

OPENING LEADS

Tips from Karen Walker 1997

(There are a few modifications from Milt Shioya)

<http://home.comcast.net/~kwbridge/leads.htm>

Assignment: Read the first 3 pages and circle areas where you have questions.

Which suit? To Suit Contracts:

You usually want to make a "safe" opening lead that will set up tricks for your side without giving declarer extra tricks. Your general order of preference can be:

1. A singleton (hoping partner can lead the suit back for you to trump).
2. A suit partner has bid. **Lead low** if you have 3+ cards AND a high honor; **lead high** from 2 cards OR without a high honor.
3. A suit that offers a good attacking combination -- two or more touching honors (KQ10x, QJ10, AKxx, J109).
4. Your longest suit. **Lead low** if you don't have touching honors.
5. A suit the opponents have not bid.
6. If there are no unbid suits, choose a suit that **dummy** has bid.
7. Lead trumps if you have no other safe lead **OR** if declarer has shown a two-suited hand. This may prevent declarer from using dummy's trumps separately.

When leading to a suit contract, AVOID:

- Leading an unsupported ace if you have another safe lead.
- Underleading an ace (don't lead a small card from a suit headed by the ace).
- Underleading broken honor combinations (KJxx, Q10x) unless it's in partner's suit.
- Leading a suit declarer has bid (unless you're leading trumps).

Which suit? To Notrump Contracts:

You usually want to make an attacking opening lead to set up tricks in your long suit. **Lead the fourth-best card** (count down from the top) from your longest and strongest suit **unless:**

1. Partner has bid a suit. You should then lead his suit.
2. Your long suit is one the opponents have bid. You should choose your longest unbid suit or a suit dummy has bid.
3. Your long suit has three or more touching honors (KQJx, QJ10x, AQJ10x, J109x, etc.). You should lead an honor to be sure you force declarer to win with the highest card possible.

When leading to a notrump contract, AVOID:

- Leading a short suit, unless it's the suit partner has bid.
- Leading aces or "unprotected" high cards, especially ones in your short suits.

- Leading a suit declarer has bid.

Which Card?

- From all **AK** combinations, lead the **ACE**. Years ago the advice was to lead the King. (and also the King from a KQ holding). If you have a doubleton **AK** then lead the king. By breaking the "rule" you announce something different.
- From all other suits with touching honors, lead the **top honor**: **KQ5** **J109** **QJ103** **10985**
KJ1054
- From a 4-card-or-longer suit without touching honors, lead the **fourth-best card**: **K9743** **10752**
J87643
- From a 3-card suit without touching honors, lead the **lowest card**: **J96** **Q43** **865**
- From a 2-card suit, lead the **top card**: **82** **J7** **Q10**

PRACTICE

The opponents have bid 1S-3S-4S. What is your opening lead?

♠632 ♥942 ♦KQJ7 ♣A43

King of Diamonds. Lead the top card from an attacking combination. Even if declarer has the ace, you'll set up tricks you can take later. Don't lead the club ace-that's more likely to set up tricks for declarer.

♠Q6 ♥Q92 ♦K104 ♣J6543

4 of Clubs. When no other lead looks safe, lead from your longest suit (the 4th card down). Declarer may be short in this suit, so your lead is unlikely to help him.

Your LHO opens 1C, partner overcalls 1S and RHO bids 2H. LHO jumps to 4H. What is your lead?

♠1072 ♥642 ♦9843 ♣KQ8

10 of spades. You should almost always lead the suit partner overcalls (with 3 or more, lead low if you have a high honor and high if you do not). Although a KQ is sometimes a good attacking combination, it isn't here because you know clubs is LHO's suit.

♠K4 ♥943 ♦AJ8 ♣87532

King of Spades. Since partner has shown strength in spades, leading an unprotected honor is safe. If your king holds the trick, you'll lead the spade 4 to partner's ace and be able to trump the third round. From your high-low leads, partner will know you have only 2 spades.

♠5432 ♥A74 ♦4 ♣108543

4 of Diamonds. This is an exception to the rule about leading partner's suit. Partner will know you had a good reason for not leading spades. If he has the diamond ace, he'll lead one back for you to trump. If

partner can't win the first diamond lead, you'll have another chance later. When you win the ace of trumps, you can try to get partner on lead with a spade.

The opponents have bid 1NT-3NT. What is your opening lead?

♠QJ1082 ♥K43 ♦A5 ♣10543

Queen of Spades. You should plan to keep attacking spades whenever you're on lead. Even if declarer has the AK, there's a good chance you can set up and "run" your suit later.

♠AK8 ♥854 ♦75 ♣KJ542

4 of Clubs. You have no sequence, so lead the 4th best card and hope partner has fillers. Resist the temptation to cash the spades. You'll need them as entries to run your club suit.

♠95 ♥43 ♦K10976 ♣AQ102

Ten of Diamonds. Lead your longer suit, even though the clubs are stronger. To force out an honor, lead the top of an "interior" sequence.

Partner opens 1C, RHO bids 1H, you bid 1S. LHO bids 2H and all pass. What is your opening lead?

