

Bridge Maxims Related to Finesses

“5,6,7,8!” — said when opponents hold 5 in a suit: odds of a 3/2 split are 67.8%.

“Eight Ever, Nine Never” — said when the Q is among the 5 or 4 you lack.

If you have 8 of the suit between the partnership, **always** try the finesse. The odds of a 3/2 split are 67.8, but the Q is likelier to be with the 3 than with the 2; factor these odds with 50-50 LHO v. RHO finesse odds.

If you have 9, **never** finesse, but hope the Q falls in your first two leads, A and K. The odds of a 2/2 split are only 40.7%, but factor in the 50-50 LHO v. RHO finesse odds.

Card Split Percentages

2 —	1/1=52%	2/0=48%			
3 —	2/1=78%	3/0=22%			
4 —	3/1=49.7%	2/2=40.7%	4/0=9.6%		
5 —	3/2=67.8%	4/1=28.3%	5/0=3.9%		
6 —	4/2=48.5%	3/3=35.5%	5/1=14.5%	6/0=1.5%	
7 —	4/3=62.2%	5/2=30.5%	6/1=6.8%	7/0=.5%	

“Cover an Honor With an Honor” — said of defending against *The Trap Finesse*.

You lose your honor, but you take two of theirs with your one. If you or partner have the 10, it will become high. (Not all finessers are wise.)

Do not cover, however, if you have several low cards to protect your honor. Keep ducking, and eventually Declarer will run out of leads in that suit, and your honor will still be in your hand, and might still be a taker.

“Second Hand Low” — said almost always in any kind of defense.

Yes, if there is an obvious finesse being maneuvered and you as LHO hold the sought honor, you will lose. But not always is the finesser absolutely sure he/she will indeed go forward with the finesse. If you play low, the finesser in doubt might decide **not** to try the finesse. If you go up with your honor, you remove all doubt.

“Save it for an End Play” — said of *The Two-Way Finesse*

A *Two-Way Finesse* is when you can finesse in either direction from your hand to Dummy, e.g., when you hold A10x and Dummy holds KJx.

You don't know whether to finesse LHO or RHO for the Q, and there has been no clue in the bidding or play of the hand. So, strip all players down to their last four cards, your three in each hand above and one loser. Your opponents both have three cards in this suit as well as a winner for your loser.

If you give up the lead now, before trying the finesse in either direction, you have made a successful *End Play*. The opponent who takes the trick, either LHO or RHO has no other suit to lead and must lead straight into your finesse. Either way, their Q is a goner.

♥♥ Finesses ♦♦

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The first bridge stratagem many beginners learn—often feeling as grown up and smug as the name itself implies—is the *finesse*: dictionary definition, an adroit or evasive maneuver. Since the odds of a finesse working are only 50-50, however, it might as aptly be called the *gauche*.

Personally I don't like a device that works only half the time; so I try to find other, safer ways to achieve extra tricks, for example, setting up long suits and paying them off by discarding loser(s). Still, sometimes the best device possible to nab an extra trick is the *finesse*.

Whole books have been written about the *finesse*—or more properly *finesses* since there are so many different kinds that Wikipedia accords a plethora of names: *Direct, Indirect, Deep, Double, Triple, Marked, Two-Way, Ruffing Finesse*, etc. Some of those names make sense, and you can figure them out; some not.

The Sneak Finesse

Take the example of the AQ *tenace*, which is what such a gap between cards is called... if you play the A first and later the Q, you will lose the Q practically 100% of the time because the opponent's K is not going to lie idle, especially when the Q is in Dummy where everyone can see her. If, however, you lead low from your hand toward the AQ *tenace*, if the K lies *onside* (held by your LHO, Left-Hand-Opponent) you can sneak that Q *past*—literally *past (after)*—that K. If LHO *ducks* with a low card, you play your Q and win the trick, making a successful finesse; if LHO goes up with the K, you capture it with the A, making the Q high.

The 50-50 proposition comes in, however, because that K could just as easily be held by your RHO—*offside*—ensuring failure of the finesse. Learn to pay attention to the bidding. If LHO bids and RHO passes, LHO is *marked* with most of the missing high cards, likely including the honor you hope to sneak past.

