

The ABC's of Defensive Signals

When defending a hand, every card you and your partner play should have a purpose. If the card played cannot win a trick or generate a trick, then it should give partner information about your hand. Three signal types exist, *attitude signals*, *count signals* and *suit preference signals*. They work together, and when used thoughtfully, give defenders an advantage in the play of the hand.

Attitude Signals

Attitude signals are used in two situations: at trick one by the partner of the opening leader and the first time a defender makes a discard in a suit. An attitude signal may be a positive one stating, "Attack this suit!" *It may also be a negative signal* stating, "We're wasting our time with this suit." **Good bridge always takes precedence over signaling.** In other words, don't waste a trick just to tell your partner you like a suit.

The attitude signal at trick one

Partner has made the opening lead and the dummy is tabled. If the card you play is not being used to win a trick, it should tell partner *how you feel about the suit he or she led*. Is the defense most likely to take their tricks if partner's suit is continued? Or should the defense attack another suit? The signal you choose is not based solely on the cards you hold. Your choice also takes into account the knowledge of the hand you have gained from the bidding, from partner's lead, and from the cards that appear in dummy.

- The play of a high card in the suit encourages partner to continue leading that suit. If you do not want partner to switch to a new suit, encourage partner to continue the suit already led.
- The play of a low card in the suit tells partner to *make the obvious switch*. Before automatically signaling for a switch in suits, review the bidding and examine dummy from partner's perspective. The suit you want partner to lead is obvious to you, but may not be so obvious from partner's perspective.
- The play of an honor card when partner will probably win the trick is a *singleton*, or it *promises the honor immediately below*.
- The card you play when attempting to win a trick is also a type of **attitude signal**. Play the lowest of equal cards when winning a trick. Include the cards in dummy when determining those equivalents.
- Don't forget that the lead of a King against a no trump contract specifically asks for attitude. *Play a high card if you hold the Ace or Queen in the suit partner led*. (Note that some players use the lead of an Ace against a no trump contract to ask for attitude.)

Dummy: ♠K752

♥65

♦97

Partner: ♣AQJT3

♥A

You:

♠83

♥QJ73

♦JT63

♣742

Auction: South – Partner – North – You

1S – X – 2NT! – P

4S – P – P – P

Partner's opening lead is the ♥A. What should you do? Play the ♥Q under partner's ♥A at trick one! This play promises a singleton or the ♥J. If partner leads a low heart to your ♥J at trick two, what do you plan to do next?

The attitude signal when discarding

The first card you play when discarding a suit is an **attitude signal**, and in standard signaling methods, refers to that suit only. When discarding, you must first choose the suit, *not the signal*. Remember that **good bridge takes precedence over signaling**. When the discard suit has been chosen, choose the card based on your attitude relative to that suit.

- The discard of a low card tells partner that you have no interest in that suit. Admittedly, partners notice high cards and tend to ignore low cards, but a negative signal is less likely to cost your side a trick. Remember the definition of discard – it’s something you’re throwing away!
- Discard a high card to ask partner to lead that suit if partner wins a trick. Play the highest card you can afford, but *do not waste a trick in a suit just to signal to partner*. When defending a no trump contract, think carefully before discarding from a long suit. You may be throwing away the setting trick!
- With two or more positive signals to show partner, encourage partner to lead the suit it is not safe for you to lead yourself.

Dummy:	♠3	
	♥--	
	♦AJ96	
Partner:	♣KQ32	You:
		♠--
		♥64
		♦K852
		♣A94

Auction: North – You – South – Partner

1D – P – 1H – P

2C – P – **3NT** – P

Even without knowing the first four tricks, you should be able to figure this out. Declarer leads the ♠3 from dummy and you must discard. You have the ♦K and the ♣A. Tell partner to lead a diamond; you can win the ♣A by yourself. You have two ways to show partner that you prefer diamonds. Which would be best with the cards shown her?

Count Signals

Count signals are used to tell partner *how many cards* you hold in a suit. A player should *echo* in a suit, i.e. play a high card followed by a low card, to show an **even number** of cards in that suit. Clues from the bidding, as well as dummy’s and partner’s own holdings, should quickly tell partner whether you hold two, four, or six cards in the suit. Play a low card in the suit followed by a high card to show an **odd number** of cards in the suit. Again, keep in mind that **good bridge always takes precedence over signaling**.

The count signal when declarer leads a suit

- A **count signal** may be used any time declarer first plays a suit. Usually when declarer plays a suit, neither you nor your partner will win many tricks in that suit. An attitude signal would be unnecessary, so bridge players signal to tell partner *how many cards they hold* in the suit declarer is playing. When you and partner know the number of cards held by each in a given suit, you also know the number held by declarer. Using clues obtained from the bidding, opening lead, attitude signals, and count signals, declarer’s hand quickly becomes an open book.

