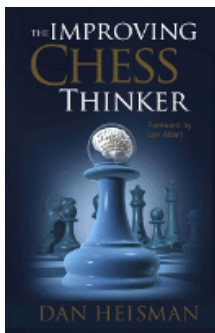




COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



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The Most Common and Important Use of Tactics

Quote of the Month: *If your move is not safe, it probably does not matter how strategically sound it is.*

I have a number of crusades involving chess instruction and a couple of them involve tactics. Teaching the breadth and importance of Counting is one and this month's Novice Nook covers another.

In [A Different Approach to Studying Tactics](#), I discussed the need to start – and concentrate upon – basic tactics. In [The Best Novice Nook Ideas](#), I wrote

“One of the most important ideas involving safety is that *basic tactic skills should be used to prevent an opponent's tactics, not to find winning tactics for oneself!*”

Unfortunately, I have found that this idea is either misunderstood or continues to fly under the radar. Thus, the message is not getting through. Even some of my long-term students are not completely aware of this concept. However, it may be *one of the most important ideas separating weaker players from stronger ones* (in this sense it represents another aspect of [The Secrets of Real Chess](#)), so this premise deserves an entire column devoted to it.

This importance of using tactics to prevent loss of material is illustrated by a story involving a typical “Class B” student that I had a few years ago. I suggested he start by studying the basic tactics in John Bain's *Chess Tactics for Students*, which he subsequently purchased. At the next lesson, he began by politely shoving his copy of the book across the table at me, saying “You've got to be kidding. These problems are way too easy for me!”

I proceeded to examine two recent games he had lost, and it turned out that both losses were primarily due to overlooking, and thus allowing, his opponent to play a basic tactic. After the second game, I said “I don't understand. You said that *Chess Tactics for Students* was too easy for you, but are you saying that the two tactics that caused your losses in these games were more difficult than the tactics in this book?”

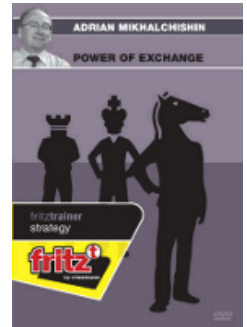
The student stared at me for a few seconds. Then he reached across the table, grabbed the book back, and quietly admitted “I see what you mean.” To be fair, this student's attitude is typical of most players near his level.

After hearing this story, one could argue that it was not my student's lack of familiarity with the patterns, but his lack of a Real Chess thought process that was his main problem. And that could be true – thought process and pattern recognition go hand in hand. But it is also undeniable that the more familiar you are with a pattern, *the more you will avoid allowing it for your opponent, no matter how poor your thought process.*

Here is an example:

White to play: Is 1.Rxd7 safe?

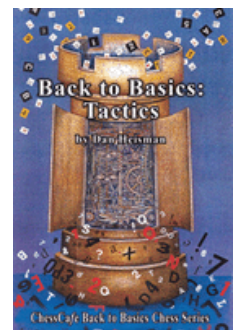
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[Back to Basics: Tactics](#)
by Dan Heisman



Using the Real Chess thought process, White should decide if his candidate move is safe by seeing if it can be refuted in reply by an opponent's check, capture, or threat. After 1.Rxd7??, the only check for Black is 1...Re1# and this indeed would make 1.Rxd7?? unsafe.

However, with the exception of absolute beginners or those in time trouble, almost no one would play 1.Rxd7??, even those who rarely practice Real Chess. Because this back-rank mating pattern is so *prevalent* and *dangerous* that almost everyone is familiar with it. Even players near beginner level who are not that familiar with this pattern are often wise enough to ask "If my opponent is leaving his a queen *en prise* on purpose, is it possible it might be dangerous to take it?" The fact that weaker players avoid this trap demonstrates a very important point:

*Having a good thought process is important and even necessary for high level play, but it does not negate the advantage of being **extremely** familiar with basic tactical patterns.*

The more familiar you are with tactical patterns, the more likely you will find them on offense (to win material) but, more importantly, the less likely you are to allow them to defeat a candidate move (to avoid losing material).

I have seen hundreds of games lost by intermediate players who allow a basic tactic that was "too easy" for them to study. While these losses may have been mitigated by a more consistent thought process, they also would be much more likely avoided if the student was much more familiar with basic safety patterns. Thus, this familiarity is very much like in math, where the ability to add seven eights or eight sevens accurately does not negate the advantage of knowing that $7 \times 8 = 56$.

