

Common Errors and How to Avoid Them

The ACBL published the following list of common errors in their July 2007 bulletin:

1. Playing Too Fast

Whether you are declaring or defending, you are allowed to stop and think before playing to trick 1! As declarer you should be developing a plan and this plan may determine where you win the first trick. – Slow down and think about the hand when dummy does down before you play to trick 1. As an aid to declarer's thinking process, when dummy, place the suit led on the table last, so that partner can see all of the hand before they play to trick 1.

2. Cashing Tricks too Early

Try to establish extra tricks, not just cash the ones that you started with. Aces are meant to take Kings, not small cards. This applies both to declarer and defenders. Work on your long suits, whether by losing a trick or by trumping. – Plan ahead, both as declarer and defender.

3. Trump Management 1

One small error is having winners trumped because you failed to remove the opponents' trumps. - If you have winners outside the trump suit, remove the outstanding trumps so these winners are not ruffed.

4. Trump Management 2

Another error is drawing too many rounds of trumps. - If you need to cross-ruff the hand, or if you need to trump losers, don't draw trumps until after those other jobs have been done.

5. Bad Bidding After Doubles

Remember what your partner's takeout doubles show, and bid accordingly. If you belong in game, then let partner know this, either by bidding game or cue-bidding the opponent's suit. – Don't make partner guess what to do, tell them what you have got instead.

6. Bad Bidding After Overcalls

Support your partner's overcall if you have support. Treat an overcall like an opening bid until you find out otherwise. – When partner overcalls respond as if it was an opening bid.

7. Bad Penalty Doubles

Don't double the opponents for penalties in a suit contract based on points alone, as long suit winners are likely to be trumped. You need tricks and usually trump tricks to succeed with penalty doubles. – Don't double for penalties just because you have a strong hand.

8. Describing V Deciding

Overbidding or underbidding occurs because you and your partner are both "describing" or neither of you has taken a "deciding" role. – Describe your hand to partner and then let partner decide where you belong. Similarly when partner has finished describing their hand to you, you should decide the final contract.

9. Telling the Same Story Twice

Don't rebid known 5-card suits if there is a reasonable alternative, - Either introduce a second suit or bid NT.

10. Physical or Mechanical Errors

Slow down and concentrate on what you are doing. – Check it is your bid, check what has already been bid by all at the table, check what you are about to bid, and during play check that you have followed suit.

Opening Leads

Opening leads are the most important part of the defence, for it is then that the defenders have the tempo to develop their tricks. This is especially important if Declarer has to relinquish the lead to a defender during the play of the hand.

Opening leads are made with only the leader's hand and the bidding to guide the choice of opening lead, and as such, even when a strong opening lead is evident, they are not always successful. Leading partner's suit is often a good start.

While it is important to set up your tricks via the opening lead, it can be equally important to avoid giving Declarer a cheap trick from a bad opening lead. When a strong opening lead is not available, this may mean making a negative opening lead.

Strong opening leads include leading from a sequence of 3 or more honours, the strongest being AKQ(x), and the weakest being JT9(x). The lead of the top honour in a sequence is normal, and the lead of the King from KQJ(x) has the advantage of giving Declarer nothing (the Ace is always a trick), and setting up at least 2 tricks for the defence, unless it is a suit contract and Declarer or Dummy is short. Either way, the lead gives little away to Declarer.

Opening leads in a suit contract can be different to those in a notrump contract. While it is often right to lead away from an Ace (even 4th highest from AKxx) in a notrump contract, it is a good idea NOT to lead away from an Ace in a suit contract. In a suit contract, if you decide that a suit such as Axx(x) should be led, lead the Ace! However, the lead of the Ace may give Declarer a cheap trick and the lead of another suit may be more productive in defeating the contract.

In a notrump contract, 4th highest of your longest and strongest suit is still recommended, as long as Declarer or Dummy has not bid the suit naturally, and this is also valid in a suit contract, as long as the suit is not headed by the Ace.

In general, the lead of a low card, either as the opening lead or during the play of the hand, should indicate that you have at least 1 honour card in the suit led. If you lead a suit without any honour cards, lead the second highest (Middle Up Down – MUD), and follow up with the highest card next if appropriate. When leading a suit with 2 low cards and 1 higher card, such as 842, it may even be better to lead the 8!

