

Checklist for Declarer

1. Give yourself permission and time to think
2. Mentally review the auction for points and shape information
3. Make sure you know the defensive lead and signaling agreements
4. When dummy comes down count all the points you can see
5. Is the contract likely the same as the field?
6. Apply the Rule of 11 if they made a 4th best lead
7. Make a list of what the defensive hands can and can't have
8. Remember your starting distribution so you can reconstruct the play mid play
9. Count the trumps – just 13 cards, count the critical suit – just 13 cards, count signals help
10. Once you know two suits in one hand, subtract from 13 for the total of the other two

Checklist for Defense

1. Give yourself a generous amount of time when dummy comes down to estimate declarer and partner's HCP and distribution based on the auction and contract
2. 4th best lead? Apply the Rule of 11
3. Decide if you need an Active or Passive defense
4. What suits does partner need count in? What suits do you need count in?
5. Estimate how many tricks declarer is likely to get
6. Do you want to encourage the opening lead or ask for a switch?
7. Is the contract likely the same as the field?
8. What are you going to play when declarer leads from dummy?

Practice counting every hand you see in print as either Declarer or Defender!

Counting tools

40 points

There are 40 high card points in every deal. On defense you can count your points and dummy's points and subtract that total from 40. That gives you the combined points for partner and declarer. Often you can assign declarer a narrow point range based on the bidding or on the contract level.

Example, as West you hold

♠ KJ7
♥ A95
♦ J8652
♣ 10 3

The auction goes

	S	W	N	E
1NT		pass	3NT	pass
pass		pass		

Before the opening lead you can give declarer and dummy 26 points. You have 9 points. So before you even see dummy you should estimate that partner has around 5 points. You lead the ♦5 and see this dummy:

♠ Q62
♥ QJ3
♦ K74
♣ Q865

Your opponents are playing 16-18 NT. So give declarer 17 points, add dummy's 10 points, your 9 points and now you know partner has 4 points +/-1 point. This information is key to guiding your defensive play.

40 point – contract levels

Before you see dummy you can assign partner a point estimate based on the contract level.

2 level suit contract = 19-21 points
3 level suit contract or 2NT = 22-24 points
4 level suit contract or 3NT = 25-30
6NT = 32-36
7NT = 37+

Of course, this estimate does not take into account distributional points which could be considerable, and it assumes that the opponents know what they are doing. Nonetheless armed with a rough idea of partner's high card points you can start to formulate a defensive strategy.

High level contracts not on the list may have considerable distributional components but common sense still applies. Opponents who investigate slam but stop at the 5 level will likely have 29-31 combined high card points.

Reading Shape

Listen carefully to the auction and start to build a mental picture of the hands. Every bid has information for you to use.

Shape from Stayman

In this auction declarer is very informative about her hand.

S	W	N	E
1NT	pass	2 Clubs	pass
2 Diamonds	pass	2NT	pass
3NT	pass	pass	pass

Declarer is playing 15-17 NT. So what do we know just from the auction? Declarer shows 16-17 points for accepting the invitation to game and does not hold a 4-card major. Dummy is usually going to have at least one 4 card major and about 9 points.

Let's say as West you hold

♠ K74
♥ 92
♦ 632
♣ 109532

So you know that partner is going to have 10-11 points. How many hearts does partner hold? Declarer cannot have more than 7 hearts between her two hands so you know partner has at least 4. So what should you lead? No trump is a race for each side to try to establish their long suits and cash them. Here your prospects of establishing clubs is poor. Declarer with no 4 card major is more likely to have some length in clubs, and you are unlikely to be able to get back in to cash your long clubs even if you can get them going. Better to try to set up a long card in partner's hand by leading a heart. If dummy has 4 hearts you may be leading through strength and if not then your partner has at least 5 of them. With 10 points your partner is much more likely to have entries to establish and enjoy his long suit than you are.

Which heart do you lead? Lead the 9, the traditional high/low lead with a doubleton. The 9 has the advantage that when your partner applies the Rule of 11 it should be pretty obvious that you are leading from a short suit. Partner can do the math as well and should be able to guess that you are trying to hit his length rather than leading from yours.

