



Defensive Play and Carding

The lead, each seat in turn, and the signals that tie them together

Upside-down signals · you are South, partner is North

Both sides see 26 cards — one side plays them together

Declarer sees their hand and dummy. Each defender sees their own hand and dummy. The sight is even.

The advantage is CONTROL, not information. Declarer plays both of those hands as one unit, knowing exactly what sits in each and planning them together. You play only your own thirteen and cannot see partner's — so the defense must coordinate two hands that neither defender can see at once.



Your job changes with your seat

Leading · second to play · third to play · fourth to play. Four different problems.

How much you know when it is your turn depends entirely on where you sit at that trick. Leading, you know least; playing fourth, you know everything. Almost every rule of defense is really a rule about one of those four positions.

Learn the four seats first. Signals come afterwards, and will make far more sense for it.



The one card chosen blind

The opening lead is made BEFORE dummy appears.

Every other card in the deal is chosen with dummy face up. This one is chosen on the auction alone, which makes it the hardest card of the deal — and very often the one that decides it.

The defender to declarer's left leads. Dummy goes down only after that card is on the table.



What to lead

These are partnership agreements, so the same list tells you what to lead AND what partner's lead meant.

Top of a sequence The king from K-Q-J. Safe — it cannot cost a trick — and it promotes the cards behind it.

Fourth highest From your longest suit against NOTRUMP. It shows length, not strength.

Third or fifth highest Against a SUIT contract: third from a three- or four-card suit, fifth from five or more.

A doubleton, high then low Against a suit contract, hunting a third-round ruff.

Exception: from a doubleton headed by the KING, lead low instead, so the king is not wasted.



Never underlead an ace against a suit contract

And therefore: a low lead DENIES the ace.

Underlead an ace and declarer may win with a bare king or queen you would otherwise have captured — the ace never gets to do its job. Because neither defender ever does it, the rule works in both directions.

So when a low card appears from partner, you can place the ace elsewhere immediately.



Which SUIT to lead — this matters more

Picking the suit is a bigger decision than picking the card inside it.

Partner's bid suit They spent a bid telling you they have length and strength there. Believe them — it is right far more often than it feels.

A major against notrump If they reached 3NT without finding a major fit, neither holds four in a major the other could support. That is where they are thinnest.

Through strength, up to weakness You want the STRONG hand playing second, so partner plays last and can capture what it produces — and the WEAK hand playing fourth.

In practice: dummy on your left, lead through it. Dummy on your right, lead toward its weakness.



The Rule of 11 — arithmetic that reads declarer's hand

Partner led fourth-highest? Subtract that card's rank from 11.

The answer is how many higher cards are in the OTHER THREE hands combined — dummy, declarer and you. You can see dummy and your own hand, so subtract those and you have declarer's exact number.

It works only when the lead really was fourth-highest — so against a suit contract, where third and fifth are led, it does not apply.



Rule of 11, worked through

Against 3NT, partner leads the $\spadesuit 6$ — fourth highest. Eleven minus six is FIVE: five diamonds above the six sit outside partner's hand.

DUMMY SHOWS $\heartsuit$ K 9 4 → two above the six

YOU HOLD $\heartsuit$ A J 3 → two above the six

SO DECLARER HAS $\heartsuit$ 5 - 4 = exactly one

J $\heartsuit$

And the jack is safe

Declarer holds just one diamond higher than the six. That one fact tells you the suit is nearly ready to run, and that your jack cannot be swallowed by a string of higher cards — the arithmetic, not a guess, is what makes the play clear.



Reading what partner led

Decoding trick one is often what makes the rest of the defense obvious.

An honor The top of a sequence. A king promises the queen and jack behind it — so you can place declarer's honors at once.

A low card Length, not strength. Count the suit and you can often work out declarer's holding exactly.

High, then low A doubleton. Partner wants a ruff on the third round — give it to them.

A low card Denies the ace. It is somewhere else, and that may change your whole plan.



Second hand low

An opponent leads and you play second — the default is your lowest card.

Your honors are worth more sitting BEHIND declarer's. Play one early and declarer captures it with a bigger card; wait, and declarer has to commit first, letting you play over the top of whatever they choose.

You are also the least informed player at the trick. Cheap and patient is usually right.



Exception 1 — split your touching honors

A low card is led and you hold two or more touching honors: play the LOWEST of them.

From Q-J-5, play the jack. It forces a top card out of the hand after you, and it promotes your queen — while the queen itself stays safely behind declarer.



Exception 2 — cover an honor with an honor

An honor is led and you hold a higher one: cover with your CHEAPEST higher honor.

Two enemy honors crash on the same trick, and partner's middling cards grow up behind them. A ten or a nine that was worth nothing can become a winner.



Third hand high — but as cheaply as possible

Play high enough to win the trick or force out a higher card. Never higher than that.

