

Some Standard Safety Plays in Bridge by Maritha Pottenger

Safety plays are designed to guard against bad breaks. It is a form of “taking out insurance.” Some safety plays sacrifice a trick when the cards lie favorably, but they prevent you from losing an extra trick when the cards lie badly. Safety plays are mandatory at imp scoring, in doubled contracts and when you are in a good contract (which most people will not bid). Following are some common card combinations that lend themselves to safety plays. Some “safety plays” are just following good technique, such as leading low toward honors whenever possible. The “obligatory finesse” (see #23) is one such example. Many avoidance plays (preventing the dangerous hand from getting the lead) are made to safeguard the contract, but they are not, technically, safety plays.

- 1) If you and dummy have 8 cards in a suit with AK10 between you, it is usually best to play one top honor from the shorter side, and then finesse the 10 (unless the Jack or Queen pops). This protects against a 4-1 break with QJxx in one of opponents’ hands. Examples: K10xxx opposite Axx OR K10xx opposite Axxx OR AK10x opposite xxxx OR AK10xx opposite xxx OR K108xxx opposite A9 OR AK109xx opp xx.
- 2) If you and dummy have 9 cards in a suit with AQ in one hand (with or without the 10), the safety play (to try to limit your losers to *one*) is to cash the Ace and then lead low to the queen. For example: AQ10xx opposite xxxx or xxx opposite AQxxxx.
- 3) Similarly to above, if you have 8 cards in the suit with the AQ in one hand, and wish to limit your losers to no more than *two*, cash the Ace first and then lead toward the queen. For example: AQxx opposite xxxx OR AQxxx opposite xxx OR AQxxxx opposite xxx.
- 4) Note that with the above combinations, sometimes it is better to simply duck the first trick completely and then lead toward the AQ. If the KJ10x are behind the AQ(xxxx), by ducking the first trick and then leading up toward the AQ, you can discover that the person in front of the AQ had a singleton and simply take your Ace on the second round, and abandon the suit.
- 5) If you have 9 cards in a suit, including the AKQ (but NOT the jack or ten), and your objective is to lose no tricks in the suit, begin by playing the high honor that is by itself. For example: Axx opposite KQ9xxx, you should play the Ace first. That allows you to pick up J10xx in front of the KQ9xxx. With K8xx opposite AQ9xx, begin with the King. With KQ8xx opposite A9xx, begin with the Ace.
- 6) If you & dummy have 10 cards in a suit, missing the King and 10, with queen and jack in different hands, there is a safety play to try to avoid losing any tricks. Jxxxxx opposite AQ9x, begin with the Jack. Similarly, Jxxx opposite AQ9xxx, begin with the Jack. AJxxx opposite Q98xx, begin with the Queen. Notice that, in the first two examples, if the K10x is onside (in front of the AQxxx), you will win all the tricks if you begin with the Jack. If, however, you play low to the queen on the first round of the suit, you will lose a trick!
- 7) If you & dummy have 9 cards in a suit, missing the K109x, there is a safety play to hold your losers to one (maximum). In such cases, start with the honor that is by itself. Jxxx opposite AQ8xx, begin with the jack. J87xx opposite AQxx, begin with the jack. Qxx opposite AJ8xxx, begin with the queen.
- 8) Similarly, if you & dummy have 9 cards in a suit, missing the A109x, you begin by playing the honor that is by itself. With Q7543 opposite KJ82, play the Queen first. Now, you can pick up the A109x in front of the KJ82 with one loser. (If the A109x is on the other side, you cannot pick it up anyway.) Also, with KQ652 opposite J873, begin with the jack.
- 9) If you & dummy have 9 cards in a suit, missing the QJxx, and your objective is to limit your losers to one (guarding against the 4-0 break), you play low toward an honor combination and take the deep finesse (unless the queen or jack pops). With K10xx opposite A9xxx, lead low and put in the 9 or the 10 (depending on which hand you are leading from—unless the singleton Jack or Queen shows up). With A10x opposite K9xxxx, lead low toward the 10 first. (If it wins, you’ve held your losers to one. If it loses, cash the Ace. If both follow, the suit is breaking and you only lose one trick. If LHO is out of the suit, you have the K9 remaining over RHO’s Jx.

