

TRICK ONE THINKING



When you are declaring a bridge hand, by far and away the most important point of the deal occurs at Trick One. There's an old adage, with a good deal of truth to it, that more contracts are lost at Trick One than at any other time.

So.... if you want to be a successful declarer, you MUST stop at Trick One. Slow down a bit. Take stock and make a plan – *before* you begin to play.

In order to make a plan, you have to know what to think *about*. And that can be extremely confusing for an inexperienced player. Fortunately, there's an easy-to-remember formula for doing exactly that. It's a simple little acronym to help you work your way through the confusion of counting and constructing, and it simplifies the process of planning a line of play. I call it RCCPCP. More on this later.

If you want to make more contracts, there are several things you need to do *before* you call the first card from dummy. Not all of them will come easily to you at first. It takes practice. For example, you need to know how many tricks you have, and how many losers. You need to know how many tricks the opponents may be able to cash if you let them gain the lead. And, you need to develop a plan for getting the tricks you need to make your contract. So you may need to know which finesses are likely to succeed. Or, you may need to decide if you will need to develop a long suit, or ruff some losers in the dummy. As you become a better player, you'll sometimes need to know if there is a possible endplay or squeeze that will help you make your contract.

In order to do all this you need to know something about the unseen hands, so you'll need to start building a picture of the deal. That newspaper diagram we're all familiar with - you may be surprised at how easy it is to start building it in your head. And when you are able to do it successfully, it's pretty exciting – it's like playing a hand double dummy – looking at the hand record before you play the hand! We'd all be better declarers if we could do that!

HOW CAN I DO ALL THAT?!

Does it sound like a lot of work? Or impossible to do? I have good news...

Some of this work will already be done instinctively: as the bidding progresses, you have begun to form a picture even if you don't know it. You already know quite a bit about the deal, but you may not be aware of it yet. Do you think it's all a mystery? Try it out.

For example, let's say that your hand is

KQxx AKxx xx Qxx.

Your partner opens 1S and you already have a pretty good picture of one of the four suits. You mentally register the fact that the opponents have at most four spades between them – you realize, without consciously thinking of it, that somebody is probably short in spades.

Next, RHO overcalls 3C. Again you register the fact that your partner and LHO probably have at most 3 clubs between them – one of them has a singleton (probably partner: since he's known to hold 5+ spades, he has fewer empty spaces for clubs). And you have subconsciously placed your RHO with the spade shortness, since you now know that 6 or 7 of his cards are clubs. Your mental picture now tells you that LHO will have a lot of red cards (since he's pretty short in both black suits), and that partner will have quite a few as well. So... you know a whole lot about the deal, and there have been only two bids!! Here's your rough picture:

SSSSS } 11+ hcp (probably 11-14)

HHHH ?

DDD?

C

SSS }app 5-8 hcp

HHH ?

DDDDD ?

CC

S } app 3-8 hcp

HH ?

DDD ?

CCCCCCC

KQxx

AKxx

Ax

Qxx

You aren't quite sure about who has the singleton club yet, and you will probably be off a bit about the red suit distribution. But you're going to be pretty close. As the bidding progresses you'll find that you know more and more, and when dummy comes down you will try to complete the picture.



Seeing the picture of the four hands is important but it's not the only thing you need to do at Trick One. You have to make a plan for how you're going to play the hand. In order to make the plan you have to know your goals. For many years I used an acronym to help me:

RCCPCP

It was about 40 years ago, when I was a struggling declarer in the all night IMP game at the Beverly Bridge Club New York City, that I developed a little step sequence of the important things to think about at trick one. RCCPCP. (My seven-year-old daughter dubbed it “Red Cows Can Play and Count Points!”) I don’t use it anymore – it’s all second nature now. But I needed it for several years, in order to get myself focused and thinking about the right things. RCCPCP stands for:

Review
Count
Construct
Plan
Check
Play

Review: Review the bidding, and check to see if there is anything about the opponents bidding that you might need to ask about. If there were any alerts find out what they mean (if you haven’t done so already). If there are inferences available from those alerts and you’re uncertain about them, ASK. Don’t be shy about it. You have a right, and a responsibility, to know what’s going on.

