

Planning the Play as Declarer

Planning the play in notrump

These are the steps in planning the play in a notrump contract:

- Count your *winner*s
- Decide whether you need to develop tricks
- Don't be afraid to give up the lead
- In general, establish your extra tricks before cashing sure tricks
- Plan your entries

An example of counting your winners:

♠	K Q 9 8 2
♥	J 10 9
♦	7 6 4
♣	A 3
	<input type="text"/>
♠	A 4 3
♥	A 7 4 3
♦	K Q J 10
♣	K 10

South is in 3NT. West leads the ♣Q.

Look at both hands, suit by suit. In spades, you have the ace, king and queen that could win you three separate tricks. You might make two more tricks with the nine and the eight but this is not certain so you can't yet count them as winners. They will have to be developed. In hearts you have one immediate winner — the ace. In diamonds you have no winners! Tricky here — you won't have any certain winners until you have lost a trick to the ace but after that trick the remaining high cards will be winners. In clubs you have two winners. So you have six winners and must develop three more to make 3NT.

How can you develop three more tricks? Looking at spades, the opponents have five between them. About two-thirds of the time one person

will have three spades and the other two. Roughly a quarter of the time they split 4-1 and a 5-0 split is pretty uncommon. It doesn't hurt to remember these numbers. If they split 3-2 this will give you five spade tricks but only eight winners in total.

The best bet is the diamond suit. Once you knock out the $\heartsuit A$ you will have three winners, which is just what you need. So you plan to lead a diamond as soon as you get in and keep leading them until the ace appears. This will give you nine tricks. Then if the spades break 3-2 you will get two extra tricks as a bonus.

Planning the play in a suit contract

These are the steps in planning the play in a suit contract:

- Count your *losers*
- Decide whether you need to develop tricks
- Consider trumping losers in the short trump hand
- Draw trumps right away unless there is a good reason not to
- Don't be afraid to give up the lead
- Plan your entries

An example of counting your losers:

\spadesuit	J 10 2
\heartsuit	K 10 9 5
\diamondsuit	A 8 4 2
\clubsuit	7 3
\spadesuit	A K Q 4 3
\heartsuit	A 7 4
\diamondsuit	7 6
\clubsuit	A J 10

South is in $4\spadesuit$. West leads the $\heartsuit K$.

Find the hand with the most trumps — in this case it is South. It is known as the **long trump hand**. Consider only losers in the long trump hand. In spades the ace, king and queen will take tricks and the jack and ten in the short hand will take care of the four and three in the long hand, so no losers in spades. In hearts the ace will take a trick and the seven and four are

losers, but the king will take care of one of them so you only have one loser. In diamonds the seven and six are losers, but the ace will take care of one of them so you only have one loser. In clubs you have the ace plus two losers, neither of which can be covered by a high card in the short hand. So you have four losers — one in hearts, one in diamonds and two in clubs and you need to eliminate one of them to make your contract.

There are thirteen tricks in a deal. Take your four losers from thirteen and you get nine. That is, you expect to take nine tricks in 4♠. But you need ten, so you have to eliminate one of your losers.

Can you trump a loser in the short hand? Yes — since you have three clubs in the long hand, South, and only two in the short hand, North, you could trump one club in the short hand. The next thing to consider is whether you can safely draw trumps right away. If there is no reason to delay, you should always draw trumps first. In this case if you draw trumps there will be none left in dummy to trump a club. So you plan to lead the ♣A and then another club. When you regain the lead you will be able to draw a round or two of trumps, leaving one in dummy, and then trump your losing club. This will give you ten tricks and your contract.

There are other possibilities here but trumping a loser in dummy is the best bet to eliminate a loser.

Planning the Defense

During the bidding

The time to start planning the defense is during the bidding. The opponents' bidding tells you what they have in their hands. It might take them one or many bids to tell you. There are numerous possibilities but here are some of the things they might say:

- I have a minimum opening hand with six spades
- I have a big hand with a good heart suit
- I do not have enough points to respond to a non-forcing bid
- I have a balanced hand with 15-17 HCP
- We have a fit and I am minimum
- I am highly distributional and my strength is...

and so on.

So by the end of the bidding you have a fair idea of the strength and distribution of declarer's and dummy's hands. Looking at your hand, you can work out what's left for partner.

Dummy comes down

Declarer plans the play. You plan the defense.

