

Ask Jerry



Well-known teacher and player **Jerry Helms** answers your bridge questions.
Send your questions to askjerry@jerryhelms.com.

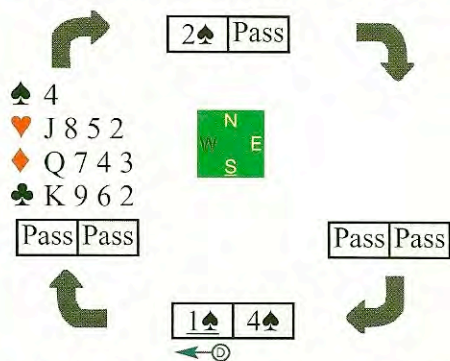
Dear Jerry: Isn't the most practical approach for playing the game to just memorize a few rules that you can follow each time you play?

—N. D., Philadelphia, PA

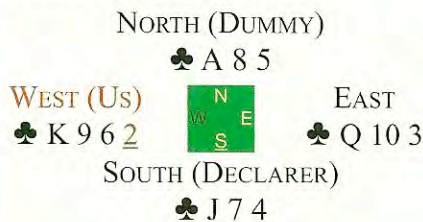
Dear N. D.: I don't like the idea of memorizing rules. Bridge is not a game of absolutes such as 'always' and 'never.' It's a game of flexible words such as 'generally,' 'usually,' 'probably,' and 'most likely.'

There are guidelines, of course, to 'guide' us when we are first gaining experience with the game. But even some of these are what I refer to as "phrases that slay!"

Here's an example: "Don't lead away from a king." Suppose you are West, on lead against a contract of 4♠ with no useful information from the auction.

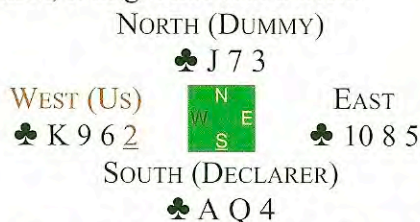


With nothing else to go on, I would chose the ♣2, leading away from the ♣K. In my experience, I've noticed that I don't need much from partner for this to be a success. If partner has the ♣A, we'll immediately get two tricks in this suit. If partner has the ♣Q, we'll establish at least one trick in the suit, perhaps two:



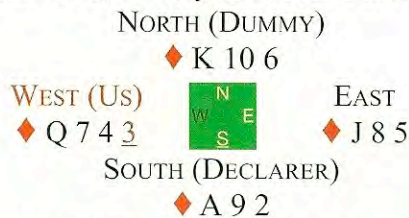
If I lead the ♣2 and this is the layout, we can establish two tricks in the suit, trapping declarer's ♣J. We'll be able to do this before declarer has a chance to set up winners in another suit on which to discard the club losers.

We may be concerned that if we lead a club it could be right into declarer's ♣A-Q. That's a possibility, but even then, it might not cost a trick:



True, declarer will win the first trick with the ♣Q, but declarer was always entitled to two tricks in the suit, and we might still win a trick with the ♣K on the third round of the suit.

Let's contrast leading away from the ♣K with leading away from the ♦Q. If I lead from the ♦Q, I'm really hoping partner has the ♦K so we can establish a trick in the suit. If partner has the ♦A, we were getting that trick anyway, and we may have saved declarer from a tough guess. At best, we'll break even. If partner has the ♦J, however, we may have cost a trick:



In this layout, the suit is 'frozen.' Whichever side leads the suit first loses. If declarer has to play the suit, declarer can take the ♦A and ♦K, but must then lose a trick. If we lead the ♦3, however, declarer plays low from dummy and captures partner's ♦J with the ♦A. Declarer can then lead toward dummy and trap our ♦Q with dummy's remaining ♦K-10.

Also, if we lead away from our ♦Q and declarer has ♦A-K-J, it's very unlikely we can recover our trick.

Leading away from the ♥J suffers from similar problems. If partner holds the ♥A, that's a trick we're likely to get anyway. If partner has the ♥K, we still may not get a trick as declarer has the ♥A and ♥Q. If partner has the ♥Q, we may have broken open a frozen suit. Partner needs a strong holding, such as ♥K-Q, to make this lead effective.

So "Don't lead away from a king" may not be such good advice. Here's another phrase that slays: "Don't make an opening preemptive bid with a side four-card major suit." Consider these two hands:



If I had to follow the 'rule', I guess I'd have to pass with both hands. In practice, I'd likely open 2♠ with the first hand but pass with the second. What 'rule' am I following? Not point-count; one has 7 high-card points, the other 8. It's not distribution; both hands have 6-4-2-1 shape.

It's actually trick-taking potential. The first hand has at least five tricks as long as I make spades the trump suit. The second has only two sure tricks in spades, and those tricks would be available if another suit were trumps—hearts perhaps.

Also, the state of the match, the vulnerability, and the players at the table might influence my decision. Bridge is a game of judgment. The problem with a rule-driven approach is that it can lead to a certain degree of intolerance. ❏

For upcoming cruises with Jerry visit www.jerryhelms.com