

# Opening Leads

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**When making an opening lead, you have two decisions: What suit shall I lead and which card should I lead?**

Why do we have agreements about our leads and our defensive signals? We have an underlying principle tied in with the very definition of the game. Declarer can see two hands and on his own can make a plan of attack. The defenders need to cooperate in order to defeat declarer's plans (even when declarer has no plan).

One of the problems with lead and signal agreements is that the rules require that defenders must share their agreements with declarer. In spite of this, it is critically necessary to become a good bridge player and a good partnership to have defensive signaling methods.

***Remember: Declarer might not believe you, even when you are being honest. A good partner will always believe you (well at least a big majority of the time).***

If you were to kibitz the pair who some would say is the best bridge partnership in the world, Jeff Meckstroth and Eric Rodwell, you would see that they try and signal clearly to partner about their holdings. They lead normally for the same reason. It is similar with other experts. In bridge you never say never. There are times for unusual leads and defensive false cards, but those are rare and limited to specific situations, often when you know because of your hand that partner does not have any values to contribute to the defensive effort.

Any expert will tell you that the most important skill for good opening leads is listening. Listen to the auction. Sometimes listen to what didn't happen! Eddie Kantar says: "You cannot defend properly unless you remember the bidding". Opening leads are difficult, but there are often clues in partner's and the opponents' bidding. A great tip from Billy Miller (Ask Billy) in the A.C.B.L. Bulletin was to think about the opening lead without looking at your hand! Sometimes the auction tells you what to lead and then checking your hand confirms or overrules that. Again, a tip from Eddie: "You cannot defend properly unless you know what system the opponents are playing.", in other words, you need to understand the bidding.

Standard lead agreements have been devised mainly to aid in playing card combinations that, until dummy hits, are unseen. They try and cater to the *most likely* possibilities. In spite of that, in some cases almost any play can backfire spectacularly. I have seen a lead that looks very safe, the Jack from JT97 give our side an otherwise no play slam. Our A.C.B.L. convention card helps by telling us the standard leads in **BOLD**. Find out how to fill this part at <http://web2.acbl.org/documentLibrary/play/ConventionalWisdom/CW%20may%2006.pdf>.

The rule: "Lead 4<sup>th</sup> best from your longest and strongest" has more to do with "longest and strongest", than with specifically "4<sup>th</sup> best". Leading a long suit is backed by the reasoning that we are attacking what might be our sides combined longest suit. As well, it may be a short suit of declarer's and therefore will set up tricks for us in NT, or give little away in a suit contract. This combines aggression and passivity in about the right mix.

## a) 4<sup>th</sup> best

A simple principle: Lacking an honour sequence, the lead is the 4<sup>th</sup> best spot card.

QT653  
K982

QT65  
K9872

QT65432  
K98732

This does not apply to interior sequences. From QT987, the lead is always the Ten, never the 8 (AQJT9 AJT98 AT987 KJT98 KT987). The decision on whether to lead an honour from a sequence or a low card depends on whether it is NT or a suit, what the auction was and the specific holding.

**b) The Rule of Eleven.**

This is a way for 3<sup>rd</sup> hand (and unfortunately declarer) to make use of 4<sup>th</sup> best leads. Deduct the spot card lead from 11. Then subtract the number of higher cards you can see in dummy and your own hand. The remaining number is the number of cards declarer has larger than partners lead.

e.g. Partner leads the 6 in their bid suit and dummy has AJ5. The five is played and you have Q972.

$$11 - 6 = 5 \quad 5 - 2 \text{ (AJ)} = 3 \quad 3 - 3 \text{ (Q97)} = 0 !!!$$

Declarer cannot beat the six, so you can play 9, 7 or 2, knowing that partner has lead from KT86. BEWARE OF LEADING M.U.D. (It makes the leads harder to read).

**c) Partner's suit**

**A Fundamental Bridge Rule:** You might not be right when you lead partner's suit, but you can never be wrong.

**d) Low from Honour third.**

If you have decided to lead the suit with Hxx, the lowest card is the correct card, even though partner may think you have a four card or longer suit.

**e) Other Old Axioms**

**1) When in doubt lead a trump:** Trump leads have their time and place, but people often use this rule because they are always in doubt!

Lead a trump when you have length and strength in declarer's first bid suit.

Lead a trump when they have bid two suits and end in a third.

Beware of trump leads when you have something like three small (xxx) in declarer's first bid suit.

Consider a trump lead vs. a doubled contract, especially if we have most of the high card strength.

Lead a trump when they have opened a 3 suited bid.

Often lead a trump when they have opened Flannery.

Avoid leading singleton trumps unless the auction demands a trump lead.

**2) Lead through strength:** This rule is often used to get people to avoid a different bad opening lead.

**3) U.B.S. – Lead the UnBid Suit:** Not a bad rule for NT. When they have bid three suits, the fourth suit is often inviting, but listen to the auction, sometimes there is a better choice.

**4) Dummy's 2<sup>nd</sup> bid suit (vs. NT):** When the choice is between suits bid by declare or dummy, often lead the second suit bid by dummy.

**5) "Top of nothing":** This is similar to "when in doubt lead a trump". Players, who are afraid to lead away from something, will lead high from two small, three small or four small.

