



## The Most Common OTB Mistakes

**Quote of the Month:** *Even if you do know history you might be doomed to repeat it, unless ...*

After teaching hundreds of students for thousands of hours, I have sifted through the rubble to pick out the most common over-the-board (OTB) mistakes. The following problems are not in any particular order; however, they all occur quite frequently – and sometimes on the same move! Miscounting is probably the most significant error, while being careless and failing to develop one's pieces are the most common.

COLUMNISTS

### Novice Nook

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#### 1) Playing too fast because of overconfidence

Overconfidence is usually caused by one of two factors:

- You are winning easily, or
- You are playing a lower-rated opponent.

In either case, you probably do not expect much opposition and if you let your guard down, you are exposing yourself to any number of ways to lose. For example, if you use a “Hope Chess” thought process, then you are not checking to see if a candidate move can be answered by a check, capture, or threat. So you make your move too quickly, and then your opponent makes a threat (or check or capture) that you can't meet, and it's “Uh-oh!” time.

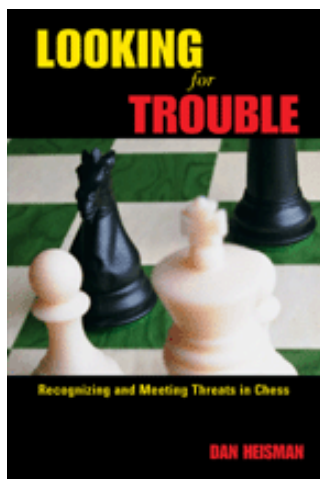
The further ahead you are, the more you have to lose, so that should make you *more* careful, not less. For instance, you would be more careful if you had \$3,000 in your pocket, than if you had \$3.00. *The more you have, the more you have to lose, and the more careful you should be.* It is far worse to lose a game by playing carelessly when you were winning easily, than to lose a game where you never had a chance and so had nothing to lose. That is also why you should take risks when behind, but play simply when ahead.

If you play too quickly against someone rated much lower than yourself, then the speed of your play is likely to lessen your rating advantage. For example, a player rated 500 points higher should win over 90% of the points, but suppose he loses 200 rating points of playing strength by moving too quickly, then he is only a 300 point favorite and is almost twice as likely to be upset.

#### 2) Not recognizing the critical moment

One definition of a **critical move** is *when missing the best move can possibly change the expected outcome of the game.* For instance, if your position goes from a win to a draw or a loss, or from a draw to a loss. It may even change your game from an easy win to a difficult win.

There are many things that can make a move critical, but they almost all fall



under one of two general categories: tactical complications or important strategic decisions (see *The Most Important Strategic Decisions*). The latter includes the following situations: the first move out of your “book,” almost all exchanges, changes in the pawn structure, decisions about where and when to attack, where to place your king, whether to defend passively or actively in the endgame, or when you see a move that seems to win.

If you can't recognize a critical position, then you are more likely to believe your move does not matter that much and as a result play it too fast. I have seen several competent intermediate players make a crucial mistake in the endgame and then slam on the breaks *on the very next move*, thinking: “What did I do?” If they had been more careful on their previous move, they likely would have realized the criticality of the situation and saved the game.

### **3) Playing too fast because of carelessness**

This problem is the bane of many fast players, who can't face the fact that it only takes one bad move to lose the game, and that move could come at almost any time. I am amazed how often my students move quickly in positions where grandmasters would fear to tread, on the assuredness that their seven seconds of analysis was sufficient to find the best move. It is a truism of chess that you can't be a good player if you just want to make a move and then see what happens. You have to know how you are going to answer your opponent's threats before he makes them, and not wait until after he has moved to ask yourself whether you can safely meet his threats.

### **4) Being overcautious**

Being overcautious is the exact opposite of being careless and it is almost as prevalent. A player with this problem is often frozen by the knowledge that every move could be the one that loses the game, and thus has difficulty making any move at all. This player will consistently take too long to make non-critical moves and end up in time-trouble. The result is that they either lose on time or have to make too many moves in too little time, increasing the chances of a blunder. In either case, the result is usually a loss. These players have to remember two things:

- In trying to avoid small errors, they are making a bigger mistake by risking a loss on time or blundering in time trouble, and
- It is generally not worthwhile to try and differentiate the subtle distinctions between two equivalent moves. So use general principles to make non-critical moves rather quickly. A good start is to make each non-critical move using considerably less time than the average move of the time control.