The full deal that I constructed to prove my point:

	North		
	♠ A1086		
	♥ K43		
West	♦ Q76	East	
♠ K74	♣ Q87	♠ 932	
♥ 92		♥ AQ1075	
♦ 632		♦ A54	
♣ 109532		♣ 84	
	South		
	♠ QJ5		
	♥ J86		
	♦ KQ109		
	♣ AKJ		

On any lead but a heart declarer makes her contract with an overtrick – 4 spades with a finesse, 3 diamonds after forcing out the Ace and 3 clubs. On a heart lead your partner scores the Queen and Ace, knocks out the King and still has the diamond Ace as an entry to cash his remaining hearts for down 1.

Reading Shape – 2 Suited Bids

Two suited bids like Michaels and Unusual NT make counting distribution a lot easier and are a great starting place for building your counting confidence. These bids typically show 5-5 in two specific suits. That means once you account for the remaining 3 cards you have a full distributional count and can almost play the hand double dummy (as if you can see all four hands).

Also when you are declarer, when the opponents have made a 2-suited bid and you can count their hands completely you are well situated for end plays like throw-ins and squeezes.

Example

You hold as South

♠ AQ
 ♥ AJ842
 ♦ AQ3
 ♣ Q65

With the auction

	S	W	N	E
1 Heart		2 Hearts	3 Hearts	3 Spades
4 Hearts		pass	pass	pass

West's 2 heart bid is Michaels showing 5-5 in the two highest unbid suits. So West has 5 spades and 5 diamonds. Therefore West has 3 cards in the rounded suits (hearts and clubs).

East has enough to bid 3 spades freely, so either 4 spades to follow the Law of Total Tricks or 3 spades with some high cards and shape. After you bid game, West feels she has fully described her hand and leave it to her partner to decide whether to save in 4 spades. East calculates that 4 hearts is going to be worth less than the penalty of going down doubled, or perhaps thinks there are good defensive chances against 4 hearts.

For your part in the auction your initial excitement at a 19 point hand has been dampened by learning that your two pointed Queens are likely sitting under the Kings making your hand worth closer to 15 points.

West leads the club Jack and you see this dummy:

North

♠ 76
♥ KQ63
♦ 8743
♣ A73

South

♠ AQ
♥ AJ842
♦ AQ3
♣ Q65

Let's start by counting points. You have 19, dummy has 9. That leaves 12 for the defense. We'll give West the pointed Kings for her bid so with the club Jack that's 7 of the 12 accounted for. Where is the King of clubs? East must have it, so that's 10 of the missing 12 points located. The only unaccounted points are the two pointed Jacks, and they are more likely to be with West.

Now we count our tricks. 5 trumps and 3 outside Aces makes 8. Since we've gives East the club King we can anticipate that our club Queen will be a trick since we have good transportation to the board for a finesse. So we're up to 9 tricks. Where's the last one going to come from?

Let's see if we can get a full count of the hand and see if there's an answer. What should we play to the first trick? We already know that West has a total of 3 cards in hearts and clubs so the lead is very likely a singleton. If we duck in dummy East will win and return a club for West to ruff. We don't want that so we'll play the Ace knowing that we can draw trump ending on the board to lead a club towards the Queen later.

After winning the club Ace, let's draw trump which will complete our picture of the deal. Lead to the Ace to guarantee that we'll be able to draw trump ending in dummy. Both follow to the heart Ace so there are only two trumps out and we can draw them with dummy's KQ. Lead a heart back to dummy's King and both follow which we guessed was going to happen once we identified the club lead as a singleton (2 hearts + 1 club = 3 rounded cards) for West.

Now that trumps are drawn and we know exactly who is holding what and the lead is in dummy:

	North		
	♠ 76		
	♥ Q6		
West	♦ 8743	East	
♠ Kxxxx	♣ 73	♠ xxxx	
♥		♥	
♦ Kxxxx		♦ x	
♣		♣ K10984	
	South		
	♠ AQ		
	♥ J84		
	♦ AQ3		
	♣ Q6		

This is a pretty double dummy problem. See if you can figure it out before you read on.

Knowing where all the cards are means you can engineer a throw-in end play against West? What are the clues?

- 1) You have excess trumps in dummy meaning that there is the possibility of a ruff/slough
- 2) You have tenaces in your hand
- 3) West is restricted to leading only a pointed suit card if given the lead.