Lead 4th highest from a 4-card suit headed by 2 honours, although in a suit contract, do not underlead an Ace and if the 2 honours are in sequence, in a suit contract it may be better to lead the top card of the sequence.

If you have a long suit in which Declarer is likely to be void, it may be better to lead a side suit such as KQx, or QJT to try and set up a trick while you have the tempo. If declarer trumps your opening lead, then Declarer has the tempo and may be able to set up their suit for discards before your side next regains the lead.

Suggested opening leads from various holdings:

bold and underlined:

Suit Contract

- AKQ(x)
- AKx(x)
- KQJ(x) or KQT(x)
- KQx(x)
- QJT(x) or QJ9(x)
- QJxx(x)
- JT9x or JT8x
- JTxx(x)
- T98x
- T9xx
- AJT(x)
- AQJ(x)
- KJT(x)
- AQxx or AJxx or ATxx
- KJxx(x) (4th highest)
- Axxx
- Kxxx (4th highest)
- Qxxx (4th highest)
- Ax or Kx or Qx or Jx or xx
- 987(x) (MUD)
- 632
- 842 or maybe 842
- X (singleton)

Notrump Contract

- AKQx(x)
- AKxx(x) (4th highest)
- KQJx(x) or KQTx(x)
- KQxx(x) (4th highest)
- QJTx(x) or QJ9x(x)
- QJxx(x) (4th highest)
- JT9x or JT8x
- JTxx(x) (4th highest)
- T98x(x)
- T9xx(x) (4th highest)
- AJTx(x) (interior sequence)
- AQJx(x) (interior sequence)
- KJTx(x) (interior sequence)
- AQxx(x) or AJxx(x) or ATxx(x)
- KJxx(x) (4th highest)
- Axx(x) (4th highest)
- Kxxx(x) (4th highest)
- Qxxx(x) (4th highest)
- Ax or Kx or Qx or Jx or xx
- 987(x) (MUD)
- 632
- 842 or maybe 842
- X (only if partner's suit)

Try not to lead opposition's suit, unless a singleton looking for a ruff. Generally do not lead an Ace in a suit contract unless it is partner's suit.

To Open or Pass?

When you have a possible sub-minimum hand for an opening bid, before opening the bidding in 1st or 2nd seat, decide what your rebid is going to be when your partner makes a response. Consider the following possible opening hands:

AJTxxx, x, AJx, JTx – Open 1S and rebid 2S – Only 11 HCPs, but 2 Aces, a couple of useful Tens and an easy rebid over virtually any response is better than a weak two. Likewise any similar hand with another 6-card suit.

Axxxx, J, AJx, Jxx – 2S or pass if not opening weak twos – 11 HCPs and 2 Aces but a poor suit and no pips makes the 2-level rebid risky and may mislead partner.

AJTxx, AJxx, JTx, x – Open 1S and rebid 2H – Only 11 HCPs, but 2 Aces, useful Tens and an easy rebid over virtually any response (Can consider passing 1NT response).

AJTxx, x, JTx, AJxx - Pass – 11 HCPs and 2 Aces but a 2D or 2H response will make a rebid difficult or at least misleading.

AJTxx, xx, JTx, AJx - Pass – 11 HCPs and 2 Aces but any response except 1NT will make a rebid difficult or at least misleading.

KJxxx, x, Qxx, KQxx – Pass – 11 HCPs, but no Aces, makes this a sub-minimum opening, for 1st or 2nd seat, but okay for 3rd and 4th seat (satisfies Rule of 15 for 4th seat). Swap the majors around and pass in 4th seat also.

Axxxx, KQxx, Qxx, x – Open 1S and rebid 2H – 11 HCPs, 1 Ace and 4 hearts, makes this a minimum opening, but not if the other 4-card suit is a minor.

When to Draw Trumps

When playing in a suit contract, as soon as dummy tracks, your first consideration should be when to draw trumps. Consider the following question: “Do I want to use any of dummy’s trumps to ruff a short suit in dummy?”

QJx	AKxxx
QJx	Kxx
Axx	x
xxxx	AKxx

In a 4S contract, declarer has the shortage and dummy is balanced, so win the DA at trick 1 and draw trumps, expecting to lose a club and a heart. It would be a mistake to win the DA and ruff a diamond at trick 2, as the hand with the long trumps should normally only ruff if forced to by the defence.

