

*This series is based on Grant Standard, a set of conventions and agreements that are in popular use today, such as 15-17 INT openings, five-card majors, and weak two-bids. A summary chart of Grant Standard and the corresponding convention card can be found at [www.AudreyGrant.com](http://www.AudreyGrant.com). The site also has Grant Basic, a simpler set of agreements.*

*Earlier articles in this series appeared in the Bridge Bulletin and can also be found under 'Articles' at [www.AudreyGrant.com](http://www.AudreyGrant.com).*

The opening lead can often be critical to the success or failure of a contract, so it's important to get off to the right start whenever possible. There are two aspects to the opening lead:

- Choosing the suit
- Choosing the card

Choosing the suit to lead requires good judgment. Choosing the right card once the suit has been decided is more a matter of rote. There are many guidelines to cover that aspect.

In this issue, we'll focus on leads against a suit contract.

### Choosing the Suit

The key to choosing the best suit to lead is to listen to the auction. The standard guidelines are:

1. Lead partner's suit
2. Lead an unbid suit
3. Lead a singleton or doubleton
4. Lead a trump

#### 1. Lead Partner's Suit

The popular comment here is that "leading partner's suit may not be right, but it is never wrong!" In other words, partner can rarely fault us for leading the suit.

If our side has bid and raised a suit, then that is obviously a likely source of tricks, and it is unlikely to give

## Leading Against Suit Contracts

away a trick on the opening lead. If partner has overcalled a suit, then we can expect partner to have a good holding in the suit. In fact, one of the reasons partner may have overcalled is to help us get off to the best lead.

If partner has opened a major suit, showing five or more cards, it's best to lead that suit with nothing clearly better to do. It's unlikely to cost a trick, since declarer will also be aware of partner's holding in the suit.

If partner has opened 1♣ or 1♦, the situation is not quite as clear-cut. Partner might have opened a three-card suit and may hold a good four-card major suit. So this is one time when we might exercise a little judgment and choose another suit.

#### 2. Lead An Unbid Suit

It is usually a bad idea to lead a suit bid by the opponents. They are likely to have length and strength in the suit. It will usually help declarer to develop tricks in the suit and is unlikely to be a good source of tricks for our side. Even if declarer has losers in the suit, they are unlikely to go away.

Even if leading their suit doesn't give away a trick, it often loses a "tempo." The opening lead is a chance to start developing winners in our suit(s). If we give up that opportunity, declarer may win the race to develop tricks or eliminate losers.

Of course, that doesn't mean we *never* lead their suit. Their minor-suit opening bids could be on a weak three-card suit—just like ours. Also, with K-Q-J-10 in their suit, we shouldn't shy away from leading it!

#### 3. Lead A Short Suit

We can try to use the trump suit to our advantage by leading a singleton, hoping to get to ruff one or more of declarer's winners. However, we have to pick the right time.

Leading a singleton is most likely to be effective when:

- It is in an unbid suit, where there is a good chance partner holds the ace, or some strength.
- When we expect partner can gain the lead and return the suit before declarer can draw all of our trumps.
- When we hold the trump ace or king, so that we are likely to regain the lead before our trumps are all gone.

Leading a singleton is less likely to be effective when:

- It is in a suit bid by the opponents. First, there is less chance partner holds the ace and can give us a ruff. Second, even if that happens, we may have helped declarer establish winners in that suit for later use. If we do lead their suit, however, partner should strongly suspect that we have a singleton.
- When we hold four or more trumps. Getting a ruff may make it easier for declarer to draw our remaining trumps. It's usually better to lead our long suit, hoping to force declarer to ruff. We may then end up with control of the trump suit.

Leading a doubleton is typically less effective. It requires more from partner if we are to get a ruff. It is also difficult for partner to distinguish between a singleton and a doubleton. Partner may try to give us a ruff when we still have to follow suit. Leading a doubleton honor, such as ♥Q-3, can be especially confusing and dangerous. For example, partner might think we have the ♥J and are leading top of touching honors.

A popular guideline is, "Don't lead a doubleton unless it's a singleton!"

## 2. Lead A Trump

There is a popular saying: “When in doubt, lead a trump.” **This is usually bad advice!** We should only lead a trump when we think it’s the best lead.

It’s usually declarer’s job to draw trumps, so we don’t want to help our opponent! Even if it doesn’t cost directly, it will often give up a tempo, allowing declarer to take the initiative in developing tricks.

