

Defensive Strategy

Unfortunately, you can't play all the hands.

Introduction

Defense is the most challenging part of bridge, even for experienced players. Newer players have trouble with bidding (which the collection of articles on the website hopefully addresses), and maybe some difficulty in playing the hand, but those two aspects of the game are relatively easy to learn, especially with a bit of study and practice.

Defense is more challenging for two reasons:

1. When declarer is playing the hand, declarer can see all 26 of his side's cards. Defenders aren't so lucky. Defenders have to work out both partner's and declarer's likely holding in each suit without seeing each other's hands.
2. When declarer plays the hand, he is in complete control of his line of play by being able to select cards from both his hand and dummy. Each defender, however, suffers from a major potential obstacle: his partner. When defending, partners must cooperate in controlling the line of play.

The first thing newer players tend to ask themselves on defense is: what should my opening lead be? Unfortunately, that tends to be the last question they ask, and it isn't even the right one to ask first (at least, not in those terms).

This article will show you that the first question to ask on defense is: what **strategy** should my partner and I use to defend this hand? The strategy then leads naturally to the opening lead.

But defense goes on throughout the entire hand, not just on the opening lead. After dummy comes down, you and your partner need to ask: considering dummy, is the selected strategy still right? If it appears to be, continue with it. If not (if dummy is different than what you expected), switch to the strategy that looks right.

Why Defense Is Important

Good defense is rewarded with good scores. Setting a contract no one else sets will obviously give you a good result, but even limiting declarer's overtricks compared to other tables will give you excellent matchpoint scores (this second point isn't as important in a team game, where your primary goal is to set the contract).

Defensive Objective

In a team game, your objective on defense is obvious: try to set the contract. If your defense gives up an overtrick or two in a team game, it's not all that important.

At matchpoints, defense is much more difficult because your objective is not so clear. You would still like to try to set the contract, but more often your objective is to prevent unjustified overtricks. This means defense at matchpoints must be both more precise and more cautious.

How do you know whether you should try to set the contract or prevent overtricks in matchpoints? Here are some guidelines:

- If you or your partner have made a penalty double, it's obvious that you expect to set the contract.
 - If both sides have been bidding furiously and the opponents end up playing the hand (doubled or not), your objective is to set the contract.
 - If the opponents have bid without any interference from your side, your objective is to prevent unjustified overtricks.
 - If the opponents have bid with only a little bit of interference from your side, your objective is less clear. Generally, the lower the level of the contract, the more you should think about preventing overtricks.
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What This Article Does (And Doesn't) Cover

This article explains the four defensive strategies and how to choose the most appropriate one. These strategies, and how to select among them, apply equally to team games and matchpoint games.

This article does **not** cover actual defensive play (which card to play holding such-and-such a combination), nor does it cover defensive signalling. There are numerous books available covering defensive technique which go into great detail on these subjects. If you're interested in seriously improving your game (and your partner's game), we would strongly suggest that you obtain one of these books and study it. Any of the more experienced players will be happy to suggest their favourites.

Four Defensive Strategies

So what are the four defensive strategies? Here goes:

Active Defense

Active defense means trying to take your tricks as quickly as possible, before declarer can get rid of his losers.

This is the defensive strategy most newer players adopt "by default". They lead out their aces and ace/king combinations as quickly as possible, fearing that they will lose them if they don't.

Declarers love players who always adopt active defense: it makes playing the hand so much easier. The truth is, active defense is only correct in certain cases, and those cases don't arise all that often.

When in doubt, **don't adopt active defense.**

Passive Defense

Obviously, this is the opposite of active defense. Leads of "top of nothing" are common, and switching suits is rare. The object is to make declarer work for his tricks without giving him any help.

Declarers hate passive defense.

This is the strategy newer players overlook most often, but it tends to be correct in a large number of cases.

When in doubt, **adopt passive defense.**

Forcing Defense

In this strategy, you and your partner keep leading your longest suit, forcing declarer to ruff in his own hand (which is usually the hand with the greater number of trumps). The objective is for the defenders to gain control of the trump suit.

This strategy applies in one specific circumstance, but when it does apply, the effect can be quite devastating for declarer.

Attacking Trumps

There are actually two strategies involved in attacking trumps, which apply in different cases:

- **Reducing Ruffing Power:** In this strategy, you lead trump to prevent declarer ruffing losers in dummy (which is usually the hand that is shorter in trumps).
- **Creating Defensive Trump Tricks:** In this strategy, you try to promote trump tricks for either you or your partner. You aren't trying to gain control of the trump suit (that's the purpose of the forcing defense), but you are trying to gain trump tricks you might not otherwise have taken.

Selecting A Strategy

Each strategy has one or more conditions which suggest it will be successful. These conditions can be determined in two ways:

- **By The Auction:** Observe the opponents' auction carefully, and take note not only of what they **did bid**, but also what they **did not bid**. Also, use information from any bids you and your partner made to help guide your strategy selection.
- **By Your Hand:** Your selection is also partly governed by your own hand. Do you have a long suit? Do you have length in the trump suit? Can you stop a side suit the opponents have bid? All of these questions (and more) will guide your strategy selection.

