How to play card combinations as declarer

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As declarer, make a plan!

For *each suit*, ask:

- What is the *minimum* number of tricks available?
- What is the maximum number?
- What is the best way to play the suit?

Example: AK532
J76

The "best play" depends on your *goal* for the suit. For example, you may want to get:

- As many tricks as possible in the suit
- A *specific* number of tricks (say, to make the contract).
  (You might be willing to give up some chances to make *more* tricks, by making a *safety play*.)

Assumptions
(not always valid)

- Trumps are not a factor
  Assume we are in NT and/or not worried about trumps. We're not discussing combinations that involve ruffing.

- The opponents didn't lead the suit.
  (For more on that, see my talk from 2012 "Card combinations when the defenders lead")

- You have enough entries to lead from either hand

- There is no "dangerous opponent"
  Sometimes the number of tricks is less important then keeping one hand off lead.

How do we win tricks?

- Cash winners

  AK32 - QJ54

- Establish winners by driving out opponents' honors

  KQ32 - J1075

- Take advantage of the location of opponents' honors by leading *toward* a particular holding (i.e. *finessing*)

  AQJ - 543 Q72 - A54

- Set up *length tricks* by exhausting the opponents of their cards (which may involve *ducking)*

  A5432 - 876 A543 - K72

- Some combination of the above!

  A53 - Q10542

For each combination:

- How many cards do we have?
  (and hence, how many do opponents have?)
  The more cards in a suit, the more likely we are to cash top honors instead of finessing (or before finessing).

- Is there a chance for length tricks?
  AQJ - 432: no 10987 - 5432: yes

- Which honors do we have (and hence, which ones are we missing?)
  Intermediate cards are important too
  QJ5 - A432 QJ10 - A932

- What are the possibilities for how the opponents' cards can be divided?
  (*basic probabilities)*

“Eight ever, nine never”?

11:	76432 AQJ1098	missing K	Drop*
10:	76432 AQJ109	missing K	Finesse
9:	A876 KJ543	missing Q	Drop*
8:	A876 KJ54	missing Q	Finesse
7:	A52 KQ103	missing J	Drop*
6:	A2 KQ103	missing J	Finesse

* When we have **odd**, they have **even** and the suit can split evenly. Best play is drop (close).

When we have **even**, they have **odd** and suit cannot split evenly. Best to finesse.

K7

53

A 50%

50% A

Lead toward K

0 50%; 1 50%

KJ7

532

AQ	25%	
A	25%	Q
Q	25%	A
	25%	AQ

Lead toward J, then K

0 25%; 1 50%; 2 25%

KJ10

532

Q 50%

50% Q

Lead toward J, then K

1 50%; 2 50%

(Location of A doesn't matter!)

Q109

532

J 50%

50% J

Lead toward 9, then 10

0 50%; 1 50%

(Location of AK irrelevant!)

Alternate: AK on left (only 25%)

AQ10

532

KJ	25%	
K	25%	J
J	25%	K
	25%	KJ

Lead toward 10, then Q

1 25%; 2 50%; 3 25%

AQ9

532

KJ10	12.5%	
J10	*12.5%*	*K*
K(J/10)	25%	J/10
J/10	25%	K(J/10)
K	12.5%	J10
	12.5%	KJ10

Lead toward 9, then Q

1 37.5%; 2 62.5%

AJ10

532

KQ	25%	
K	25%	Q
Q	25%	K
	25%	KQ

Lead toward 10, then J

1 25%; 2 75%

But what if we have 9 cards...?

AJ1093

7654

Alternate play: cash A`

2-2 split: 40%
Singleton honor: 25%

Finessing twice is 75% but in practice A may be better:

- Not enough entries
- Worried about ruff

A102
QJ4

K 50%

50% K

Simple! Lead Q or J

2 50%; 3 50%

Leading an honor is fine if you have *supporting honors.* QJ10 are equivalent.

A102

Q54

KJ	25%	
K	25%	J
J	25%	K
	25%	KJ

Lead toward Q, then 10

1 25%; 2 75%

This play gives you 2 finesses!

Any other play effectively gives only one. However....

A10762
Q543

Now we have length, so better to cash A first. Works if:

- 2-2 split
- Singleton K
- Singleton J
- Kxx with RHO

78% to get 4 tricks.

A54
Q109

Missing K and J but this time you have the 9 (a key card). Can finesse in several ways, all roughly 75% to win 2 tricks. (There is even a small chance of winning 3 tricks!)

(With 9 cards, it is correct to play A first.)

KQJ7

8542

Goal: 3 tricks. Leading an honor works if suit is 3-2 (68%). Better to lead *toward* honors (multiple times) in case LHO has A stiff or A10xx. (Adds about 14%.)

(In practice, sometimes there won't be enough entries.)

J32

KQ86

Goal: 3 tricks. Any play works if suit is 3-3 (36%). Better to lead *toward* KQ (potentially twice) in case RHO has A stiff or doubleton.

A432
QJ6

AK2

J653

Goal: 3 tricks. (No way to get 4)

Cash A, K, then lead toward J. Works if:

Q falls singleton:	2%
Q falls doubleton:	16%
Any 3-3 split:	36%
RHO has Q	23%
	78%

AK32

J65

Goal: 3 tricks.
Cash A, but then you can't afford to cash K, because if Q doesn't fall, you will lose 2 tricks to any 4-2 split. So finesse J at second trick.

Q falls singleton:	3%
Any 3-3 split:	36%
Q with RHO	30%
	69%

AK732

J65

Goal: 5 tricks. Must cash A, K.
Qx on either side: 27%

Goal: 4 tricks. Play A, then finesse J.
Q falls singleton: 6%
Any 3-2 split: 68%
Qxxx with RHO 9%
83%

Goal: 3 tricks. Same as above: 95%.

Goal: maximum. Cash A, K

A87

KJ65

Goal: 4 tricks. Play A, then finesse J.
Works if RHO has Qxx. (18%)

Goal: 3 tricks. Play K, A, then finesse J.
Gains when LHO has Qx (16%).

Goal: maximum (A, then finesse J)

AKQ642

53

There are no entries to dummy.
Best play for 6 tricks? for 5 tricks?
Best play at matchpoints?

AQ764

532

You want to set up *length tricks.* You must lose at least 1 trick, so *duck* the *first round*. Reasons:

- RHO might have a singleton K.
- You retain *entries* to establish suit
- Try leading low *from dummy!* RHO with Kx is very likely to play the K.

Safety play for 3 tricks: Suppose there are no entries to dummy. Duck twice in case LHO has Kxxx.

A1032

K9654

1. Goal: 4 tricks
2. Goal: maximize tricks

1. Lead small from either hand & play 9 or 10 if opponent follows low. This guards against 4-0 in either hand (5%). This is a *safety play.*

2. Play A or K. If Q/J falls, finesse on 2nd round (*Principle of Restricted Choice).*