



Criticality Quiz

Quote of the Month: *Take more time on critical moves.*

Any decision that may strongly affect the rest of the game can be critical. This of course includes complicated positions that may contain tactics. Therefore, you must approach a critical move carefully, often devoting detailed analysis to the position. For instance, suppose you recognize your position as one where there is much potential danger and, with superficial analysis, all plausible moves might lose. Then you could consume most of your remaining time to find a move that puts up resistance. At the other extreme, a move in a non-critical position can often be played quickly – but not immediately! – using general principles.

COLUMNISTS

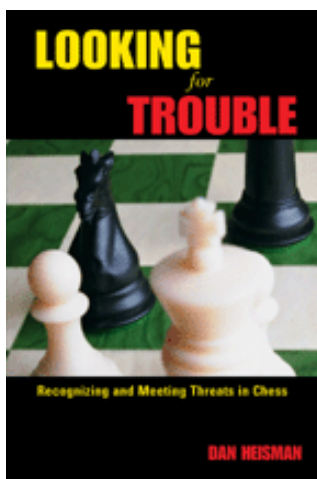
Novice Nook

Dan Heisman

Much of time management is dependent on criticality assessment: the ability to correctly allocate time to a move is dependent upon the ability to assess criticality. Therefore, criticality assessment is a prerequisite for achieving a high playing strength. Being able to identify when a move is critical has been discussed in several Novice Nooks, most notably [The Two Move Triggers](#) and [The Most Important Strategic Decisions](#).

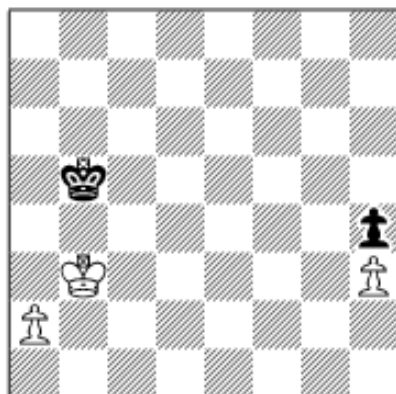
This month we put the reader to the test:

Rate the criticality of the following positions; use a scale of 0 = non-critical to 10 = the most critical. Answers and explanations are given at the end of the quiz.

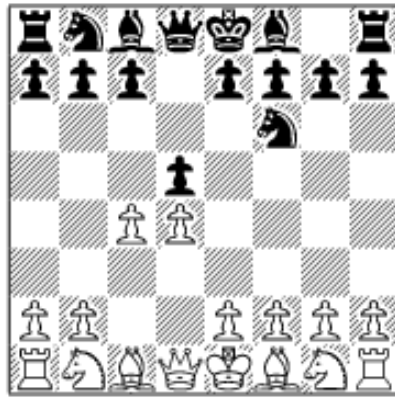


1. Black to move

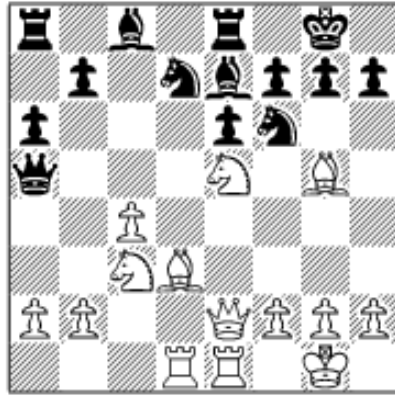
Yes, that's a white queen on d8!



