



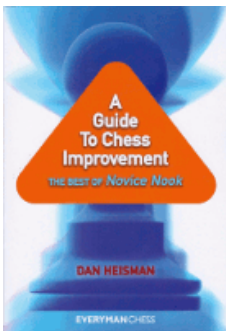
COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



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Don't Know What to Do? Try Dan's Dirty Dozen

Quote of the Month: *Chess is not tic-tac-toe.*

When I ask new students why they are taking lessons, one of the most common answers is

"I often get into positions where I don't know what to do."

My reply is

"Good! Chess is not tic-tac-toe. If you never got into positions where you did not know what to do, then the game would be trivial and not fun, and you would be the best player who ever lived!"

I am not trying to be insensitive. As a master I often get into positions where I don't know what to do, but I don't panic. Not knowing what to do – and thus left on your own to try to figure it out – is one of the main reasons why chess is fun.

I have included a multitude of references in this month's column, so consider this the "Guide for What to Do When You Don't Know What to Do"!

There is a conceptual difference between "not knowing what to do" and two similar concerns (at least one of which is likely what my students really mean):

1. Not knowing *how* to figure out what to do.
2. Not having any reasonable thought about what plans or candidate moves might be chosen.

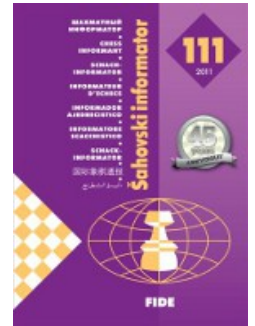
Therefore, "not knowing what to do" can be considered a cousin of planning (see [A Planning Primer](#)). Planning addresses mostly short-term ideas of what to do. Long-term planning is rarer. "Not knowing what to do" usually involves only one or two moves, primarily *this move*, which is about as short-term as it gets.

We could define "strategy" as encompassing both – there is no official dictionary of chess. However, strategy usually implies positional play. "What to do" could include recognizing and addressing tactical issues (see [The Seeds of Tactical Destruction](#) and [Revisiting the Seeds of Tactical Destruction](#)) and even time management. In [Winning Chess Exercises for Kids](#), Jeff Coakley quips "Strategy is knowing what to do. Tactics is knowing how to do it."

Planning and strategy are primarily based on imbalances. These are factors that one side possesses that the other side does not. This includes extra material, more material in one area of the board, pawn weaknesses, an exposed king, and the bishop-pair. You want to maximize your strengths and your opponent's weaknesses, which means taking advantage of them. At the same time you want to minimize your weaknesses and your opponent's strengths.

However, because "what to do" can be more encompassing than that, any factor that affects your move might be involved. For example, your criticality assessment may tell you that this is a complicated move that will decide the game. Thus, allocating extra time to make sure you analyze correctly could certainly be part of "what to do." The position could be symmetric without static imbalances, but having the move could be the vital dynamic to give the advantage or, rarely, in the case of *zugzwang*, be the winning factor.

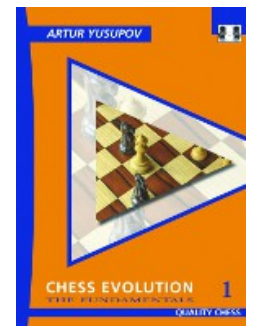
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Let's consider some expert advice on "what to do" from three well-known sources, GM Michael Rohde, IM Jeremy Silman, and [Rapid Chess Improvement](#) author expert Michael de la Maza (I paraphrase each, since I can't locate the exact quotes):

In a "Game of the Month" article in *Chess Life* about a decade ago, GM Rohde made a very insightful observation:

"During the average forty-move chess game, a grandmaster does not know what to do on about five moves during a game. An international master might average about eight, a FIDE Master about ten, and a national master about fifteen. This is a very large advantage to the GM."

So, Rohde's estimate tells you about how often *strong players* do not know what to do, which is probably more often than the average player might guess.

It is important to add that *even if you do know what to do, that does not necessarily mean you know exactly which move to play*. Sometimes you see the correct set of moves, but you have to work out the move order. Or you know one of several candidates does the job, but have to carefully analyze to see which one is the most accurate or the most flexible. There still may be work to be done, which is yet another reason why good players always play slowly in long time control games.