QJx	AKxxx
Qxxx	Kxx
Axxx	Kx
xx	xxx

In a 3S contract, declarer has 5 losers if trumps are drawn, thus the 9th trick has to come from a club ruff in dummy. This is not the time to draw trumps, so win the DA at trick 1 and lead a club. Win the spade switch in dummy and lead another club. The DK will allow declarer to ruff the 3rd club and draw trumps, losing 2 clubs and probably 2 hearts.

Consider Whether to Play your Lowest Trump as Declarer

When you have a long trump suit, and either ruff in hand early in the play, or play a high trump from dummy, it is natural to play your lowest trump. Over many years of playing bridge there have been quite a few times when I later wished I had kept my lowest trump.

KQ9xx	J42
xxx	Qx
Axx	xxxx
xx	AKQx

On the above hand after a 1NT (12-14) opening and a transfer sequence I was in 2S as East and the opening lead was the DK, which I won in dummy. It would normally be good practice to lead a trump towards KQ9xx in dummy and I wanted to set up a heart ruff in my hand, so I led a small heart off the table. North rose with the HK and cashed the HA and followed with the HJ.

I had no inclination there was any danger and was just about to ruff with the S2 when I thought that my next move would be to lead the S4 towards dummy, so I may as well ruff with the S4 now and then lead the S2. To my surprize, South discarded! As well as a doubleton heart, South had a doubleton spade, precisely the SA and S3.

Teams	QJ63			
Bd 4	6			
Dir W	K752			
Vul All	9832			
65		T9742		
Q		7543		
QT8		A94		
AKJT65		Q		
4				
	AK			
	AKJT98			
	2			
	J63			
	7			
W	N	E	S	
1C	/	1S	4H	
//				

The adjacent hand featured in one of Tony Jackman's Saturday Courier Mail columns and I am sure most (all?) declarers would make the mistake of ruffing the club at trick 2 with the H2, but with such a good suit, it is perfectly safe to ruff with the H8 to keep all options open.

Looking at the NS hands alone, after cashing the trumps and unblocking the spades there will be 11 tricks if the DA is on side, and only 9 tricks otherwise. When East proves to have only 1 club and 4 hearts, there is a sure-fire way to make just 10 tricks, as long as declarer still has the H2!

When West plays the HQ at trick 3, cash 2 more hearts, then the SA and SK and finally exit with the H2! East gets a surprize trick, but must then give you the DK in dummy and the SQ takes care of the other diamond.

Cashing a Long Suit at Notrumps

When playing in any level of Notrumps, if you have a strong long suit, consider cashing out the suit, especially when dummy and declarer's hand have the same number of cards in the suit. Thus you will not have to discard from either hand, but the defenders will have to discard a number of times. If one defender has controls in two or more suits, they may be squeezed and thus forced to let go a control, or discard one of their long suit tricks.

For example, in 3NT you may have a 5-5 solid club fit and after winning the 3rd round of spades to isolate the menace, you know from the bidding that the opponent who overcalled has 2 more spades to cash if you lose the lead, but also that the same opponent is likely to have the HQ and DK that you are missing. Since you have to finesse into the unsafe hand for either card, the probable losing finesse will see you 1 off.

If you run your clubs, the hand with the spades will likely have to find 4 discards, and to keep the HQ and DK protected, will have to discard a spade, thus you can take the finesse with safety. If a spade is not discarded, cash your top tricks and hope they have been squeezed.

Pairs 87
Bd 14 32
Dir E KT85
Vul Nil KJ986

K92
A7654
QJ3
32

A653
KQ
A72
AQ74

W	N	E	S
		/	1C
1H	2C	2H	2NT
/	3NT	//	

QJT4
JT98
964
T5

The adjacent hand features the general principal, except that in 3NT there are 9 top tricks, but in a Pairs contest, overtricks are very important and a squeeze may produce extra tricks if EW are not vigilant.

West led the H5 to 3NT and South wins the HK and runs the clubs, forcing East and West to find 3 discards each.

The bidding by South shows an 18+ hand, so EW are mindful that discards are crucial, and West knows his partner is weak.

West wants to protect spades and diamonds, and East wants to protect the spades, but they do not know the defensive values in their partner's hand, so almost certainly 2 hearts will be thrown by both of them, allowing a diamond to be ducked for a 10th trick.