So what's the answer? Cash the spade Ace and play the spade Queen. West wins but has to lead back either a spade which you ruff in dummy discarding a diamond from your hand, or lead a diamond into your AQ tenace. You get back to dummy to lead a club towards your Queen for your 10th trick.

Yes, it is not impossible in this deal for East to have the spade King which would spoil your lovely end play. That would mean West was ready to put down this dummy in 3 diamonds holding Jxxxx, xx, KJxxx, J with East having maybe only 2 diamonds and 1 spade and all her high cards sitting under the opening bidder.

The Rule of 11

When someone makes a 4th best lead, the Rule of 11 applies.

The Rule of 11 says that you subtract the lead card (e.g. a 5) from 11 (to get 6 in this case) and that tells you how many cards above the led card (in this case a 5) are in the other three hands. So when someone leads a 4th best 5, there will be 6 cards higher than it in the other hands.

Example

Against South's NT contract West leads a 4th best diamond 7. Dummy comes down with these diamonds: K65 and in diamonds you hold AJ92.

11-7 = 4 so there are 4 cards higher than the 7 outside of partner's hand. Since you can see 1 card higher than a 7 in dummy and 3 higher cards in your hand you know declarer has no diamond higher than a 7. Declarer plays low from dummy – what card should you play?

Other Opening Lead Clues

Make sure you know what your opponents' agreements are on leads and carding. You are entitled to ask them before you have played a card.

We're all taught that the safest leads are from honor sequences (e.g. AK or KQJ). When an honor sequence is unseen and the opening lead isn't from the sequence you can guess that opening leader is missing at least one honor in that suit.

Example, as South you hold

♠ 3
♥ AQ872
♦ Q87
♣ AJ87

And the auction goes

S	W	N	E
	1 Diamond	pass	1 Spade
2 Hearts	2 Spades	4 Hearts	pass
pass	pass		

West leads the heart 5 and dummy comes down

	North
	♠ Q964
	♥ K104
	♦ J109
	♣ K102

♥5 led

	South
	♠ 3
	♥ AQ872
	♦ Q87
	♣ AJ87

Your partner clearly has great faith in your declarer play.

Let's count points. You and dummy have 22 points leaving 18 for them. West opened and East responded so the points are likely to be 12 and 6 for West and East.

What about honor sequences? You can't see the spade AK or the diamond AK. West surely would have led from either of these if she held one or both. So she can't have either of those sequences. Let's give her both missing Aces and her partner both missing Kings. That accounts for all of East's high card points. When it comes time to take the club finesse you already know that West has to have the Queen for her opening bid. When trumps break 2-3 you can safely force out the diamond AK and make 10 tricks with 5 hearts, a diamond and 4 clubs. (West isn't going to show up with 4 spades, 2 hearts, 4 diamonds and 4 clubs)

Final Exam(ple)

Sitting East you hold

East
♠ AJ92
♥ 982
♦ A1053
♣ 97

And hear this auction

S	W	N	E
1 Heart	pass	1 Spade	pass
2 Clubs	pass	3 Clubs	pass
3NT	pass	pass	pass

Your partner leads the 4♦ and you see:

	North	
	♠ 107543	
	♥ K5	
	♦ 92	
	♣ AQ102	
West		East
		♠ AJ92
		♥ 982
		♦ A1053
		♣ 97
4♦		
	South	
	???	

You win the first trick with the A♦. Now what?

Let's see if we can figure out South's distribution. She is likely to have 5 hearts and 4 clubs from the auction. Partner presumably led a 4th best diamond, and we can either use the Rule of 11 or just notice that it is the lowest diamond we can see to determine that partner has exactly 4 diamonds leaving South with 3 diamonds. We count South with 5 hearts + 4 clubs + 3 diamonds = 12 cards. South has a stiff spade! And partner has 3 Spades to the K or Q.

So to beat the contract, cash the A♠ dropping South's honor, then lead the 2♠ to partner asking for a spade back. You collect 4 spades and the A♦ for down one. Lead anything else and declarer makes her contract with an overtrick.

The full deal:

	West	North	East	South
♠	Q86	107543	AJ92	K
♥	J74	K5	982	AQ1063
♦	Q874	92	A1053	KJ6
♣	653	AQ102	97	KJ84