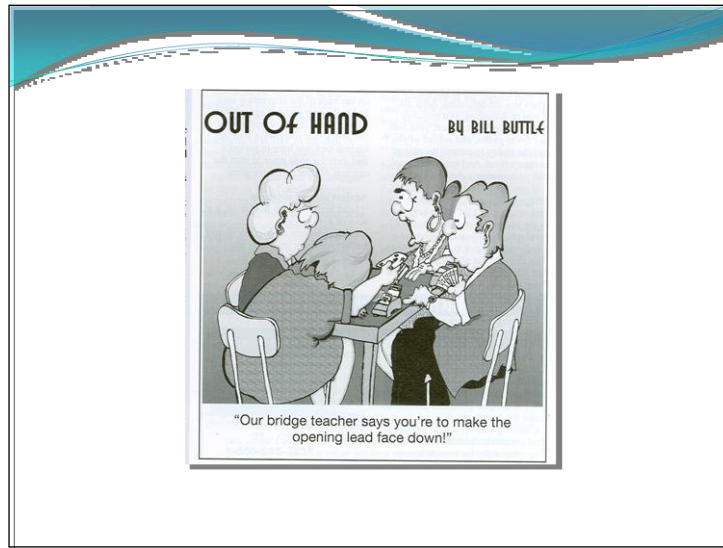




Many of you know me..... for those of you who don't, my name is Kismet Fung....I'm not a professional bridge player or bridge teacher, and I personally find opening leads the most difficult part of this game so it is with some trepidation that I am here discussing this subject.

By a show of hands..... How many have ever read a book on opening leads??

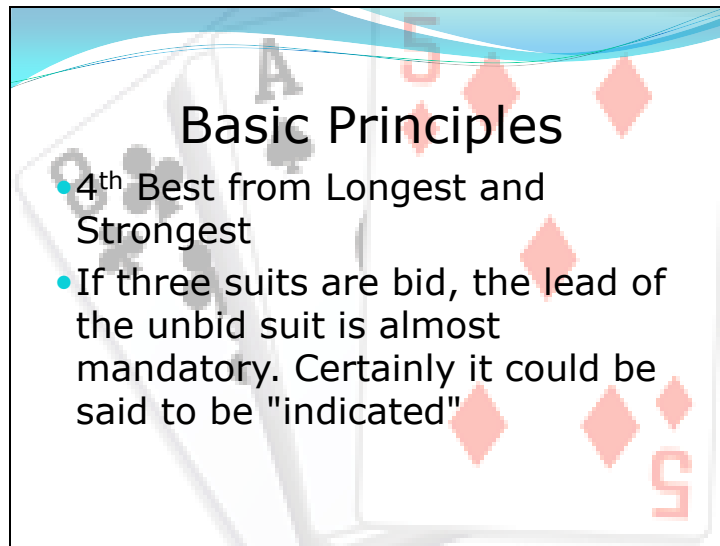
How many do what I used to do.....if it is your lead, you shuffle your cards and lead the card that is fifth from the right??



I believe that you can always improve your game and great opening leads singlehandedly can raise your score ..... enough to consistently put you in the overalls

First..... the lawyer in me must provide you with a caveat..... the following lecture reflects my opinions only, you WILL read other lead books or articles that disagree with some of the principles that I espouse below. While I believe those other authors are wrong, you must learn in bridge, to bear your own risk.....

My talk today is primarily geared towards matchpoints, where opening leads can make break a game. In any given session, out of 26 boards, statistically you will lead a quarter of the time, meaning 6.5 times..... if you can get it right 6 of those times..... that amounts to 25% of your score



The opening lead, more than any other aspect of the game, is dictated by percentages. While most decisions in card play, in the mid-game and end-game (tricks 4 through 12, say) can be resolved by logic, and percentages are only a secondary aspect, the opening lead is a question of percentages. The opening leader has less information available, by far, than either defender at any other point in the defense. Not only have no tricks been played, but the dummy has not even appeared. Once the play begins, and the partner of the opening leader plays to the first trick, and players show out of suits or defenders give count, much more about the hand becomes known. If a bridge deal was a crossword puzzle, the opening lead on a blind auction (1nt-3nt) would be like a nearly blank puzzle.