First off, were you right about dummy's hand? Add your HCP to dummy's and subtract the total from 40 because there are 40 HCP in the deck. This is the number of HCP shared between declarer and partner. Take the number you think declarer has from this and you have partner's HCP.

You will have some idea of declarer's hand from the bidding. If declarer opens and rebids a major, you can expect there to be six cards in the suit. If declarer bids two suits, you have an even better idea of the distribution. And don't forget partner's bidding, if any. As the play develops you will be able to build up a clearer picture of declarer's hand.

Start by trying to work out what declarer might do.

- Does the dummy have a short suit? Then it looks like declarer might try to ruff losers in that suit. Try to counter this by leading a trump whenever possible to stop those ruffs in dummy.
- Is there a long strong suit in dummy? Declarer will want to use it to discard losers in hand and you will want to stop that. It may be imperative for the defenders to take their tricks as soon as possible. Sometimes it is possible to take out declarer's entries to dummy before the long suit is established.
- One defender may have length in trumps and a long side suit. A good defense here is to lead the side suit at every opportunity, forcing declarer to trump and thus lose control of trumps and the hand.

Third hand play at trick 1

Try to determine the nature of partner's lead. If it is an honor it is probably from a sequence. If it is a low card it may be the fourth highest of the suit. If it is a high card it is probably from a short suit. Things may be different if you have bid the suit — for example, partner might lead a doubleton honor, something which would normally not be a good lead.

Do you return partner's suit?

Partner has led to the first trick, which you have won. Your normal instinct is to return partner's suit, but have a good look at dummy before doing anything. It may be best to switch to another suit. Some of the reasons not to return partner's suit are:

- There is no future in that suit. Dummy has a strong holding or a void.
- There is a long threatening suit in dummy on which declarer might discard losers.
- You want to lead a trump to minimize declarer's ruffing power.
- You want to lead a short suit of your own and attempt to get a ruff.
- You want to lead a suit that partner bid but didn't lead.
- This might be your last chance to lead through declarer in some suit.

If you do return partner's suit, lead your lowest card if you have three remaining; lead fourth best if you have four or more remaining. If you

originally held three cards in the suit, return the higher of your two remaining cards.

Defensive signals

It is useful to be able to tell partner (legally!) that you like the lead or hate it, how many cards you have in the suit that declarer just led or which suit to lead back so that you can get another trick. However, there are no secret signals in bridge — that would be cheating. When an opponent asks about your signaling methods, you must explain them. In competition they must appear on your convention card.

First, you have to discuss the whole thing with partner and decide which signals you will introduce and when. The following are standard signals but there are other methods too. It is suggested that you become comfortable with one type of signal before introducing the others.

ATTITUDE SIGNALS

An attitude signal is used when partner leads a suit and you won't be taking this trick. Don't just throw away your lowest card willy-nilly. If you want the suit continued, play the highest spot you can afford. This signal is often useful when partner's lead was top of a sequence. If partner continues with another card from the sequence, you can complete your signal by now playing a low card. If you want to discourage the suit led, play the smallest card you have in the suit, then the next one up if another round is played.

The same type of signal can be used when declarer leads a suit in which you are void. Discard a high card then a low card in a suit in which you have strength, or a low card then a high card in a suit in which you are weak.

Remember:

- High/low encourages
- Low/high discourages

COUNT SIGNALS

Count signals are used by the defenders on leads from declarer's hand or from dummy. They tell partner whether you have an even or odd number of cards in that suit. The standard method is to play a high card followed by a

low card to indicate an even number of cards in the suit led, or vice versa to indicate an odd number.

Some players like to give count on every suit that declarer leads, but experts are wary of giving away such useful information to declarer so they do it only when it will be of more use to partner than declarer. One common situation is where declarer is trying to establish a long suit in dummy and one defender needs to know how many cards declarer has in the suit in order to take his ace at the right time.

SUIT PREFERENCE SIGNALS

You can use this signal as a defender when leading a card for partner to trump. You want to tell partner which suit to play after ruffing so as to get back to your hand for a second ruff. There are two suits outside trumps that partner may return. Lead a high card to say that your entry is in the higher-ranked of these suits or a low card to indicate an entry in the lower-ranked suit. Lead a middle card when you have no preference.

