

Defensive Signals

The declarer has a big advantage over defenders in that he can see both his hand and the dummy and can play the hand based on that knowledge. Defenders cannot see their partner's hand. However, defenders can play their cards in a manner which conveys information to partner. For example, when one defender leads the queen at trick one in defending a NT contract, partner knows that the opening leader also holds the Jack and probably the 10 as well, but not the King.

The circumstances in which defenders can convey information to partner fall into three main categories: attitude, count, and suit preference. Attitude signals tell partner whether you have high cards in a particular suit. Partner can use this information to lead the suit (or not) if she gains the lead. It may also help partner know which suit you will protect and which suit she must protect. Count signals give partner information about how many cards you have in a suit. Partner can then use this information to judge how many cards declarer has in the suit. Suit preference signals tell partner which of two suits you have values in.

Both sides are entitled to know what signals are being used. Thus, when one defender signals partner, declarer can see the signal also and make his own judgments. There are times when a defender may make a "false" signal to mislead declarer.

Just as there are multiple bidding systems in use in bridge, there are also multiple signaling systems. For this tutorial, "standard signals" (which have been in use for decades and continue to be widely used) will be used.

Attitude Signals. In Standard Signals, "high" cards encourage; low cards discourage.

	Dummy	
Partner's Lead	A54	You
3		K92

If a low card is played from dummy, you will play the King. This is not a signal; it's a normal play to win the trick. Suppose the Ace had been played from Dummy. Now you have a choice to play the 9 or the 2. You should play the 9 (a high spot card) to tell partner you like the lead.

	Dummy	
Partner's Lead	A54	You
3		972

Now if the Ace is played from dummy, you should play the 2 (low) to tell partner that you don't have any values in hearts.

	Dummy	
Partner's Lead	753	You
A		Q64

Suppose you are defending a suit contract and partner leads the Ace of a side suit. Partner will usually have the King when she leads the Ace (but not a guarantee). You should encourage partner to continue the suit by playing your highest spot card (the 6). If partner continues with the King, you play the 4, which confirms to partner that you want her to continue to lead the suit (because you played "high" initially). This is called a "high-low" play.

	Dummy	
Partner's Lead	753	You
A		64

Again you are defending a suit contract and you are expecting partner to have the AK. You should play the 6 to encourage partner to continue. When she does and you play the 4, she will lead a third round, which you will ruff.

	Dummy	
Partner's Lead	753	You
A		642

Now you have no reason to encourage partner, so you play the 2 (low). Partner may continue anyway if she has AKQ8, but would switch to some other suit if she had AKJ8. In the latter case, she is hoping that you can gain the lead to lead through declarer's Queen.

Sometimes you may like the suit partner leads but the circumstances cause you to ask her to switch to another suit.

	Dummy	
	♠K5	
	♥10863	
	♦86	
	♣AKQJ5	
Partner's Lead		You
♦A		♠AQ74
		♥75
		♦KQ10972
		♣3

If you encourage and partner continues, you are stuck in your hand. You could cash the ♠A, but if declarer has no trump losers, he will take the rest of the tricks. You should play the ♦2 to discourage partner. She will surely switch to a spade (that's the only reasonable chance for tricks). So you win your AQ and then cash the ♦K.

The lesson is to look at the "big picture", not just the suit being led. Here's another example.

	♠Q64		Partner leads the ♦Q against 4♠. The Ace is played from dummy. Normally you would encourage with the King and otherwise discourage. However, if you discourage, partner has to guess what to switch to and may well switch to a heart, which gives declarer the contract. To prevent this, you should encourage in diamonds. Declarer can win the diamond, but must eventually lose two clubs and a heart, in addition to the ♠A. Again, the lesson is to look at the big picture, not just the suit led.
	♥8764		
	♦A2		
Partner	♣KQ109	You	
♠A7		♠985	
♥KJ3		♥10952	
♦QJ1095		♦873	
♣743		♣AJ5	
	♠KJ1032		
	♥AQ		
	♦K64		
	♣862		

Attitude signals may be made while discarding as well as when following suit.

<p>♠A8 ♥J74 ♦KJ7 ♣J8542</p> <p>♠KQ103 ♥985 ♦Q65 ♣Q76</p> <p>♠J95 ♥AKQ3 ♦1083 ♣AK3</p>	<p>♠7642 ♥1062 ♦A942 ♣109</p>	<p>Partner leads the ♠K against 3NT. The Ace is played from dummy. You discourage with the 2. Declarer plays the A, K, and 3 of clubs. On the third club trick you should signal with the ♦9 to encourage a diamond lead. Partner leads a diamond to your Ace. Now you can lead a spade to partner (through declarer's Jack) for the setting tricks. If partner had held KQJ10 of spades, she would cash all her spade winners and then lead to your diamond Ace.</p>
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Sometimes it's easy to show your "attitude"; other times it's not so easy. In a suit contract, partner leads the Q and dummy plays the Ace.

