

**TEST YOUR
BRIDGE TECHNIQUE**

READING THE CARDS

David Bird • Tim Bourke

♠ 8 5 3
♥ A 8 7 5 2
♦ K 6
♣ Q 9 7

♠ K led

♠ Q 9
♥ K Q J 10 6
♦ A 7 4
♣ A 5 3

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READING THE CARDS



David Bird
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HOW TO READ THE CARDS

In this book we will look at the techniques available to you, as declarer, when you are trying to reconstruct the defenders' hands. If one or both of the defenders have spoken during the auction, you are off to a strong start. If one of the defenders made a preemptive bid, for example, you will have a fair idea of his hand before the opening lead is made. Just as often both opponents will have maintained a discreet silence. What then? The opening lead and the play to the first trick will tell you a fair amount about how one suit lies. As the tricks are played, with the defenders showing out and perhaps signaling, you will gradually build a complete picture of how the cards lie. The remainder of the play will then become far easier.

It's time for a deal. Try this one in four spades:

	♠ J 10 5 4 ♥ K Q 2 ♦ J 8 3 ♣ K 7 6											
♠ K ♥ J 7 4 ♦ A Q 9 5 2 ♣ Q J 10 3	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 40px; height: 40px; margin: auto;"> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">N</td><td></td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W</td><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">E</td></tr> <tr><td></td><td style="text-align: center;">S</td><td></td></tr> </table>		N		W		E		S			♠ 7 6 2 ♥ 10 8 5 3 ♦ K 7 ♣ 9 5 4 2
	N											
W		E										
	S											
	♠ A Q 9 8 3 ♥ A 9 6 ♦ 10 6 4 ♣ A 8											

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1♦	pass	pass	1♠
pass	2♦	pass	4♠
all pass			

West leads the ♣Q against your spade game. How will you play?

You have three seemingly unavoidable diamond losers and cannot afford a trump loser. West opened the bidding and is therefore a strong favorite to hold the ♠K. Unless the card happens to be a singleton, however, you cannot avoid losing a trick in the suit. Perhaps you should finesse East for the trump king. If the finesse wins, you will make the contract however the spades break. What do you think?

An important first step in reading the cards is to count how many points the defenders hold. There are 16 points missing on this deal. West needs only 11 or so to justify an opening bid, so there is room for East to hold the ♠K. Two more pieces of evidence are already at your disposal. Can you think what they are? The first is that East failed to respond at the one level and is therefore unlikely to hold as many as 6 points. The second is that West failed to lead a diamond. What do you make of that? If he held the ace and king of diamonds he would surely have preferred a diamond lead to a club lead. You can deduce that East must hold one of the top diamond honors and, since he failed to respond, he cannot hold the ♠K as well!

After winning the club lead, you play the ♠A. Much to the admiration of your partner, the singleton ♠K falls offside. You can now draw trumps, eliminate hearts and clubs and lead a low diamond from dummy. If East is asleep and fails to rise with the king on the first round, you will make an overtrick! East will have to give you a ruff-and-sluff when he wins the second round of diamonds.

Sometimes reading the cards requires some detective work.

	♠ 9 7 2 ♥ Q 8 7 ♦ K J 5 3 ♣ Q 9 2										
♠ A K Q 8 ♥ J 4 3 ♦ Q 10 2 ♣ A 6 3	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> <td style="text-align: center;">N</td> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">W</td> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> <td style="text-align: center;">E</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> <td style="text-align: center;">S</td> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> </tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ 10 6 5 ♥ 10 ♦ A 9 6 4 ♣ J 10 8 7 4
	N										
W		E									
	S										
	♠ J 4 3 ♥ A K 9 6 5 2 ♦ 8 7 ♣ K 5										

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
1NT	pass	pass	2♥
all pass			

West's opening bid of 1NT shows 15-17 points. You protect with 2♥ in the South seat and there is no further bidding. How will you play the contract when West cashes the three top spades and switches to a trump?