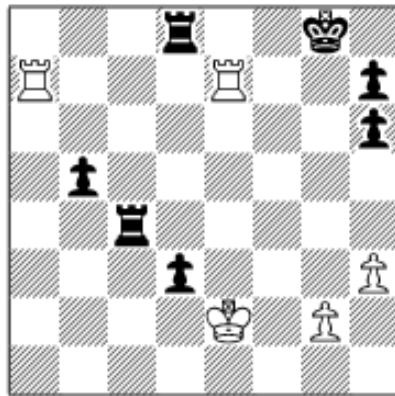
2. White to move



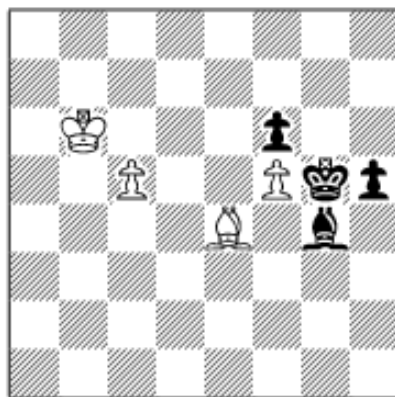
3. White to move



4. White to move

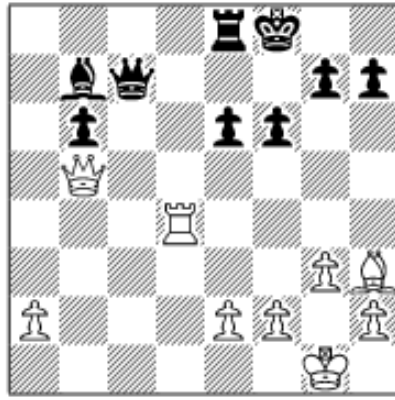


5. White to move

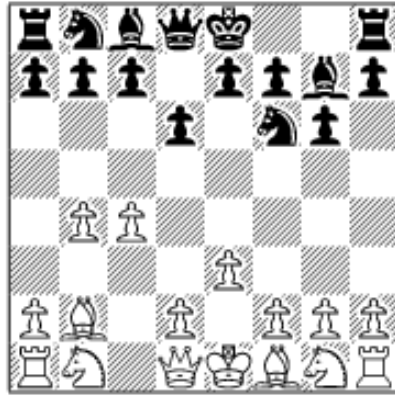


6. Black to move

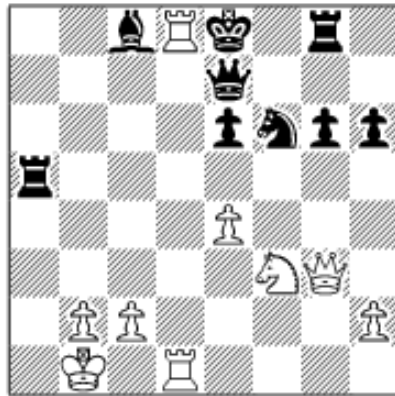
7. White to move



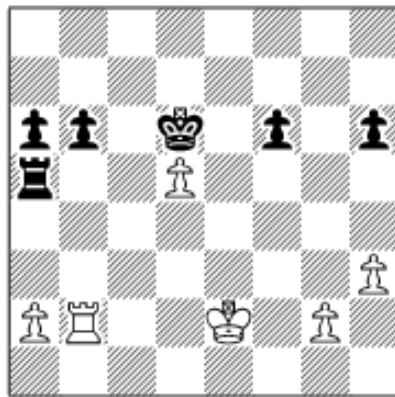
8. White to move



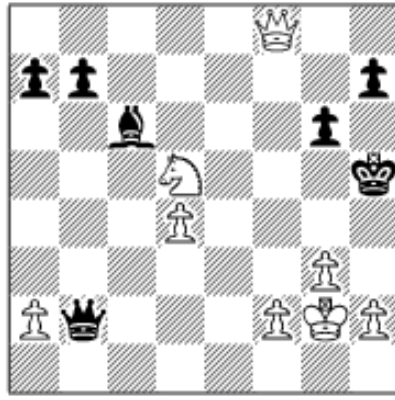
9. Black to move



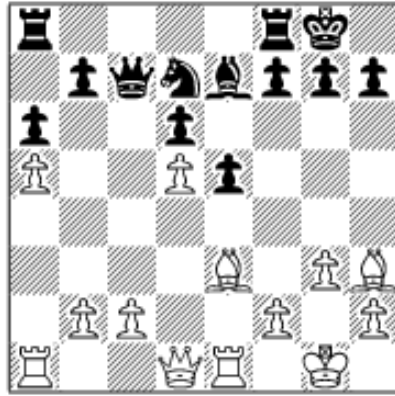
10. Black to move



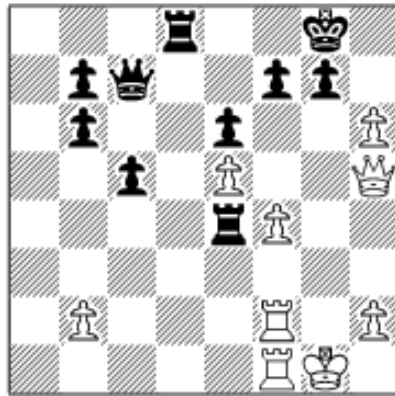
11. White to move



12. Black to move



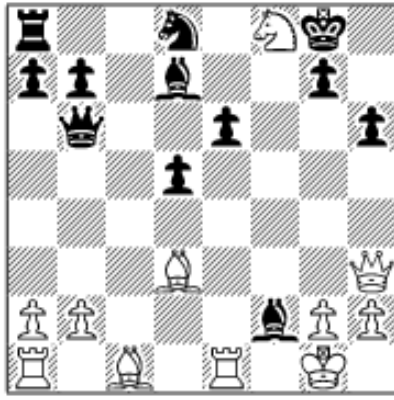
13. Black to move



14. Black to move



15. White to move



1. CR (criticality rating) **0** – This problem was placed first to illustrate my definition of “critical.” Of course, it could be considered “ultimately critical” that Black play $1\dots Kxd8$, and not the silly $1\dots Kf7??$. However, to be consistent with the idea of criticality and its relation to important decision making, *I define trivial recaptures as non-critical*, especially when there is no reasonable alternative. So $1\dots Kxd8$ should be played with little additional thought. Note that *there is no reason for Black to take time to see what White is going to do next*. Even if White has a terrific attack after $1\dots Kxd8$, Black may as well recapture immediately, as otherwise he is down a queen. Remember, *your job is to find the best move you can given the circumstances, not necessarily figure out what is going to happen after the best move*.