On the hand I watched, West did not guard what he could see in dummy and discarded the D3, so now declarer had 11 tricks!

Passed Hand Bidding

If your partner opens the bidding and you bid a new suit, it is generally meant to be forcing on partner, who must bid again. However, if you have already passed and partner has opened in 3rd or 4th seat, this changes, and it is now very difficult to make a forcing bid!

What you bid on changes too, as partner may now pass with a minimum opening bid, so while you would happily bid 2C in response to partner's 1S opening bid with Qx, KQx, JTxx, Kxxx, if you have already passed with this hand, you cannot afford to as partner may pass with only 2 clubs, so the best response is 2NT, showing a maximum pass (10 or 11 points) and almost certainly exactly 2 spades.

However, with Qx, JTx, JTx, KQJxx you can respond 2C as a passed hand as if partner passes your 5-card suit will be a suitable trump suit, and may be a source of tricks if partner elects to rebid 2NT (invitational) or 3NT (to play).

PLANNING A NO TRUMP CONTRACT

Here is a simple step by step approach to planning a notrump contract. You must plan and think a hand through BEFORE you touch a card if you want to get good results. Many contracts are lost due to playing too fast to the first trick.

Step 1: Does the opening lead tell me anything?

The lead may tell you how many cards in a suit one player has or the position of the opponents' honours.

Step 2: Count the number of absolute top tricks you have.

Step 3: How many more tricks do we need? Which suits are the tricks going to have to come from? Form a general plan/approach.

Step 4: Are there any dangers you need to try to protect against?

Can the opponents run a suit if they get in? Can they attack a critical honour? Do you need to duck the opening lead to possibly keep the danger-hand from gaining the lead later?

Step 5: Form a final plan to get the necessary tricks (and any overtricks) taking into account the possible dangers.

	S	43	
	H	432	
	D	AJ1085	
	C	K65	
	N		
S7 lead	W		E
	S		
	S	KQ2	
	H	AK	
	D	K976	
	C	A432	

The contract is 3NT by South. West leads the S7, East plays the S10 and you win with the SK. How do you plan to play the contract?

Step 1: Does the opening lead tell me anything?

Yes! Where's the SA? Because East didn't play it, West must have it behind your king. The S7 is a little ominous – if it is 4th highest, West may have more spade cards below the S7 and a 5 or 6 card suit.

Step 2: Count the number of absolute top tricks you have.

CAK, DAK, HAK, SK = 7 top tricks

Step 3: How many more tricks do we need? Which suits are the tricks going to have to come from? Form a general plan.

We need at least 2 more tricks. There are no extra tricks to be had in hearts, clubs might get you one more, but this isn't enough. Diamonds will definitely get you 2 or 3 tricks depending on whether you can catch the DQ, or if it drops you have more. So the general plan is to play on diamonds for the tricks you need.

Step 4: Are there any dangers you need to try to protect against?

Yes! If East gets the lead, they could lead another spade catching your SQ under the SA we know is in West's hand. The opponents could run a number of spades and put your contract down.

Step 5: Form a final plan to get the necessary number of tricks (and any overtricks) taking into account the possible dangers.

We must keep East off the lead. Play across to the DA and then lead the DJ to finesse against the DQ. If it works, you get 3 more tricks in addition to your current 7 and make 10 tricks for an overtrick. If you lose the finesse to the West hand, West can't catch your SQ and you have 2 more tricks to your current 7 for 9 tricks to make your contract.

	S 43		
	H 432		
	D AJ1085		
	C K65		
S AJ976	N	S 1085	
H Q1065		H J987	
D 4	W E	D Q32	
C 987	S	C QJ10	
	S KQ2		
	H AK		
	D K976		
	C A432		

Strong 2C

When partner opens with a strong 2C, it is normally good practice to let them describe their hand before introducing a weak suit of your own, thus respond 2D, unless you have something important to say.

If partner rebids 2NT (generally 22-23 HCPs), then transfers will apply as if they opened 2NT, but if you are really bad (4HCPs or less) you can pass, or transfer to a 5-card (or longer major) and then pass. Otherwise this should be forcing to game.

If partner rebids a suit (even 3D), then this should either be forcing to game, or at least one more round of bidding. Holding 3 or more cards in partner's 2H or 2S rebid, bid to game with a poor hand, or just raise to the 3-level with something extra. Without 3-card or longer support for the major and some values, bid a new suit, encouraging partner to bid 3NT or show another suit with a highly distributional hand.