Example Hands

A RUFFING DUMMY APPEARS

	♠ 7 6 5		
	♥ 8 6 5 4 3 2		
	♦ 2		
	♣ 5 4 3		
♠ Q J 9	<div style="display: flex; flex-direction: column; align-items: center; justify-content: center; gap: 10px;"> N W S E </div>	♠ 8 4	
♥ K Q		♥ J 10 9	
♦ A 4 3		♦ J 10 9 8 5	
♣ Q J 10 7 6		♣ A 9 2	
	♠ A K 10 3 2		
	♥ A 7		
	♦ K Q 7 6		
	♣ K 8		

West	North	East	South
			1♠
2♣	pass	3♣	3♦
pass	3♠	all pass	

From the bidding we know that North is weak and probably has more spades than diamonds.

West leads the ♣Q, taken by East with the ♣A. East, who can see that dummy's only assets are the ability to ruff diamonds, immediately leads a spade. South takes the ♠A and leads the ♦K, which West wins with the ♦A to lead another trump. This restricts South to one diamond ruff in dummy and eight tricks. East's trump switch was essential to defeat the contract.

A THREATENING SUIT IN DUMMY

	♠ 10 5 4 ♥ 3 2 ♦ 9 8 7 ♣ A K Q 10 9											
♠ Q J 8 2 ♥ A 8 7 4 ♦ 10 2 ♣ 6 5 4	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ A 3 ♥ Q J 10 9 ♦ 6 5 4 3 ♣ J 8 7	
	N											
W		E										
	S											
	♠ K 9 7 6 ♥ K 6 5 ♦ A K Q J ♣ 3 2											

West	North	East	South
pass	3NT	all pass	1NT

West leads the ♠2, fourth best, taken by East with the ♠A. East can see that dummy's club suit is good for five tricks once declarer gains the lead because the ♣J will fall on the third round of the suit. The only hope for the defense is to take four more tricks in a hurry. Perhaps they can take three more spades and a red ace? West would need to have started with ♠KQ102, but if West's spades were that good he would not have led the ♠2. No, the best bet is the heart suit, hoping that West has the ♥A over declarer's ♥K. So East switches to the ♥Q and the defense prevails. Even if declarer plays low on the first round, West will play an encouraging ♥8, and East will continue the suit. If East makes any other return, declarer will win ten tricks without raising a sweat.

A FORCING DEFENSE

<p>♠ 10 9 6 4 ♥ Q 4 3 ♦ A K Q 2 ♣ 7 6</p>	<p>♠ K 3 2 ♥ 8 6 2 ♦ 9 7 6 4 ♣ A 10 2</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> <p style="margin: 0;">N</p> <p style="margin: 0;">W E</p> <p style="margin: 0;">S</p> </div> <p>♠ A Q J 8 5 ♥ A K 7 ♦ 5 ♣ Q J 9 3</p>	<p>♠ 7 ♥ J 10 9 5 ♦ J 10 8 3 ♣ K 8 5 4</p>
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West	North	East	South
pass	2♠	pass	1♠
all pass			4♠

When you have length in the trump suit it often pays to lead your long side suit to force declarer to ruff. Here the long side suit is very strong so West has no hesitation in leading the ♦A and continuing with the ♦K, which declarer ruffs.

Declarer appears to have only three losers — a heart, a diamond and a club. South leads a low spade to dummy's ♠K and returns a spade to the ♠A in hand, on which East shows out. Now South cannot afford to draw all West's trumps because none would be left to stop the run of the diamonds. So South takes the club finesse, leading the ♣Q from hand. East wins with the ♣K and must continue to force declarer by leading a diamond. South will be forced to ruff and will then have only one trump remaining whereas West will have two. At this stage South has lost control of trumps and will be defeated. If East mistakenly returns the ♥J when in with the ♣K, declarer will make the contract.

This deal shows the power of the forcing defense where declarer is forced to ruff at every possible opportunity.

PROBLEM 1

You are South. After a simple auction you are declarer in 3NT.

♠ 9 3 2
♥ A 4
♦ Q 4 2
♣ J 10 9 6 2



♠ A K 5
♥ K 7 3 2
♦ A J 7
♣ A Q 4

West	North	East	South
pass	3NT	all pass	2NT

The lead is the ♥Q by West.

How do you plan to play the hand?

Analysis

The first thing to do in a notrump contract is to count your winners. You have the ♠A and ♠K — that's two, then the ♥A and ♥K — that's two more, and the ♦A and ♣A bring the total to six. So you need to find three more tricks. The obvious source of extra tricks is the club suit where you have all the honors except the king. In fact, you could finesse against the ♣K if it were with East.

Is that the best way to proceed?

