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Novice Nook

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Principles of Analytical Efficiency

**Quote of the Month:** *Always check, it might be mate.*

Every chess player understands that the aphorism “always check, it might be mate” is untrue; however, a closer examination as to why the quote of the month is not true provides helpful insights about how to play better chess. Similarly, the principle *never play a bad move fast* yielded the fascinating [The Two Move Triggers](#).

I find that many players confuse principles about *analytical efficiency* – those that help you think better – with principles that tell you what you should probably do on your move. This confusion leads them to make the wrong decisions for the wrong reasons. Of the following principles, choose which are about analytical efficiency and which are about what you should do on your move:

- Always check, it might be mate.
- When ahead pieces, trade pieces but not necessarily pawns.
- Move all your pieces once before you move any piece twice, unless there is a tactic.
- Develop your rook on the same file where your opponent develops his queen.
- Look at all your checks, captures, and threats.
- When conducting a mating attack, bring a new piece into the attack or try to get your queen as close as possible to the opponent’s king.
- During the opening, allow for a place where your king might be safe in the middlegame.
- When you are ahead material in the endgame, make sure to retain sufficient material to checkmate.
- Play non-analytical moves quickly and save your time for analytical moves.
- If you only have one legal move, play it right away – don’t waste time looking to see what will happen next.
- Whenever you have multiple recaptures it means it is probably a critical move so don’t recapture quickly.
- Don’t develop your pieces onto squares where they can be attacked or driven back by lesser valued pieces.

Let’s begin with why *always check, it might be mate* is not true. Is it supposed to be a joke, like *castle early and often*. Not really, although you could interpret it in that manner. Just as the *bishop-pair* does not mean you have two bishops – it is short for the *advantage of the two bishops*, where you have both bishops, but your opponent does not. *Always check, it might be mate* can be considered a shortened version of “always consider all your checks, one of them might be very good (mate).”

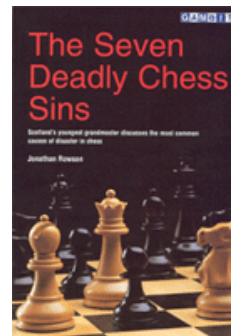
What’s the difference? By phrasing the suggestion *always check, it might be mate*, it seemingly tells you what to do, but it’s clearly not correct since checks are not always the best moves. However, the interpretation about considering all your checks is good advice. For example, a checkmate in one would always be the best move, so to not consider all checks and possibly miss a mate in one (or any beneficial forced sequence starting with the check) could be disastrous. Sure, there are plenty of positions where you shouldn’t spend much time analyzing your checks:

**White to play**

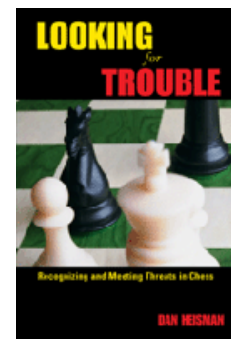


Here **1.Qh7+** is met by either **1...Kxh7** or **1...Nxh7** and White has no compensation for his lost queen. Since the risk is clearly greater than any perceived reward, any time spent on these continuations is wasteful. But in a similar position...

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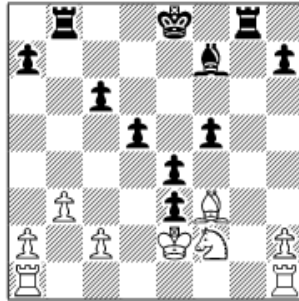
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- *If you only have one legal move, play it right away – don't waste time looking to see what will happen next.* – This is clearly about efficiency. There is no suggestion as to which move to play; it's simply a question of whether you wish to waste time.
- *Whenever you have multiple recaptures it means it is probably a critical move so don't recapture quickly.* – This is another efficiency suggestion that should help you decide which moves are more critical, and thus worth more thought.
- *Don't develop your pieces to squares where they can be attacked or driven back by lesser valued pieces.* – This has little to do with thought process or efficiency. It is meant to help you eliminate candidate moves that will likely lose time. Could that be a form of analytical efficiency – yes, but I would place it clearly on the other side of the line.

Let's consider the "what to do vs. what is efficient" issue from a practical, rather than a theoretical standpoint. The following is an offhand game I played at our club a few years ago. I was black and my opponent had just captured a bishop on f2:

**Black to play after 1.Nxf2**



Black is clearly winning, but what should he play? There are some applicable guidelines, but how to use them?

1. *If your opponent makes a capture, then most likely one should just recapture (to regain material), possibly after a zwischenzug (in-between move).*
2. *If there are multiple possible captures, be careful as the move may be critical.*
3. *After an opponent's capture, if you can make multiple (re)captures of the same material value, don't automatically recapture on the same square, as the other captures may be just as good or better.*
4. *Consider the captures that are checks first because they force the opponent to get out of check, and that may lead to the possibility of making further advantageous captures.*

Of these, point one argues for **1...exf2** and point four argues for **1...exf3** +. Of the two, point four is more important, but does that have any bearing on what Black should play?

No! If you thought the answer was "yes," then you may be the type of player who practices *hand-waving* – using principles to make analytical moves. These principles do have a bearing on the efficient *order of analysis*, but not what Black should play. Instead points two and three both indicate that it may be a very important decision. There is only one way to identify the correct move:

Roll up your sleeves, analyze each candidate move carefully, and choose the one that you evaluate as best.