When reviewing these games, in many of these instances I catch the fatal safety error instantly. Sometimes simply because my thought process causes me to immediately ask *Is It Safe?*, but many other times it is just that I am more familiar with the "simple" but dangerous pattern it allows.

The conclusion is obvious but undervalued: intermediate players can benefit greatly from being much more familiar with basic tactic patterns. Intermediates who can easily solve every problem in a basic tactic book when given the knowledge "White to play and win" cannot spot it so easily when:

1. The position occurs outside of a problem, when there is no "red flag" saying the position is winnable and, even more importantly,
2. When the pattern *is going to be created for their opponent by their candidate move* and has to be visualized and considered. The pattern is not in the present position, waiting there for them to play.

In the aforementioned *Is It Safe?*, I gave an example of this enormous difference, but clearly more examples are helpful. Below is an identical problem presented in four different guises, where the same safety issue is shown in an increasingly easy manner:

White to play after 1...Nxd4



White to play after 1...Nxd4 – Is 2.Bxd4 safe?



Black to play after 2.Bxd4



Black to play and win after 2.Bxd4



The final position is the guise that intermediates find easy. Here the red flag of “...play and win” has been hung out and it is their move. But give those same players White in the first position and just say “White to play” - don’t ask if 2.Bxd4 is safe - and see how many play that move!

My estimate is that half the players rated 1900 would play the right move *for the right reason* in diagram one, half the players rated 1700 would get diagram two correct, half rated 1650 would play the right move for the right reason in diagram three, and half the players rated 1450 would get diagram four correct!

In the actual game my opponent, who played white and was rated in the 1500s, followed the nonexistent (and often wrong) “principle” *when there is a choice, capture with the lower valued piece* and played **2.Bxd4?** Instead **2.Rxd4** was the only way to continue. After **2.Bxd4**, his play is easily refuted by the pseudo-sacrifice (a sacrifice wherein all the material and possibly more will be won back by force) **2...Rxd4! 3.Rxd4 Bc5** The pin will win. **4.Bxb5** Desperation, but White is lost. **4...Bxd4+ 5.Kh1 Bxc3 6.bxc3 axb5** and White soon resigned. After the game I asked my opponent if he had considered **2...Rxd4** at all and he honestly answered “No.” When I asked why, he replied “Because rooks are worth more than knights.” If this erroneous logic is applied in games, all the pseudo sacrifices in basic tactics books would be overlooked.

The moral of the story is clear: you want to be as intimately familiar with as many tactical ideas as possible, not just be able to solve them when given a “Play and win” position. That may require you to practice an enormous number of “easy” play and win positions, but, just like knowing the multiplication tables, this repetition will come in very handy each and every game!

I think it is safe to say that although I cannot *solve* beginner tactics problems any better than many intermediates, I am probably more familiar with them and can recognize them more quickly and in more guises than almost any intermediate player.

Supposedly famed instructor IM Mark Dvoretsky has a notebook with 2,000 basic tactical patterns that everyone should know. While I am not aware that IM Dvoretsky has ever published his notebook, that number seems reasonable, and it makes sense to try to find and study about that many different “easy” problems to get as much coverage as possible. ChessCafe.com sells many basic tactics books that cover this area, including my [Back To Basics: Tactics](#).

Unfortunately, I run into this “too easy” issue almost every time I teach an intermediate student: “I don’t need to study those tactics; I can get each one quickly.” Once in a while I do get a student who is nearing 2000 and knows these tactics well enough that indeed, further study would achieve diminishing returns. However, this proficiency among players with ratings under 1800 is exceedingly rare – see if you can honestly take [A Tactics Quiz](#) and score at least 2000 (I have noticed many test takers either do not follow the timing directions or give themselves full credit for only partially correct answers!). If you can score that high, it is possible that further basic tactics study may not be necessary – but it likely can’t hurt.