Partner has led and one opponent has played in between. Your job is to fight for the trick without spending more than the fight is worth — the difference between winning with the jack and winning with the king is a whole honor.



With touching honors, play the lowest

From K-Q-J, play the JACK.

It wins exactly as often as the king would. And if declarer beats it with the ace, partner now knows you hold the king and queen — the cheaper card won the same trick and told partner more.

Gaps dummy fills still count as touching: K-J with the queen in dummy is a run.

Do not crash partner's winner

Partner leads the ♣K, which promises the queen behind it, and it is beating dummy's card.

YOU HOLD

♣ A 10 4

4♣

Play the 4

Overtaking would spend two honors — partner's king and your ace — on a single trick that is already won. Play low and keep the ace sitting over dummy.

Third hand HIGH assumes the trick is in doubt. When partner is already winning it, it does not apply.



The two times you DO overtake

Both are about the shape of your holding, not its strength.

Two cards or fewer A bare ace, or an ace with one small card. Overtake so your high card cannot later jam the suit — with three or more, as in A-10-4, you play low.

Two cards above partner's honor You can afford to take control: overtake with the CHEAPER of them and keep the higher one.

Trap dummy's honors when dummy has already played

Partner leads the ♠2. Dummy sits to your right, holds ♠K 10 4, and follows with the 4 — so only declarer, playing after you, can still beat your card.

DUMMY

♠ K 10 4 (played the 4)

YOU HOLD

♠ Q 9 6

9♠

Play the 9

Play the 9, not the queen. If it loses to the ace or the jack, your queen still sits over dummy's K-10 and will take one of them later. Spend the queen now and declarer wins the ace — after which dummy's king AND ten both score.

Keep the higher card as a guard; play your highest winner below it.



Fourth hand knows everything

Three cards are already on the table. You are the only player who can see the whole trick.

No guesswork is needed here, which makes it the easiest seat — and the one where a careless card is least forgivable. If your side is not already winning the trick, win it as CHEAPLY as you can.



If partner is already winning, spend nothing

Do not overtake partner's winner, and never ruff a trick partner has already won.

The trick is yours. Any honor you add to it is thrown away, and any trump you spend is one fewer stopping declarer later.

A card that cannot win anything is a card that is free to do something else — which is where signals come in.

You won the trick — now what?

Return partner's suit With a doubleton left, lead the HIGH one. From longer, return your original FOURTH-BEST — from an original A-J-7-3, win the ace and return the 3.

A fresh suit of your own Top of a sequence — the king from K-Q-J. Safe, and it promotes what sits behind it.

Ruffing Use the LOWEST trump that does the job.

Returning your original fourth-best tells partner how long you started — the return is itself a message.



Now the cards that were free all along

Second hand low. Third hand can't win. Fourth hand, partner already has it. In every one of those, your card was doing nothing.

You have now met the positions where the choice of card cannot change who wins the trick. Those are precisely the cards that can carry information instead — at no cost whatever.

That is what signalling is: spending nothing, and telling partner something.



The cards are the only channel you have

You cannot speak, gesture, or hesitate meaningfully — but WHICH card you choose is legal information.

Agreed with partner in advance, and disclosed to the opponents. It is the one way two defenders who cannot see each other's hands are allowed to cooperate.

Three questions, three signals

Partner only ever needs to know one of three things, and each has its own moment.

Signal	The question it answers	When you give it
Attitude	"Do I like this suit?"	The FIRST time you play a suit
Count	"How many cards do I hold?"	When you are simply following suit
Discard	"What should you lead?"	When you cannot follow and must throw

Work out which moment you are in first. The right signal follows from that.



Everything here is upside-down

A LOW card is the good news. Every time.

This system plays upside-down (reverse) signals. Once you have that single fact, all three signals follow from it — you are never memorizing three separate conventions.

LOW = "I like it" · LOW = an EVEN number · LOW = "lead this suit".



Why upside-down is worth the confusion

Encouraging costs you a card you can spare, instead of one you wanted to keep.

With standard signals, "I like this suit" means throwing a high spot — often a card that would have won a trick later. Reversing it means the good news is delivered by your cheapest card.

The cost is that it feels backwards for a while. It stops feeling backwards.



Never spend an honor on a signal

A, K, Q, J and 10 are for winning tricks, not for talking.

Holding A-8-3 and wanting to show an odd count, you play the 8 — never the ace. Always the cheapest card that carries the message, because the message is worth nothing if it costs a trick.



And a signal must never cost a trick

When discouraging, choose the highest spot card still BELOW dummy's top card in that suit.

That way the card you throw away can never be promoted into a winner you would otherwise have taken. You get to send the message and keep the trick.



Attitude answers a question PARTNER asked

Given when partner led the suit and you cannot influence the trick.

