

## Outline for first talk on suit combinations

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Let's start with a definition of suit combinations and card combinations. A suit combination is simply the cards that declarer has in his hand and dummy in a single suit without any reference to the other cards in the hand. A card combination deals more with a suit combination in the context of the entire hand.

### 1. Objective

In today's talk I hope to help you learn how to think about how to play suit combinations. Before the second talk in 2 weeks, I'd really appreciate any feedback.

So the objective is to provide ways to deal with combinations rather than to try to memorize specific ones. I don't plan to give you any combinations to remember. Instead I'll try to help you find ways to address combinations in real time (say less than 20-30 seconds) at the table. There will be many combinations that you won't be able to figure out at the table, but as you become more aware of combinations, and start analyzing them, your ability to think them through quickly will increase.

You will become more aware of situations in which good results depend on handling a combination correctly, and how often you can succeed. We'll only scratch the surface in these 2 talks. I'll concentrate exclusively on declarer play today.

I don't think there are many hard and fast rules, but there are some guidelines:

1. The best play will often vary depending on the number of tricks needed in the suit. So it is important to decide how many tricks you need before attacking the suit.
2. Try to keep flexibility by preserving tenace positions and controls in both hands.
3. Before you take a finesse, ask yourself if there's an option.
4. Lead toward honors. Don't just lead honors from a limited sequence to drive out higher honor(s).

There will be many situations that you can't figure out at the table. You can figure them out later or look them up in the references.

### Assumptions

Unless I state otherwise, make the following assumptions on the examples we discuss.

\* I'll try to label all of the spot cards, but if I resort to using x's, assume that your x's are smaller than the defenders'.

\* We will look at only one suit. In practice suit combinations should always be considered in the context of the entire hand, but we're not going to get into that here.

\* Assume that there is no information from opponents' bidding/not bidding, opening lead, or previous play. For now simply look at best way to play a suit to take a specified number of tricks. This is probably never true.

\* Assume that there are always adequate side entries so that you can play the suit the best way.

While these assumptions will not be true, the idea today is to concentrate on the suit combination, not on the rest of the hand and the validity of the assumptions. It is still essential that when the dummy comes down, you must take some time to plan your play. The issue of suit combinations is only one ingredient. By concentrating on these combinations today, I do not mean to suggest that this replace your planning and considering all of the factors – auction, lead, need for preventing one opponent from gaining the lead, etc.

### Approach

There are usually 2 or more ways to play a combination.

\* State to yourself the opponents' total holding (e.g., K 10 8 3). In time you will not always have to do this.

\* Decide how many tricks you need from the suit. This is essential; the best play will often differ depending on the number of tricks needed.

\* For the different lines of play dismiss those configurations that yield the same result (success or failure) in all lines of play.

\* Try to identify those configurations that favor one line over another, and you will often have a situation where most configurations yield the same result with both lines of play, but there is one or more configurations where one line of play is superior.

This sounds complicated, but it will be clearer as we look at some examples and easier to do as you get in the habit.

First a word about probabilities: I suggest that at this stage you do not try to remember a host of probabilities. A very good reference on a small number of very useful probabilities is Kantar's "Take Your Tricks section on "Lower Mathematics." For now I suggest you just remember one simple thing: If the opponents have an even number of cards – 4, 6, 8 – there is a higher probability that they will not break evenly. If they have

an odd number of cards, the highest probability is that they will break as evenly as possible, e.g., 5 cards will break 3-2 about two thirds of the time. They will break 4-1 a little more than a quarter of the time.

Let's consider some examples

A32

QJ54      Opponents hold K109876

Assume that you need 2 tricks, but you cannot afford to lose a trick. You have 2 choices:

- a. Lead the Q or J to finesse. This works 50% of the time.
- b. Cash the A first. This only works if the K is singleton in E, which is quite unlikely. So you finesse, and half of the time you'll succeed.

If you need 3 tricks, the situation is very different. Any play will work if the suit breaks 3-3, but this is less than half the time, (36% chance). Alternatively you can cash the A, and then lead twice toward the QJ. This will work whenever the K is East, which is 50% of the time. It also works if the K is W and the suit is 3-3. In addition there is a slight chance that the K will be singleton in the W, which is why you should start by cashing the A.

