

When you first learn bridge you are inundated with rules, third hand high, second hand low, do not finesse against partner. None of these “rules” are a substitute for working it out for yourself. They are a starting point for your thinking processes. Here, I put forward a set of such rules. They are so often right that it needs a very good reason not to follow them. There is no “never” in bridge but you should ask yourself “Why?” before you do otherwise. Expert readers of this publication will have considered all of them already and possibly come up with a different view. Less experienced players should consider them carefully and discard them only when they are satisfied that they know better. If you are just starting out it will take a very long time to work them all out for yourself. Perhaps even carry a copy in your pocket. There are so many exceptions to second hand low and third hand high, that they are not included in this list at all.

1. If your partner opens or overcalls in a suit, lead it. Alfred Sheinwold said that there is only one reason for not leading your partner’s suit. If you don’t already know what it is, find out. This rule should really be rule 2, 3, 4 and 5 as well.
2. Never lead a singleton trump. Yes, Garozzo once led a singleton king of trumps, which was destined to win a trick had he not led it, but it was the only lead to defeat the slam contract. So perhaps modify the rule, but only if you are Garozzo. You don’t want to have to double a grand slam, holding Qxx in trumps, just so partner won’t lead one.
3. Never lead a trump. This is not quite so absolute as rule 2, but almost. So often a vital tempo is wasted just because your partner, not you, won’t make an aggressive lead. You need a reason for leading a trump and “unattractive” leads in the other suits is a very weak one.
4. Do lead aggressively, not only against no trump contracts. The more you hold in a suit, the less you need from partner to set up tricks. If you persist in leading “safely” you will find, too often, that the suit you establish is declarer’s.
5. Do lead the unbid suit. The opponents usually haven’t bid it, or no trump, for a reason, they don’t have it. Get your winners cashed while you can.
6. Do not under-lead an ace against a suit contract at trick one. This rule can be broken if the king is likely to be in dummy and if partner will co-operate by playing the queen if dummy’s king is not played. These are big ifs.
7. Assume partner does not hold the ace when playing third in hand to partner’s lead of a small card against a suit contract. Holding KJx, for example, insert the jack, if it does not force the ace you know that you will have to look elsewhere for tricks and that that suit will not provide an entry to partner’s hand. But consider the bidding, don’t woodenly withhold your queen if this is one of those hands where partner might just have broken rule 6.
8. When splitting honours, as second player to a trick, play the top of touching honours. This style is more informative than playing the low one, as you do in third position. It helps a lot if partner has the same understanding. If declarer’s ace captures partner’s queen, you know who has the king, and it is not partner. You do know partner holds the jack.
9. Think ahead, especially in the early stages. Often it is right to lead a high honour with length and strength in partner’s suit. You may be able to continue with the suit, forcing declarer if there is a high honour and two or three spot cards in dummy. You may hold the trick, and be able to make a useful switch. The same is true when you win the trick when partner has led.

Don't just woodenly return the suit, consider what problems partner may face after winning the next trick. Sometimes you can keep the lead by playing another high card in the suit, at other times it is vital to switch immediately. First satisfy yourself that if you have a second trick in partner's suit, it will not run away.

10. Do not raise a second suit without four cards. Partner must be able to rely on four-card support. The common situation is this, partner has opened with a good running suit, a four-four trump fit combined with this may make a slam a good thing. With only three-card support, if partner is forced to ruff early the hand will likely fall to pieces. Keep in mind, as well, that partner's bid in a second suit will sometimes be made on three-cards, for a number of good reasons.
11. With a bad suit in a minimum hand, do not open in third seat, or overcall opposite a passed partner. You are likely to be outbid and partner's lead of your suit will help only the opponents. It is often better to open a short good suit than a longer weak one. In first or second seat, the price of passing an opening bid, just because your suit is bad, is too high to pay.
12. Do mix up your pre-empts in third seat. Pre-empt on a good suit as high as you dare. The upper limit of hand strength should be, a hand that is very unlikely to make game opposite a passed hand. (Just a little commercial here, for 10 point openers. If your partner insists on passing 12 counts, you have no hope of getting this right. More horrors flow from passing good hands than from any other single action, here inaction, in bridge. It is closely followed by its ugly sister, overcalling after passing.)
13. Do play (good) five-card suit weak two bids, good suits not good hands. Your opponents cannot possibly bid accurately after you have stolen two rounds of bidding from them. There is a downside risk but it is a big winner in the long term. As long as 9 points is your agreed absolute maximum your partner will get it right when the hand belongs to you. In third seat, see rule 12. Penalty doubles of overcalls is unproductive to put it mildly. Double must show a game going hand of any shape.
14. Do not rebid with a minimum flat hand opposite a passed partner. Partner, reasonably, will assume you are proud of your hand and treat this as a game try.
15. Do not push for game on flat hands. If your one of a major response is raised, even a flat 12 points may not be enough. You need the full 25 points to make game with flat opposite flat and only a 4-4 or 4-3 trump fit.
16. Do not over-estimate the value of an eight-card trump fit, but with bigger fits, do. There is less downside to going overboard with a big fit, quite often your opponents have a contract of their own.
17. Do raise your partner's one over one response with three-cards, but only with the right sort of hand. A singleton or a small doubleton somewhere is the right hand, as are most hands containing two high honours in partner's suit. Players of that abomination, transfer-to-a-major replies to 1C are obliged to show three-card support, always.
18. Do not by pass a diamond suit to show a four-card major. Players of the treatment referred to in rule 17, above, are obliged to do so. Bid your hand, not your majors, is the simple rule.
19. Do not be talked into playing 2C check back or new minor forcing. Like the treatment referred to in rules 17 and 18, above, these conventions put partner into the robot mode at a level where his contribution to partnership judgment is at its most important. These bids are of immense value in their natural sense.

20. Do raise your partner's opening of one-of-a-major with three cards and the requisite strength for a raise to two. If you do not, partner will simply not believe that you have three-card support and devalue accordingly. The three-card support is the best feature of your hand, show it!
21. Stretch to find a reply to one of a suit with any ace and nothing else. Aces are valuable and it is usually right.
22. Do give count, not "attitude," to partner's lead. This must be by agreement but if have to play hi-lo holding Qxx, partner has no chance of working things out. Surely you want your partner to think, not slavishly follow your suggestion. Even if you refuse, generally, to depart from giving attitude you must give count when partner leads an ace or a king against a suit slam. It is so often vital that partner knows if a second round will be ruffed.
23. Do not open an off-shape 1NT or 2NT. NT is an ugly starting point for accurate bidding at any time but if your hand might be a 5422 or 6322 shape, or even 5332 with five cards in a major, your partner's task is magnified. Good suit contracts will go begging, bad NT contracts will fail.
24. Never rebid 3NT after a 2C opening and a 2D reply, even at the risk of being passed out in 2NT when partner holds zero. Agree to play 2NT here as forcing, the upside exceeds the downside many-fold. To bid accurately facing a 2NT (effectively) opening bid is hard, facing 3NT it is impossible.