Finally, let’s prove how much more powerful it is to apply tactics to your candidate move’s safety than it is to your opponent’s. We’ll start with a model estimating *how many times per game a player might make a move that would give an opponent a basic tactic that would win material*:

- 800 rating – sixteen times per game
- 1200 rating – four times per game
- 1600 rating – once per game
- 2000 rating – once every four games
- 2400 rating – once every sixteen games

This model estimates that for every 400 rating points a player is one-fourth as likely to make an unsafe move. It is not based on any specific study, but it will do.

This model implies that if you only use tactics for offense (to win material), then, even if you are perfect, you will have the opportunity only one-fourth as often each time your opposition is 400 rating points stronger. In other words, you can use tactics to win material quite a bit when your opponents are beginners, but, as your opposition improves, your opportunities will drop dramatically. That is not to say you shouldn’t still look for them – *you always should assume your opponent’s move might not be safe* – but the opportunity to easily win material greatly diminishes as the opposition gets better. And of

course the chance to beat players with advanced tactics is always lurking. Just watch a lowly master play Rybka or Fritz!

Okay, but now we arrive at an important point. If an 800 player gives his opponent sixteen basic tactics per game, he can't be doing it on every move – even by luck he must be making some safe moves where the opportunity to blunder existed. This means the number of possible moves where one can blunder – allow a basic tactic – is much higher. For example, in a forty move game it may be that on thirty-six of the moves (with the exception of the first couple and maybe another one or two) it might be possible to make an unsafe move. For example, after 1.e4 e5, White now has a possible unsafe move 2. Ba6 putting the bishop *en prise*. Moreover, on most moves there are *many* possible unsafe moves. In the average position a player has about thirty-five legal moves, but maybe only half are safe. When your opponent makes a threat – such as attacking your queen with a lower valued piece – it is likely that almost all the legal moves, except for the few safe queen moves, are unsafe.

We can argue about how many of these many unsafe moves constitute *en prise* or “easy tactics” but the conclusion is clear – everyone has ample opportunities to make unsafe moves on almost every move. If you don't believe me, teach someone how to play chess and then watch their first game!

The point is that there are many opportunities to make unsafe moves and you need to apply your tactical skill (at least your basic Counting skills) on a high percentage of your candidates to see if these are safe. In other words, you should ask yourself “If I make this move, does my opponent have any forcing move that can refute my move?” If so, then unless you are consciously making a sacrifice, this candidate move likely has to be discarded. Thus, you are using your basic tactic skill hundreds of times during a game to verify the safety of your own moves. This skill usually involves recognizing and avoiding trivial material loss, such as seeing that the candidate is ridiculous and must be discarded as it would place a piece *en prise*. However, it also often involves recognizing that the candidate would allow the opponent the type of basic tactic found in books like Bain's or mine, and thus must be rejected. This Real Chess process to reject unsafe candidate moves has to be successfully applied many times throughout the game *no matter the strength of the opposition*.

Contrast this with the diminishing opportunities to refute your opponent's moves. As the level of your opposition rises, the chances that you will be punished for an unsafe move also rises; however, the chances to tactically refute your opponent's move diminishes because stronger opponents also play Real Chess and wisely reject a much higher percentage of candidates that would give you the opportunity for material gain! Therefore, it is clear that a primary reason one studies tactics – and especially keeps studying tactics as one progresses – is **not** to win material, but to prevent losing material. Pass the word...

Question While studying your book, [Back To Basics: Tactics](#), I made a remarkable discovery: "counting" is not as simple as it seems to be. To my dismay I was unable to perform the first six problems in the first chapter correctly. And this is after studying all the available material written on the topic.

I was forced to conclude that if I was unable to solve such a fundamental basic tactic, then I'm probably missing-out on many other tactics as well. While it's possible to use "pattern recognition" in discovering and solving many tactics, is there any other "general methodology" that is also applicable to resolving the task of "counting"?

Also, would you consider writing a more detailed article on the subject? I believe the "average" player takes "counting" for granted, which can become quite a painful and disturbing liability. Considering that it is the one aspect of the game that will reoccur throughout the game on a fairly consistent basis, I sincerely believe it demands a great deal more attention. Keep up the good work.

Answer Thanks for your insightful note and encouragement; you are not the

first intermediate player to make this important observation. There are four Novice Nooks on Counting: [A Counting Primer](#), [The Most Important Tactic](#), [Is It Safe?](#), and [The Two Types of Counting Problems](#). This month's Novice Nook is on a related topic, which should fulfill some of your request.

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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