Now change the layout very slightly. Move the 4 from S to N

A432

QJ5.      Opponents still hold K109876

This is almost the same but not quite. Now you don't cash the A first because if you did, the QJ would be left stiff, and the K ( whether it's E or W) would capture an honor, and you would not get 3 tricks unless the suit breaks 3-3. So you start by leading a small card toward the QJ5. Your chance is only slightly less than the last case.

A32

QJ104      Opponents hold K98765

Here 3 tricks are assured; you risk nothing by finessing twice to try for 4 tricks if W has Kxx.

AQJ6

5432      Opponents hold K10987

If you need 4 tricks, it's pretty obvious that you must finesse twice and hope for a 3-2 split. (3-2 is 68% probable, and the K will be W half of that – 34%).

If you need 3 tricks, you can finesse twice here also, but you can improve on this. If you finesse twice, and E has K1098, you will fail no matter what you do; however, suppose W has 10987, and E has the K alone. Now you will lose 2 tricks if you finesse. You can guard against this layout by cashing the A first. Suppose both play small. Now you return to S and lead twice to the QJ, and this gives you 3 tricks whenever there's a 3-2 split or if W has K1098. Notice that this gives you a greater chance of 3 tricks, but it gives up any chance for 4 tricks. This can be a tough decision. This is a type of safety play, called an optional safety play where you give up the chance of an extra trick to increase the chance of getting the tricks you need.

Let's look at another simple case (really several very similar cases).

In all of the configurations in this set of cases the honors can easily be interchanged without changing the basic situation. In other words

KQ2	HHx	HHxx	Opp have A109876
=			
J543	H543	Hxx	(H stands for K,Q, or J)

You want 3 tricks – obviously there is no way you can get 4 tricks from breathing opponents, and you can always get 2 tricks. The issue is the best play for 3 tricks.

If the cards divide 3-3, any play will get 3 tricks, If E has 2 or 4 to the A, no play will work for 3 tricks. But if W has a singleton or doubleton A, you can get 3 tricks by leading small twice from S toward the HH2(x).

Change this slightly to

KQJ5

432 Opp have A109876

Here again you always get 3 tricks if they break 3-3, and you can't get 3 tricks if E has A1098. But if W has the A regardless of length, you can always get 3 tricks by leading 3 times from S to N. If you only have enough hand entries to lead from S twice, you still get 3 tricks if W has A singleton or doubleton.

HHxx

Hxxx Opp have A10987 (one less card than before)

Here's where many declarers get lazy and lead an honor from whatever hand they are in. They still get 3 tricks if the suit breaks 3-2 (68% probable). So it works about 2/3 of the time, and they never realize that they erred. If someone has a singleton A, these declarers

will end up with only 2 tricks, and they'll claim they were unlucky. But if someone has a singleton A, and you can guess who is more likely to have it, you lead a low card through that hand. In other words he must play the A before you commit to play an honor. Remember what Jim Leuker said about discovery plays to get insight into the opponents' distribution in a suit.

If either opponent has 4 cards including the A, you can't get 3 tricks as long as the person with the A waits to catch an honor with her A.

Let's look at some cases where a lot of players make an automatic play.

A1032

K654 Opponents hold QJ987.

We want 3 tricks. Start by playing the K.

If E plays Q or J at first trick, you can lead to the A for a chance of 4 tricks if E held QJ doubleton. If E shows out on the second trick, you can still return to S and lead toward the 10x to get 3 tricks.

Now assume that when you play the K first, both opponents play low. You now lead low from S, and assume W plays low again. If you play the A, and E shows out, you will only make 2 tricks. If instead you finesse the 10, you will make 3 tricks no matter what happens. You must lose at least one trick, and this safety play prevents you from losing 2 tricks if W has QJxx. This is called a mandatory safety play because it can't lose a trick and might gain a trick. There may be other aspects of the complete hand why you would forego the safety play, but under our basic assumptions, you would not.

An example of an optional safety play that is a bit more counter-intuitive.