♠KJ43 ♥843 ♦AJ2 ♣854

3 of Hearts. You could lead a club (partner's suit), but a trump is better for two reasons: **(1)** It's safe (partner didn't promise great honor strength in clubs, and a spade or diamond could give up a trick); **(2)** Your side has most of the high-cards, so declarer may have to trump losers in dummy to make his contract. A trump lead will take one of his trumps out of dummy right away.

♠AK743 ♥86 ♦J532 ♣105

Ace of Spades. An AK is usually a good lead because it lets you look at dummy and decide what to do next. Here, you're hoping partner has only one or two spades (a good possibility, since he didn't raise) and can trump the third round. Depending on dummy's spade holding and partner's signal (he'll play a high card if he has a doubleton, a low card if he has three), you can decide whether to continue with the spade ace or to switch suits. If you decide to switch to partner's suit (clubs), lead the 10 (the top card to show 2). If partner has the AK of clubs, you may get to trump the third round of that suit.

IF YOU FEEL OVERWHELMED, THIS IS A GOOD PLACE TO STOP. The information on the next 5 pages is for more advanced players. Re-read the first three pages so that you understand them really well, circling the items where you have questions.

There are four practice sheets at the end of this document. Cover the answers on the right side of each page and write down your answer.

Opening Leads: When to be aggressive

<http://home.comcast.net/~kwbridge/leads1.htm>

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

<http://home.comcast.net/~kwbridge/leads2.htm>

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

<http://home.comcast.net/~kwbridge/leads3.htm>

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:

RHO	You	LHO	Partner
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.

Leads when you don't have other significant information from the bidding.

Against Notrump

Lead?

Answer

1

S	H	D	C
J	A	J	8
10	K	10	4
9		9	2
8			
7			

J of spades

2

S	H	D	C
A	Q	9	J
3	J	5	6
	10	3	3
	6		
	3		

Q of hearts

3

S	H	D	C
K	7	J	Q
J	3	9	6
6		4	5
3		2	

3 of spades

4

S	H	D	C
2	Q	K	A
	4	10	J
		8	6
		7	3
		4	
		2	

7 of diamonds

5

S	H	D	C
Q	K	K	9
6	J	10	4
	6	4	2
	3		
	2		

3 of hearts,
or 2 of hearts

6

S	H	D	C
8	K	7	8
4	J	3	6
	10	2	2
	9		
	2		

J of hearts

Leads when you don't have other significant information from the bidding.

Against a spade contract

Lead?

Answer

1

S	H	D	C
J	A	Q	2
10	K	9	
9	7	6	
8		5	
		4	

5 of diamonds
The 4 trumps are a threat.
Don't look for a ruff. Set up a side suit.

2

S	H	D	C
A	Q	9	2
3	J	6	
	10	4	
	6	3	
	3	2	

2 of clubs.
With the A of trump, you hope to reach partner's hand and get a ruff

3

S	H	D	C
J	K	J	A
5	Q	8	6
	J	4	5
		2	3

K of hearts

4

S	H	D	C
8	Q	5	10
4	7		9
3	5		8
	2		7
			2

5 of diamonds

5

S	H	D	C
6	K	Q	J
4	10	9	10
2	7	6	3
		2	

Who knows?
This is the pits.
2 of diamonds or J of clubs

6

S	H	D	C
8	K	7	8
4	Q	3	6
	10		4
	5		3
	2		

K of hearts

Leads when partner has bid hearts

Against Notrump

Lead?

Answer

1	S	H	D	C
	J	J	A	8
	10	10	K	4
	9	9		2
	8			
	7			

J of hearts
 You block
 diamonds &
 spades on
 your own.
 Help partner.

2	S	H	D	C
	6	Q	10	J
	4	6	8	6
		2	6	3
			3	2

2 of hearts
 (Discuss)

3	S	H	D	C
	K	Q	9	J
	7	J	6	10
	6	8	2	5
		3		

Q of hearts

4	S	H	D	C
	8	K	K	J
	5	7	10	9
	4	4	8	6
	2		7	3

4 of hearts

5	S	H	D	C
	A	2	A	9
	Q		6	4
	10		4	2
	8			
	5			

8 of spades
 or 5 of spades
 Your suit is
 good
 (Discuss)

6	S	H	D	C
	8	8	7	K
	3	4	3	J
	2		2	10
				9
				2

J of clubs

Leads when partner has bid hearts

Against a spade contract

Lead?

Answer

1

S	H	D	C
J	A	Q	2
10	K	9	
9	7	6	
8		5	
		4	

A, K then
7 of hearts

2

S	H	D	C
A	Q	9	2
3	J	6	
	10	4	
	6	3	
	3	2	

2 of clubs.
With the A of
trump, you
hope to reach
partner's hand
and get a ruff

3

S	H	D	C
J	K	J	A
5	Q	8	6
	J	4	5
		2	3

K of hearts

4

S	H	D	C
8	10	5	10
4	7		9
3	5		8
	2		7
			2

5 of diamonds
You want a
ruff and might
reach partner
with a heart
later

5

S	H	D	C
6	K	Q	J
4	10	9	10
2	7	6	3
		2	

7 of hearts

6

S	H	D	C
8	K	7	8
4	Q	3	6
	10		4
	5		3
	2		

K of hearts
(You should
compete to the
4 heart level &
make opponents
play 4 spades.)