



## Getting the Edge

**Quote of the Month:** *You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink.*

As a full-time chess instructor I try to advise my students on the best and most efficient ways to improve. However, as noted in several *Novice Nooks*, notably [Chess, Learning, and Fun](#), chess work has to be fun or you should not do it. Chess is a hobby for all of my students. Therefore, *in the long run* amateur players will – and should – only do what is fun, no matter how much a certain activity may help.

Below I list my *least* followed advice: the suggestions I make that are followed by the smallest percentage of students. By turning this around and following all – or almost all – of the advice, the reader will surely **Get the Edge** over most of their rivals on future improvement!

For each suggestion I will provide:

- The advice.
- Why it is helpful.
- Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow the advice (most common reasons: it's not fun or they don't fully realize how much it could help them if they did it).
- The consequences of not following the advice.

If a student decides not to follow my advice, he should tell me – I won't get upset. If doing so is not fun or is too time consuming, I will understand, and won't expect it to be done. That keeps expectations equivalent for both parties. Of course, I hope the student would also understand that their progress may be affected as described below.

The reader should decide for themselves if the subsequent advice is both worthwhile and sufficiently fun. If so, reap the benefits!

**1) The advice:** Review each of your games, identifying opening (and other) mistakes with the goal of not repeatedly making the same mistake.

**Why it is helpful:** One of the most meaningful things someone can do to improve at anything is to identify your mistakes and misconceptions and set up an "improvement loop" to help avoid repeating those mistakes. It is especially critical not to continually fall into opening traps – or even lines that result in difficult positions – by reviewing opening moves in an opening encyclopedia or database. One should be able to answer the question: "If my opponent played the same way next time, where would I deviate?" In the middlegame and endgame, review the game with a strong player or, at worst, a computer (which can at least indicate tactical mistakes). The goal is to confidently feel that you would know what to do if the same pattern arose.

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** Reviewing is not as much fun as playing, and it can be somewhat time consuming. This is ironic because so many players love buying and studying opening books, sometimes taking enormous amounts of time trying to memorize lines that rarely occur in games. It is far more efficient to learn not to repeat one's mistakes. Looking up an opening after a game involves learning how to use a book like *Modern Chess Openings-14* (see [How to Use MCO-14](#)) or a database, finding a strong player, or loading your game into a chess engine.

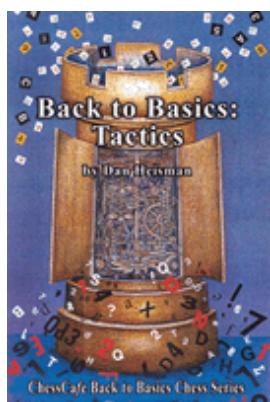
**What happens when it is not followed:** The player repeatedly makes the same mistakes and doesn't learn the proper patterns. That player's improvement either halts or suffers serious setbacks.

**2) The advice:** Read many annotated [game collections](#) (review each game relatively quickly).

## COLUMNISTS

### Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



## CHESSTHEATRE

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

[The Complete DGT Product Line](#)

**Why it is helpful:** Many of the best players and instructors have written books and articles to help future generations. By looking at entire games, the aspiring player learns about openings, middlegames, and endgames all at one fell swoop. Playing through annotated games spurs improvement as the reader learns how good players consistently handle common positions and problems.

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** It takes quite a bit of time (even more so, since players often read these games too slowly) and, for some, it is not fun. Treating each game like a mystery tale, where you find out how the winner takes advantage of his strengths and his opponent's weaknesses, is a good way to maximize the fun of reviewing each game.

**What happens when it is not followed:** A player who does not read annotated game collections is slower to learn how to handle common positions and problems, good planning, and technique. The best way to learn about many key aspects of chess is to play over a considerable number of annotated master games. On the other hand, playing over the same game repetitiously, or too slowly, has two drawbacks:

- A player gets diminishing returns on multiple reads of the same game and, even more importantly,
- It is far more beneficial to read how multiple authors describe similar situations. One author's text in a particular game can be prejudiced, incomplete, or even incorrect. However, if you read works from a dozen authors, it is not only more interesting and memorable, but also probably likely homing in on the "truth" of the situation.

**3) The advice:** Play as many very slow games as possible (where the game is played with a clock, and each player has at least one hour to complete the game).