Is there a time to lead trumps? Yes. If we suspect from the auction that declarer is likely to want to trump losers in the dummy, we can try to prevent this by removing dummy’s trumps. For example, suppose we are on lead as West after this auction:

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1♠
Pass	1NT	Pass	2♥
Pass	4♥	All Pass	

♠ A Q J 8 3 South has a five-card spade suit which North  
♥ 7 4 2 didn’t support. Dummy  
♦ Q 6 is almost certainly  
♣ Q 9 3 short in spades, and declarer is likely to want to ruff some spade losers in dummy. We should lead a heart.

Another time to lead a trump is when the lead of any other suit looks dangerous, since it is likely to cost a trick. It’s not that we’re in doubt; it’s that we don’t have a doubt!

## Choosing the Card

This is the easy part. Having chosen the suit, there are specific guidelines about which card to lead:

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- Lead the top of a doubleton (♠K-5, ♥5-3).
- Lead the top of touching honors (♦K-Q-6-2, ♣Q-J-4, ♠K-J-10).
- Lead the ace (♥A-J-7-4-2).
- Lead fourth best (♦K-J-7-3, ♣J-9-7-6-3, ♠8-5-4-2) or low from three cards (♥Q-10-5, ♦8-6-3).

## Ace from Ace-King

At one time, it was popular to lead the King from a suit headed by either A-K or K-Q. This was so that the lead of an Ace would specifically deny the King. Defenders sometimes lead an Ace against a suit contract when not holding the King (see below), either looking for a ruff, or for a helpful signal from partner.

The popular style today is to lead the Ace from a suit headed by A-K, consistent with always leading the top of touching honors. The standard ACBL Convention Card no longer defaults to K from A-K-x, but if we lead Ace from A-K-x, we should mark it appropriately on the Card.

If we hold a doubleton A-K, we can alert partner by reversing our usual lead. So we lead the King followed by the Ace, if we normally lead Ace from A-K-x. Knowing this shows a doubleton, partner might be able to gain the lead and give us a ruff on the third round of the suit.

## Leading the Ace

A popular saying is: “Don’t lead away from an Ace against a suit contract.” **This is a good piece of advice.** If we decide that the best suit to lead is clubs and we have a holding such as ♣A-J-7-4, we should lead the ♣A, not a low club—*away from* the ♣A.

The danger of leading a low club is that declarer might have a singleton ♣K. Declarer would win the first trick, and we’d never get our ♣A, since declarer could trump if we lead the suit again. Even if declarer does not have a singleton, declarer might win the first trick and discard any remaining club losers before we regain the lead. If we don’t want to lead the ♣A, we should probably pick another suit to lead.

Note that this only applies against suit contracts. Leading away from an Ace is common against notrump contracts. Declarer won’t later be able to ruff our Ace.

## Top of Partner’s Suit

Another saying is: “Lead the top of partner’s suit.” **This is typically not a good idea.** Consider this layout:

	DUMMY	
	♦ 9 7 2	
Us		PARTNER
♦ K 6 5		♦ A J 10 4
	DECLARER	
	♦ Q 8 3	

If we lead the ♦K, declarer will eventually get a trick with the ♦Q. If we lead the ♦5, as recommended by the guidelines, declarer’s ♦Q is trapped, and we get all the tricks to which we are entitled.

## Leading From Three Low Cards

There are three possible approaches when leading from three low cards:

- Top of nothing (♥7-5-2)
- MUD (Middle-Up-Down) (♥7-5-2)
- Low (♥7-5-2)

The problem with leading the top of three low cards is that partner may have difficulty determining that we aren’t leading from a short suit. Holding the ♥A-K-x, for example, partner might try to give us a ruff, thinking we have a doubleton.

The only time it is recommended to lead top of three low cards is when we have raised partner’s suit. Partner will know we don’t have a singleton or doubleton. By leading high, we are denying an honor, so partner can usually visualize the layout of the suit.

Leading the middle card presents a challenge in that partner may have difficulty visualizing the layout of the suit until the third round. When we follow ‘up’ on the second round, partner may assume we have led low from an honor. By the time we follow ‘low’ on the third round, it may be too late for partner to switch to a different suit.

The standard guideline is to lead low. Partner may not know if we are leading low from an honor or three low cards, but neither will declarer. At least partner won’t expect us to have a singleton or doubleton.

The guidelines for leads are based on long experience. They usually help our partner on defense. So we shouldn’t stray from them without a good reason. ♠