When the auction is more revealing (1S-1nt-2h-4h, say) it is like a crossword puzzle with a quarter of the clues filled in. Once the dummy has come down (immediately after the opening lead) it is as though half the clues have been filled in on our hypothetical crossword puzzle.... then once we have played to two or more tricks, it is as though the cross-word puzzle is 2/3 to 3/4 full....by Trick 6 or 7, the deal is usually like a crossword puzzle with only a few blank squares....by that stage, on most

deals, the hand is essentially fully known....but at the time of the opening lead the hand isn't partially known....that is why we try to be careful with opening leads....that is one reason we don't NORMALLY lead aces or trumps: because even when they don't give away the hand immediately, they don't resolve the question of what to do next - at least when we lead from an unbid suit, we find out a great deal about the hand - say we lead from a king-ten holding - usually the lead from a king is to be avoided, but maybe we have king ten fourth in one suit and the unsupported ace of the other - we lead from the king ten, dummy has three small, and partner puts up the queen - now we can place declarer with the ace - jack, and possibly an additional small card in the suit....

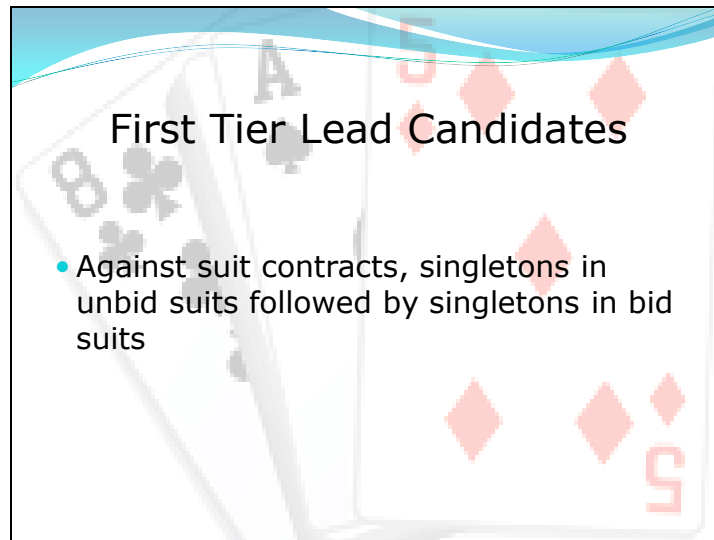
So how do we figure out what to lead?

How many of you have heard the adage "4<sup>th</sup> best from your longest and strongest"?

This adage, "Lead fourth best from your longest and strongest suit" is actually pretty good advice. It is ignored in almost every case, but you would do better on opening lead if you blindly followed this rule. I mean this against suit contracts as well as against no trump

Listen to the bidding

Should the auction proceed (non-competitive) to 4 Hearts thus: 1D - 1H - 1S - 4H, clubs is the unbid suit. After an auction like this (one un-bid suit) only powerful alternatives would prevent a club lead.



There are two "hierarchies" of opening leads. We speak of a hierarchy of opening leads for lack of a better term, if you can come up with one I am receptive to hear it. When I speak of two hierarchies (shall we call them "ladders"?) I refer to leads you should make (chief among them Ace-King, three honors in sequence, a suit we have bid and raised, and, higher than all of these, a singleton in a suit the opponents haven't bid naturally.

On the "lowerarchy" (I know there's no such word but I'm not being paid for my grammar), of leads you should never make, we start with a trump from a vulnerable holding (Qxx, Jxx, Kx, AQ). The second worst lead is a trump from a holding which isn't vulnerable, such as two or three small Assume we are defending a suit contract at the game level (4H, 4S, 5C,5D).

Here are a handful of leads that qualify as "First Tier" lead candidates.

They are in loose order of desirability. This ranking among "Tier One" leads is only to provide a guideline if as opening leader you are fortunate enough to have more than one "Tier One" candidate.

Singletons in unbid suits. Singletons in bid suits.

A) A singleton in a (bid) side suit - in this case diamonds or spades.

B) The unsupported ace in the unbid suit - that is a holding such as A10xx or AJxxx....

So we see, we have the best lead against a trump contract. The off-suit singleton. Even at the highest tournament level many more points are lost when players try and be clever and not lead their singleton for one reason or another.

Let us instead consider when you might not lead a singleton.

1) If your trump holding is Queen-Jack third or similar (actually, there is no "similar" here, this exception only applies if your trump holding is queen-jack-third, anything less you should assume you will get finessed out of....) and you have a sound alternative (an honor sequence such as Ace-King King-Queen or Queen-Jack in a suit bid and raised by our side)

2) The singleton is an honor (generally Jack or higher) and it might be an impediment in a suit the opponents have length and have to guess the position

3) The suit is clearly the critical suit for the opponents and we have enough strength in the side suits and we might be able to take four fast ones against their major suit game

The exceptions to leading singletons only apply at the game level or higher.

At the part-score level the lead of a singleton is mandatory at all times.