- A **count signal** is mandatory when dummy holds a long suit with no outside entry. To prevent declarer from taking any extra tricks, you or partner must know exactly when to win a trick in that suit. *If you play no other count signals, play them in this situation!*
- Do not give a count signal when declarer is playing a four-card holding such as **AKQT**. You or partner may hold four cards to the **J** in that suit and you don't want to give declarer the information that a finesse is necessary.

Dummy: ♠953
 ♥65
 ♦97
 Partner: ♣KQJT8 You:
 ♣?? ♣A52

Auction: North – You – South – Partner
 P – P – 1D – P
 1S – P – 2NT – P
 3NT – P – P – P

Declarer wins partner's spade lead in hand, and promptly leads the ♣3 towards the dummy. Partner plays the ♣9. When will you win the ♣A? When will you win the ♣A if partner plays the ♣4?

The count signal at trick one

- If partner's opening lead is a low spot card, the card you play is normally an attempt to win the trick. If dummy wins the trick with an honor card, the card you play is still an *attitude* card. If declarer plays a winning *spot card* from dummy that you cannot cover, however, your attitude about this suit will be obvious. Don't waste your first play. Choose the card that shows *count* in the suit.
- When defending a trump contract, echo with a **small doubleton** in partner's opening lead suit to show a desire to trump. *Do not echo with honor doubleton*. When defending a no trump contract, echo with a small doubleton only when partner's lead asks for count.

The concept of present count

If your first play in a suit was an *attitude signal*, your second play in that suit – assuming you are not making an attempt to win the trick – should show what is known as **present count**, the number of cards you are holding in that suit at that time. Echo if your *present count* is an even number of cards; play low followed by high if that count is an odd number of cards.

- At trick one, if declarer plays an honor from dummy which you cannot cover, or do not cover, your first card shows *attitude* in that suit. Your second card, if not an attempt to win the trick, shows *present count*.
- The first card played in a suit when discarding is an *attitude signal*. The second card played tells partner your **present count** in the suit. Echo if your *present count* is an even number of cards; play low followed by high if that count is an odd number of cards.

You: ♦86432

Contract: **4S**
 You hold only one spade. When declarer pulls trumps, you follow to the first spade, but must discard when the second spade is played. You decide to discard diamonds and pitch the ♦2 to show your *attitude* in this suit. On the third spade, tell partner your *present count* in the diamond suit. You now hold the ♦8643, or four cards. Play the ♦8 to begin your *echo* to show an even number of cards remaining.

- Consider telling partner your **present count** when returning his or her opening lead suit. With an even number of cards left in the suit, play high followed by low; with an odd number, play low followed by high. If you started with at least four cards in the suit, play your original fourth best card. *There are many card combinations that take precedence over present count.* Examples include sequence holdings and cards needed to surround dummy's honors.

The trump echo

The final class of count signal is known as the **trump echo**. When holding three trumps, play high followed by low in the trump suit. Use this signal to tell partner you want to trump a suit and to let partner know how many trumps you have available for that purpose. Be careful not to waste a high spot trump, though.

When you hold a poor hand, it is very easy to become careless in your defense. Unfortunately, this is the time when partner will need your help most. Count signals may be vital in preventing a fatal mistake by your partner. *Make all signals as clear as possible.* Good defenders do their best to avoid giving partner a problem.

Suit Preference Signals

Suit preference signals are the third signal type used by defenders to defeat contracts. These signals are used when following suit in very specific situations to tell partner to switch to a given suit. Again, remember that **good bridge always takes precedence over signaling.**

- Your partner leads a singleton against a trump contract. You win the first trick and return the suit for partner to ruff. *The card you lead is a suit preference signal.* This signal tells partner in which suit, if any, you hold an entry. If your entry is in the lower of the two outside suits, return a low spot card for partner to ruff. If your entry is in the higher of the two outside suits, return a high spot card. If your entry is in the trump suit, or you have no outside entry, return a middle card. You want to caution partner against an unusual lead away from a possible trick. **Be as clear as possible in your signals.**

Dummy:	♠7532	
	♥765	
	♦KJ9	
Partner:	♣KJ8	You:
		♠8
♥9		♥AT842
		♦QT86
		♣A52

Auction: South – Partner – North – You

1S – P – 2S – P

3H – P – 3S – P

4S – P – P – P

You suspect from the bidding that partner's ♥9 is a singleton. Your side needs four tricks to set this contract. Although you may be taking a trick with your ♦Q, it would be best to guarantee the set with two ruffs in partner's hand. With this in mind, what heart should you return at trick two for partner to ruff?