	Dummy	
Partner	A5	You
QJ106		A. K92 B. 942 C. K32 D. 987

With A, it's easy to play the 9 to encourage. In B, it's easy to play the 2 to discourage. With C, you do your best to encourage with the 3. A good partner will look at declarer's card and wonder where the 2 is. An observant partner will see that it's possible you are encouraging with the 3. With D, you can discourage with the 7, but it will be very hard for partner to know what the message is.

Count Signals. While there are many times when you want to show your attitude about a suit by playing an encouraging or discouraging card, there are other times when your attitude is clear-cut, but it is important to signal "count" to your partner, i.e., how many cards you have in the suit. It is not always possible to show the exact number of cards you have, but it is possible to tell partner whether you have an odd number of cards or an even number of cards. This clue may be enough to enable partner to determine exactly how many you have. If you play "high-low", you show an even number of cards. If you play "low-high", you show an odd number of cards.

<p> ♠A4 ♥753 ♦KQJ103 ♣653 ♠Q1073 ♥9862 ♦A75 ♣Q8 ♠J92 ♥AKQJ ♦86 ♣AK92 </p>	<p> ♠K865 ♥104 ♦942 ♣J1074 </p>	<p>Partner leads the ♠3 against 3N. The 4 is played from dummy and you win with the King. You return a spade, won in dummy. The ♦K is led. If declarer has the Ace, what you play is irrelevant, but if partner has the Ace, it makes a difference when she plays the Ace. If partner wins the Ace immediately, declarer will be able to take the remaining 4 diamond tricks. But if partner delays taking the Ace until declarer has no more diamonds, then declarer has no other dummy entry to the diamond winners. A partner who knew about hold-up plays but nothing about count signals would probably duck the first two diamond tricks. This would allow declarer to make the contract (1 spade, 4 hearts, 2 diamonds, and 2 clubs).</p>
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If you know count signals, you will play the ♦2 on the first diamond lead, which is clearly the beginning of a “low-high” signal showing an odd number of diamonds. Partner sees 5 diamonds in dummy and 3 in her hand, leaving 5 for you and declarer. So you could have 1 and declarer 4 (if which case it makes no difference when partner wins the Ace, since declarer will always have an entry on the fourth diamond), or you could have 3 and declarer could have 2 (which is the situation here). Thus partner should only duck one diamond and win the second diamond lead. This will hold declarer to 1 diamond trick, and the contract will be set.

<p> ♠A4 ♥753 ♦KQJ103 ♣653 ♠Q1073 ♥9862 ♦A75 ♣Q8 ♠J92 ♥AKQ ♦862 ♣AK92 </p>	<p> ♠K865 ♥J104 ♦94 ♣J1074 </p>	<p>Same contract; same play to the first two tricks. Now when the ♦K is led, you should play the 9, the beginning of a high-low showing an even number of cards. Again partner knows that you and declarer hold a total of 5 diamonds. It’s impossible for you to have 4 and declarer 1, since declarer would not have opened 1N with a singleton. Thus you must have 2 and declarer 3. So partner wins the third round, and declarer is again 1 trick short.</p>
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Suit Preference Signals. A Suit Preference Signal tells partner which of two suits to lead. The two suits involved will be clear from the circumstances. A high card indicates that you want the higher of the two suits, and a low card indicates that you want the lower of the two suits.

<p> ♠A1075 ♥8 ♦K842 ♣K842 ♠84 ♥AK92 ♦J1093 ♣J109 ♠92 ♥106543 ♦765 ♣AQ3 ♠KQJ63 ♥QJ7 ♦AQ ♣765 </p>	<p> West leads the ♥A against a 4♠ contract. With a singleton in dummy, there is no benefit in an attitude signal or a count signal. The important question for the defense is “what should West shift to?” There are only two choices: the remaining side suits (clubs and diamonds). East can use a Suit Preference Signal to answer the question. If East wants a diamond lead, she plays the ♥10 (a high card for the higher suit) on the first trick. If East wants a club lead, she plays the ♥3 (low). In this case, she signals for a club, and West leads the Jack (top of a sequence). The defense cashes 3 club tricks and sets the contract. With any other lead, South would eventually throw a club loser on the ♦K. If East had no preference for a lead, she would play a “middle” card (if available). </p>
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<p> ♠10853 ♥Q95 ♦KJ5 ♣K95 ♠J74 ♥J873 ♦9 ♣J7642 ♠6 ♥1042 ♦A108742 ♣A103 ♠AKQ92 ♥AK6 ♦Q63 ♣Q8 </p>	<p> Against a 4♠ contract, West leads the ♦9. East wins the Ace and goes through the following thought process. “The 9 is either a singleton or top of a doubleton. I’m hoping it’s a singleton and will return a diamond for partner to ruff. I will also tell her what to lead back (a club) so that I can get back on lead and give her another ruff.” East and West recently had a lesson on Suit Preference Signals, so they know that leading a low diamond back at trick two asks for a club return. Leading a high diamond back would ask for a heart return. </p>
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