

Play of Card Combinations by Bridge Declarer

Based on Commentary by Louis Watson, Marty Bergen, and Richard Pavlicek
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In Louis Watson's classic book, *The Play of the Hand at Bridge*, he explained principles of the play of the cards. Particularly relevant to this discussion, he argued that (a) "Whenever you play an honor combination that is not in continuous sequence...lead from the weak hand toward the strong hand" (p. 26); (b) "You can profitably finesse a card by leading it, only if you hold another card in sequence" (p. 26); and (c) "When you hold two top honors in a suit, it is always better to lay one down on the first round" (in case the missing honor happens to be a singleton) (p. 38).

The chart below draws from Watson's principles, a chart developed by Marty Bergen, and an article on "Card Combinations" by Richard Pavlicek.¹ The chart is organized by the number of cards frequently held by declarer/dummy in playing a contract and related bridge strategies for dealing with missing honors. Blue-colored superscripts link to **General Principles of Card Play** on Page 2.

# Cards Between Declarer/Dummy	Missing Honors	Example	Strategy
8	Q ¹	A ² KJ654 ³	Take the A, then finesse the J.
8	Q ²	AJ ^T K864 ²	Take the K. If Q doesn't fall, finesse the J.
8	K ³	432 AQJT ⁹	Finesse. Do not play for the drop.
8	K ⁴	AQ654 J3 ²	Finesse the Q. Do not play for the drop.
8	K ¹	QJ654 A3 ²	Cash the A, then finesse the Q.
8	Q-J ³	5432 AKT ⁹	Finesse the T hoping RHO holds the Q-J.
8	Q-J ³	AKT ⁹ 5 43 ⁶	Finesse the T. If it loses cash the A, K.
8	K-Q ³	543 ² AJT ⁹	Lead low toward the J. If it loses, finesse the T.
8	K-Q ⁴	AT ⁶ 5 J43 ²	Finesse the T.
8	K-J ³	AQ ⁹ 65 43 ²	Finesse the 9, then the Q.
8	K-J [*] Exception	AT ⁶ 5 Q43 ²	Cash the A, then finesse the Q.

¹ <https://www.rpbridge.net/4a00.htm>

8	K-J [*] Exception	A ^T 98 Q432	Finesse the T in T,9,8 sequence.
8	A-J ³	5432 K ^Q T9	Lead low toward the Q. If it loses, finesse the T.
9	Q ⁵	A32 KJ7654	Do not finesse. Play the A and K for the drop.
9	K ⁶	6543 A ^Q JT9	Finesse the Q. Do not play for the drop.
9	K-J ³	A ^Q T76 5432	Finesse the Q, if it loses to K, cash A next.
9	K-J ⁴	A ^T 765 Q432	Cash the A, then finesse the T, if possible.
9	K-Q ³	5432 A ^J T98	Finesse the J. If it loses, finesse the T.
9	A-J ³	65432 K ^Q T9	Finesse the Q. If it loses, play the K.
10	Q ²	AJ976 K ⁵ 432	Cash the K, lead toward A-J combination.
10	K ³	65432 A ^Q JT9	Finesse the Q. Do not play for the drop.
11	K ⁷	65432 A ^Q JT98	Play for the drop by playing the A.

[Superscripts](#) link to General Principles of Card Play. “x” = first lead. “x” = second lead. **Bold** text = card cashed. **Red** text = card finessed.

General Principles of Card Play

Declarer/dummy hold **8 cards**, missing Q or K, or 2-honors including Q-J, K-Q, K-J, A-J

1. Hold A, x... in one hand. Cash A, lead toward card finessed.
2. Hold two “top” honors split between hands. Cash one honor, lead toward card finessed.
3. Hold broken sequence of honors in one hand. Lead toward card finessed.
4. Hold honors split between hands (e.g., declarer one honor, dummy 2 honors). Lead toward card finessed in hand with commanding honors.

Declarer/dummy hold **9 cards**, missing Q or K, or 2-honors including K-J, K-Q, A-J

Apply principles **1, 2, 3, and 4.**

5. Hold A, K with 9 cards missing the Q. Play A, K for “drop.”
6. Hold A and a broken sequence of honors in one hand. Missing only the K, finesse the Q.

Declarer/dummy hold **10 cards**, missing either the Q or K.

Apply principles **2 and 3.**

Declarer/dummy hold **11 cards**, missing the K.

7. Hold A and broken sequence missing only the K. Play for the “drop” by leading A.

Other # of Cards Declarer/Dummy	Missing Honors	Example	Strategy
7	J*Exception	AQ <u>T</u> 4 K 3 <u>2</u>	Cash A then K. Finesse the T.
7	Q ²	AJ <u>5</u> 4 K 3 <u>2</u>	Cash the K. Finesse the J.
7	Q ³	AKJ <u>T</u> 5 3 <u>2</u>	Finesse the T.
7	K ⁴	AQJ <u>4</u> T3 <u>2</u>	Finesse the J.
7	K ⁸	AJT3 Q9 <u>2</u>	Lead the 9 against the K.
7	K ⁸	AJ983 Q <u>2</u>	Lead the Q against the K. If Q loses to K, cash A and J, hoping to drop T.
7	Q-J ³	AK <u>T</u> 94 3 <u>2</u>	Finesse the T. If it loses, finesse the 9.
7	Q-J ²	A <u>T</u> 94 K 3 <u>2</u>	Cash the K then finesse the T. If it loses, finesse 9.
7	K-Q ³	AJ <u>T</u> 5 43 <u>2</u>	Finesse the J, if it loses, finesse the T.
7	K-Q ³	AJ <u>9</u> 5 43 <u>2</u>	Finesse the 9, then the J. Hope W holds K-T or Q-T. Odds better than K-Q
7	K-J ³	AQ <u>T</u> 5 43 <u>2</u>	Finesse the T. If it loses to the J, finesse the Q.
7	K-J ¹	A 5 <u>4</u> QT3 <u>2</u>	Cash the A then lead 4. If no Honor played, finesse T. If T loses, finesse Q.

[Superscripts](#) link to General Principals of Card Play. “x” = first lead. “x” = second lead. **Bold** text = card cashed. **Red** text = card finessed.

General Principles of Card Play

Declarer/Dummy hold **7 cards**, missing J, Q or K, or Q-J, K-Q, K-J

1. Hold A, x... in one hand. Cash A, lead toward card finessed.
2. Hold two “top” honors split between hands. Cash one honor, lead toward card finessed.
3. Hold broken sequence of honors in one hand. Lead toward card finessed.
4. Hold honors split between hands (e.g., declarer one honor, dummy two honors). Lead toward card finessed in hand with commanding honors.
8. Hold honors split between hands. Lead honor that is in “sequence” with partner’s hand.

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