The following sections will discuss each defensive strategy, with conditions and examples of when it is most likely to apply.

Active Defense

Adopt this defense whenever you think declarer will dispose of his losers, normally by discarding them on a long suit in dummy. Also, this defense is indicated when the opponents have shown slam interest in their bidding, but stop in game. Here are some examples:

Example 1

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1 ♥	Pass	2 ♦	Pass
2 ♥	Pass	4 ♥	All Pass

You are sitting East (on opening lead) with the following hand:

♠ A 8 3 2
♥ 7 5
♦ 9 6 3
♣ K J 9 4

On this auction, both opponents are showing good hands. North has a minimum opening bid, and South has an opening bid with (most likely) a good five-card diamond suit. If you give North the chance, some of North's losers will be discarded on those diamonds. Your spade trick is probably safe, so attack clubs by leading the ♣4. If your partner has ♣A and declarer has to lose three club tricks, you will set the contract. Even if declarer only loses two clubs, you might well prevent overtricks.

Example 2

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1 ♥	Pass	2 ♦	Pass
3 ♥	Pass	4 ♥	Pass
5 ♣	Pass	5 ♥	All Pass

You are sitting East (on opening lead) with the following hand:

♠ A 8 3 2
 ♥ 7 5
 ♦ 9 6 3
 ♣ K J 9 4

On this auction, both opponents are again showing good hands. North has a hand worth 16 to 18 points, and South has 10+ points with (most likely) a good five-card diamond suit. North has shown slam interest by showing first-round control of clubs, but South declined the invitation. A club lead is out this time; North controls the suit. On this auction, lead the ♠A and hope. It is rarely correct to lead an ace without holding the king; this is one of the rare times that it is correct. Your side may be limited to two spade tricks; get them before declarer's spade losers disappear on dummy's diamonds.

Passive Defense

This is the defensive strategy most overlooked by newer players, but it is one that should be selected quite (if not most) often, especially at matchpoints.

Adopt a passive defense when any of the following conditions exist:

- No evidence of a strong side suit in dummy.
- Declarer is very strong, and dummy is very weak (eg, declarer started with a 2♣ or 2NT bid, and dummy made minimum responses).
- The hand appears to be a misfit, or you know that a key suit will split badly for declarer.
- You don't have a good suit to lead against a notrump contract (especially against 3NT).
- You are defending against 6NT, or against any grand slam.

Here are some examples:

Example 3

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1♥	Pass	1NT	Pass
2♥	All Pass		

You are sitting East (on opening lead) with the following hand:

♠ A 8 3 2
 ♥ 7 5
 ♦ 9 6 3
 ♣ K J 9 7

On this auction, both opponents are showing minimum hands. North has a hand with 12 to 14 points, and South has between 6 and 9. South is unlikely to have a long and strong side suit, so an attacking (active) defense is not necessary. Lead the ♦9 ("top of nothing") and let declarer struggle for his tricks. On this auction you know that partner has some high cards; don't risk leads that will finesse them to declarer's benefit.

Example 4

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1 ♥	Pass	1 ♠	Pass
2 ♥	All Pass		

You are sitting East (on opening lead) with the following hand:

♠ K 9 8 3 2
♥ 7
♦ 9 6 3
♣ K J 9 7

Again, both opponents are showing minimum hands. North has a hand with 12 to 14 points, and South has between 6 and 9 points with (probably) no more than four spades. The hand looks like a misfit (you hope partner has length in hearts). You also know that partner has some high cards. Again, lead the ♦ 9 and let declarer struggle.

Example 5

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1NT	Pass	2 ♣	Pass
2 ♥	Pass	2NT	Pass
3NT	All Pass		

You are sitting East (on opening lead) with the following hands:

♠ K 9 8
♥ Q 7 6
♦ 9 6 3
♣ K 8 7 3

Most newer players learn the rule, "lead fourth best from your longest and strongest suit against notrump". This advice is frequently wrong, as is likely with this hand. Leading fourth-best is rarely correct when you have only one honour in the suit (especially when it is a minor suit). Try leading the ♦ 9 instead. It won't always be right, but the odds are in your favour. But it needs an understanding partner when the club lead would have been better.

♠ J 9 8
♥ Q 7 6
♦ 9 6 3
♣ K Q 9 4

This hand has a stronger club suit, so a club lead is more likely to be correct. Lead the ♣ 4.

Forcing Defense

This is the defensive strategy that declarers generally hate the most.

In a forcing defense, you lead and continue your partnership's longest and strongest suit. You hope that by forcing declarer to ruff in the hand with long trump, either you or your partner can gain control of the trump suit. This makes it impossible for declarer to draw trump and safely cash his side suit tricks.

