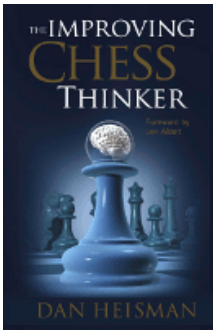




COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



CHESTHEATRE

Play through and download the games from ChessCafe.com in the [DGT Game Viewer](#).



Tactical Sets and Goals

Quote of the Month: *How often have you sacrificed your queen for a checkmate when even or behind in material?*

Suppose someone asked an adult, "What is 7×8 ?" and he replied, "That's easy! Of course it is $8 + 8 = 16 + 8 = 24 + 8 = 32 + 8 = 40 + 8 = 48 + 8 = 56$. See! Anyone can do that!"

You might think that the responder knows how to figure out the answer, but that he did not memorize his multiplication tables. I deal with this type of problem all the time.

I once suggested to a student rated about 1600 USCF that he repetitively do the problems in *Chess Tactics for Students* by John Bain. At the next lesson he politely tossed the book across the table and said, "You've got to be kidding! This book is way too easy for me!"

We then reviewed two of his slow games, and in both he lost by overlooking simple tactical sequences by his opponent. So I asked, "Do you really think that the tactics you allowed in those two games were more difficult than the problems in the Bain book?"

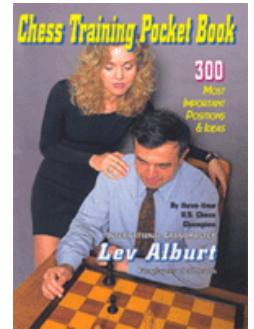
He thought that over for a few seconds, then grabbed the book back, while quietly remarking, "I think I see what you mean."

As first noted in [A Different Approach for Studying Tactics](#) and featured in [The Most Common and Important Use of Tactics](#), there are at least four levels of solving/recognition capability with regard to the same problem pattern. These levels, in ascending order of helpfulness and difficulty to master, are

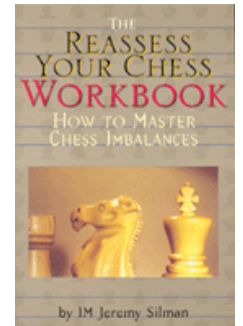
- Level 1 - The ability to *figure out* the answer when presented with the position posed as a problem (this is the level the 1600 found too easy). We could further break this level down into 1A: the motif of the tactic is known (pin, double attack, removal of the guard, etc.) and 1B: the motif is not known. It is more difficult to solve a puzzle if you don't know the motif. That is why in *Back to Basics: Tactics* I start by presenting the motifs and puzzles associated with that motif, but later provide a puzzle set without stating the motifs.
- Level 2 - The ability to quickly and accurately recognize the pattern and the answer when presented with a position containing well-known basic tactics (this is similar to knowing $7 \times 8 = 56$ without adding), but without the stated requirements, such as "White to play and win."
- Level 3 - The ability to quickly and accurately recognize (or at least figure out) the answer when playing a game. Since you are in a game situation, you don't know whether you have a tactic (as discussed in [The Seeds of Tactical Destruction](#) and [Revisiting the Seeds of Tactical Destruction](#)).
- Level 4 - The ability to quickly and accurately recognize that your intended candidate move is not safe, because you allow your opponent to *reply* with a basic tactic (this is the level the 1600 had not come close to achieving, and it is the basis for playing Real Chess – see [Real Chess, Time Management, and Care: Putting it All Together](#)).

To be fair, as one ascends through the levels of difficulty, more than just your tactical recognition is involved. At the fourth level, thought process plays a role that is just as important. If you don't ask yourself if a candidate move is safe, then only superb tactical recognition is likely to help. But if you do ask yourself this question, then quick recognition is very helpful!

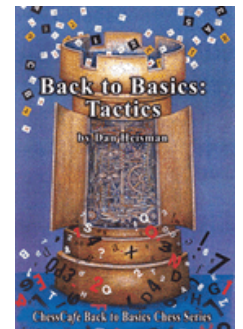
Purchases from our [shop](#) help keep [ChessCafe.com](#) freely accessible:



[Chess Training Pocket Book](#)
by Lev Albur



[Reassess Your Chess Workbook](#)
by Jeremy Silman



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

The point, of course, is that *being able to solve simple tactical problems does not provide enough proficiency with the patterns to achieve mastery!* To complete the picture you need both a consistently good thought process and the ability to recognize safety issues quickly, not just be able to figure them out when challenged.

