

Opening Leads: When to be aggressive

Some opening leads are relatively easy. If you're on lead after the opponents bid 1NT-3NT, for example, the old guideline of "fourth down from your longest and strongest suit" works well on most hands. You also have an easy lead if partner has overcalled a suit, or when you have a suit with a strong honor holding (KQJ, QJ10, AK, etc.).

On many hands, though, your choice won't be as clear, and that's why opening leads are one of the most difficult parts of the game. Making a good one requires careful analysis of the auction. On some difficult hands, you'll want to make a passive, safe opening lead that isn't likely to give away a trick -- such as a lead from a "topless" suit like 87643 or 10982. On other hands, it will pay to make an aggressive lead, such as an underlead of an unprotected honor.

How do you know when an aggressive lead is the best choice? One of your strongest clues comes when the opponents have an auction that identifies a long, strong side suit that can be set up as a source of tricks. For example, suppose you're North holding:

♠A5 ♥743 ♦KJ953 ♣Q72

and it's your lead after your opponents have the following auction:

<u>West</u>	<u>East</u>
1S	2H
2S	4S

Your best opening lead is probably the 5 of diamonds (fourth best). You hope partner has either the ace or queen of diamonds, but even if he doesn't, your risky lead may not cost anything. Dummy has shown a long (and probably strong) heart suit that may be used to pitch declarer's losers. It's important to set up possible tricks for your side right now, while you still have the trump ace as an entry to cash them.

How about leads to higher-level contracts? When the opponents bid a small slam, your natural instinct may be to make a safe opening lead, but on some hands, being passive can give away the contract. An aggressive lead is often your only chance to beat a slam, especially if the opponents have shown great strength and/or a side fit. For example, suppose your opponents bid to 6H via this auction:

<u>West</u>	<u>East</u>
1H	2D
3D	4NT
5H	6H

And you're on lead with ♠109874 ♥762 ♦A3 ♣K102.

The spade 10 looks safe, but it doesn't rate to set up a trick for your side. That would require partner to have the spade king and dummy to have the ace (or partner to have KJ and dummy the queen), *and* declarer and dummy to each have at least two spades. It's better to set your sights lower and play partner for the club queen. Lead the club 2 and hope you can set up and cash a club when you get in with the diamond ace. If it happens that you've led into declarer's AQ of clubs, you may have lost nothing, since it's likely that his potential club losers would have been pitched on dummy's diamonds.

Opening Leads: When to be passive

Some auctions (such as those where the opponents have shown a good source of tricks outside the trump suit) call for an aggressive, potentially risky opening lead -- one that will probably give away a trick if partner has no honors in the suit, but may set the contract if he does. On other hands, you need to be more patient and let declarer work for all his tricks. Your goal on these hands is to make a safe opening lead that won't give declarer an undeserved trick.

A "safe" lead may also be an attacking combination -- such as a suit headed by AK, KQJ or QJ10 -- and these are usually good choices for a lead to any contract. You won't always be dealt these easy holdings, though, so you'll sometimes have to select a "passive" lead. Passive leads include:

- **A lead from a topless suit** (such as 8754), especially one in which you don't expect partner to hold an honor. When in doubt, lead *through* strength by choosing a suit dummy (rather than declarer) has bid.
- **A lead from length** -- such as fourth best from Q9653 or K87432. Even though underleading an honor is "standard" to a notrump contract, it can be risky against a suit contract. Length, however, gives you a margin of safety -- the longer your suit, the less likely it is that declarer will need to develop his own tricks in it.
- **A trump**, in some cases.

How do you know when one of these passive leads is your best choice? Here are some of the contracts and types of auctions that call for a safe, non-attacking opening lead:

1 - The opponents are in 6NT or a grand slam. An exception is if the opponents bid 6NT after an auction that suggests that declarer's main source of tricks will be a long, strong suit. In this case, you may want to make an aggressive opening lead (away from an honor) to try to set up a trick you can cash if you get the lead later.

2 - The auction tells you that declarer has a strong hand and dummy (and/or partner) will be weak.

Suppose your right-hand opponent opens 2NT (20-22 pts.) and left-hand-opponent raises to 3NT. What's your lead from:

♠987 ♥AJ92 ♦KQ54 ♣Q7 ?

If you follow the "fourth-down-from-your-longest-and-strongest" rule, you'd choose the ♥2 or the ♦5. But with almost all the outstanding honors on your right, either of these leads has an unusually high risk of giving declarer a "free" trick. Partner can't hold more than 3 high-card points, so it's not a good idea to count on him for help in a specific suit.

A better choice is a passive ♠9. A spade is unlikely to set up any quick tricks for your side, but it probably won't help declarer. Declarer will have to give you the lead soon, and if your spade lead was indeed "safe," you should probably continue leading them. If a switch is called for, you'll have a better idea of what suit to choose later.

Note that you do *not* want to lead a diamond honor. A diamond will probably only be right if partner has the ♦J or ♦A, so if you did want to lead diamonds, the correct lead from this holding would be low (the ♦4). If partner has no honors -- and declarer has a holding like ♦AJ109 -- leading the ♦K will give him *three* eventual tricks. If you instead lead low, declarer can't take more than two tricks in the suit.

