

The Opening Lead

The Laws of Duplicate Bridge specify a procedure for making the opening lead. This procedure and the reasons behind it can be a bit of a mystery to newer players. This document explains the correct procedure for making an opening lead and provides some explanation of why it is important, and what can happen if it is not followed.

How to make an opening lead

In the *normal course of events* the process of ending the auction and commencing play should be:

1. The auction ends (a bid or double or redouble followed by three passes).
2. Declarer's left hand opponent (LHO) has an opportunity to seek explanation of the auction.
3. Declarer's LHO selects a card for the opening lead and places it face down on the table.
4. Declarer's right hand opponent (RHO) and the declarer have an opportunity to seek explanation of the auction.
5. The opening lead is turned face up ('faced').
6. Dummy's hand is put on the table.

This process of making the lead face down is not a nicety or piece of etiquette, it is specified in the Laws of Contract Bridge.

Why make the lead face down?

The main reason this process is used is to reduce the risk of *unauthorised information* being communicated between the defenders before the opening lead is chosen. Unauthorised information is broadly information that a player may receive other than through the bidding and card play, and that they are not allowed to use to inform their decisions.

If the defender not on lead were to ask about a specific bid before the opening lead is made this could provide information to the defender on lead (eg their interest in a particular suit may be suggestive of a lead in that suit). This information could be unauthorised and use of the information in choosing the lead could be an infraction of the Laws.

Prior to making the opening lead face down the defender on lead can seek explanation of the auction. The defender not on lead, the declarer and the dummy should not seek explanations during this period as this could influence the defender on lead. Once the opening lead is made, the defender not on lead and the declarer (but not the dummy) get an opportunity to seek explanations of the auction. When there are no further questions the lead is faced. This is why the defender on lead will often ask "Ready?" or "Any questions?" and wait for acknowledgement from their partner before facing the lead.

An important thing to note is that the lead is actually made when the selected card is placed face down on the table, not when it is faced. Once made the lead can not be changed without the approval of the Director. If some irregularity comes to light during the explanations after the lead is made (eg failure to alert an artificial bid) that would have influenced the choice of lead, the Director should be called.

Opening lead out of turn

For simplicity the discussion above uses the term 'declarer'. The relevant Laws refer to 'presumed declarer'. This is because there are circumstances when the presumed declarer (ie 'the player who, for the side that made the final bid, first bid the denomination of the final bid') does not end up as the actual declarer in the play of the hand.

This can occur when an opening lead out of turn is faced, ie when presumed declarer's RHO faces an opening lead. If this occurs the Director should be called. One of the options that presumed declarer has in this situation is to spread their hand as dummy in which case their partner ('presumed dummy') becomes declarer.

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Following the correct process of making the opening lead face down and checking for any questions helps avoid a lead out of turn. During this process it is likely that the mistake will be realised and the lead can be withdrawn and made from the correct hand. Note that after the final pass either defender has the right to ask whether they are on lead (Law 20C1!).

Mistaken explanations

Another activity that may occur during this period of the game is correction of a mistaken explanation by declarer or dummy. If either declarer or dummy believe that their partner gave a mistaken explanation of a call during the auction they must call the Director and inform their opponents that, in their opinion, their partner's explanation was erroneous. This should be done after the last pass in the auction. Note that mistaken explanations can include failures to alert. In some cases the Director may allow the auction to be reopened if there is found to have been a mistaken explanation.

Note that if either *defender* believes that their partner gave a mistaken explanation they have the same obligation but must do it at the end of play, not at the end of the auction.

No player is allowed to indicate in any manner that they believe their partner has given a mistaken explanation while the auction is in progress.

In summary

The intricacies of the Laws of Contract Bridge can seem overwhelming. Fortunately the Director is there to help. The correct procedure for making an opening lead is straight forward and will help avoid problems.

If you are the defender on lead seek clarifications about the auction if needed, then select your lead and make it face down on the table. If partner and declarer have no questions face the lead.

If you are the defender not on lead or declarer, wait until the lead is made face down before seeking any clarifications.