

DISCARDING.

When you have run out of the suit that is led you have to choose what to discard. Sometimes there is no difficulty either because it is clear what you have to keep or you have cards that are obviously useless. Other times the choice can be very difficult even for experts who have advanced techniques of signaling and such – which we will not go into at this level. Between these two extremes there are some fairly simple situations that you can recognize and below is some advice for you to follow which will reduce the number of times you are embarrassed to see declarer win a trick with a lowly card in the suit you have just thrown away.

Here is a typical situation: you are defending a 3NT contract. You led a spade and you and your partner have just taken the first four tricks in spades (unfortunately you each had four spades each and declarer had three). Your hand is now ♠ -; ♥ 10 9 7 6; ♦ 9; ♣ J 7 5 3 and your partner leads a diamond. Declarer wins with the ♦A and proceeds to cash the ♦K and ♦Q. What do you discard?

First of all the very worst thing you can do is to discard a card from each suit. In the absence of any indication you have guess which suit to keep and discard two cards from the other one. But there is usually some information to help you.

♠ - ♥ AK2 ♦ 753 ♣ K682 <hr/> ♠ - ♥ 10976 ♦ 9 ♣ J753
--

First of all you can see dummy.

Here North is dummy. It is clear that if declarer has the ♥Q and ♣A and ♣Q then the contract will make with three top tricks in each suit. So you have to hope that your partner holds one of these and you do not know which one. However, there is one thing you can stop and that is declarer making four club tricks holding e.g. ♣A Q 3 – so you should discard hearts.

Change the ♣8 to the ♥8 and you would discard clubs.

Of course this is not foolproof; in the first scenario, if declarer has four hearts your discards would enable four hearts tricks to be made, since your partner's doubleton queen would drop. However, the club suit was the most visible threat and it is the best tactics to guard against this rather than some speculative possibility. So the first piece of general advice is:

Try to keep the length of your suit the same as the long suit of dummy.

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1♣	Pass	1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

Another source of information is the bidding. If the auction in the first scenario is at the left then, since South would have bid 1♥ with a holding of four hearts, you can discard hearts with confidence.

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
	1♣	Pass	1♥
Pass	1♠	Pass	1NT
Pass	3NT	All Pass	

However if this was the auction (it is not quite compatible with the residual holdings but no matter, it illustrates the idea) then you *know* that South has four hearts so the right play is to discard clubs, guarding against the more likely danger rather than the speculative one - hoping partner holds the ♣Q. So the second piece of advice is:

Try to keep the length of your suit the same as the known length of declarer's side suit.

<i>West</i>	<i>North</i>	<i>East</i>	<i>South</i>
			1♠
Pass	2♣	Pass	2♦
Pass	4♠	All Pass	

The bidding sometimes gives some rather obvious clues. For instance, if the bidding is as on the left and as West you have ♦Q J 7 6, you know that you have to hold on to them if you can.

Counting. Counting of all the suits all the time is difficult and requires great concentration. With all the other things to think about it is not realistic to do it consistently until you have a lot more experience. But it is useful and often not too hard to take note of some clear features during the play of the hand. A player failing to follow to a key suit is an obvious case. Other deductions can be made from the (correct!) leads made by partner.

If declarer cashes tricks and leads a winner on trick 12 and you have cards which are high in two different suits then theoretically you nearly always have the information to know which to keep. In practice it is often different. We are all familiar with the sinking feeling when declarer wins the last trick in the suit we have just discarded. Taking note of things early often saves the day. Here is an example:

♠ Q2	
♥ AK954	
♦ J532	
♣ 82	
	♠ A3
	♥ 6 32
	♦ K Q4
	♣ AKO75

You open 1♣ and South ends up in a contract of 4♠. Partner leads a club. You take the ♣K and ♣A and then play ♠A and ♠3 (to prevent declarer ruffing a possible losing club). Declarer plays the ♥A, ♥K, ruffs a heart plays the ♦A and another four spades leaving one card in hand and the ♦J on dummy. You have to discard from ♦K and ♣Q. What a nightmare! The clue should have come from the first two tricks. Did partner play high low in clubs, showing two or low high (MUD) showing three. You should have immediately noted that declarer had a third club in the first case and no more clubs in the second. You could then relax and know exactly which card to keep. Of course, you have to trust your partner!

Keep declarer in the dark. Sometimes your discards can be quite informative to declarer. Everything being equal, you should have this consideration in mind. For example, when it is likely that declarer could finesse either way for a queen, you should try not to discard a lot of cards in that suit if there is a good alternative. One thing you should almost always try to avoid is discarding all the cards in one suit.

For example, suppose in a 4♠ contract after drawing trumps (when you had to make discards because partner had length in spades) dummy has ♦ K J 9 2. Now declarer plays the ♦A. If you had discarded ♦7 ♦6, voiding yourself of diamonds you have given the show away and even if partner has, for example ♦ Q 10 8 5, declarer would be able to make four diamond tricks.

In a similar vein, if you have an ace together with useless cards in one suit, try not to reduce your holding to just the ace. The danger here is that you might crash a winner held by your partner.

Of course, in any given hand, it may prove impossible to follow all the above advice simultaneously. As always, judgement – which comes with experience – is the key. Above all it is important to **think** rather than to play automatically.

For declarers. If you are playing the hand and have no legitimate way to develop tricks you should bear in mind that discarding is not always easy for the defenders. If all but one of your cards are winners, play them all, including all your trumps, and hope for a mistake by the defence. If you have just two losing cards in a side suit, play off all but one of your trumps and your other winners then play the losing suit. If you are lucky the last one becomes a winner and you can ruff the return and win the last trick.

Do not be afraid to use a bit of guile. You can sometimes create a false impression with your own discards. Sometimes abandoning a suit can suggest that you have no further interest in it. For example, if in one suit you have ♦ A Q 7 6 in hand and ♦ K 4 2 on dummy then playing the ♦K and ♦A and then going on to cash other winners might suggest that you are hoping for a trick in another suit. If it is the ♦A Q 7 6 on dummy and ♦K 4 2 in hand, you might play the ♦2 to the ♦Q, giving the impression that you have finessed the ♦K and perhaps persuading a defender that it is safe to discard a card from ♦ J 9 8 5. Be creative. Remember that you don't have to worry about fooling your partner.