2. CR **9** – This problem is just about as critical as it gets. White has to determine *now* whether or not to push the a-pawn. The answer is “No!” Because it places the pawn closer to the black king and allows a draw. White has to begin the race with $1.Kc3$. The two reasons that it is not a level CR10 are:

- White would go from a win to a draw, not a win to a loss, and
- White can repeat the position by $1.Ka3 Ka5$ (or $1\dots Kc5$ $2.Kb3$ $2.Kb3 Kb5$) before making his winning dash. Note the white king must occupy one of the key squares g7 or g8 in order to win (which he can).

3. CR **4** – Black has played the opening inaccurately and *now* is the time to make him pay (in a small way) by $3.cxd5 Nxd5$ $4.Nf3$ and then e4. If White waits even one move with $3.Nc3$, then Black can transpose back into a Slav via $3\dots c6$, Queen’s Gambit Declined by $3\dots e6$, or Grünfeld with $3\dots g6$, etc. This is certainly not the most critical move you will ever play. In fact, it is far less critical than many middlegame and endgame decisions, because White will still retain his normal advantage, but it could be a little greater after $3.cxd5$. In any case, *the first move that takes you out of your “book” is always at least somewhat critical*.

4. CR **3** – Sharp early middlegame positions are often critical – but not always. One way to tell the criticality of a move is to analyze it with a computer and note the difference in evaluation between the top recommendations. If the difference between the first move and the last is slight, then the position must be less critical. Here White has no blockbuster continuation, so the position is less critical – any good idea will likely leave White on top. To take a lot of time on this move would be a terrible mistake, but so would taking too little time and playing the first move you see. For example, if you think the best idea is to sacrifice $1.Nxf7 Kxf7$ $2.Qxe6+$ (it isn’t), then you should take much longer because you would be making a critical sacrifice. The top PC program *Rybka* considers $1.Bf4$ the best move. The move I chose, $1.f4$, was rated third best, but “only” 0.18 pawns worse in a deep analysis. So it was not critical to find $1.Bf4$, still I took a few minutes to investigate $1.Nxf7$ and reject it as too speculative.

5. CR **8** – In every game, the losing move is always critical! As is any move that turns a win into a draw. If you can identify when such a move might be present, then you should also realize you are making a critical decision, and you should take your time. Here, White

has a saving perpetual on the seventh rank, so it is critical that he not allow Black to prevent the drawing sequence. However, White mistakenly played 1.Kd2?, allowing Black the winning 1...Rc2+ 2.K(any) Rxc2 winning. Nevertheless, after this mistake by White, Black did not recognize the criticality of his move and *lost* by 1...b4?? 2.Rg7+ Kf8 3.Rxh7 Rc2+ 4.Kd1 b3?? It is always critical to see a checkmate pattern and stop it in time! 5.Rh8#. I bet Black will recognize this pattern next time! By the way, a good guideline is that *endgame moves are much more likely to be critical than ones in the opening or middlegame*. Therefore, make sure to save sufficient time to play the endgame.

6. CR 10 – This is another ultra-critical endgame position, where one move draws – and all the rest lose! This position was featured in my book [Looking for Trouble](#). My opponent, Expert Neal Oberholtzer, played brilliantly in time trouble and found the only saving move: **1...Kf4!!** I had been counting on a win, but I had to settle for a draw after Neal played this great move!

7. CR 2 – This kind of position often causes confusion with regard to criticality. According to a 15-ply search by [Rybka](#), there is only a tiny 0.18 difference between the top sixteen moves! It does not get much more non-critical than that! So long as White does not fall into a trap, all reasonable moves give about the same chances! Thus, the criticality is very low, as in number one, but there is much more choice involved. For example, at 18-ply the seemingly promising 1.Rd7 Qc1+ 2.Bf1 Bc6 3.Qb4+ Qc5, with a very small advantage to White, is only the third choice. Therefore, White should not take a long time to decide on his move – *once he determines that no one move is much better than another* – because there is very little difference between the remaining reasonable moves. If you understand the process of weeding out safe, final candidate moves, and can identify non-critical positions and consequently play relatively quickly by using general principles, then you are probably on your way to becoming a pretty good player.