The Most Helpful Patterns

Heralded trainer IM Mark Dvoretsky has theorized that there are about 2,000 basic patterns that one should recognize and master, and I believe he has privately cataloged those. I completely agree with his assessment (see [A Tactics Quiz](#)). Short of training with Dvoretsky, what is the best way to obtain these patterns? And how do you know that a tactics set (and thus most of the problems within) gets the most out of for your study time? These are questions I got asked frequently on my weekly Internet Chess Club Q&A radio show.

I usually cite the following books:

- [Back to Basics: Tactics](#) by Dan Heisman
- [Chess Tactics for Students](#) by John Bain
- [Winning Chess Strategy for Kids](#) by Jeff Coakley
- [The Chess Tactics Workbook](#) by Al Woolum
- [Bobby Fischer Teaches Chess](#) by Fischer and Margulies
- [The Winning Way](#) by Bruce Pandolfini
- [Winning Chess Traps](#) by Irving Chernev

I am guessing that this set likely covers at least ninety percent of those 2,000 patterns.

As a sample, everyone should know, in the opening:

White to Play after 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 f5 3.Nxe5 fxe4?



4.Qh5+ g6 4...Ke7? 5.Qf7+ Kd6 6.Nc4+ Kc6 7.Nc3 d5 8.Ne5+ is completely winning for White. 5.Nxg6 The key idea to know, and now Black has nothing better than **5...hxg6 6.Qxh8 Kf7 7.d3** and White is winning.

In the middlegame:

White to Play



1.Nd5 White has other winning moves as well, but this famous removal of the guard is easy and best. **1...Rxc2** If 1...Nxd5, 2.Qxh7# is the idea. **2.Nxf6 Rxb2+** Desperation, but what else? **3.Kxb2** and eventually White will mate.

In the endgame:

White to Play after 1...g5?



2.fxg5 hxg5 3.h4 White creates a winning passed pawn. **3...gxh4 4.gxh4** and White promotes the h-pawn.

Once those 2,000+ patterns are mastered, there are some great intermediate tactical pattern sets in:

- [Winning Chess Exercises for Kids](#) by Jeff Coakley (one of the best intermediate sets ever; it is one of the most misleading book titles ever. It is hardly a book for kids unless they are some of the best around!)
- [Chess Training Pocket Book](#) by Lev Albur
- [The Art of the Checkmate](#) by Renaud and Kahn

I should also mention Igor Khmel'nitsky's [Chess Exam and Training Guide](#), which tests your overall analytical ability. There are also many specialized puzzle books with goals other than tactics, such as Ward's [The Improver's It's Your Move](#) (planning); Pandolfini's [Endgame Workshop](#); [Can You Be A Positional Chess Genius?](#) (Dunnington); Chen's [Practical Chess Exercises](#) (all types; no goal specified to make it more like a game); Silman's [How to Reassess Your Chess Workbook](#) (imbalances).

One of the issues is that many tactical sets have far too high a percentage of checkmate problems, which is out of proportion to both their frequency in actual play and their practicality. While it is certainly true that if you do run across a checkmate pattern you get a large reward for your study; however, the relative rarity does not justify an extremely high percentage of checkmate problems in a set. This is true even though all tactics, especially checkmate patterns, must be used on defense (to prevent them) as much or more than used on offense (to win material or checkmate). Therefore, while finding or preventing a checkmate is very important, it does not happen that often compared to, say, a double attack or removal of the guard.

Compare the following two problems:

White to Play and mate



White wins with the cute but basic **1.Qxg7+! Nxf3 2.Nh6#**

1.d4 d5 2.c4 e6 3.cxd5 exd5 4.Nf3 b6 4...Be7 would create a similar, common position, although not quite as instructive. **5.Nc3 c5**

White to Play after 5...c5



5...c5 is not a good move, as capturing it creates a simple discovered attack on d5: **6.dxc5** and, no matter what Black plays, he loses his d-pawn.