If partner jump rebids a suit (even 4C or 4D), this should be forcing to game and show a self-supporting suit, asking for a cue-bid of first or second round control in another suit. A simple raise denies the ability to cue-bid.

To make a positive response to 2C (anything but 2D), the suit should be robust, of at least 5-cards, and the hand should have an Ace and a King, or two KQs. To respond 3C or 3D, which is slightly pre-emptive on Opener, the suit should be 6-cards, something like AKJ9xx, and a few outside values. A 2NT response to 2C is a positive response without a robust 5-card suit.

A jump response to a 2C opening (3H, 3S, 4C or 4D) shows a self-supporting long suit and invites cue-bids from Opener. Partner opens 2C, responder holds:

AKT9x, Qx, xxx, xxx – Just worth a 2S response (also if 5-card suit is hearts)

ATxxx, KQx, xxx, xx – Suit not robust enough, but 2NT okay.

ATxxxx, QJx, xx, xx – Not strong enough for a positive response, bid 2D now and await Opener's rebid. Transfer to spades and bid 4S if Opener rebids 2NT.

xx, xx, QJx, AKJ9xx – Worth a 3C response, or 3D if minor suits swapped.

xxx, xx, QJx, AKxxx – Suit not robust enough for 3C (or 3D), but 2NT okay.

xx, xx, xxxx, xxxxx – Respond 2D, and pass Opener's non-jump rebid.

AKQJxxx, xx, xx, xx – Respond 3S, setting spades as trumps and asking for cue-bids (likewise with hearts).

xx, xx, xx, AKQJxxx – Respond 4C setting clubs as trumps and asking for cue-bids (likewise with diamonds).

xx, AKxxx, x, QJTxx – respond 2H and rebid 3C over 2S or 2NT rebid.

Reverse Bidding

When you open at the 1-level and rebid a higher ranking suit at the 2-level, responder is forced to the 3-level if they prefer the first-bid suit, thus you need extra points and distribution. This is called a Reverse! The minimum distribution is 5/4 with the first-bid suit longest, and the minimum strength for this shape is 16 HCPs. If the shape is more extreme, the HCPs can be less.

The responder should only pass opener's rebid if they have a weak hand (5-7 HCPs) and strong preference for the second suit. Preference to the first-bid suit is not forcing and therefore also 5-7 HCPs, and a rebid of responder's own suit is similarly non-forcing. With a stronger hand responder bids the 4th suit, or 2NT if they have a stopper in the 4th suit, or a jump rebid in their own suit.

Typical hands could be:

x, AKxx, AKJxx, JTx; Open 1D and rebid 2H over a 1S or 1NT response

x, AKxx, JTx, AKJxx; Open 1C and rebid 2H over a 1S or 1NT response, but 1H over 1D response;

x, JTx, AKxx, AKJxx; Open 1C and rebid 2D over a 1H, 1S or 1NT response;

x, AKxxx, x AKxxxx; ; Open 1C and rebid 2H over a 1S or 1NT response (extra shape) but 1H over 1D response;

x, x, AKxxx, AKxxxx; Open 1C and rebid 2D over a 1H, 1S or 1NT response;

x, xx, AKJxx, AKJxx; Open 1D and rebid 2C – shows at least 4D and 4C and unbalanced, and if available, a 3C rebid shows the 5/5.

Since a reverse promises a stronger hand, you can sometimes be forced to open 1D with 5 clubs, if you are not strong enough to reverse, and do not want to rebid 1NT because of a singleton, and the club suit is not strong enough to rebid. If you have a 1345 minimum opening you can cheat a little by rebidding 1NT if partner responds 1S to your 1C opening, but if partner responds 1H, you have no safe bid, and cannot reverse without 16 HCPs, so are forced to rebid a 5-card club suit or give partner 3-card support.

x, JTx, AQJx, KJxxx; Open 1C and rebid 1NT over a 1S response, or 2H over a 1H response.

xx, xx, AQJx, KQxxx; Open 1D and rebid 2C over a 1H or 1S response, pass a 1NT response.

x, QJx, AJxx, KJxxx; Open 1C and rebid 1NT over a 1S response, or 2H over a 1H response.

x, xxx, AQJx, KQxxx; Open 1D and rebid 2C over a 1H or 1S or 1NT response.

x, xxx, AQxx, KQJTx; Open 1C and rebid 2C, or raise a 1D response to 2D.