In the example shown, return the ♥2 to tell partner to lead the *lower outside suit*, clubs. If you held the ♦A instead of the ♣A, you should return the ♥T for partner to ruff. Don't think the ♥4 is low enough or the ♥8 is high enough.

The suit preference signal at trick one

In rare instances, the card you play when partner makes the opening lead against a suit contract will be a **suit preference signal.**

- If partner's card is likely to hold the first trick and dummy will take the next trick in that suit, your first card may be a *suit preference signal*. Play a low card in the suit to tell partner to switch to the lower of the remaining suits, excluding the trump suit.
- The play of a high card in partner's suit may be a *suit preference signal* asking partner to switch to the higher of the remaining suits, excluding the trump suit. It may also be an **attitude signal** telling partner to continue that suit, regardless of dummy's holding.

The opening leader, if in doubt, should assume that a high card is an *attitude signal* requesting the continuation of the suit. **Attitude signals take precedence over suit preference signals.**

Dummy:	♠A82	
	♥KQ5	
	♦KJ5	
Partner:	♣KJ83	You:
		♠83
♥A		♥T42
		♦8642
		♣AQT4

Contract: 4S

Partner's ♥A lead may not be best for your side, but you do your best and play the ♥2. Partner doesn't need your signal to tell him a heart continuation may be useless. Your card tells him to switch to the lower of the outside suits: clubs. Without this *suit preference signal*, partner's next play is simply a guess. What heart would you play at trick one if your clubs and diamonds were reversed?

Make all signals as clear as possible. Good defenders do their best to avoid giving partner a problem.

Standard Signaling Summary

In defining defensive signals, plays were viewed from the signaler's perspective. This short quiz will view signals from the partner's point of view.

Signals at trick one

Dummy:	♠A82	
	♥K95	
	♦KJ53	
You:	♣KT8	Partner:
♥A76 <u>3</u>		♥??

Auction: South – You – North – Partner
1NT – P – 3NT – P

Your opening lead is a low card. Partner assumes your lead is from a long suit, probably headed by an honor with no leadable honor sequence.

- 1a. Declarer plays the ♥5 from dummy and partner plays the ♥J. Partner is attempting to win the trick with the *lowest of equal cards*. What card can you now place in declarer's hand?
- 1b. Partner's ♥J wins the trick, and partner now returns the ♥Q. How many hearts does declarer have?
- 2a. Declarer plays the ♥K from dummy, partner plays the ♥2, and declarer follows with the ♥5. Declarer now leads the ♥9 from dummy and partner plays the ♥4. How many hearts did partner start with?

2b. Partner has nothing in hearts, but his play at trick one asks you to *make the obvious switch*. How will you discover what the obvious switch is? Your answer to these two questions will tell you when to win the ♥A.

3. Declarer plays the ♥9 from dummy and partner does not cover dummy's card. He follows with the ♥8. How many hearts does declarer hold? What are they?

Dummy:	♠AK2	
	♥845	
	♦KJ73	
You:	♣984	Partner:
	♠85	
	♥ <u>K</u> Q92	♥??
	♦864	
	♣KJ2	

Auction: South – You– North – Partner
 1S – P – 1NT! – P
 2C – P – 3S – P
 4S – P – P – P

Your opening lead is an honor card. Partner assumes this is the top card in an honor sequence.

1. Partner plays the ♥J. There are two possible reasons for this play. Which one is most likely?
2. Partner plays the ♥3 and your ♥K wins the trick. What will you do now?

Dummy:	♠A842	
	♥8	
	♦KJ73	
You:	♣KJ86	Partner:
	♠75	
	♥ <u>A</u> KJ92	♥??
	♦864	
	♣932	

Auction: South – You– North – Partner
 1S – P – 4H! – P
 4S – P – P – P

Your ♥A will win this trick, but declarer will be able to trump a heart continuation. What do you expect to learn from partner's card?

1. Partner plays the ♥4 and declarer follows with the ♥3. What do you do now?
2. Partner plays the ♥7 and declarer follows with the ♥5. What are your thoughts?

Signals when you are leading a short suit against a trump contract

Dummy: ♠953
♥A865
♦Q973

You: ♣KJ
♠7
♥742
♦JT85
♣86432

Partner:
♠A

Auction: South – You – North – Partner

1H – P – 2D – P

2NT – P – 4H – P

You lead your singleton spade and partner wins this trick with the ♠A. What do you expect to learn from the card partner plays at trick two?

1a. Declarer follows at trick one with the ♠6. Partner returns the ♠T and declarer plays the ♠J. What card do you use to trump this trick? What card do you play at trick three?