You met this position two sections ago: partner's ace is winning, so your card cannot change who takes the trick. Partner is asking "should I keep going?" — attitude is the answer, and the card is free to give it.

Partner led it. That is the condition — not merely that it is your first card in the suit.



When do you actually "like" a suit?

Not "do I have something" — "is this suit worth partner continuing".

Ace or king Your top card in the suit is the ace or the king.

Touching honors Two or more in a row — and gaps that DUMMY fills still count. K-J opposite dummy's Q is a run.

Short, in a trump contract A doubleton or singleton. Here the low card asks for a RUFF rather than promising values.

Anything else Discourage. Most of the time you are discouraging, and that is normal.



Encouraging: play your lowest

Contract 4♠ by West. Partner leads the ♥A and it is winning, so your card cannot affect this trick.

YOU HOLD

♥ K J 10 5 3

3♥

Play the 3

The K-J-10 behind the ace means this suit is well worth continuing, so you encourage — and encouraging is the LOW card. The 3 says "keep going" while costing you nothing at all.



Discouraging: the highest card you can spare

Same contract, same ♥A lead — but this time your holding has nothing behind it.

YOU HOLD

♥ J 6 5 2

6♥

Play the 6

A high spot says "switch". Note what you do NOT play: the jack. An honor is never spent on a signal, and the 6 sends the identical message for free.

Highest card you can SAFELY afford — never one that could have won a trick.



Count tells partner how long you are

LOW = an EVEN number. High-then-low = an ODD number. Always your ORIGINAL length.

Given when declarer is running a suit and you cannot win it — the second-hand-low position, where your card was doing nothing anyway. Count describes what you STARTED with in the suit, not what you have left: partner is reconstructing the whole deal, so the original number is the useful one.

That high-then-low sequence is called an ECHO. Once you start one, always finish it.



Why partner wants your length

They add your length to dummy's and to their own — and the rest is declarer's.

Knowing declarer's exact holding tells partner when a suit is about to run out, and whether an ace held up will still be there to cash or will get ruffed. It is the most useful thing you can tell them.

Count is the signal experienced defenders rely on most.



Even, odd, and the ace you must not spend

Declarer is running diamonds and you cannot win the trick. Three different holdings, three different cards.

FOUR (EVEN)

♦ 8 5 3 2 → play the 2

THREE (ODD)

♦ 8 5 3 → play the 8, then the 5

WITH THE ACE

♦ A 8 3 → play the 8

8♦

Odd count: high now, low next

The third case is the one worth remembering: it is an odd holding, so it echoes — but the echo starts with the 8, never the ace. Honors are not signals.



Which signal am I giving? Look at who LED

Partner led it → attitude. · Declarer or dummy led it → count.

Both assume you cannot influence who wins the trick. The difference is what partner needs: when they lead, they are asking "should I keep going?" When declarer runs a suit, nobody is asking you anything, so the useful thing to add is your length.

And once attitude has been shown in a suit, every later card in it shows count too.



When you cannot afford to signal at all

Trick two: PARTNER led the ♥A and you played the 2 from ♥Q J 6 2 — attitude, "I like hearts". At trick six hearts are led again.

YOU NOW HOLD

♥ Q J 6

J ♥

Play the jack

Attitude is already known, so this would be a count card — and count would mean showing your ORIGINAL four, not the three you have left. But both the queen and the jack are far too valuable to spend on a message. The jack is right for a different reason entirely: it is the lowest of touching honors, splitting them in case the hand after you holds the ace, and perfectly safe if partner holds it instead.

Card value outranks signalling. A signal is only free when the cards really are equivalent.



Your first discard chooses partner's next lead

It is an instruction, not a hint.

When you cannot follow suit, the card you throw is the clearest message in defense — and partner will act on it. Make the FIRST one count; later discards are often forced and mean much less.



What to throw

LOW in a suit you can win "Lead this." Encourage only with a suit headed by the ace or king AND at least three long, so throwing one still leaves the honor guarded.

HIGH in a suit you do not care about Steers partner away and leaves them to work out the rest.

Never a trump Your trumps are the only thing stopping declarer ruffing freely.

The whole system on one card

LEAD TOP OF A SEQUENCE

fourth highest against notrump, third or fifth against a suit — and never underlead an ace

SECOND HAND LOW

unless you are splitting touching honors or covering one

THIRD HAND HIGH

but as cheaply as possible — and never crash partner's winner

FOURTH HAND CHEAPEST

you can see the whole trick; win it for the least you can

LOW = LIKE, LOW = EVEN

attitude and discards encourage low; a high-low echo shows an odd number

HONORS ARE NOT SIGNALS

always the cheapest card that carries the message

Practice: Test your defense at bridge.jmariada.org.

Your robot partner defends by exactly these rules.