FOURTH SUIT FORCING

There are hands where responder knows there is enough for game (or slam) but doesn't know *which* game or slam. More information is needed about opener's hand and opener must be forced to continue bidding to game or slam.

This is where fourth suit forcing comes in. As the name suggests, it is the bid of the remaining fourth suit after the other 3 have been bid. It does not promise anything in the fourth suit (and hence must be alerted) but asks opener to describe their hand more fully. It can be played as only forcing for one round, but I think it is much better to play it as forcing to game. It makes slam exploration much easier if partner knows they have to keep bidding to at least game.

S 54	S QJ6
H A	H QJ1082
D KJ10843	D AQ9
C Q872	C K6
1D	1H
2C	?

These were the West-East hands during a club duplicate. I would open the West hand 1D on the Rule of 20 – you have 10 HCPs plus 10 cards in 2 of your suits making 20, and you have an easy rebid. East responds 1H and then has a problem after West's 2C rebid. East knows that with his/her 15 HCPs opposite an opening hand that there is enough for game. But which game? If West has 3 hearts, we want to play it in 4H. But if West doesn't have 3 hearts, we want to play in 3NT.

There is no adequate bid for East in basic standard. 2H would show 6+ hearts and a weak hand. 3H would also show 6+ hearts and an invitational hand. So the right bid is 2S fourth suit forcing. This tells partner that we are going to game and asks them to describe their hand further. West will bid 3D: this denies 3 hearts or a spade stopper for 3NT. East can now bid 3NT with a clear conscience about the 5 card heart suit.

When partner bids fourth suit forcing at you, you should respond in this order of priority:

1. 3 card support for partner's major
2. Extra length in your own major
3. A stopper for NTs in the 4th suit
4. Extra length in your second suit
5. 4 card support for the 4th suit
6. Lacking 1-5, the most natural and least misleading bid. Never feign holdings 1 and 3.

Let's change the hands slightly:

S KJ5	S 64
H A	H QJ1082
D KJ1084	D AQ9
C Q872	C KJ6
1D	1H
2C	?

East has a bigger problem with this hand – as well as not knowing if partner has 3 hearts, East has no spade stop for 3NT. 2S fourth suit forcing solves the problem as West will respond 2NT showing the spade stop and East can happily bid 3NT.

Let's change the hands again:

S 98	S 64
H A	H QJ1082
D KJ1084	D AQ9
C KQ872	C AJ6
1D	1H
2C	?

In response to 2S fourth suit forcing, West will reply 3C, show 5 clubs as well as 5 diamonds and denying 3 hearts or a spade stop. With good support for West's diamonds and clubs, and knowing 3NT and 4H do not appear to be viable games, East can try 5D.

One exceptional sequence: 1C 1D 1H 1S is NOT fourth suit forcing unless you have a specific agreement with your partner. The spade bid is natural and forces for one round. If you want to use fourth suit forcing in this situation, you should bid 1C 1D 1H 2S.

COUNTING THE HANDS!

Thanks to Joan Butts from the March 2018 QBA Bulletin.

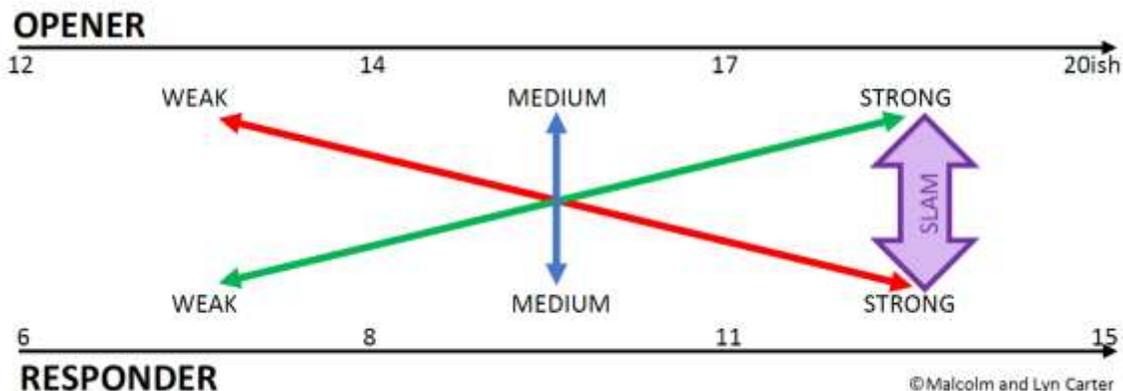
Especially as a declarer, but also as a defender, it is very important to use the bidding and the play so far to count out the unseen hands, and adjust as necessary as more tricks are played. It is not easy, requiring steady concentration, but once mastered will reap enormous rewards. A simple example that most declarers follow is to count the cards played by your opponents in your long suit so that you will know how many tricks are available, or how many rounds of trumps are required to exhaust the defenders.