And another thing:

There is one more exception where you might not lead a singleton:

When you have four card or longer trump holding and elect instead to "go for the tap" ....

Also, there is one trump holding that's "similar to Queen-Jack - third" .... that's jack-ten fourth; the other holding where a ruff doesn't help you - ace-ten fourth is a third holding of that type...

A classic "go for the tap": Axx, KQJxx, Jxxx, x

Both vul, the bidding goes: 3D in front of this hand - after a disciplined pass (hand with diamond length should wait for partner to re-open and then jump to 4H), LHO raises to 5 Diamonds....

While as a rule we would always lead a singleton, this deal happily combines three causes for exceptions to the always lead singletons - four, actually.

- 1) They are in game, not part-score.
- 2) you have a triple - sequence in another suit
- 3) You have a classic slow trump trick - Jack fourth - you don't need the ten here because there is extreme diamond length on your right.
- 4) You see a possible "clear path to three (book plus one to defeat the contract, three tricks in this case) tricks"
- 5) your partner is likely to be so weak that there won't be an entry to his hand for a ruff.....

We have established that with rare exceptions we will lead a singleton whenever we have one. What if we don't have one?

## First Tier Leads.. continued

- A suit partner has bid or doubled for
- A suit in which I have AKQ (lead the queen)
- A suit in which I have AKJ
- A suit in which I have AK
- A suit we have bid and raised

A suit partner has bid (or doubled for) .....

Can anyone tell me why?

.....

—to stop the “well I guess if I wanted a club lead, I should have bid diamonds) from partner

A suit in which I have Ace-King-Queen (lead queen) We lead the queen from AKQ not as a matter of system, or as an adjunct to Ace from Ace King (we lead queen from AKQ regardless of what we lead from ace-king) but because it is raw bridge logic - that is, when we lead the queen and it holds, partner will know our holding - he may think we have queen jack when we first lead it (he may give attitude based on whether he holds the ten, if the ten is not in dummy) but once the queen holds, he will assume ace-king-queen - the alternative, that declarer has both ace and king and has held off, is barely possible but I can't imagine a situation where the ambiguity of a queen lead (Ace king queen or queen jack and maybe the ten) would not be immediately apparent....

The alternative method, where you lead the ace or king from ace - king, with or without the queen, is nowhere near as effective. First, with queen from Ace-king-queen, the other leads (ace or king) DENY ace-king-queen - valuable information for the partner

of the opening leader. - Simple example, opening leader's partner has a singleton - opening leader plays king, then ace - partner of the leader knows they only have one discard to make - if the queen is led, followed by the ace (or perhaps the king, based on present count remaining) opening leader's partner knows they have two pitches to make....

That was just one example of many - also, if the leader cashes the queen, and then shifts, and as leader's partner I win a trick, I can cash the jack (holding the lead) and then play something else....I can't do that if you lead king-ambiguous.

A suit in which I have Ace-King-Jack

A suit in which I have Ace-King-ten or AK  
(Barry Crane rule—Barry Crane was one of the best matchpoint players to have ever lived—he played 3 decades ago and he is famous for saying..... If God deals you an AK, say thank you for not having to think about what to lead)

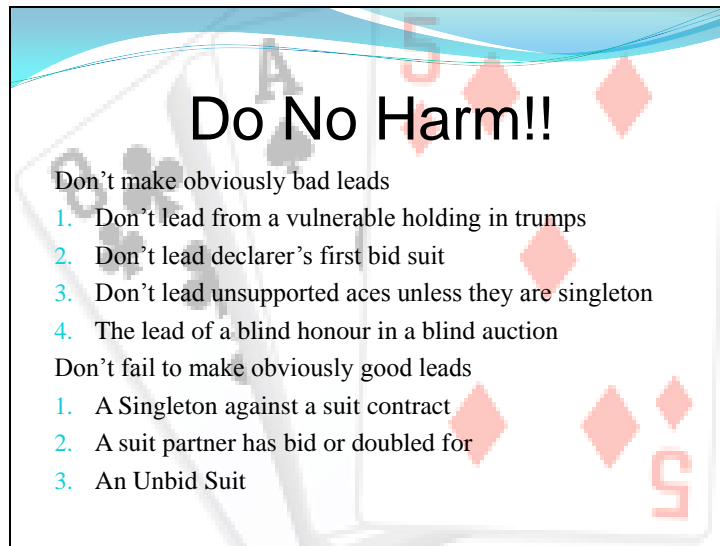
A suit we have bid and raised\*\*\*\*\*

- Depending on the vulnerability and the auction, this bullet might in fact be at the top of the list

**First Tier Lead Candidates**  
....continued

- A four card or longer suit headed by King-Queen-Jack
- A four card or longer suit headed by King-Queen-Ten
- A four card or longer suit headed by Queen-Jack-Ten
- A four card or longer suit headed by Jack-ten-nine
- Any six card or longer suit not headed by the ace or king

A few examples of classical sequences that we look for when nothing else indicates an obvious lead



Hippocratic Oath for Opening leaders is the same as the Hippocratic Oath for Physicians, which goes back over two thousand years.