Let's compare these two problems:

- The first one is much prettier (and will therefore sell more books).
- The first one is much more dramatic and, if White finds it (or, similarly, Black's previous move allows it), then the game is over and knowing the pattern was extremely helpful.
- But weaker players allow positions like the latter all the time – discovered attacks in the opening that win a pawn are extremely frequent.

Therefore, although it makes sense to study the former, it makes even more sense to concentrate most of your studies on problems like the latter. Winning a pawn may be dull, but unless you are a very strong player with strong opponents, you probably get much more frequent opportunities such as the latter.

A key question is "Of all the games you have won in the past few years, how many times did you win by finding a checkmate when you were even or behind in material?" Compare this to your answer for "How many times did you win because you won material, traded off, and then eventually through attrition either your opponent resigned or you checkmated him with a superior force?" I don't think anyone I have asked has ever answered that a majority of their wins came from mating attacks when the forces were even or they were behind in material.

Therefore, from a practical sense, you will much more likely win a game recognizing, say, a removal of the guard tactic, followed by winning through attrition, than you would a queen sacrifice for a mate in two. Having stated this, I must admit that *checkmate problems are much more useful on defense than they are on offense*. This is because if you are a decent player who is

playing similar opposition, it is much more likely that you will have to recognize and avoid giving your opponent checkmate patterns, than you would be given the opportunity to do that checkmate yourself. This is because good players "filter out," and thus prevent, most of the tactical opportunities for their opponent – see [The Most Common and Important Use of Tactics](#). Thus, this filtering almost always recognizes and prevents candidate moves that allow checkmate, but that same decent player rarely gets the opportunity to checkmate his opponent. So studying checkmates is necessary to recognize the pattern, mostly to prevent the mate from being delivered to you!

For more about the characteristics of a good tactical problem set, please refer to [The Four Homeworks](#), where this question was discussed in detail. There are many well-known problem sets, both in book form and software, which don't meet my criteria – some don't even come close. *That does not make them "bad" – they are still helpful!* The problem sets I like the most are found in the books I recommended.

Question Playing "real chess" requires a good deal of focused effort and discipline, even for an adult. Just to do the "tactical minimum," that is, to simply consider all checks, captures, and threats for both sides before and after all candidate moves are visualized is a big job. Plenty of adults (like myself!) can have a hard time doing just this much, and even one lapse on one move can lose a game.

So then: How is it that many children, even some very young toddlers, seem to have the capacity to play "real chess," when getting them to do other "lesser" tasks can be nearly impossible? Do you think that their sheer enjoyment of chess simply overrides all the obstacles that very young people naturally have to structured behavior, or is it something else?

Answer First, as noted in [Critical and Principle Variations](#), it is often the dangerous moves we need to consider, not necessarily all possible replies or even just the best one. For example, if you are starting a kingside attack and it is possible the opponent can threaten a queenside pawn, you might not even care whether it is possible to defend it, since it is not relevant for your opponent possibly thwarting your attack. So the ability to determine what is critical is just as important as the ability to see if you can meet all checks, captures, and threats.

Of course, a smaller percentage of youngsters play "Real Chess" than adults, but certainly some of them do. They likely possess the same characteristics as the adults: concern that each move is the one that could lose the game, fun in finding and eliminating possibilities for the opponent (in very young players this means overcoming their natural egoistic tendencies), and a desire to use all their time to do the best they can.

Question It would be great if you could talk about pawn storms, how to stop or slow (I know the answer is "it depends").

Answer There is no "single" way to stop or defend pawn storms. The ways to meet them vary greatly, which is why one of my suggested homework assignments is to read as many annotated games as quickly as possible from Chernev, McDonald, Giddins, Euwe, Crouch, etc.

What works against one pattern could be a disaster against a similar pattern, so this type of defense takes experience. For example, the ...h5 idea Gligoric used against the King's Indian and Soltis' against the Dragon in a flank attack might not work against a similar pawn structure. And a central pawn storm like in the Four Pawns Attack in the King's Indian or Benoni is different than a flank attack.

In a short time period an instructor can review a small percentage of pawn storms attacks with you, but, in the long run, it really takes plenty of homework and reading – there is no quick fix with, say, three talking points (not that I have ever seen). Also, playing many speed games (five second time increment for US players) and reviewing them is excellent, as you get lots of experience that would be hard to get in a short time in slow games. If the computer says "X" stops the pawn storm in a speed game, then it will work in

a slow game, too.

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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