You draw trumps in three rounds, noting the fall of the jack from West. Everything depends on a successful guess in the diamond suit. What is the best bet? Should you lead to the king or to the jack?

The correct answer is: 'I have no idea... yet!' Before making the key play in diamonds, you need to find out which defender holds the ♣A. When you lead the ♣K from your hand West wins with the ace. Have you been keeping track of his points? He has shown up with 14 points outside the diamond suit. He cannot therefore hold the ♦A, which would give him a total of 18 points — too much for a 1NT opening.

You win West's club exit with the queen, return to your hand with a club ruff and lead a diamond towards the dummy. 'Jack, please,' you say and when East's ace appears the contract is yours.

Suppose East had turned up with the ♣A. West would need 5 points in the minors to give him the minimum 15 points needed for a 1NT opening. You would then have read him for the ♦A and played a diamond to the king instead.

When you have a two-way finesse against a queen (or a jack), you can bend the odds in your favor by obtaining a count on the hand. In other words, you should determine the shape of each defender's hand. That's what you need to do on this deal:

	♠ 10 7 2										
	♥ Q 10 8										
	♦ K 10 5										
	♣ A K 5 4										
♠ K Q 5 ♥ 6 4 2 ♦ Q 7 3 2 ♣ Q 9 6	<table border="1" style="border-collapse: collapse; width: 60px; height: 60px; margin: auto;"> <tr> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> <td style="text-align: center;">N</td> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center;">W</td> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> <td style="text-align: center;">E</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> <td style="text-align: center;">S</td> <td style="width: 20px;"></td> </tr> </table>		N		W		E		S		♠ A J 8 6 ♥ 7 3 ♦ 9 6 4 ♣ J 8 7 3
	N										
W		E									
	S										
	♠ 9 4 3										
	♥ A K J 9 5										
	♦ A J 8										
	♣ 10 2										

You reach game in hearts against silent opponents. West leads the king and queen of spades, followed by a low spade to East's jack. East switches to a trump. How will you play the contract?

Everything depends on your guess in diamonds. Do you have any idea yet which way to take the finesse? At the moment it appears to be a 50-50 guess. To improve your prospects you must try to obtain a complete count on the hand. If you can discover which defender holds the majority of the diamonds, he will then be the favorite to hold the ♦Q. Don't forget what you have already seen in the spade suit. Which defender do you think holds the outstanding spade? It is clearly East because West would not have led a low spade on the third round if he had started with ♠A-K-Q-5. (While it's true that East might have hidden this information by winning the third round with the ace, many defenders are careless in such matters.)

You continue with two rounds of trumps, both defenders following, and the two top clubs. When you ruff a club high, the queen drops from West. You return to dummy with a third round of trumps and complete your picture of the defenders' distribution by ruffing dummy's last club, West showing out.

Which defender started with more diamonds? If you have kept track of all the suits, you will know that West started with 3-3-4-3 shape and is therefore a 4-to-3 favorite to hold the diamond queen. You finesse through him and on this occasion all is well. He does indeed

hold the $\heartsuit Q$ and you make the contract. Here you obtained only a narrow edge in your favor. Sometimes you will hold eight cards in the critical suit and discover that the defenders' cards split 4-1. You will then have a guaranteed finesse against the queen on the second round.

Finally, let's look at how you can read the cards by observing the spot cards played by the defenders. In a notrump contract, the play in the suit the defense has led can be very revealing. How would you play 3NT here?

	\spadesuit 8 3 \heartsuit K J 8 3 \diamondsuit K 10 5 \clubsuit A 10 9 4					
\spadesuit Q J 7 5 2 \heartsuit 6 4 2 \diamondsuit A 7 4 \clubsuit K 6	<div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin: 0 auto;"> <table style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">N</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">W E</td></tr> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">S</td></tr> </table> </div>	N	W E	S		\spadesuit A 10 6 \heartsuit 10 9 7 \diamondsuit 9 6 2 \clubsuit 8 7 5 3
N						
W E						
S						
	\spadesuit K 9 4 \heartsuit A Q 5 \diamondsuit Q J 8 3 \clubsuit Q J 2					

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
pass	2 \clubsuit	pass	1NT
pass	3NT	all pass	2 \diamondsuit

West leads the $\spadesuit 5$ against 3NT. East wins with the $\spadesuit A$ and returns the $\spadesuit 10$. How will you play?