### **5) Guarding instead of moving**

There are often multiple ways to make a piece safe: move it out of harm's way, block the attack, guard the piece, capture the attacking piece, or counterattack. In any given situation there may only be one viable alternative. However, when the principal choices are moving the piece to safety or guarding it, there are several reasons to prefer moving the piece:

- Guarding ties down other units to the defense,
- The opponent may be able to pile on additional attackers, and you

either commit further resources to defensive functions or move the attacked piece anyway, and

- Guarding often allows the common tactic: *removal of the guard* (see #7 below).

## 6) Miscounting

This is a *raison d'être* of my quest to improve the way people learn to play chess. In this context, “Counting” covers any sequence of exchanges that can win or lose material. Counting occurs during the analysis of most moves and, if not addressed properly, it can result in a huge mistake. Here is a very simple example, where White has just played 1.Qg3?:

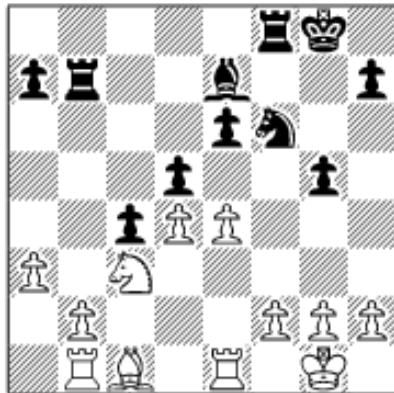


### Black to play

Black is attacking the e-pawn twice and it is only guarded once, so 1...dxe4 wins a pawn whether White recaptures or not. Instead, Black spent 46 seconds on his move and played **1...d4?**, which ironically moves the correct piece, but to the only *other* square to which it can move!

Note: If Black was way ahead in material, then wasting time winning a pawn might be counterproductive (see the [The Principle of Symmetry](#)).

Here is a very typical counting mistake! White has just played 1.Rb1 to protect the b2-pawn, so the bishop can capture on g5:



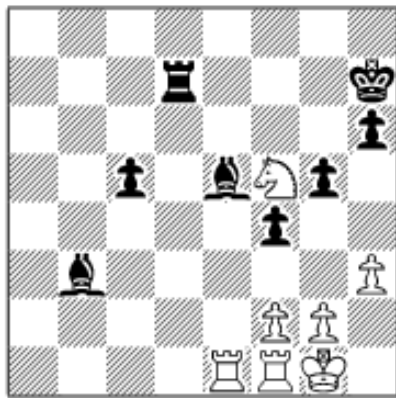
### Black to play

Black saw this threat and responded with **1...Nh5?** to allow his bishop on e7 to guard g5, but this overlooks the fact that the knight was guarding d5. So now White has two pieces attacking d5 and Black only has one defending. White simply played 2.exd5 winning another pawn.

I see this type of mistake more often than all the others combined. That is why *Novice Nook* leads a crusade to bring this most common and basic tactic to the attention of all chess instructors and students. For more on this error see [A Counting Primer](#), [The Most Important Tactic](#), and [Is it Safe?](#).

## 7) Allowing a removal of the guard tactic

This mistake was chronicled in [The Underrated Removal of the Guard](#), and it is as frequent today as it was in those ancient times. One player told me he even raised his rating from class “C” to class “A” primarily by studying this tactic!



### Black to play

White is threatening the bishop on e5, so Black should just move it. If he erroneously plays 1...Rd5?!, then 2.Ne7 attacks the rook. And 2...Rd7 does not help, as the capture 3.Rxe5 protects the knight and thus wins a piece. So, after 2.Ne7, Black should move the e5-bishop anyway, and “only” lose the exchange on 3.Nxd5. *A defending piece that can be captured or forced to move (usually via*

*attack from a lesser valued piece) is not really defending at all.*

Removal of the guard opportunities occur in many openings. We have seen the following example before, but it is worth repeating: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Ba4 Nf6 5.O-O Be7 6.Re1, when White defends e4 in a Ruy Lopez, it should signal Black to make e5 safe, but Black often errs with 6...O-O?.