Firstly, what is meant by 'counting the hand' - It is working out the distribution of each opponent's hand by remembering the cards they play as each trick is completed, and therefore constructing the defender's hand shapes in your mind. Any bidding (or lack thereof) by the defenders can assist in this regard.

As declarer, the most important things to consider are:

1. Always count the trump suit, or your longest suit in a NT contract.
As soon as dummy goes down, count your total trump holding, and establish how many trumps are held by the defenders. An even number of trumps out will generally not break evenly, but an odd number out will often break evenly. Thus with an 8-card fit, the 5 outstanding trumps will break 3-2 almost 50% of the time, followed by 4-1 and 5-0 rarely. Holding a 7-card fit, the 6 outstanding trumps will break 3-3 only about 1/3 of the time, with a 4-2 break almost 50%. Holding a 9-card fit, the odds are about even for a 3-1 or a 2-2 break, but many players, adhering to the 8 ever 9 never maxim, will play for the even break missing Qxxx.
2. The best way to get a count in a suit is when one opponent shows out!
Make a mental note of how many their partner has in the suit and hold that thought.
3. Remember that the bidding will give you clues, especially preempts!
A weak 2 opening bid generally shows a 6-card suit and a 3-level opening bid generally shows a 7-card suit. Count yours and dummy's cards in the suit, and you can estimate how many cards in the suit that the other defender has.
4. Remember that some suits are more important than others.
As dummy comes down experience will indicate to you which suits are more important to count than others. The trump suit obviously should always be counted out, but also yours and/or dummy's longest suit.
5. Counting can often help when you do not remember all of the cards in a suit that were played to the tricks. If you have a 4-3 fit and **both** opponents followed three times, the remaining card is good, no matter how small it is.
6. Start off with the easy suits first, to build up as large a mental picture as you can before you tackle the difficult suit. This can often point to the way a 2-way finesse should be taken to maximize the chance of success, or sometimes even guarantee success, especially when one of the defenders has shown a long suit in the bidding.

Following the “keep it simple” approach, it should be possible to classify opening bids and responses as weak, medium and strong, regardless of the system being taught. The following diagram illustrates the indicative points needed for weak, medium and strong opening bids and responses, and the interaction between them.



Points for Game Diagram

This Points for Game Diagram shows that the following hand combinations are enough for game:

- weak opening and strong response;
- medium opening and medium response; or
- strong opening and weak response.

If there is a strong opening and a strong response, then there may be enough points for a slam.

Rebid Summary - Opener

- Rebid opening suit at minimum level - 12-14
- Jump opening rebid suit - 15-17
- Rebid 1NT - 12-14 (1NT opening = 15-17)
- Rebid 2NT - 18-19
- Rebid 3NT - Long solid Minor about 7 or 8 tricks in hand

Bid/ Rebid Summary - Responder

- Rebid responding suit at minimum level - 5-9
- Jump rebid responding suit - 10-12
- 1NT response - 5-9 (no 4-card major)
- 2NT response - 10-12 (no 4-card major)
- 3NT response - 13-15 (no 4-card major)

Leading to a Slam

When the opponents bid to a slam it is nice when you have an easy lead (but will it defeat the slam?), but often, if the opponents have bid the hand well, you will have to lead in the dark unless your partner is in a position to make a lead-directing double after the final bid. Sometimes you have no chance as the slam is cold, but other times you have a chance if you get off to the right lead. What is the right lead?