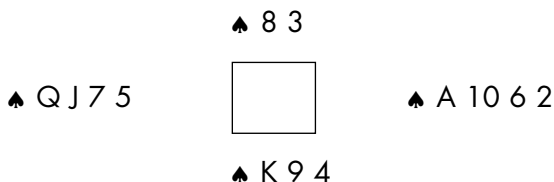
Since no switch will cause any damage, you should hold up the king on the second round. East continues with the $\spadesuit 6$, forcing out your $\spadesuit K$. How should you continue?

You need to read the lie of the spade suit. If spades are breaking 4-4 it will be safe to knock out the $\diamondsuit A$, giving you nine easy tricks. If instead spades are 5-3, it will be dangerous to play a diamond. You will go down when West holds the $\diamondsuit A$ and can claim two further spade tricks. A better chance is to take the club finesse. So, how do the spades lie?

Against most defenders it will be a trivial matter to read the lie of the spade suit. When the cards are as in the diagram, West will follow with the ♠2 on the second round, making it clear that he started with five spades. After winning the third spade, you will therefore finesse in clubs. You will make the contract when West has the ♣K or when East holds the ♦A.

Suppose that West is a little more cunning and follows with the ♠7 on the second round of spades and the ♠J on the third round. (He is hoping to convince you that he started with only four spades and that it will be safe for you to play a diamond.) What then? You still have a pretty big clue in the shape of East's ♠10 on the second round. If he began with ♠A-10-6-2, he would surely have made the standard return of the ♠2, his fourth-highest card. So, you should still take the club finesse rather than playing a diamond.

If East had returned the ♠2 on the second round, it would be reasonable to assume that the spades lay like this:

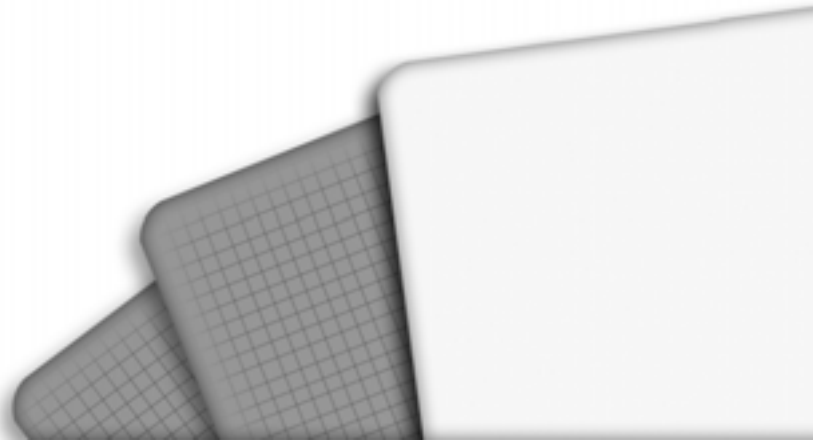


In that case you would play on diamonds instead of clubs, expecting to lose just one diamond and three spades.

Well, we've reached the end of this brief introductory session. The purpose was not so much to give a complete summary of the card-reading techniques available to declarer but to get you in the right mood for the problems that follow.

Are you ready for the challenge? No one is watching, so there's no need to feel nervous! If any of the problems defeat you initially, the solution overleaf will make it clear how the contract could have been made. Good luck. Gather your courage and... turn the page.