IM Silman observed, "If I had only twenty seconds to think in a game of forty moves in two hours, instead of the average three minutes, my playing strength would only drop to about 2300. I would still always find a reasonable plan and I would not miss any easy tactics. However, it is those three to five moves per game where I would take time and find a much better idea, which makes me a 2500 player when I play slowly."

Silman's remark is also instructive. It means that even if you do have a good idea what to do, that does not mean you should just play a move quickly, as so many beginner and intermediate players do (see [Slowing Down](#) and [The Fun of Pros and Cons](#)).

It is also not a coincidence that Jeremy Silman wrote the most well-known book on planning, [How to Reassess Your Chess](#) (an older book on this topic is *Judgment and Planning in Chess* by Euwe). I am quite struck by how much Silman improved the fourth edition, completely re-writing his "classic." Ironically this fourth edition is the one that most deserves the accolades given to the earlier editions. It is both more generic (less about bishops vs. knights) and more basic at the same time. Instead of a minimum rating of 1700, I can recommend it to players rated as low as 1600.

Yet readers of *Novice Nook* know that I am very reluctant to put too much emphasis on the subtle positional aspects of chess until you can do [The Three Showstoppers](#) very well. I think our third source, Michael de la Maza, stated the case excellently:

"Someone suggested that I needed to read [How To Reassess Your Chess](#), so I did. I was encouraged that I had learned much useful information that I had not previously understood. So the next game I spent thirty minutes trying to figure out how to get a good knight against a bad bishop – and then I dropped my knight to a tactic!"

Michael's observation provides a key point: *knowing what to do is almost always less important than knowing how to make safe moves*. If you can't make safe moves, then subtle planning is not going to help. An email from Jeremy Silman that I have had posted on my website for many years states

"...And yes, you have to start people out with tactics and the basic mates else they will get shredded instantly."

For more on how and why to study tactics, starting with the key skill of counting, I strongly recommend [The Most Common and Important Use of](#)

[Tactics](#) and [Is It Safe?](#), including their referenced articles.

OK, we've put the issue in perspective: *the first thing you want to do is keep your pieces safe and see if there is a way you can win your opponent's pieces (or checkmate)*. Only if everything is safe should you usually resort to "tiebreak" strategy mode. The biggest chunk of chess strategy can be easily summarized as follows:

You want to make your army as active as possible and you want to make your opponent's army as inactive as possible (see [The Fundamental Theorem of Safety and Activity](#)).

This also implies that you want to make each of your pieces as strong as possible and each opponent piece as weak as possible. Most strategy revolves around this idea (which indirectly includes pawn structure – see [Evaluation Criteria](#) and [A Planning Primer](#)).

So far we have addressed the first issue – "If you don't know what to do, how can you figure out what to do?" from a macroscopic level, but the Devil is in the details. The new edition of [How to Reassess Your Chess](#) addresses the idea of identifying imbalances and helping you figure out what to do with that imbalance as well as any single source. However, *I did not learn planning from reading books on that topic – I learned it from reading a multitude of the best players and authors discuss games in annotated game collections (see [Annotated Game Collections vs. Instructive Anthologies](#))*. Since in every game the author – often the player – had to explain what the players were trying to do. My students and friends who have read hundreds (if not thousands) of annotated games rarely complain that they don't know what to do.

One student emailed me as follows:

"Dan, I have taken up your suggestion to play through many annotated instructive master games. I have to tell you that I have just finished game number 700 (!) and, for the first time, I am starting to understand what is going on when I watch grandmasters play."

Instructive comment – you don't learn enough about a big subject like chess just by reviewing twenty or thirty games – there are too many common types of positions. But, after reviewing hundreds of games, you start to "hear the chorus" and are thus well on your way to developing a chess conscience. Reading through that many games is not that much work if each game is done quickly and it is fun – see [Reviewing Chess Games](#) and [Chess, Learning, and Fun](#). I estimate that in my first three to four years of serious play I read through about 2,000 annotated games. This helped me immensely in getting my rating to 1900 in two years and expert (USCF 2000-2199) in three (see [Getting the Edge](#)).