The exact same finesse—called by Wikipedia *Direct Finesse* (I don't know why, and therefore I feel bold to call it by my own more memorable monicker *The Sneak Finesse*)—works the same way as with all other tenaces: KJ, Q10, J9, etc.

AQJ? Now here you have a dandy opportunity for what I call *The Repeat Sneak*. If a finesse works once, the same finesse will work again.

TRANSPORTATION

The major key to successful finessing is to keep—or to make—*entries* in both hands, takers that allow you to transport the lead back and forth to make second and third finesses. Take a look at the Deal-out-of-a-Dream below and imagine making a Grand Slam with only 27 HCP if all four Ks are *onside*. You merely oil your merry way back and forth between hands much to the chagrin of your hapless opponents.

Dummy: ♠AQJ ♥xxxx ♦AQJ ♣xxx
 You: ♠xxx ♥AQJx ♦xxx ♣AQJ

The Trap Finesse

Another kind of finesse—also called by Wikipedia *Direct Finesse* (and I still don't know why since the mechanism is different)—is what I call *The Trap Finesse* for the obvious reason that the missing honor is literally trapped between your honors in both hands.

Take a look at another Deal-out-of-a-Dream below and figure out for yourself how it works and how you must maneuver your transportation. Again, what fun for you and nightmare for your opponents if the missing honors are *onside*, each with 50-50 odds.

Dummy: ♠Axx ♥J10xx ♦AQx ♣J10x
 You: ♠QJ10 ♥AQxx ♦J10x ♣AKx

The secret of *The Trap Finesse*? Lead high from the hand with the lower honors, intending to play low in your other hand if LHO *ducks*. If LHO does cover, then you go up with your higher honor, making your lower honors good.

An added advantage of *The Trap Finesse* is that it keeps the lead in your original hand until the trapped honor does fall.

Note: most players by the time they are intermediates have learned the bridge dictum, “Cover an Honor With an Honor,” which means, “Make them pay for their *Trap Finesse*: two of their honors to capture one of yours.” Sometimes this means making a 10 good eventually in your own or partner's hand.

But also note it is the unwise finesser who tries *The Trap Finesse* without enough honors to make them all good. What is the point of capturing LHO's K if you make their 10 good?

The Kafkaesque Finesse

Another kind of finesse is one I guess I invented since I can't find it in my research. I feel free, therefore, to call it *The Kafkaesque Finesse* since it is rather tortured, also since it occurred to my rather tortured mind while I lay awake in Prague fretting about the next bridge lesson I was to teach and—having tread so many of the same cobblestones as Franz Kafka—I was

feeling a rather tortured kinship with that dark brain. *The Kafkaesque Finesse* is essentially an *Orphan Finesse*. I shall explain:

Well... yes... (ahem) Wikipedia does include a similar kind of finesse situation which they call *Indirect Finesse* (again I don't know why). Wikipedia's *Indirect Finesse*, however, is simpler than my *Kafkaesque Finesse*, their example the Kx in one hand and xx in the other; naturally you lead low toward the K in hopes the A is *onside*. If so and if LHO goes up with it, your K will be good for a later trick. Or if LHO does *not* go up with the A, you go up with the K and win the current trick.

In the case of *The Kafkaesque Finesse*, you hold Qx(x) in one hand—an *Orphan Queen* you see, no king for protection—and Ax(x) in the other, three of the suit opposite two. I have so often seen beginners—with the lesson of *The Trap Finesse* newly in their portfolios—lead the Q toward the A, evidently planning to finesse. But without the J also in either hand, this is a 100% losing stratagem. If RHO covers, you must go up with your A, using two honors to capture one and leaving yourself with two losers in the suit. If RHO does not cover, clearly the K is held by LHO who captures the *Orphan Queen*, leaving you still two losers in the suit. 100% failure.

However, if again—as with all other finesse techniques—you lead low toward the Q, and the K is indeed *onside*, both A and Q will be takers at a later trick, and you will lose only one trick in the suit. Again, it is a 50-50 chance, but that is way better than a 0-100 chance otherwise.

Kafkaesque? Well, I think so. Among his friends, Franz was known for a sense of humor, in itself rather Kafkaesque, it seems to me.