Even the oldest laws for opening leads go back no more than five hundred years, to the origins of whist, and Ace-From Ace-King wasn't even invented until the 1950's, so two thousand years is really old as these things go.

The Hippocratic Oath for opening leaders states, "First, do no harm." I pause here for a minute just to let that sink in, to allow that phrase to reverberate around the room, bank around. If I have a good microphone I like to pretend I'm Ellen Degeneres or somebody and just have fun up here for a minute, play with the microphone and repeat that phrase a few times:

Do no harm, Do no harm, Do no harm, Do no harm, harm, no harm no harm no harm no harm. Do no harm.

Ahh, breathe deep. That was fun.

That does not mean you should never make an attacking lead.

Quite the opposite! You usually should make an attacking lead.

So to be precise, the phrase could be altered. The phrase should read: Do no harm unless you calculate the percentages and determine, based on a cross-section of at least 1000 deals that fit the bidding as we understand it, and our own hand as we're looking at it, and based on our estimate of the opponents' general bidding style and skill level, both in general and at this particular moment.....

Kind of a mouthful, really. No chance that one's going to catch on like the other, Do no harm.

When we say Do no harm, we mean don't make obviously bad leads. The most obviously bad leads fall into three main categories.

First, a lead from a vulnerable holding in trumps.  
Second, a lead of declarer's first bid suit.

Third, the lead of an unsupported ace

Except:

1. singleton ace and/or a suit headed by ace - king;
2. When opponents bid a gambling 3NT—You need to see dummy, chances are there is a weakness that you need to retain the lead to capitalize on
3. When opponents are on the way to a grand but stop in 6 because of lack of key cards only..... "use it or lose it"... will get you lots of matchpoints
4. Similar to (3), if opponents are on the way to slam but stop in 5 because of lack of key cards, TAKE your aces now especially in matchpoints
5. When opponents have bypassed 3NT in favour of 5 of a minor because there is a weakness in a particular suit

Finally, the bad leads are the failure to make a desirable lead, such as a singleton, or from a suit partner has bid or doubled for, or in the unbid suit. Since any unbid suit is usually a desirable lead, a trump lead is almost always an undesirable lead. We will

discuss exceptions later in this section, and we will list about a dozen situations where trump leads are acceptable or desirable. But those are exceptions!

"Do no harm" does not mean "Lead passive rather than aggressive." Bridge is a game of percentages, and the percentages favor aggressive leads. In rare cases this is in conflict with the do no harm dictum, but it generally isn't.

Some rare cases will be difficult, but in general, when you don't have a Tier One lead available, you will judge whether to be aggressive or passive.

Defending at the game level, it is usually better to be aggressive. You will be unlucky sometimes, and a lead from queen-ten fifth or some other desirable holding will give away the contract. That does not mean you should have avoided the lead, because it was likely to do harm. It means you followed the percentages, and it didn't work out.

Unless of course, if the declarer opened the bidding in this suit, and then you lead from queen-ten-fifth anyway, you violated the Do no Harm rule.

Even if it works.

But while a lead from queen-ten-fifth in an unbid suit is a desirable lead, that doesn't mean it is always a good lead. If your alternatives are a singleton in an unbid suit, and KQJ10-fifth of the other unbid suit, then a lead from the queen-ten-fifth is a bad lead. It is at best a "Tier Two" lead.

We follow the Do No Harm dictum by sticking to the hierarchy of opening leads.

## When to Lead Trump

- Defending a One Level Doubled Contract
- Partner opens a strong notrump, or it is shown your side has the HCP
- Hands where Declarer has shown 2 suits and we have strong holding in second suit

If you had a hand with thirteen card length in the opponents' trump suit, say they had a Flannery accident and were playing in Two Diamonds, then a trump lead would obviously be acceptable.

You'll notice that the trump lead neither gains nor loses a trick in such a situation, since the defense gets all thirteen tricks regardless.

And no, that is not the only situation where it's okay to lead trumps. We mentioned another situation, where partner sat for a take-out double at the one level, such as 1 Heart - double - pass - pass - even with a hand such as AKQx, x, KQJx, QJ10x, the opening leader is expected to lead a trump despite superb alternatives in all three other suits.