1b. Declarer follows at trick one with the ♠2. Partner returns the ♠4 and declarer plays the ♠Q. What card do you use to trump this trick? What card do you play at trick three?

1c. Declarer follows at trick one with the ♠6. Partner returns the ♠4 and declarer plays the ♠K. What card do you use to trump this trick? What card do you play at trick three? What are your thoughts?

Signaling Variations

Bridge players experiment with signaling variations just as they experiment with bidding systems and conventions. One of the most common variations is known as *upside-down count and attitude*. Pairs using this signaling agreement simply reverse standard signaling methods. Some partnerships also add *upside-down suit preference* to their methods. Others retain standard suit preference signals. While experts do claim that there is a slight advantage in using the upside-down count and attitude signals, it is not the type of signals you use that is important. What is most important in good defense is that you and your partner use signals.

- When showing attitude, a low card followed by a high card is a *positive* signal; high followed by low is a *negative* signal.
- When giving count, a low card followed by a high card shows an *even number of cards*; high followed by low shows an *odd number of cards*.
- The trump echo remains the same.

Attitude signal variations

In standard signaling, the first discard is an *attitude signal*. Some pairs redefine the first discard using one of the following methods. *Note that these signals are allowed only on the first discard.*

- **Lavinthal discards** combine both attitude and suit preference signals in one card. The first discard by either defender *denies interest in the discard suit* and the rank indicates suit preference for the higher or lower of the two remaining suits.

Example: Declarer is leading hearts. The first discard by one defender is the ♣9. This defender denies interest in the club suit and shows preference for the higher of the remaining suits: spades. Defender's partner first discards ♠2. This play denies interest in spades and shows interest in the lower of the remaining suits: clubs.

- **Odd-even discards** also combine attitude and suit preference signals. If the first discard is an odd card, defender shows interest in the suit being discarded. If the first discard is an even card, defender denies interest in the discarded suit. The rank of that card *may show suit preference*.

Example: Declarer is leading hearts. The first discard by one defender is the ♣3. This is an odd card and shows interest in the club suit. Assume the first discard is ♣2. This even numbered card denies interest in the club suit and shows interest in the lower ranking outside suit: diamonds. If the first discard were the ♣8, the defender would be showing interest in the higher ranking outside suit: spades.

Other signal variations

- The **Smith echo** is used to communicate how each defender feels about the opening lead. When declarer first leads a new suit, defender plays high followed by low to show partner that he liked the opening lead. Low followed by high signals that defender did not like the lead. Some pairs reverse the meaning and play **reverse Smith echo**. Note that if declarer first plays a suit in which a dummy entry may be critical, don't bother with the Smith echo. *Give partner count!*
- The **Foster echo** is played when defending a no trump contract and begins at trick one. If third hand cannot win the trick, this defender is expected to *unblock the second highest card*. Their second play in the suit is their next lowest card and the third play is the lowest card in that suit.

Examples: Partner leads the ♣3 and dummy's holding is ♣Q86. Declarer plays the ♣Q and you hold:

♣J73 – Play the 7 on this trick and play the 3 next.

♣T742 – Play the 7 on this trick, then the 4, and last the 2.

- Some bridge players do not use the **trump echo**. The manner in which they play the trump suit may show **suit preference**. When declarer plays the trump suit, a defender plays a high trump followed by a low trump to show interest in the higher of the outside suits. A low trump followed by a high trump shows preference for the lower of the outside suits. This signal may be of limited use as defenders usually have few trumps.

Signals and the Declarer

Of course, declarer has no need to follow signaling conventions. When declaring a hand, play your cards in a way designed to confuse the defenders.

- Your LHO leads a small spade and you hold ♠AQJ. Your RHO plays the ♠T. Win this trick with the ♠Q. Each defender will think his partner holds the ♠J.
- Your LHO leads the ♣K against a 3NT contract. You hold the ♣AT82, dummy holds ♣764, and your RHO plays the ♣5. It may be right to let LHO hold this trick. To encourage him to continue the suit, play the ♣8. By hiding the ♣2, you make it seem as if your RHO is playing a high club.
- Just as playing a high spot card may camouflage the defenders' discouraging signal, playing a low spot card may also camouflage an encouraging defensive signal.

Remember to play *false cards* that agree with your bidding. If you are known to hold four hearts, don't try to make it seem as if you hold only three.

Remember!

- Make all signals as clear as possible. What you want from partner seems obvious to you because you can see your own cards. Make it obvious to partner, too.
- Good defenders do their best to avoid giving partner a problem.
- **Good bridge always takes precedence over signaling!**