Select the forcing defense whenever you hold four trump, or you suspect partner might. This often occurs when declarer has shown a two-suited hand, or when declarer is playing a seven-card trump fit. Here are some examples:

Example 6

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1♥	1♠	1NT	Pass
2♦	Pass	2♥	All Pass

You are sitting East (on opening lead) with the following hands:

♠ A K Q 9 8
♥ Q 10 7 6
♦ 9 6
♣ 7 3

This hand is easy; you have four trump, and a long and strong suit to force declarer with. Keep leading spades as long as declarer cannot ruff in dummy.

♠ A K Q 9 8
♥ 6
♦ Q 10 9 6
♣ 7 3

This time you're hoping partner has trump length. Again, keep leading spades as long as declarer cannot ruff in dummy.

Attacking Trumps: Reducing Ruffing Power

There's an old saying in bridge, "when in doubt, lead trump". Like many of the old sayings, this one is completely wrong. Only lead trump when you know that it's right.

Your purpose in leading trump is to reduce ruffing power in the hand with shorter trump (normally dummy). You select this strategy under one of the following conditions:

- The hand is a partial or total misfit. While this is frequently grounds for passive defense, attack trumps instead when a simple suit preference has been taken, and your side has (or could have) trump length.
- Dummy has taken a preference for opener's second suit, and you (or your partner) have length and strength in opener's first suit.
- The bidding suggests dummy has a short suit (singleton or void). When this happens, declarer will normally want to use dummy's trump for his losers in this short suit. Your job is to not let him.
- You control the opponents' side suit.
- The opponents are sacrificing.

Let's look at some examples:

Example 7

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1 ♥	Pass	1NT	Pass
2 ♦	All Pass		

You are sitting East (on opening lead) with the following hands:

♠ 10 6
♥ A Q 8 7 4
♦ 9 6
♣ Q J 9 4

This is the classic situation where a trump lead should be made. Dummy has a weak hand (6 to 9 points) and has shown a preference for partner's second suit (diamonds). Expect dummy to have a singleton heart. That's bad news for you, because you want to take heart tricks. Lead a trump to help prevent declarer from ruffing all his heart losers.

♠ 10 6
♥ A Q 8 7 4
♦ Q 6
♣ J 10 9 4

Do you have the nerve to lead a trump away from your queen (which may win a trick if declarer finesses)? Lead the ♦ 6 anyway; your potential heart tricks are too valuable to lose. This can pay off in another way: very few players lead trump holding the queen. Declarer may still take a diamond finesse, which you'll win. When that happens, declarer will consider you to be a serious bridge player. When you do make this daring lead, don't fidget and hesitate; that gives the show away.

Example 8

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
Pass	1 ♥	2 ♠	3 ♣
4 ♠	Double	All Pass	

The opponents certainly have their nerve, sacrificing against your likely 4 ♥ game. You're sitting West (on opening lead). What do you do?

Where does South expect to get his tricks from? Your side has hearts and clubs, and partner probably holds diamonds. South expects to get his tricks from ruffing (particularly cross-ruffing). Lead trump (regardless of your hand) to cut down on declarer's tricks.

Attacking Trumps: Creating Defensive Trump Tricks

Select this defense when you are short in any unbid suit and you want to trump declarer's winners in that suit. You generally adopt this defense when you have a weak hand with no better line of defense.

The technique of leading singletons and ruffing declarer's tricks in that suit is a popular and well-known defensive strategy. However, it is often abused.

Very often, your short suit is declarer's long side suit. He'll thank you for leading it (and helping to develop it, if necessary), especially if he can draw trump immediately.

Try and limit singleton leads to cases that satisfy all of these conditions:

1. You have no natural trump tricks.
2. You can expect an entry in partner's hand (particularly a high trump honour) so you can receive your ruff.
3. You are desperate and nothing else seems advisable.

Example 9

North dealer, neither side vulnerable

North	East	South	West
1 ♥	3 ♠	4 ♥	All Pass

You are sitting East (on opening lead) with the following hand:

♠ A K J 9 7 4 3
♥ 7 4
♦ 6
♣ 10 9 4

You have two options here: the ♠A (or ♠K), or the ♦6. Either might work, but leading the singleton diamond is probably a better shot. One of your opponents is likely to be void in spades (probably South) and if not, you will probably take a spade trick eventually. What you want to do is try for a diamond ruff. If partner can win the first heart trick, he can lead a second diamond for you to ruff. Then it's time to try spades. If you try spades first and your first spade gets ruffed, you won't have enough hearts to get a diamond ruff.

There are two other ways to create defensive trump tricks: a trump promotion and a trump uppercut. They are quite similar: the trump promotion can be performed by one defender on his own, while the trump uppercut requires partner's cooperation and hope. These plays are more complex and outside the scope of this article, but here's the essence of how they work:

- In a **trump promotion play**, declarer is forced to ruff higher than he would like, thereby promoting a trump trick for the defense.
- In a **trump uppercut play**, a defender ruffs with his highest trump, hoping to weaken declarer's holding and creating a trump trick for his partner.

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