### White to play

Now the simple 7.Bxc6 dxc6 8.Nxe5 wins a pawn, although White seems to miss this as often as Black allows it! In this line 8...Qd4 fails to 9.Nf3, and the further blunder 9...Bg4?? loses to the counting tactic 10.Nxd4 Bxd1 11.Rxd1, when Black loses his bishop. Instead of 6...O-O?, Black should have prevented the removal of the guard with the popular 6...b5 or the less common 6...d6.

Here's an example that features multiple mistakes: 1.e4 e6 2.d4 f5?! 3.Nc3 The simple 3...exf5 is also good. 3...Nf6 Black continues to attack e4. 4.Bd3 White defends, but *both* sides will miss that Bd3 *also* attacks f5 a second time (see #13)! 4...Bb4?



### White to play after 4...Bb4?

White can now play 5.exf5 winning a pawn. 5.Bd2? Instead, White makes the common mistake of paying too much attention to his opponent's last move and overlooking his own threats. Not only does 5.Bd2 fail to win the f-pawn, it *loses* a pawn since Black now has the simple removal of the guard tactic 5...Bxc3 6.Bxc3 fxe4. Note that 6...Nxe4? is not as good because of 7.Bxe4 fxe4 8.Qg4, with a

double attack on e4 and g7. The best way to save the e-pawn was to use it to win the f-pawn! 5...O-O? Black misses both winning the pawn *and* saving his pawn on f5. 6.Nf3?? Again failing to win the pawn with 6.exf5, and allowing

the removal of the guard 6...Bxc3 7.Bxc3 fxe4, which now wins a piece!  
**6...fxe4?** Still missing the removal of the guard. And both players thought they were meeting their opponent's threats adequately!

### 8) Not adjusting from one phase of the game to another, or not playing differently when way ahead or behind

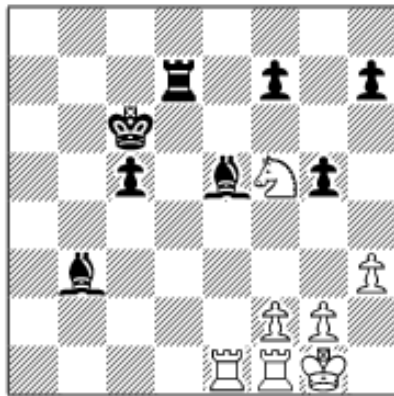
Examples of this mistake include:

- Playing for unnecessary complications when winning,
- Unnecessarily exchanging pieces when losing,
- Starting a premature attack when all the pieces are not developed,
- Not quickly activating your king in the endgame (even though it is safe), and
- Not paying attention to your opponent's chances when way ahead.

This error also has a *Novice Nook* devoted to it: [The Six Common Chess States](#).

### 9) Counterattacking a guarded rook when an unguarded minor piece is attacked

We have encountered this common counting problem before. Here are two examples from recent online games:



#### Black to play

White is threatening 2.Rxe5, and Black should either move the bishop with 1...Bf6 or guard it by 1...f6. Instead, Black takes 14 seconds (*less than the game's time increment!*) and plays **1...Bc4??**. Black thinks that he is threatening to win a rook, but "winning a rook" means you capture a rook and your opponent captures nothing. Here White will happily play **2.Rxe5 Bxf1 3.Kxf1**. Before 1...Bc4?? Black was about

equal; afterwards he is losing.

The following example is similar, except that the defender thinks he should save the rook instead of taking the two pieces.



#### Black to play after 1.Nxg6?

Black should scoop up two pieces for the rook with 1...exd3. Instead, he played 1...Rf7?.

If you don't understand these examples or if you've ever made this mistake yourself, study them until you know it cold!

### 10) Not developing *all* your pieces

Unless you are in a “book” position, try to follow the important beginner guideline: “Don’t move any piece twice until you move every piece once, except if there is a tactic.” Here the word “piece” does not refer to pawns. A tactic is a forced sequence that wins material or checkmates, and does *not* include a defensible threat.

Here is a typical “opening” dialog between me and a student:

Me: “Why don’t you just bring out your bishop and castle?”

Student: “Because I wanted to ... (insert a reason that is much less relevant or impossible to achieve).”

Me: “This part of chess is easy; your main goal in the opening is to safely and efficiently develop all of your forces. I would just get out my bishop and castle.”