PROBLEMS



Problem 1

[To Solution](#)

♠ K led

♠ 8 5 3
♥ A 8 7 5 2
♦ K 6
♣ Q 9 7

♠ Q 9
♥ K Q J 10 6
♦ A 7 4
♣ A 5 3

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
pass	pass	pass	1♥
1♠	2♠*	pass	4♥
all pass			

West, who passed initially, leads the ♠K against your heart game. He continues with the ace and jack of spades, forcing you to ruff. How will you play from here?

Problem 2

[To Solution](#)

♥ 5 led

♠ 9 6 5 4
♥ 7 6 4
♦ J 10 5
♣ J 9 4

♠ A K Q J 10 3 2
♥ —
♦ A K 6
♣ A 7 6

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
		1♥	dbl
4♥	pass	pass	6♠
all pass			

With ten tricks in your hand, it is obvious (ahem!) to bid a small slam. West leads the ♥5 to East's ace. How will you play?

Problem 3

To Solution

♠ K Q 2
♥ J 7 6 4 3
♦ 7 4
♣ K J 5

♦ K led

♠ A 9 8 7 6 4
♥ A K
♦ A 6 2
♣ A 4

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1 ♠
4 ♦	4 ♠	pass	6 ♠
all pass			

West leads the ♦ K and East follows with the ♦ 3. How will you proceed?

Problem 4

To Solution

♠ 9 4 2
♥ A 5 4 2
♦ A 9 8 5 3
♣ 7

♣ Q led

♠ K 10 6
♥ K Q J 9 7 6
♦ Q J
♣ A K

WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
			1 ♥
1 ♠	4 ♣*	pass	4NT
pass	5 ♥*	pass	6 ♥
all pass			

You win with the ♣ A and play the king and queen of hearts, East throwing a club on the second round. When you lead a diamond honor, West covers with the king. How will you continue?

SOLUTION TO PROBLEM 1

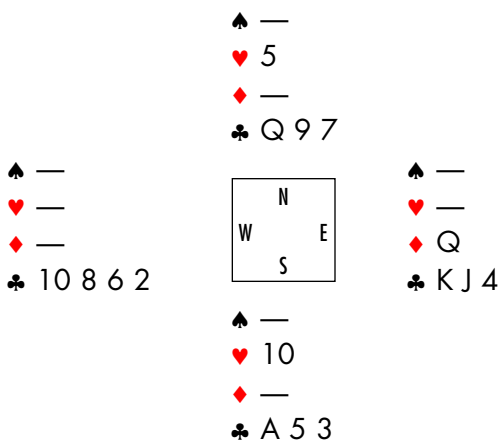
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WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
pass	pass	pass	1♥
1♠	2♠*	pass	4♥
all pass			

West, who passed initially, leads the ♠K against your heart game. He continues with the ace and jack of spades, forcing you to ruff. How will you play?

There are two possible losers in the club suit and you can afford to lose only one more trick. If West holds the ♣K you can restrict your club losers to one simply by leading towards the ♣Q. However, West would surely have opened the bidding if he held ♠A-K-J-x-x, the ♣K and a heart void. (We know several players who would have opened 1♠ on the cards that West actually held!). So, you can be almost certain that East holds the ♣K. What chance is there in that case?

You must aim for an elimination play, hoping to endplay East in clubs and thereby force him to lead away from the ♣K. You cash the king and ace of diamonds and ruff a diamond high, eliminating that suit. You then draw trumps in three rounds, ending in the South hand. These cards are still to be played:



You lead a low club from the South hand. West is likely to play the eight, six or two and you cover in the North hand, forcing East to win the trick. He must now lead a club away from his king or give you a ruff-and-sluff, so you make the contract. West would do no better by inserting the ♣10, of course, because you would cover with dummy's ♣Q. After winning with the ♣K, East would have to lead from his ♣J around to dummy's ♣9. Ten tricks once again.

If West had opened the bidding with 1♠ instead of passing, you would have read the cards differently. West would then have been a big favorite to hold the ♣K. You would have opted for that chance instead of the elimination play.