SOLUTION 1

<p>♠ Q 8 7 4 ♥ Q J 10 9 ♦ 5 3 ♣ K 7 3</p>	<p>♠ 9 3 2 ♥ A 4 ♦ Q 4 2 ♣ J 10 9 6 2</p>	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	<p>♠ J 10 6 ♥ 8 6 5 ♦ K 10 9 8 6 ♣ 8 5</p>
N						
W E						
S						
	<p>♠ A K 5 ♥ K 7 3 2 ♦ A J 7 ♣ A Q 4</p>					

Let's follow that line mentally before playing a card. To take the club finesse, you need to win the first trick in dummy with the ♥A because that is the only entry to dummy. Then you will lead the ♣J and if East does not cover, let it run. If it wins the trick, you can continue with another club from dummy. If East has the ♣K you will win three club tricks and then set up a diamond trick to make your contract. If, however, the finesse loses to West's ♣K, you can take the ♣A and ♣Q but the suit will be blocked — that is, you will not be able to access the other club winners in dummy and the contract will fail.

There is a better play. Win the first trick in your hand, retaining the ♥A in dummy. Then play the ♣A, ♣Q and a small club. At some stage West will win the ♣K but you will be able to get to dummy with the ♥A to reach the two established clubs. This way you will make four club tricks no matter which opponent has the ♣K.

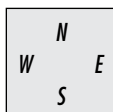
Key Point

Play high honors from the short side to unblock a suit.

PROBLEM 2

You are South, declarer in a precarious 4♥.

♠ 3 2
 ♥ 9 7 6 4
 ♦ A K Q
 ♣ A J 10 6



♠ A K 5
 ♥ 10 8 5 3 2
 ♦ 5 3 2
 ♣ K Q

West	North	East	South
	1♣	pass	1♥
1♠	2♥	pass	4♥
all pass			

The lead is the ♠Q by West, which you win in hand with the ♠A.

How do you plan to play the hand?

Analysis

Ouch! You were hoping that partner had some of the missing honors in trumps — but they are still missing! You would probably be better off in 3NT, but that's not important now.

Should you attempt to draw trumps?

SOLUTION 2

<p>♠ Q J 10 9 6 4 ♥ K Q J ♦ 7 4 ♣ 9 7</p>	<p>♠ 3 2 ♥ 9 7 6 4 ♦ A K Q ♣ A J 10 6</p>	<p>♠ 8 7 ♥ A ♦ J 10 9 8 6 ♣ 8 5 4 3 2</p>			
<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">N</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">W E</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="padding: 5px;">S</td> </tr> </table>			N	W E	S
N					
W E					
S					
<p>♠ A K 5 ♥ 10 8 5 3 2 ♦ 5 3 2 ♣ K Q</p>					

If the trumps are split 4-0, you are in big trouble, so you have to hope for a more friendly distribution. You have a loser in spades and possibly three losers in hearts.

It is difficult to bring yourself to lead trumps, but that is what you have to do, because you don't want the opponents to make their trumps by ruffing four separate tricks. You want two big trumps to fall on the same trick at least once.

Lead the ♥2 from your hand. When both opponents follow suit, you are safe — they can take only three trump tricks. They will probably return another spade. You will win this and lead another trump. If the trumps are split 2-2, you will only lose two trump tricks. In either case, your losing spade can be discarded on a long club in dummy or ruffed in dummy.

If, instead of leading trumps at Trick 2, you cash the ♠K and try to ruff your losing spade in dummy, East will overruff, West will still get three trump tricks and you will go down.

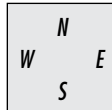
Key Point

Draw trumps early unless you have a good reason to delay.

PROBLEM 3

You are South, declarer in 4♥.

♠ A 9 8
 ♥ A 5 3 2
 ♦ J 10 3
 ♣ 8 7 4



♠ 6 4
 ♥ K Q J 8 6 4
 ♦ Q 2
 ♣ A K 6

West	North	East	South
			1♥
pass	2♥	pass	3♥
pass	4♥	all pass	

West leads the ♠K.

How will you make ten tricks?

Analysis

The first thing to do in a suit contract is to count your losers. You have four — a spade, two diamonds and a club, so you need to eliminate one of them.

What is your plan?

SOLUTION 3

	♠ A 9 8											
	♥ A 5 3 2											
	♦ J 10 3											
	♣ 8 7 4											
♠ K Q 7 5	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ J 10 3 2	
	N											
W		E										
	S											
♥ 9 7		♥ 10										
♦ A 8 7 6		♦ K 9 5 4										
♣ Q 3 2		♣ J 10 9 5										
	♠ 6 4											
	♥ K Q J 8 6 4											
	♦ Q 2											
	♣ A K 6											

The way to play this hand is to set up the ♦J as a winner by knocking out the ♦A and ♦K, and then discard the club loser on it.

