

FINESSING - DO YOU FEEL LUCKY?

A finesse is an attempt by Declarer (usually) to make an extra trick by leading up to an honour when Defence has a higher honour. You usually have a 50% chance of success - but may get better odds by waiting, analysing bidding, and watching play.

Defenders should be aware of these tactics!

SIMPLEST FINESSE: Lead x up to Kx in dummy; if West doesn't play the Ace, play your King

TYPICAL FINESSE: Lead x up to AQ in dummy, play the Q unless West plays the King

SPLIT FINESSE: Lead Q up to Ax in dummy from QJ or (ideally) QJT - if West plays the King, play the Ace in dummy making your J and T winners. If you want to encourage Defenders to duck lead the bottom of your sequence. Sneaky.

BAD FINESSE: Do not lead Q from Qxx up to Axx in dummy; West should play the King, you play the Ace, making the Defender's J and T winners. Bad idea! In this situation, play low towards your Q; you have a 50% chance of making it

FREE FINESSE: If you can get Defence to lead up to your AQ (in dummy or hand), you will make both tricks with zero risk. Give Defence every opportunity to make this kind of mistake! Easier if AQ is hidden in hand. Use suit elimination and a throw-in to force the lead. (Ask me.)

RUFFING FINESSE: Lead a K towards a void, ruff it if Defender covers it, otherwise discard

FAKE FINESSE: Lead Q from QJT in dummy towards a bare Ace in hand, East does not know you will have to play the Ace, so might (should) cover it with their King. If they don't, you still have to play the Ace, but you haven't lost much. This works a lot of the time! Sneaky.

DON'T FINESSE:

* If drawing trumps when Defence might get a ruff when it loses

* On the first round if you have a spare top honour (eg AKJ), play it first if you can - the Queen might drop or a defender might be void - making the finesse 0% or 100%

* If you might lose control when it loses - especially in NT

* If the odds are bad - see THE DROP

NEVER, NEVER, NEVER lead the Q from Qxxx up to Axx in dummy thinking it's a finesse; with good defence it will always fail

THE DROP

If Defence has only a few cards in a suit, it may be better to play for drop. It might also be obvious from the bidding (or counting points in play) that the finesse is bad, so you might as well play for the drop:

* Holding AQ, finesse the King if Defence has 3 or more cards

* Holding AKJ, finesse the Queen if Defence has 5 or more cards - but play for drop on round 1

* Holding AKQT, finesse the Jack if Defence has 7 or more cards - but play for drop on rounds 1 and 2

DUCKS

Sometimes Defence will lead away from Axx, especially on an opening lead. (This is OK in NT but risky in a suit contract, especially a game or slam, as Declarer might have a singleton K.) If you've got Kx in Dummy, you probably need to take that finesse right away - unless you've got Qx in hand.

A finesse might not work the second time - Defence may duck (refuse a finesse on the first round) especially in NT, to try to confuse you or deny you entries.

FINESSING IN DEFENCE

Is a lot harder, as you can't see partner's cards, only infer them. Happens naturally if you can lead through Declarer when there are no honours in Dummy, or (more speculatively) when there are honours in Dummy (say Kxx) and you lead through Dummy hoping partner might have honours (say AQx). Leading Q from QJT through Dummy holding Xxx should be good too - not much to lose!

In general, lead through strength not up to it, lead the top of a sequence like JT9, and you'll get a few finesses in Defence too.

AND FINALLY

Delay finessing until you have to; Defence may give you a free finesse or clues to help you locate those missing honours.