So, if you regularly read instructive annotated games, you will be learning what to do in many positions. Nevertheless, I can provide helpful tips for your journey.

Dan's Dirty Dozen – Tips for Successful Planning

1. Start by reading Steinitz's theory.

It will take you about ten minutes maximum to read the Exeter Chess Club's [summary page](#). Yet those ten minutes will provide a lifetime of helpful information. All strategy starts with understanding the former World Champion's groundbreaking but baseline ideas.

2. Continue with a firm foundation in planning and strategy.

If you want a good basic book on strategy, check out Jeff Coakley's [Winning Chess Strategy for Kids](#). A logical follow-up would be the recent Todd Bardwick text, [Chess Strategy Workbook](#). Those references will provide a good foundation before you are ready for Silman's [The Amateur's Mind](#) and

eventually [How to Reassess Your Chess](#).

3. Don't underestimate the power of understanding pawn breaks.

The first paragraph of [Break Moves: Opening Lines to Create Mobility](#) says it all. For more encompassing pawn ideas, nothing beats *Pawn Power in Chess* by Kmoch (but read [Breaking Down Barriers](#) first).

4. Don't panic.

Panic should trigger caution, not fast play! If you don't know what to do or are faced with an unexpected opponent move, then take a deep breath, walk around, and get a glass of water. Whatever you have to do to relax, take stock of what is happening around the board, and play even more slowly than normal. If your opponent has all strengths and no weaknesses, and you have all weaknesses and no strengths (this often happens when you are behind in material for no compensation), then no wonder you don't know what to do – it's probably too late and there indeed may be nothing useful you can do! You should have been wondering what to do earlier in the game when it was more balanced. This brings up an important point.

5. Never voluntarily give up something for nothing.

As an example, many of my students feel that they don't know how to handle the bishop-pair, and so they give it away free! The logic "just because you don't know how to use an asset you should disregard it or, worse, give it away", is quite incorrect. It's like saying that you don't know too many things you can buy for fifty cents, so every time you get fifty cents you give it away – even if you do it thousands of times! Just because you don't currently understand how to take advantage of the bishop-pair, doesn't mean that giving it away free is harmless. Your opponent might know what to do with it; or you might get the bishop-pair and it might help you immensely, even though you did not understand how to best elicit that help!

Other common imbalances you might yield or provide "free" because you don't value them (or recognize at the time) might be a stray pawn, control of an open line, long-term king safety, or a bad piece. Just because you don't know how to handle something does not mean it has no value; a series of poor "minor" decisions can add up to a lost game without outright loss of a piece or more.

One thing you can learn from annotated master games is how good players always try to extract an equal but opposite imbalance. They don't do things like give up the bishop-pair without winning tempi or slightly weakening the opponent's pawn structure. Yet weaker players often give up something for nothing, such as trading a knight that has moved three times for one that has moved once in the opening, thus effectively losing two tempi, or bringing opponent's extra pawns to the center (see [More Pawns in the Center are Good](#)).

6. Don't create unnecessary weaknesses.

Bent Larsen once suggested, only partly tongue-in-cheek, "If you don't know what else to do, push a rook pawn." Yet weaker players who don't know what to do often push pawns that create unnecessary weaknesses – sometimes it would be better just to shuffle your king back and forth, as my friend Expert Jerry Kolker used to do. But you also have to give squares (make weaknesses) to get squares, so some weaknesses are necessary. Playing over a large number of annotated master games (see [Annotated Game Collections vs. Instructive Anthologies](#)) will give you a feel for which weaknesses are reasonable or tolerable.

7. Find your worst piece and make it better.

As well as the rarer corollary, "Find your opponent's worst piece and try to keep it that way." In general, *open lines for your pieces and close lines for your opponent's pieces* (see [The Most Important Strategic Decisions](#)).

8. Rooks belong on open files.

- And semi-open files.
- And on the same file as the opponent's queen.
- And behind break moves.