Win the opening lead with the ♠A. Don't duck it because East may switch to a club.

Draw trumps first with the ♥K and ♥Q, preserving the ♥A in dummy to access the diamond winner. Then lead the ♦Q, high honor from the short side first. The opponents will win and cash a spade and maybe switch to a club. Capture this and lead the ♦2. Win the return, then go to dummy with the ♥A and discard the losing club on the high ♦J.

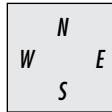
Key Point

It is possible to set up winners in a short side suit.

PROBLEM 4

You are East. South is declarer in 3NT. Partner leads the ♥2.

♠ 6 2
♥ 9 6 4
♦ K Q 5 4
♣ A K 6 3



♠ Q J 10 9
♥ A 3
♦ 10 3 2
♣ 9 7 5 2

West	North	East	South
pass	3NT	all pass	1NT

West leads the ♥2, which you win with the ♥A.

Plan the defense.

Analysis

Partner's ♥2 is probably from a four-card suit. Dummy has three hearts and you have two, so declarer will have four.

Which card will you play to the second trick?

SOLUTION 4

	♠ 6 2				
	♥ 9 6 4				
	♦ K Q 5 4				
	♣ A K 6 3				
♠ A 5 4 3 ♥ Q 10 8 2 ♦ 8 7 6 ♣ 8 4	<table border="1" style="margin: auto; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="padding: 5px;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ Q J 10 9 ♥ A 3 ♦ 10 3 2 ♣ 9 7 5 2
N					
W E					
S					
	♠ K 8 7				
	♥ K J 7 5				
	♦ A J 9				
	♣ Q J 10				

Declarer and dummy have seven hearts between them so this is their suit. You need partner to have started with ♥KQ102 to score four tricks there, and he would have led the ♥K from that holding. You need tricks elsewhere to defeat this contract.

Which suit should you switch to? Dummy's diamonds and clubs look strong so the only feasible switch is to spades. You have an attractive sequence headed by the ♠Q, so it is the card to play. If declarer ducks the ♠Q you will continue with the ♠J. In fact whatever declarer does, your side will make four spade tricks and defeat the contract.

If you had continued hearts, declarer would have made nine tricks.

Key Point

Don't return partner's suit if it cannot provide the tricks you need.

PROBLEM 5

You are South, declarer in 3♠.

♠ A 9 7 4
 ♥ 8 3 2
 ♦ A 5 4
 ♣ K 4 3



♠ K Q 10 5 2
 ♥ 10 9
 ♦ K 6 2
 ♣ A 9 2

West	North	East	South
pass	3♠	all pass	1♠

West leads the ♥A, ♥K and ♥Q, East following suit each time.
 Plan the play.

Analysis

Count your losers. You have two in hearts and one each in diamonds and clubs. You need to play the trumps to avoid a loser.

Which is the best way to proceed?

SOLUTION 5

	♠ A 9 7 4				
	♥ 8 3 2				
	♦ A 5 4				
	♣ K 4 3				
♠ J 8 6 3	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 100px; height: 100px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table>	N	W E	S	♠ —
N					
W E					
S					
♥ A K Q 7		♥ J 6 5 4			
♦ 9 3		♦ Q J 10 8 7			
♣ 8 7 6		♣ Q J 10 5			
	♠ K Q 10 5 2				
	♥ 10 9				
	♦ K 6 2				
	♣ A 9 2				

Start by trumping the ♥Q in hand.

There are four outstanding trumps. If they are split 2-2 or 3-1 there is no problem — you can draw them all in two or three rounds. So the only danger is a 4-0 split, so let us consider that.

If you play the ♠A first and West has the four spades to the ♠J, you will not be able to capture the ♠J. However if you play the ♠K first, you will discover the bad break and can handle four to the ♠J in either hand!

So play the ♠K, an honor from the hand holding two top honors. This reveals the spade position, so you continue with the ♠Q then the ♣2 towards dummy, finessing against the ♠J.

It's bad luck to have a 4-0 split in a suit, but sometimes you can cater for it.

Key Point

With a nine-card fit including A, K, Q, 10, 9 but missing the jack, retain a high honor in both hands.