Count:

- Count the high-card points. Figure out how many are left for the opponents, and how they are likely to be distributed.
- Count your tricks. Count top winners. Look for places where you can develop extra winners if you need them.
- Count your losers
- Count the tricks the opponents can take if you let them in

Construct the Hands. Form a mental picture of the unseen hands. Figure out the shape of their hands as well as you can, and try to place the missing high-card points. Look for any inferences you can draw from the opening lead, or their failure to lead something else, and from their bidding as well as their failure to bid.

Plan: Make a plan for the play. Know your goal, and be sure that the goal and the plan are realistic based upon your construction of the hands.

Check: Check your thinking. Be sure you haven't missed anything.

PLAY: 😊

If you can train yourself to do this on every hand you play, your declarer play will improve overnight. It will take time, sometimes more time than you want to spend at trick one – but try to force yourself to begin this process. You may miss out on some steps, especially at first.

If you're a fairly new player, you may want to start with one of the steps and build on it later. The most important part of the process is to count winners. So just stop and think about that one bit – and know where your tricks are coming from before you play to trick one. If you don't have enough for your contract, figure out what you can do to develop the ones you need.

Once you are proficient at this you'll see that you need to expand on the counting step – count losers too. And points.

When the counting comes easily to you, then you can start constructing the opponents' hands at trick one. (You'll need to go back to step one and review the bidding, and perhaps ask a question or two of the opponents.) If you find it too difficult to construct their hands at first (you probably will), then just start off with one suit. Your long suit is a good place to begin. Count how many cards you are missing in the suit, and try to figure out how they are likely to be distributed in the opponents' hands. Then, as the hand develops, take note of your accuracy. Were you right? If not, could you have known more? Or was it just a guess?

When one suit becomes instinctive, move on to two suits, etc. And then, when that's easy for you to do, you'll find that you can easily begin making a plan and checking your thinking before you play. The reason it will be easy is that you will now have a fairly complete picture of the unseen hands in your head. You'll know a lot more about what path to take to make your contract. It's a lot easier to plan a journey when you have a roadmap!

DEFENDING AT TRICK ONE.

When you are the defending side it's not so different from declaring. You can, and should, go through the exact same process. RCCPCP.

Review the bidding

Count. Count the points, count your tricks and declarer's tricks as well. Take note of how many losers declarer has. And take note of how many tricks you need, or may have available.

Form a picture of the unseen hands (**Construct**),

Plan.

- Set a goal. - Determine whether you have to beat the contract or just hold the overtricks. Try to determine what your side could make. For example, perhaps you will see that you need to beat the contract three tricks in order to make up for the game you missed.
- Figure out what you may have to do in order to beat the contract.
- Take note of what information you may need that you don't have yet.
- Consider what information you may need to give your partner in order to help him do the right thing.
- Decide what card you're going to play in each suit that declarer may tackle so that you are prepared and don't give your hand away.

- If you're an experienced player you will want to think about a few more things at trick one:
 - **Is there anything I need to do fast** (for example, duck an Ace or a King in tempo)? It's easy to duck, but what if you're wrong and you need to win the trick. You'd better be prepared. You can't do this without a picture, and a plan.
 - **Is there anything deceptive I need to do?** Do I need to lie? Give a phony suit-preference signal? Underlead an Ace? Win a trick with an unnecessarily high card? Hide some high-card points from declarer? Lead a deceptive honor such as J from QJx.
 - **Is there anything I need to guard against?** An endplay? A squeeze?

Then **Check** your thinking before you **Play** – make sure you didn't miss anything.

It will take some time to train yourself to do all this on every deal. Be patient with yourself – it won't come to you overnight. But be persistent with it - in time it will become second nature to you – you won't even have to think about it – you'll just know what to do.