

All* about finessing

(*not really)

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Book recommendation: “The Play of the Hand at Bridge” by Louis H. Watson (originally published 1934; updated and with a new introduction by Sam Fry, 1958). Available from Amazon.

Historical note: Almost all of the card-play techniques and principles in modern bridge were invented by whist players in the 19th century, before bridge was invented. Whist was a trick-taking partnership game but there was no bidding. The cards were dealt out and the final card was turned up to reveal the trump suit. Each pair then tried to take as many tricks as they could and (obviously) deny as many tricks as possible to the opposing pair. There was no declarer or dummy. To be a good whist player you had to understand the best strategies for playing the cards, communicate with your partner by (legal!) signaling, and make inferences about the cards held by the opponents. If you played your cards blindly and took no notice of what was going on at the table, you were a **bumblepuppy!**

The moral of the story: For newer bridge players, it’s relatively easy to learn bidding systems – there are rules that you and your partner agree on and memorization and practice will lead to success. Playing the cards, especially on defense, is harder, because it requires you to infer what your opponents hold and make decisions based on the most probable layouts. **If you want to improve your bridge play, learn how to play the cards!** If you can consistently pick up an extra trick or two, you will come out ahead.

Finessing is the first basic technique most of us learn, and it’s easy to understand. But Watson has almost three chapters on different card layouts and the appropriate finessing strategies.

Basic example:

Axx

Qxx

Play the queen from your hand; if W plays low, let it ride; if W puts in the K, win with the A.

Is this a good thing to try? **It depends on the x’s!**

AT4

QJ3

You try the finesse and it works; then come back to hand and do it again. If W has K and two small, you can take all three tricks in this suit.

If E has the K, then you will lose a trick – but so will everyone else! It’s not a loss, in duplicate strategy, because you still tried to get as many tricks from your cards as possible.

But:

A93

Q84

You could try the finesse again. But if W puts in the K and you win with the A, now what? The opponents have all the top cards in the suit, and you have spent your two honors winning one trick. Not good!

Keep in mind that when you finesse, you are not simply trying to capture the opponents' K – you are trying to get additional tricks from your other cards. This is called **promotion!** In the first example, once the K has come out (whether you or the opponents win the trick), your other high cards become good – the J and T. In the second example, you make the opponents' cards good instead. In this case, the better strategy is to play low from the board toward your hand. If E has the K but plays low, your Q will win and you still have the A. If E has the K and plays it, you lose the trick but your Q and A are now good.

If W has the K, it will capture your Q – but you still have the A and get one trick out of your combination. The difference between this situation and the finesse is that although you've only won one trick with your A and Q, in the second strategy (playing low from the board toward the Q), eight cards in the suit have been played rather than four – which increases the chance that your 9 or 8 might take a trick.

When you have a really poor holding:

A32

Q54

your best strategy is to leave the suit alone and hope one of your opponents starts it. Whether E or W leads, play low from second hand and hope the K comes out.

Another example:

A93

JT4

You're missing the KQ, but you have the T9. Play the J from hand and if W covers with the K or Q, win with the A. Now the opponents have the top honor, but you have the T9, so can get one more trick out of your holding. If you play the J and W plays low, let it ride. You'll most likely lose the trick but you can come back to your hand and try again.

Which direction?

AJ7

KT4

Who has the Q? Unless you can make an inference from bidding or from the opponents' play, it's a 50-50 guess so you can try the finesse in either direction. And no matter who has the Q, you hold the JT so

will always be left with two winners. (In this situation an important consideration is, assuming the finesse loses, would you prefer E or W to be on lead?)

But:

- | | | | |
|----|-----|----|-----|
| 1. | AJ2 | 2. | AJT |
| | K75 | | K75 |

These two cases are not equivalent! It's a 50-50 guess which side the Q is on.

Case 1: if you play low from hand toward the J, and it wins, then you can pick up three tricks in the suit. If you play low toward the J and it loses to East's Q, you still have the A and K, so get two tricks. But if you play the J from dummy toward the K, then if E covers with the Q and you win with the K, you only get two tricks; and if W has the Q you still only get two. So playing from hand toward the J is the better option.

Case 2: play low from hand toward the J, and if it holds you win 3 tricks in the suit; if it loses you get two. What if you play J from board toward the K? Now, if E covers with the Q, you win with the K and still have the top two cards – A and T. If E plays low and West wins with the Q, you also get two tricks, because you have the A and K left.

If you're one of the defenders: Look at dummy and be prepared to play smoothly when declarer attempts a finesse. In case 1 above, if E holds QTx in the suit and the J is played from dummy, it's right to cover with the Q, because that promotes your T. If W holds Q and two small, it's not so clear – declarer might have KT in hand, so covering the J with the Q promotes then T – bad for your side! But if your partner has the T, it's promoted and that's good for your side.

Final point for the defense: you're allowed to pause and think before you play a card – but declarer is entitled to take inferences from any delay. You're not allowed to pause and think when there's nothing to think about – e.g. declarer plays toward AQx on the board and you have two small. It's illegal to hesitate for a long time in order to fool declarer into thinking you have the K, so he plays the Q and loses to partner's K.