The idea is, to pass a take-out double at the one level, the partner of the doubler is expected to have such good trumps that the defense can draw trumps against the declarer. We're talking about trump holdings like QJ1087x and better, that's a minimum trump holding to pass a take-out double at the one level.

That situation is so clear-cut that you are expected to lead a

trump no matter what, when a take-out double is passed out at the one level. This principle can in general be extended to the case of any doubled part-score. The reason is not exactly the same - with a doubled part-score we expect the trumps to be divided differently than when a one-level opening is doubled and passed out. But the broad reason is the same: if we are doubling a part-score, we think that we have the balance of power (probably enough for at least a possible game, otherwise why are we taking the risk of them making a doubled part-score?) and also that their suits are breaking poorly. In that case, a trump lead is logical.

So, while a trump lead is all but forbidden against voluntary game auctions by the opponents, a trump lead is all but required in several other situations, including doubled part-scores.

This is important to remember, for the stakes are very high when you are defending a doubled part-score. When a team makes a doubled part-score it has an enormous impact on the match, both in the points scored by the declaring side and also as a momentum-changer. If the team that makes the big score had been ahead, this result will put the match almost out of reach. If the team that is defending had been ahead, plus 470 or similar often leads to an enormous momentum shift.

Against a doubled part-score, a superb lead, like a singleton, should generally be chosen ahead of a trump. When they recommend a trump lead against doubled part-scores, we are referring to two basic situations: One is where one player has shown a two-suiter, and the other has chosen one of the suits. In this case we lead trumps because one of the defenders will usually have a strong holding, four cards or longer, in their second suit. We lead trumps because we don't want the hand opposite the known two-suiter to ruff losers in the short trump hand. That's why we lead trumps in that case.

At matchpoints we might double a part-score more aggressively. At IMP's we probably wouldn't double if the opponents bid 3

Spades over our 3 Hearts, since we don't think we have a game. At matchpoint's we're much more likely to try a speculative double, or spec double, especially when the opponents are vulnerable. That's a spot where you might lead a trump against what you think is a five-three or even four-four fit, to stop one of the ruffs. Usually when you start with that defense you'll want to continue that defense, and try to lead all three rounds of trumps that you can in order to kill at least one ruff.

There are two related situations that call for trump leads, and I'll mention them now.

So first, we have the broad general category,

A: Doubled Part-scores .... now we add

B: Situations where the partner of the opening leader has opened with a strong no trump (if you are defending undoubled after opening two no trump you are dealing with a situation that occurs maybe once in 100,000 hands, about as often as 8-5 distribution.

But if the auction does go 2NT-3H-p-p-p the next time you play, I would say a trump lead is probably a pretty good idea there, too.

Unless of course, you have a side-suit singleton. You can never go wrong leading your singleton, you know. Because if it doesn't work the worst thing that can happen is you blow a trick or two. But if you don't lead a singleton, and you should have, then you have to risk hearing your partner say, "I can't believe you wouldn't lead your singleton on that hand...."

A: Doubled part-scores. B: Hands where we open with strong No Trumps.

C: Hands where declarer has shown two suits, especially when we hold a strong four-card holding in the non-trump suit.

Those are the main cases where we lead trumps on defense. There are two other situations where it is okay to lead trumps on defense that I want to mention.

One is when you have five trumps on defense, and you are facing a presumed four-three fit. It is quite surprising how often this lead of a trump from five card length is very effective. Often you will then make a ruff later, and play another round of trump. Usually this sort of defense is only noticed later, people will say, "Well if he led a trump from jack fifth she could beat it, but who's ever going to find that lead?"

The other really good trump lead you might want to be on the look-out for is from queen-fourth. Obviously queen-third is a horrible lead, and queen doubleton is equally insane, but queen-fourth is a surprising reasonable lead, almost a good lead.

Hear me out, bear with me. (Pause) Work with me here (rueful smile, head tilt), stay with me. Work with me here. Concentrate. First of all, best case scenario: Ace-king on your left. Between them they have the jack ten nine, everything except five trumps missing the queen. If you led from three small trump, they can catch your partner's queen. Good chance they go for the drop.

Wouldn't you? Which are you going to play for, the lead from three small or queen third? Three small, no one ever led from queen third. Oh, queen fourth? I never heard of anyone leading from that either.

If you're really going to try it, the best time is when the dummy is strong, bidding like 1D-1S-3S-4S or similar.

By the way, queen-ten fourth is taking the whole idea way too far.