- 10) If you & dummy have 8 cards in a suit with the AK8 in one hand and the 10 in the other, your goal is to hold your losers to one (at most). Begin by playing the Ace. If the queen, jack or 9 appears on your left or if the Jack or queen appears on your right, you follow with a low card from your hand toward the 10xx. (This saves you from losing two tricks when West has a singleton queen, jack or nine and when East has a singleton queen or jack. If you just cash the Ace, then King, you lose two tricks in those situations. What you are giving up is the opportunity to drop a doubleton QJ in one hand. However, you are making sure you do not lose more than one trick in the suit.)
- 11) If you and dummy have 8 or 9 cards and are missing the Queen and 10 (with Ace and King in different hands), you can guard against losing more than one trick. Play a high honor (Ace or King) from the hand that contains the jack. On the next round, if your opponent plays low, insert the 9. Examples: K9x opposite AJxxx OR AJxx opposite K9xxx OR KJxx opposite A9xx.
- 12) If you & dummy have 10 cards and are missing the KJ9, (A10xx opposite Q87xxx), play low toward the Queen first. If the suit divides 2-1, you lose no more than one trick. If the suit is 3-0, you still lose no more than one trick (either Queen wins right away and Ace wins 2nd round OR Queen loses to King and next time you have Ace 10 over the opponent's Jack.
- 13) If four cards are out and you are missing the Jack, and the AKQ are divided between two hands, start with an honor from the side that has **two** honors. That way, you can finesse against the Jack—on either side—after one opponent shows out on the first round. For example, with KQ9xx opposite A10xx, start with the King or Queen.
- 14) If four cards are out and you are missing the Jack AND the ten, and your AKQ are divided between two hands, start with the honor that is by itself. You can pick up J10xx on ONE side, but NOT on the other. So, with A9xx opposite KQ8xx, start with the Ace.
- 15) If the opponents have 4 cards with K1087 and you have A9xxx opposite QJxx, start by playing low toward the Queen. If either opponent shows out the first round, you have limited your losers to one in the suit.
- 16) When you have 8 cards and are missing the King and Jack, the double finesse (finessing first for King and then for Jack) is best percentage line, unless you know from the bidding who has the King. A1098 opposite Q7xx. Play Queen toward the Ace. If it loses to King, next time finesse for Jack. With 9 cards, it is slightly superior to play the Ace first and then play low toward Queen (unless bidding indicates otherwise).
- 17) With AK8xx opposite 10xx, cash one high honor first. If Queen or Jack falls, play low toward the 10 next, to guard against J9xx (or Q9xx) behind the 10xx.
- 18) AQxx opposite xxxx, play Ace first, then low to the Queen (to guard against a singleton King).
- 19) AQxxx opposite 10xx, play Ace first and then low to the 10 (guards against singleton King or Jack and also holds losers to one when King is doubleton behind AQxxx).
- 20) If you have AKJx opposite xxx and only need 3 tricks for your contract, cash Ace and King and then lead low toward the Jack (guarding against singleton or doubleton queen behind the AK).
- 21) A10xxx opposite K9, your best shot is to finesse the 9 on the first round (guards against 2nd hand holding QJxx, Qx, Jx, QJ, and xxxx).
- 22) With QJxx opposite Kxx, proper play is to lead low toward QJxx. If Queen wins, return to other hand and lead low again. If Ax is in front of QJxx, you guarantee 3 tricks.
- 23) “Obligatory Finesse” occurs when you are missing AJ10 in a suit with a royal marriage divided. The plan is to lead low toward one honor. If it wins, lead low from the hand that won and DUCK COMPLETELY on the next round. If the Ace is doubleton, you will lose only one trick. Bidding may help you decide who is likely to have the Ace or who is likely to have a doubleton in the suit involved. For example, Kxxx opposite Qxxx. If you think LHO has Ace, lead low toward King and then lead low back toward Queen, but DUCK. If you think RHO has Ace, lead a low card from hand with Kxxx and play Queen. When that wins, lead a low card toward Kxx and DUCK. The doubleton Ace falls “on air.”