8. CR 0 – A typical non-contact opening where most any good developmental move will do. Want to move out either knight? That's OK. Be2 first? No big deal. Grab the center with d4? Yes, again quite reasonable. The only thing that can go wrong is if you take an excessive amount of time figuring out what to do in a non-critical position such as this! Remember, *when the choices are nearly equal, you should use general principles and spend less time!* If you want to determine whether one move is slightly better than another, save this contemplation for before or after the game!

9. CR 10 – You can tell from the complications, right? Black only has two moves and at first it looks like he should give up the queen for two rooks by 1...Qxd8, because the alternative 1...Kf7 runs into 2.Ne5+ and if 2...Kg7, then 3.Qxg6+ is curtains. But deeper analysis shows the “sacrifice” 1...Kf7 2.Ne5+?? Rxe5! is winning for Black, as the white rook on d8 is loose, and 1...Qxd8 2.Rxd8 Kxd8 3.Qd6+! is a winning attack for White. Even if you don't see this line, but can see that 1...Kf7 2.Ne5+?? Rxe5! is winning for Black, that would tell you that 1...Kf7 is probably safer. When the pieces are flying or there are multiple capturing sequences, then the position is probably pretty critical!

10. CR 7 – Questions to ask yourself here are:

- Should I trade pawns with 1...Kxd5 2.Rxb6?,
- Should I just save my pawn with 1...b5?, or
- Is it to my advantage to offer the trade of rooks with 1...Rb5?

The latter is the course I chose, and it is *very* critical compared to the alternatives, as any time you offer to go into a king and pawn endgame, you had better be very sure – with painstaking analysis – that you are getting what you want. In these kinds of positions my students often move quickly and, after reviewing their time management, I exclaim “How can you make that move so fast?!” In the game, after 1...Rb5 2.Rxb5 axb5, the king and pawn endgame was very difficult. I managed to win, but only after several errors by both sides. Still, we played slowly – at one point I took twenty minutes on a move, then my

opponent took twenty, and then I took another twenty! It turns out that I should have kept the pressure on with 1...b5; however, such choices are anything but easy! This decision is not like example number six, where only one move saves the game, but it is certainly above average on the criticality scale.

11. CR 9 – Here I could force a draw as White, but it seemed as if I should be able to win, so I knew the position was critical and used most of my time. Yet, I did not realize that I would have to abandon my knight and mate with my queen, king, and pawns! There are two ways to do that: 1.g4+! Kh4 2.Qh6+ Kxg4 40.Qf4+ Kh5 41.Kg3! and the even more spectacular 1.Kh3! Bd7+ (1...Bxd5? 2.g4+ Kg5 3.f4# is pretty) 2.g4+! Bxg4+ Three checks in a row! 3.Kg2 and White's threats cannot be stopped. Instead, I settled for the draw by 1.Qf3+, but I racked my brain until my waning clock finally convinced me to take the draw!

12. CR 3 – The most important thing for Black to understand here is that his advantage lies with his kingside majority, so to delay 1...f5 is a disaster. White is a little better in any case, but one has to use the strengths of the position. According to [Rybka](#), the second best move is 1...Rad8, although putting the rook behind the fixed pawn could only serve to guard the knight, so that the queen can move. This move is rated only 0.07 behind 1...f5, so it is not as critical as many of the others in the quiz.

13. CR 9 – If Black is to survive, he must keep the kingside closed. Therefore, capturing with 1...gxh6?? is a losing proposition. Instead, Black should try to use the white h-pawn as a shield and play 1...g6! This move keeps both the g- and h-files closed, plus attacks the white queen. In the game Black answered White's capture of the h-pawn with the unprincipled automatic recapture 1...gxh6?? and lost quickly. Notice that since the h6-square is attacked more than it is defended, *Black cannot regain his lost h-pawn regardless*.

14. 8 – It is fairly critical that Black find the calm defense 1...Nh6 (worth at least half a pawn) to stay in the game. All other defenses lose at least a pawn. As usual, tactics trump positional considerations. Normally *a knight on the rim is grim*, but here the value of the pawn is more important – that's why it's imperative to be able to prioritize general principles (see [The Big Five](#) and [The Theory of Tactical Dominance](#)).

15. CR 10 – The funny thing about this problem is that many players might assess the criticality correctly, but for the wrong reason! White only has two legal moves, and it might seem critical to play 1.Kf1, but because of the hanging knight on f8 and bishop on d7, it turns out that 1.Kf1? loses and the “bad” 1.Kh1!! wins. In this sense this position is the antithesis of number one. The key line for each reply is: 1.Kf1? Bxe1, when Black is threatening mate on f2, and if 2.Kxe1, then 2...Kxf8 is very good for Black. But after 1.Kh1!! Bxe1, then 2.Nxd7 hitting the queen does major damage. This example shows that similar positions may yield vastly different solutions! This position can be categorized as an advanced Counting problem involving captures on multiple squares (see [The Most Important Tactic](#)), and I would expect only stronger players to get this problem correct for the right reasons.

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



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