SOLUTION TO PROBLEM 2

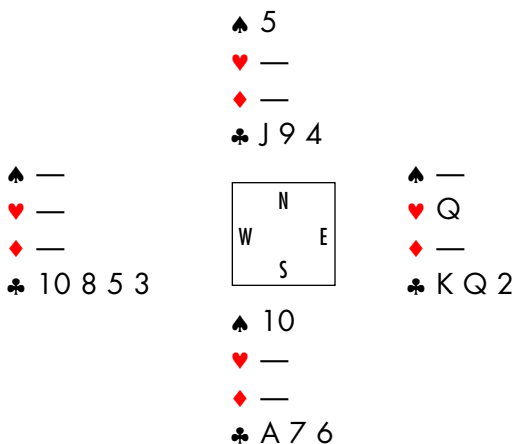
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WEST	NORTH	EAST	SOUTH
4♥	pass	1♥	dbl
all pass		pass	6♠

South had no reason whatsoever to expect North to cover two of his three losers. Bravely (or foolishly, you may think) he bid 6♠ nevertheless. How will you play the slam when West leads the ♥5 to East's ace?

You must take a successful diamond finesse, eliminate the heart suit and then exit with a low club from your hand, hoping to endplay one defender or the other. Since you need entries to dummy, you should ruff the first round of hearts with an honor. You then cross to the ♠9 and ruff another heart with an honor, eliminating that suit. You draw East's last trump and cross to the ♠6. Your next move is to run the ♦J. Whether or not East decides to cover (there is no point in him doing so), you play three rounds of diamonds, eliminating that suit.

After this competent start to the proceedings, you have reached this position:



You lead the ♣6 towards dummy and West plays the ♣3. What now? If the opponents had not bid, your best chance would be to play West for the king and queen of clubs, rising with the jack. (This assumes that West is a sound performer who will not give the game away by rising with an honor when this is certain to leave him endplayed.) Why would that be the best line? Because it would need only two cards to be well placed — the king and queen of clubs.

On the present deal, however, East has opened the bidding. The fact that he played the ace of hearts at Trick 1 suggests that West may hold the king. If West's hearts were headed by the king-queen he would have led an honor, so the hearts are most likely to be divided ♥K-x-x-x with West and ♥A-Q-x-x with East. East has also shown up with the ♦Q but he needs something good in clubs to give him an opening bid. You should therefore play East for the ♣K-Q. For an endplay to succeed, you will need West to hold the ♣10. Three cards will have to be well placed.

You finesse dummy's ♣9 and it fetches an honor. East may well attempt a mild deception by winning with the ♣K. He has to return a club, since a heart return would concede a ruff-and-sluff. You run his low club return to dummy's jack and the ambitious slam is made.

On a deal like this the card reading in hearts is no certainty because if East holds ♥A-K-x-x or ♥A-K-Q-x-x he might make a cost-nothing falsecard of the ♥A. It works out best, in the long run, to assume that the opponents have not false-carded.

TEST YOUR CARD READING!

This book is designed to accompany *Reading the Cards*, Book 10 in the *Bridge Technique* series.

It sometimes seems that expert players are able to see through the backs of the cards! Their finesses win more often, and they choose unerringly between alternative lines of play. There is a simple reason for this: they are adept at drawing the correct inferences about their opponents' hands, from the auction and the cards their opponents play to each trick. You can learn to do the same thing, if you are prepared to work a little.

The basic principles of card-reading are straightforward, but applying them is not always so easy. Rest assured that some serious challenges await you in these pages!



DAVID BIRD has written more than fifty previous books, including the award-winning *Bridge Technique* series (with Marc Smith). A regular contributor to many bridge magazines, he lives near Southampton, England.



TIM BOURKE is a world-renowned collector of interesting bridge hands, whose previous books include *Countdown to Winning Bridge* (with Marc Smith) and *Saints & Sinners* (with David Bird). He lives in Canberra, Australia.