Moving a rook just to say you moved a rook isn't that helpful unless the rook becomes more active. You can even activate rooks just by pushing the pawn in front of them or possibly by capturing with the pawn in front of them. "Whoever uses the rooks best usually wins the opening."

9. Slow down and look around.

Many of my students sometimes take longer to answer the question, "What are all your reasonable moves in this position?" than it took them to actually make their move in a game! If you don't see the entire board and consider all the reasonable things you can do, it makes it almost impossible to find which move is best or at least among the best. In this regard, it is helpful to remind the reader of the subtitle of my *Everyone's Second Chess Book*: "You can't play what you don't see."

10. Play aggressively.

One of my favorite sayings is "Always play with aggression, confidence, and respect for your opponent's moves and ideas." But if you play passively long enough, it may be entirely possible that you don't know what to do because there is no longer anything you can do. Aggressive play usually results in activity, threats, and ideas. Passive play often results in lack of mobility, facing constant threats, and, eventually, lack of meaningful choices.

11. You can't entirely approach the issue of "what to do" in every position by learning more principles.

Many positions are analytical. They require rolling up your sleeves and taking some time to do careful analysis (see [Hand-Waving is Worse than Hope Chess](#)). I recently received an email from someone who saw this advice in my Twitter "Chess Tip of the Day." He wrote that he always thought that he could play chess instinctively in every position if he just knew enough about the game. However, I finally woke him up to the fact that chess is not always that easy. In many positions you just have to do some hard work!

12. If worse comes to worse and you lose the game, join the club – but learn from your losses!

Show your games to stronger players and learn what they would do in the positions where you didn't (see [The Improvement Feedback Loop](#)). In many cases they will understand your concern and suggest a good idea or, very possibly, a strategy you could have employed *earlier* to avoid the position where you did not know what to do. No sense repeating the same mistake, so you don't know what to do next time, too. Unfortunately, sometimes your position is so bad that there is nothing you can do – then you should have done something different earlier.

No matter how you figure out what moves to make and what plans to adopt, there's no magic to it. Occasionally, pattern recognition will come to the rescue and provide a temporary shortcut, but often it's just taking time to figure things out.

Question Dan, I took your [tactics quiz](#) and got only four problems correct in 680 seconds. (I think that scores me around a zero or close to plankton intelligence level.) I timed out on at least five of the problems. I am a faithful user of the Internet free tactics server (FTS) where I am currently rated around 1115, but my overall success rate is sixty-six percent and I currently only get about one or two wrong per a problem set of ten. (I do ten to thirty problems daily.) I do have to take my time (no Hope chess) and I do see an interesting

correlation between the FTS rating and my slow game rating ICC, which is around 1135. Both of these ratings are improving and I am having a blast with chess in general. Anyways, your test was kind of depressing, since I have done more than 4,200 problems on the FTS and I was expecting a rating closer to my slow ICC or FTS ratings. Other tactics resources that I use are Fred Reinfeld's 1,001 combinations book (which I like), Wilson and Alberston's [303 Tricky Chess Puzzles](#) (which I have gone through once), and Livshitz's [Test Your Chess IQ](#) (which I found brutally difficult). Suggestions?

Answer Many of the tactics sets you are doing have too many difficult problems (see [the material here](#) and the links therein) – especially for your level.

Also, importantly, the latest tactics quiz is targeted differently than [A Tactics Quiz](#). *A Tactics Quiz* was meant to measure general competence, while last month's quiz was primarily meant to measure whether you have studied *Chess Tactics for Students* enough that going over it additional times would be very helpful. So you probably would do better on the earlier quiz if you have not taken it.

Most of my students prefer Chess Tempo to the Tactics Server. One reason is that timing is optional at Chess Tempo, where I suggest setting the problem level at 950-1250 for basic study.

For intermediate problems, the book [Winning Chess Exercises for Kids](#) by Coakley is great – much more advanced than the basic tactics study you need, but far superior to Reinfeld's classic *1,001 Winning Chess Sacrifices and Combinations* in every way: problem selection, problem type, and answer quality. It is the single highest rated book in terms of student feedback I have ever recommended.

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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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