Most of my students show immediate and noticeable improvement once they follow this principle. *It is usually far better to develop a piece that has not moved than it is to move a piece that is already developed.*

### 11) Making threats that are easily parried

There are only three times you should *consider* making a threat:

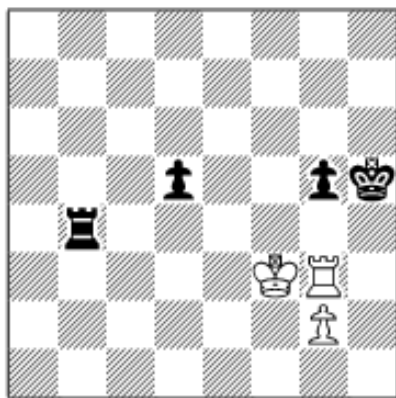
- If it cannot be met,
- If it can be met, but in doing so the tempo you spend is more useful than the one your opponent employs in meeting the threat (see [It’s Not Really Winning Tempo!](#)), or
- If you are so far behind that you have nothing to lose by attempting a swindle.

However, many players make threats just to make threats, hoping their opponent might “miss” it. To assume your opponent is going to overlook your threat is almost always a bad idea. Here’s an example: **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.O-O 4.c3** is the most common move. **4.Ng5??** is met by **4...Qxg5 4...Nf6 5.Ng5?** White threatens both **6.Nxf7** and **6.Bxf7+**, but they are both easily parried.



**5...O-O** and White’s 5<sup>th</sup> move just looks silly since **6.Nxf7? Rxf7 7.Bxf7+ Kxf7** loses material. Yes, a bishop and knight are, on average, worth more than a rook and pawn! So **5.Ng5** clearly does not fall under any of the three “threat” criteria – it fails #2 because **5...O-O** helps Black far more than **5.Ng5** helps White.

**12) Overlooking that your move can be easily refuted by a check, capture, or threat**

**Black to play**

Black saw that he could exchange rooks with 1...Rb3+ 2.Kf2 Rxc3. However, he was not sure if it was an easy win. (It was – “Trade pieces when winning.”). Therefore, with 27 minutes on his clock, he took 7 (!) seconds to threaten to win the rook by **1...Kh4??** and ended up with a sleepless night after White replied **2.Rh3#**. Had Black properly asked himself, “If I go 1...Kh4, what are all my opponent’s

checks, captures, and threats?” he would quickly find 2.Rh3#. We could also use this example under #3: “Playing too fast because of carelessness.”

**13. Not asking yourself, “What are *all* the reasons my opponent made that move?”**

*Everyone’s 2<sup>nd</sup> Chess Book* devotes the entire chapter “Just Because it’s Forced” to this problem. A player’s opponent makes a move and the player thinks “Why did my opponent make that move?” and, when he comes up with one answer, he stops, satisfied. Unfortunately a move can have more than one purpose, so if you miss any reason, the game could be over! Whenever your opponent makes a move, first ask yourself “*Is It Safe?*,” then ask “*What are all the reasons he made that move; what are all the things he can do now that he could not do before?*”

**Black to play**

In this position, White has a strong attack and is obviously threatening 2.Qh8#. Black plays **1...Kf8** and White thinks that the only reason for this move was to avoid checkmate. So White continues his attack with **2.Bg6??** allowing **2...gxh6** capturing the queen! White needed to ask “What are *all* the things that 1...Kf8 does?” Then he probably would have seen that the g-pawn is no longer pinned on the g-file. Similar

situations happen all the time.

**14. Repeatedly making the same opening mistake**

Weaker players often make opening moves that don’t follow opening principles (see *Opening Principles*), are tactically deficient, or are just innocuous (e.g. *The Most Common Opening Inaccuracies*). In many cases they could just pick up an opening manual to learn that another move is preferable or that there is a known refutation to the move they played. Instead, they just keep making the same mistake. When I was a beginner, I wore out my copy of *Modern Chess Openings* with all the curiosity I could muster. My vow to never make the same opening mistake twice was a big catalyst toward achieving a 1900 rating after two years of serious play.

It is a strange paradox that so many players spend hours memorizing opening

lines before their games, but won't spend minutes afterwards to avoid making the same mistake in commonly occurring lines!

### Conclusion

There are only two ways to improve your chess game: add positives and subtract negatives. If you make any of the mistakes I've mentioned in this article (and chances are you make more than one!), then recognizing this and eliminating these negatives may do more for your game than adding 1,000 positives.

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

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