**6) Never lead away from a King:** Listen to the bidding. If the auction suggests leading a suit lead away from that King, take a chance, live a little!

**f) Standard Honour leads.**

Against either a suit or notrump, when we lead from an honour sequence, we lead the top of the sequence. This is clear when we have three cards in sequence or even a one card gap:

( KQJx(x) QJTx(x) JT9x(x) T98x(x) KQTx(x) QJ9x(x) JT8x(x) T97x(x) )

Against a suit contract, the honour is almost always led. It is also usually correct with a two card sequence, though riskier when you have no third card “near” the sequence: ( KQx(x) QJx(x) JTx(x) T9x(x) ) BEWARE QJx, SINCE FOR ME DUMMY ALWAYS SEEMS TO HAVE ATx or KTx.

Against NT the 4<sup>th</sup> best card is usually lead, unless the sequence is 3 cards in a row ( KQJ2 QJT4 JT95 ), or the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest card is close to the 2<sup>nd</sup> honour ( KQT4 QJ96 JT87; KQ84 QJ86 JT76 )

The lead of the Ace against NT is the **POWER** lead, asking for partner to unblock, or if they hold no honour, to give count ( AKJT8 AKQT97 AKQT ) It has also become standard in NT to lead the Queen from KQT9 or KQTx(x). Partner is expected to overtake the queen with the ace (unless the King is visible in dummy), or unblock the Jack if they have it. With no honour they are to give count.

The standard lead is to lead King from AKx, but then there is confusion vs. King from KQx. The solution adopted by most players is to lead Ace from AKx and then the only confusion arises if you have chosen to lead an “unsupported” ace ( Axx ).

**g) High & 2<sup>nd</sup> high from bad suits.**

When I lead 4<sup>th</sup> best I have an honour. For this rule, the ten is sometimes an honour, but usually not. Lacking an honour I lead the highest card from a sequence and the 2<sup>nd</sup> highest card from a non-sequence. This is not standard, but it is a common agreement (Similar to Top of Nothing)

e.g. T8643                      98654                      J6543                      9754                      6543

**h) Non-standard Methods.**

**i) 3<sup>rd</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> best leads**

This helps distinguish between the actual length of the opening leader’s suit, while leaving the honour holding in some doubt. If you play this method you must lead small from xxx to avoid confusion. It is sometimes superior vs. suit contracts, but not as beneficial vs. NT.

**ii) Modern High Honours vs. NT**

There have been some changes in the last few years to the following scheme. I recommend these changes, but they do require some getting used to.

King – the new POWER lead; asks for unblock or count, so therefore becomes the lead instead of Ace or Queen.

AKJT8                      KQT9  
AKQT97                      KQT76

The lead of the Ace or Queen asks for attitude. These cards are lead from honour sequences not as strong as those above.

AKJ65                      KQT2  
AKT87                      KQ983  
AK32                      KQ2

A76                      (That is, if you have decided  
this is the right suit to lead)

**iii) Coded Tens and Nines**

In this method the lead of a Jack denies a higher honour. From all interior sequences the 3<sup>rd</sup> highest card, i.e. the Ten or the Nine is lead, thus they are “Zero or Two Higher”. This method helps defenders, but in my view crosses the line by helping declarer more.

**iv) 2<sup>nd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> best leads**

Part of Polish standard methods, it is an extension of 4<sup>th</sup> best leads, combined with 2<sup>nd</sup> from bad suits. They lead small from a doubleton (part of 2<sup>nd</sup> highest).

**v) Attitude vs. NT**

In these methods the lowest card is always lead in any situation that would otherwise be a 4<sup>th</sup> best lead, regardless of whether the suit is four, five or even nine cards long. High or 2<sup>nd</sup> high is led from bad suits. It has the advantage of concealing the opening leader’s length from declarer, but the disadvantage of hiding it from partner.

**i) vs. unusual contracts**

Regardless of your AK agreements, the lead of an Ace against a slam **denies** the King and asks for attitude. From AK, lead the King and partner should give count, so you know if the other trick is cashing. Some people also use that rule at the 5 level and against doubled contracts. This is up to you and your partner to agree.

As a general rule against a suit slam **ATTACK!** In many situations you should lead away from a Queen or a King in order to try and set up your side’s 2<sup>nd</sup> trick (The one that goes with the trick you think you have, since they stopped in SIX).

Against Grand Slams and NoTrump small slams be **PASSIVE**. Most of the time, make the lead most likely to give nothing away (an honour sequence is one of those safe things).

If declarer has opened a gambling 3NT, it is common to lead an Ace or even an unsupported King.

**j) Avoid leads from xx or xxx.**

These types of leads are usually too passive and either give up a vital tempo or tend to help declarer set up tricks rather than us setting up tricks. Also, partner might think when you lead a shorter suit that you might have a singleton. (This suggestion does not apply when partner has bid this suit.)

If you lead from a doubleton (xx), the high card is the correct lead. Against a suit contract, there is no general agreement on the lead from three small (xxx), which to me suggests it is good to look elsewhere for a lead.

**k) When is partner’s lead a singleton?**

These are all possibilities. It is not certain that these are singletons, but it is more likely than not.

- i) When you have bid and raised a suit and partner leads another suit.
- ii) When your side bids a suit and partner leads one of the opponents suit.
- iii) When you lead into declarer’s second suit.