is safe.

Once you know which is which, several decisions make themselves: finesse into the safe hand, duck to the safe hand, and play the suit from the side that leaves the danger hand playing second rather than fourth.

This is what turns a collection of techniques into a plan — not "most tricks", but "never the wrong opponent on lead".



Count losers, not winners

Count them from the hand with the longer trumps — usually your own.

In a trump contract the trumps make too many things possible for a winner count to settle. A loser is a card the opponents can win: ♠A 8 4 is two losers, ♠K 3 is one, ♥A K Q is none.

In 4♠ you can afford three. If the count says five, the plan has to dispose of two — and there are exactly three ways.



Three ways to lose a loser

RUFF IT

In the SHORT trump hand. Ruffing in the long hand trades a trick for a trick — those trumps were winning anyway.

DISCARD IT

Set up a side suit and throw losers on its winners. ♦ A K Q opposite ♦ 6 5 is three tricks and two parking spaces.

FINESSE IT

The same finesse as in notrump, the same odds — and sometimes the only chance you have.

Draw trumps — except when you must not

The default is to draw them. Every trump left out is a chance for a defender to ruff a winner of yours.

Not when dummy's trumps are needed to ruff losers — draw them and the ruffs go too.

Not when dummy's trumps are your entries to a suit you have to establish.

Not when a discard is urgent and must be taken before they can attack that suit.

Count them out as they go: "five out, three gone, two to go", from the first round to the last.



Trump control

Your trumps are not only tricks. While you hold more than they do, you decide when a suit stops running.

A forcing defence leads their long suit again and again; each ruff shortens you and not them. Ruff three times from five and they hold as many trumps as you do — at which point drawing them is impossible and your side suits start getting ruffed.

Ducking a round of the forcing suit is cheap. Losing control is not. In a 4-3 fit, expect to be forced.



The crossruff — cash first, ruff later

Ruff in both hands alternately and each trump scores separately. But take your side winners before you start.

Once the crossruff begins the defenders are discarding, and the ace you were saving gets ruffed. Count first: side-suit winners plus the trumps you can ruff with separately. If that does not reach the contract, a crossruff is the wrong plan.

You never draw trumps, so every ruff is exposed to an overruff — ruff low cards high.



Three terms, three simple ideas

LOSER ON LOSER

A trick you are losing anyway is a free place to throw a card. Concede one, shed two. Avoids an overruff, sets up a suit, or picks who is on lead.

RUFF AND SLUFF

They lead a suit both your hands are void in: ruff one side, discard a loser from the other. A whole trick, given away. A defender who concedes one has usually been endplayed.

DUMMY REVERSAL

Ruff in your LONG hand and draw trumps with dummy's. Needs enough trumps in dummy, the entries to move about, and a hand where ordinary play is a trick short.



3NT, and the suit you must not touch

West leads the Q. You need nine.

DUMMY (NORTH)

K63

Q54

KQJ5

982

YOU (SOUTH)

A74

K62

A1043

K73

Two spades, four diamond honours and the K is seven. The diamonds are eight cards missing five — a 3-2 break makes them six tricks, and six plus two plus one is nine.



East is the danger hand — so never play a heart

Duck the first club, win the second, run the diamonds, cash the spades. Nine tricks with the hearts untouched.

West led from a club sequence and has no entry. East has one — the ♥A — and still holds clubs to push through your king. Play a heart at any point and East wins, returns a club, and West cashes the suit before you have nine.

The suit that looks like a free trick is the suit that beats you.



The endplay

Take away every safe card a defender holds, then hand them the lead on purpose.

It needs three things: a position that punishes any return — a tenace, or a suit both your hands are void in; a stripped hand with no safe exit left; and a cheap card to give them the lead with at the exact moment the strip is complete.

You do not find the king. You arrange for someone else to find it for you — which is why counting the hand comes first.



The squeeze

One defender guards two of your suits and cannot keep both.

Three requirements: the count rectified — lose your losers early, so you can win all but one of the remaining tricks; a threat in each of two suits, one of them opposite an entry; and a squeeze card in a third suit whose play forces the discard.

And a fourth, about them rather than you: ONE defender must guard both threats. Split the guards and nobody is under pressure.



Trump coups and promotions

Trump tricks out of positions that look like nothing.

A trump promotion is mostly a defensive weapon — they lead a suit both are out of and you must ruff high in front of their trump. A trump coup is declarer's version: shorten your own trumps to their length, then lead a plain suit so they must ruff in front of you.

Rare. Here so the names mean something — and because both come from counting, like everything else in this lesson.

Standard suit combinations

Dummy's holding first, yours second. "Lead toward" always means from the hand without the honour.

Holding	Missing	Play	Expect
A Q • x x	K	Lead toward the queen	2 half the time
A Q J • x x x	K	Lead toward twice	3 half the time
A K J • x x x	Q	Ace, then finesse the jack	3 half the time
A Q 10 • x x x	K J	Finesse the ten, then the queen	2 three times in four
K x • x x	A	Lead toward the king	1 half the time
K Q x • x x x	A	Lead toward twice	2 half the time
Q J 10 • x x x	A K	Lead the queen and keep leading	1, always
A K x x x • x x x	5	Cash, then a third round	5 on a 3-2 break — 68%

Two finesses against ONE missing honour are one chance, not two — which is why A Q J does no better than A Q, and A Q 10 does better than both.

The five commonest mistakes

Playing to trick one before making a plan. The commonest and the most expensive.

Cashing winners first. Your top cards will not run away; establish while you still hold controls.

Drawing trumps on autopilot when dummy's trumps were the plan.

Forgetting entries. Every plan that sets up a suit needs a way back to it.

Taking a finesse you do not need. If the contract is cold on a normal break, take the certainty.

Declarer play in one screen

PLAN FIRST

Tricks needed, tricks certain, where the rest come from — before the first card.

COUNT

Winners in notrump, losers in a trump contract, from the long-trump hand.

LEAD TOWARD

Toward the card you hope will win, never away from it.

EIGHT EVER, NINE NEVER

Missing the queen: finesse with eight, drop with nine — unless you know better.

THE DANGER HAND

Name it, then keep it off lead. Leave your tenaces for them to open.

TRUMPS

Draw them unless dummy's are the plan — and count them out as they go.

Everything else — endplays, squeezes, coups — is this same discipline, applied later in the deal.

Practise it in Play With Coaching, where the AI explains every card as you go.