KJ32

A54 Opp have Q109876

You want 3 tricks; any play works with 3-3. The apparent line is to play the A and then lead the 4 to finesse the J. This is the only play that can get 4 tricks, but the probability is only 18% . There is one configuration (Qx- E, and xxxx -W) in which you can improve your chances of 3 tricks. Cash the K and the A, and lead toward the J. You give up a chance of getting 4 tricks to improve the chance of getting 3.

Look at a case where I think it's important to consider exactly what the opponents' hold.  
Q5432

AJ976            The opponents have K108. You want all 5 tricks.

Missing 3 cards headed by K, the odds favor a finesse. Should you lead low to the J, or lead the Q? If W holds the K, you will lose a trick either way. If E holds a singleton or doubleton K, either play will succeed.

The only important case is when E holds K108. If you lead low to the J after E plays the 8, now there is no way you can prevent E from taking a trick with the K10. But if you lead the Q, and E ducks, you can repeat the finesse leading to the AJ. If E covers the Q, you play the A. Then if W shows out, you go back to N, and lead toward the J9, which is over E's 108, and you will win all of the tricks. This is another mandatory safety play.

I claim that after you get in the habit of this type of thought process, you can figure combinations like this one in well under 30 seconds. The thing you'll gradually get used to is spotting the one or few configurations in which 2 lines of play differ so you can pick the better one.

I said earlier that while there may not be rules that always apply, there are some guidelines. This hand is an example of the idea of keeping a tenace over an opponent as a guard against a bad break. Giving up the J over a small card at the first trick, doesn't preserve any tenace in N to lead to, and it destroys one in S.

Let's take another example that you can solve using the method outlined.

A

J105432

The opponents hold KQ9876. You're all going to make the excellent play of cashing the A first. This may sound totally facetious, but it isn't. Where there is no choice on how to start, don't waste your time before that first trick trying to analyze all of the possible situations. After you know what they played, there are fewer situations to consider. If either opponent played an honor under the A, there are 2 possible situations of the remaining cards:

H 987 and H987 Void

There's nothing you can do about (void H987). You're going to lose 3 tricks. But in the other case (H 987) you can lead small, driving out the H, and then play the J and 10 to hold your losses to one trick.

Now consider the situation when both opponents play small under the A.

Now they have KQ98 left, and you have J10432. If their remaining cards break 4-0, you will lose 4 tricks no matter how you play. If their cards break 2-2, you only lose 2 tricks no matter how you play.

If they have

KQ9 8, you will lose 2 tricks no matter how you play.

But if they hold H H98

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You only lose one trick by playing small from your hand to drive out the stiff H.

As a homework exercise, change the holding to

A

J109432

.....  
In many combinations the spot cards are important.

### IN SUMMARY

When you start to play a hand, do all of the things you normally do – count tricks, analyze the opening lead, review the auction, check your entry issues, and add identifying a suit or suits that have combinations that have more than one line of play. But don't let consideration of suit combinations replace your other planning.

Your plan for playing a combination can change as the hand progresses based on such things as observed distribution in other suits, discards, and the location of other HCPs. The old advice “8 –ever; 9 – never” deals with the situation where you have 8 or 9 cards in the suit, missing Q. You have to decide whether to play for the drop or to try to finesse against the Q. With no outside knowledge of the hands distribution, the odds are slightly in favor of playing for the drop with 9 cards. But if you have any information about a skewed distribution in other suits, the finesse may be the better play or even a certainty.

Then remember the approach of noting the opponents' total holding in the suit and figuring the distributions that can affect your choice of plays.

Don't be discouraged with failures; this is a never ending project, as are most things in bridge.

### References

There are many books that deal with suit combinations, but I just want to give you a few:

Kantar, Eddie; “Take Your Tricks.” This is in the Unit library. It is chock full of excellent tips on declarer play. The principal sections relating to suit combinations are Chapter 9 “Lower Mathematics,” and Chapter 12, “Card Combinations and Safety Plays.” A new edition is due out fairly soon.

Encyclopedia of Bridge. This is a good reference for looking up virtually any combination.

Coffin, George, "Bridge Play from A to Z." Chapters on Safety Plays and Percentages. This book was published in 1954 so ignore the bidding and lead conventions.

The Unit 503 Web Site has a quiz on several suit combinations. Try it out and bring any questions to the next session.