Let's start with point four, *which suggests analyzing 1...exf3+ first, but not necessarily playing it!* After 1...exf3+, Black threatens to play 2...exf2 winning the knight, too. What would White play? You should visualize the following situation:

**White to play after 1...exf3+ (analysis)**



Interestingly, some of the principles that applied to analyzing Black's move also apply to White's reply. White may jump to get out of check by capturing the f-pawn with 2.Kxf3??, but that just loses the knight to 2...exf2. So instead Black should assume that White will, of course, save his

knight with **2.Kxe3**. White is not trying to help Black – he will do what Black did to him and not recapture on the same square, but instead play the move that helps him most. After 2.Kxe3, Black still has a big advantage, but perhaps he can do better with an alternative. *When you see a good move, look for a better one!*

Let's analyze the other try 1...exf2:

#### White to play after 1...exf2 (analysis)



Again, by capturing one piece Black is threatening to capture the other. So **1...exf2** threatens **2...exf3+**. White is not in check this time, but still needs to save the bishop. How can he do this?

He can't. The bishop is trapped! So that's the answer. 1...exf2 recaptures the knight and wins the bishop as well. 1...exf3+? recaptures the bishop, but fails to snare the knight.

The important point is that while all of the principles applied, none was supposed to pinpoint the move. They implied that "it is important; take your time" and "capturing with check first is more forcing, so consider that first – it may save you some time," but none said to **do** this or that. *Only analysis was able to determine the move.* Ironically, considering the more efficient check first failed to initially point in the right direction, so in this case the more efficient move was not the best. But the principle was not meant to point to a move, just the order in which the candidates should likely be considered.

Let's look at an example we have seen before:

#### White to play. Is 1.Nxe5 safe?



Basic tactics and *The Seeds of Tactical Destruction* dictate that White must consider the dangerous reply **1...Qe7**, pinning the knight to the king. But that belies the question of whether White should consider that move first. He may waste valuable time if that is not the most efficient way to analyze the position.

Do we have any other guidelines that may help? Yes, how about "checks, captures, and threats" – you want to consider them in that order because checks are more forcing than other moves. So after identifying **1...Qe7** as a dangerous move, rather than analyzing it, first list all the dangerous moves, starting with checks.

There are only two checks, **1...Qa5+** and **1...Bb4+**, but **1...Qa5+** should be the one that catches the eye – it also attacks the knight on e5. Black has no defense and would lose the knight.

Once White sees that **1...Qa5+** wins the knight, **1.Nxe5** can be eliminated from the candidate list (see *Initial and Final Candidate Moves*). White does not care whether Black has multiple ways to win the knight, so any further investigation as to whether there is a defense to **1...Qe7** is irrelevant and a waste of time.

On the other hand, if White does blunder with **1.Nxe5**, then Black – assuming it is a slow game and he has lots of time – *is* interested in the best way to win the knight. He should go through a similar thought process and, even if he spots **1...Qe7** first, realize that **1...Qa5+** wins the knight before analyzing **1...Qe7** in detail. If it turns out that **1...Qe7** does not win the knight (as it does not), then he would eliminate **1...Qe7**.

Suppose both sides blunder into **1.Nxe5? Qe7?**. Then how many moves

for White save the knight? Let's eliminate the marginal 2.Kd2?! (with the idea of 2.Kd2 Qxe5? 3.Re1). The answer is three: 2.O-O, 2.Qe2, and 2.f4. Why doesn't 2.Bf4 work?

#### Black to play and win after 2.Bf4?



The answer is the common removal of the guard theme of deflection with 2...g5!. If you missed finding 2...g5! because you thought the pawn was unprotected, then it would be helpful to follow the advice in [Quiescence Errors](#) and [The Underrated Removal of the Guard](#). If you saw 2...g5! won a piece, but refused to play it anyway because it weakened your kingside, then [When Is A King Safe?](#) and [The Principle of Tactical Dominance](#) should be instructive.

In summary, don't confuse guidelines that help you analyze better with those that indicate what you should play. Unless you are playing extremely short blitz games, don't *hand-wave* and use efficiency principles as the reason for making a move. Just because a move should be analyzed first because it is *most likely* to be correct does not detract from the necessity to closely analyze the position to see if indeed that move is best.

#### Tip of the month

1. *If you see a move that seems to win, then **stop!** Don't play it right away.* If careful reexamination verifies that the move wins, then you should not need most of your time remaining. If it's not true, then you want to know exactly why because your contemplated move may not even be a good one. Turn your excitement into extra care; never play a seemingly winning move quickly. First make sure that the win is there and there is no possibility of error, via a deep breath and a triple-check.
2. *Develop a chess conscience.* By this you are not intending to differentiate *moral* right from wrong, but rather "chess right from wrong." If you have only studied with one person or only read a few instructive books, then your conscience is usually biased or lacking key insights. Better to *read instructive text from many chess authors* so that when you are looking at a position you can ask yourself "What do the experts have to say about playing a position like this?" and your chess conscience will develop a feeling for how to apply and weigh many of the principles you have learned. It worked for me.

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Dan welcomes readers' questions; he is a full-time instructor on the ICC as *Phillytutor*.

[\*Yes, I have a question for Dan!\*](#)

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