The first thing to remember is that no leading system works all of the time, but if you use a logical system you will defeat the slam more times than most, by using logic. You would think that leading the top of an AK suit would always be right, but unless the slam is silly, at least one of the opponents must be short in that suit, and if void, the lead of this suit could lose a chance to develop a trick in another suit.

Even so, leading the top of an AK suit is still right up there with logical leads, but consider the bidding first to determine if the opponents could have bid the slam with this suit wide open. Unless it is bid as a sacrifice, the stronger you are, the more likely it is that one opponent is void in your best suit.

Now consider a lead-directing double! If the opponents bid freely to a slam, and your partner doubles when it is you that is on lead, the double is calling for an unusual lead. Most commonly it is asking for a lead of dummy's first bid suit, suggesting a void or a good honour holding such as AQ. If dummy has not bid a suit, it is suggesting a void in an outside suit, and you can best lead your longest suit.

If you and your partner have bid and supported a suit, that could be considered the normal opening lead, so double by the player not on lead is often used to suggest the lead of another suit, possibly the first suit bid by dummy. Similarly, if your partner has made a lead-directing double during the auction and then doubles the slam bid, it tends to cancel out the earlier double.

If you have an Ace (or a potential trump trick), and a holding of KQ in an outside suit, it would be normal to lead the King, hopefully to establish the setting trick before your Ace is forced out.

If you have no prospects for a second trick in your hand but you hold an Ace, it may be prudent to lead your Ace, as partner could have the King, and declarer may be able to discard enough losers in this suit unless they are cashed at tricks 1 and 2. Of course the same logic works if your only honour is the King, but this may give away the contract.

A lead of an outside singleton can be quite effective, but is only recommended if you also have at least 2 trumps, that way you get your ruff if partner has the Ace of the suit led, or wins an early trump trick. A singleton lead can damage your partner's hold on the suit, and is generally futile if you only hold a singleton trump and thus cannot ruff the return even if partner wins the trump Ace.

The 2 hands that follow were actually played in April at this club in numerical order, and on board 25 South did not lead the CA and the slam made! On board 26, which followed, after the slam on the previous board had made because the Ace had not been led, South led the DA instead of the CK and the slam made again!

M Bd 26 Dir E Vul All	Q74 T82 9632 J93		On the first board West bid 2D as a game-forcing natural bid, then showed slam interest with 3H over the 3C response. In spite of East showing no interest by raising to 4H, West was not done yet and asked for Key Cards with 4NT, although the void in spades made this dangerous. If 4S could be treated as Void-wood, it is ideal here, but it is more likely to be taken as a cue-bid. The 5S response, showing 2 Aces and the HQ gave West no choice, and the bad slam was reached.	
- K743 KQJ854 A62		AJ2 AQJ65 7 T754	South was on lead and West had shown a diamond suit and pushed on to slam despite East's reluctance, so it is a time to set up a trick. This is especially so since South had the vital DA, so it is correct to lead the CK.	
	KT98653 9 AT KQ8		On the lead of the CK South can win with the DA when East leads the D7 and cash the setting trick. If South makes a negative lead, as happened at the table, then East can discard the clubs by setting up the diamonds, making 12 tricks.	
W	N	E	S	
2D	/	1H 3C	1S /	
3H	/	4H	/	
4NT	/	5S	/	
6H	//			
M Bd 25 Dir N Vul EW	7643 JT 973 KQ54		On the second board, East's 2H response was a negative in EW's bidding system, so perchance East became declarer in 6H and South was on lead with nothing to guide them. East has reasonable values and 4-card support, so unwisely took over when West showed their heart suit, and since 5D could not be 0 KCs, assumed it was 4 and hoped the fit and West's 2C opening was enough for 12 tricks. North has an easy lead of the CK but since East bid hearts first, the spotlight now fell onto South and they had to make a decision as to whether to go on attack or defence! It has been stated in the bridge literature that every time you lead a new suit, including the opening lead, you give away half a trick, and with isolated honours, it is often correct to make a negative lead. This time South has only one real value and the advantage of laying down the CA is that they will be able to see dummy and get a signal from partner before making the next lead. On a club lead and continuation 6H goes off, on any other lead it makes.	
AKJ AKQ952 A2 72		Q92 8643 KQT JT3		
	T85 7 J8654 A986			
W	N	E	S	
2C	/	/	/	
3H	/	2H!	/	
5D	/	4NT 6H	//	