3 - The auction suggests that both opponents are fairly balanced.

On these hands, declarer will usually have to play the side suits himself, so it's best to sit back and wait for your tricks. For example, suppose you're South holding:

♠Q74 ♥5 ♦108432 ♣K1032

and it's your lead after your opponents have the following auction:

West	East
--	1H

2NT* 4H * (Jacoby 2NT, forcing heart raise)

With the Jacoby 2NT convention, East's 4H bid showed a minimum opener with no singleton and no interest in slam. Although the opponents have game-level strength, they rate to be fairly balanced -- opener had an opportunity to show a singleton over 2NT, and responder might have chosen a different forcing bid if he had a very distributional hand. You expect that declarer will have to lead the side suits himself, so you want to avoid any suit that will make his job easier.

The singleton trump is probably the most dangerous lead you can make (partner won't be happy if he holds ♥Qxx !). It's also risky to lead away from your club or spade honors. That leaves you with your "nothing" suit -- diamonds -- so try the ♦3.

Opening Leads: When to lead trumps

On many hands, your choice of an opening lead involves using clues from the auction to decide whether you should make an aggressive lead, or play it safe with a passive lead. You'll have a slightly different type of decision to make when you consider a trump lead, which, depending on the auction and your hand, may be an aggressive *or* a passive choice.

"Aggressive" trump leads

On some hands, a trump lead can actually be your strongest attack because it serves to shorten declarer's or dummy's trump holding. The types of auctions that will give you the strongest clues about this include those where:

(1) Declarer has shown a two-suited hand, especially if you have a good holding in declarer's other suit. Many good players consider it virtually mandatory to lead a trump to an auction like this one:

<u>West</u>	<u>East</u>
1D	1H
2C	2D
Pass	

If you hold ♠10962 ♥KQ6 ♦83 ♣AJ97, lead the diamond 3. It's a strong possibility that dummy will be relatively short in declarer's second suit (clubs), and you expect declarer may try to use dummy's diamonds to trump his club losers. Both opponents have shown minimum hands, so they may not have enough in high-card power alone to make their contract.

(2) You expect the short-trump hand (usually dummy) to be short in another suit. You can almost see dummy's singleton club after this auction:

<u>West</u>	<u>East</u>
1D	1H
1S	1NT
2H	4H
Pass	

Opener's sequence here typically shows some extra values with 3-card heart support. Since opener pulled partner out of 1NT, you expect that he has an unbalanced pattern -- probably 4-3-5-1 -- and that the opponents are in a 5-3 fit. If you hold:

♠109 ♥975 ♦QJ76 ♣AK43,

resist the temptation to cash a high club, which may give declarer the tempo he needs to trump two club losers in dummy. You want to lead trumps as many times as possible, so start with the heart 5. If declarer wants to set up ruffs in dummy, he'll have to lead clubs himself, and you'll be in again for a second trump lead.

(3) You have a clear advantage in overall power. This may be especially important if you've doubled the contract. After an auction like:

<u>You</u>	<u>LHO</u>	<u>Partner</u>	<u>RHO</u>
1NT	Pass	2C	2S
Pass	Pass	DBL	All Pass

a trump lead is a good idea, even if you have an unattractive holding, such as:

♠Q92 ♥QJ10 ♦KQJ2 ♣A103.

Although partner should have a fair spade holding, his double may have been partially based on his knowledge that the two of you hold significantly more than half the high-card strength. In this case, declarer's only prayer will be to score tricks with a few of dummy's trumps. Every trump lead you make may cost him a trick.

(4) **You have a clear advantage in trump length and/or strength.** In this auction:

<u>RHO</u>	<u>You</u>	<u>LHO</u>	<u>Partner</u>
1D	DBL	All Pass	

partner rates to have better trumps than declarer, so you'll want to attack declarer's holding. You may even be able to draw all of declarer's and dummy's trumps. This is one of the rare exceptions to the "rule" about never leading a singleton trump.

"Passive" trump leads

On some hands, you may be reduced to leading a trump just because nothing else looks safe. After a 1S-2S auction by your opponents, you have an unattractive choice of leads from:

♠754 ♥A1072 ♦KJ32 ♣J4 .

All the unbid suits look dangerous, so try the spade 4. You don't necessarily expect this to hurt declarer, but you hope it won't help. Since partner has only one or two trumps, probably the worst that can happen is that you'll find his doubleton queen -- and that's something declarer may have found for himself anyway.

A few warnings: When in doubt, *avoid leading a trump* if you hold:

- **A singleton trump.** Your shortness suggests partner has length, and this lead will often pick up any honors he might have. It's better to lead a long suit and try to force declarer to trump himself down to the same or shorter length than your partner.
- **A "dangerous" honor holding** like Jxx, Jx, K10x, A10x or Ax. These will be safe only if partner holds no honors in the trump suit. If he has the jack or queen, a lead from one of these combinations can make one of your natural trump tricks disappear immediately. Or, more likely, it will give declarer a finessing position that will let him pick up the suit on the next lead.