**Why it is helpful:** Slow chess is still the dominant form for providing prestige and titles. Moreover, slow chess has superb instructional value. For example, the best blitz players in the world are, for the most part, the best slow players. They got to be superb at blitz because slow play builds up information in their long-term memory as to how to recognize and play many types of positions, both tactical and strategic. Thus, in fast games the top slow players quickly recognize the problems of the position – and the solutions – and still play very well. Slow chess improves visualization – moving the pieces around in your head for twenty minutes on a move reaches analysis depth not possible in fast chess, affords opportunities to practice good criticality assessment and related "micro" time management, and builds knowledge of positions into long-term memory for later retrieval in all types of games. Slow chess also has other well-known benefits, such as teaching players the rewards of patience and the ability to live with their decisions, etc. It should be noted that playing "slow" games without a clock loses some of the key benefits, while playing games at a slow time control, but playing much too quickly, loses almost all the benefits (see [Slowing Down](#)).

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** Slow chess does not have the addictive adrenaline rush of blitz games and requires considerably more time at one sitting. In addition, sometimes the player needs a little knowledge and/or proactive searching to find appropriate opponents, both online and at local clubs.

**What happens when it is not followed:** The player does not achieve the listed benefits. I find players that do not play much slow chess have poor time management when they do, have trouble with visualization and, in general, don't improve as rapidly as those that can play a steady diet of good opponents in slow games.

**4) The advice:** Use about ten percent of playing time for fast games.

**Why it is helpful:** Because playing all slow chess or all blitz chess misses the best instructional benefits offered by both. Playing fast chess provides:

- Great opening practice per unit time (and less "penalty" for falling into traps),
- Practice of time management for time trouble aspects of slow play,
- Practice for building technique (winning won positions),
- More practice per unit time for pattern recognition (both for general board vision and specific patterns),
- Help for developing a quick feel for danger, and

- Opportunity to develop criticality analysis skills to help a player decide which moves require more thought.

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** Blitz players often think that they can get much better playing exclusively fast games. Slow players often resist quick games because either it is not “real” chess, or it is “too fast for me,” or the clock is not an important part of chess, so playing fast is antithetical to making “good moves.”

**What happens when it is not followed:** The player does not get enough chance to practice their openings. Time trouble in slow games remains a terrifying place never to be conquered. Practicing varied board positions is more difficult, and there are less “fun” games to practice technique and experiment with unclear sacrifices to evaluate them better in more important games. The player slowly or, more likely, never fully develops the criticality analysis necessary for properly deciding which moves are more critical.

**5) The advice:** Play fast games with the same increment as in meaningful games.

**Why it is helpful:** If your goal is to be a good over-the-board player (such as to get titles or championships), then you are going to have to play over-the-board chess at some point. But each federation has suggested time limits. For example, the USCF (United States Chess Federation) has a preference for digital clocks and a five-second time delay in slow games. But many serious games come “down to the wire” where quick thinking is rewarded, and learning how to best pace yourself is very important. If you cannot play intelligently with little time on your clock and a five second time delay, you are at a huge disadvantage. But online play offers increments, which are similar to time delay. Anyone who can play accurately with a five-second increment can probably play just about as well with a five second time delay. So to best get accustomed to this important skill, fast games, over-the-board and online, should primarily be played with the same increment as required by your national federation.

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** Older experienced players are used to “five minute” chess where there is no time delay. This “race condition” play is more difficult than time delay and requires a somewhat different skill set. Others like the adrenaline and randomness of bullet games. Another reason is that online services are not interested in helping your over-the-board play, and thus have no proactive program to encourage online games at that time limit. For example, the Internet Chess Club, by popular demand, has a separate rating system for five minute play, but none for the equivalent, and more helpful, two minutes with a five second increment time limit.

**What happens when it is not followed:** Depending upon their experience, players who practice the wrong speed time controls and then get into time trouble in important over-the-board games either play too fast (because they are used to zero increment games where every extra fraction of a second counts) or play too slow (because they are playing games with either too large an increment or possibly not playing the fast games at all). Either way can be equally disastrous to your results, since the error usually occurs in very critical situations.

**6) The advice:** Go over your games with your opponents.

**Why it is helpful:** Even if your opponent is not as strong as you are, it is likely you can learn something from him. For example, you might be a better analyst and a higher rated player, but he might be a better evaluator, or know the opening better. In any case, even asking your opponent “What would you have done if I had done this?” or “What do you think was the losing move?” gives you insight into how the opponent thinks: their fears, their misconceptions, etc. Also, going over the game with your opponent gives you a chance to analyze without a computer or a very strong player, so you can test your “moving the pieces” analysis skill before getting information that will prejudice your thinking. This gives you more raw data with which to improve your analysis and evaluation skills. Of course, when a stronger player does chime in, it is usually so much the better.

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** Some players have legitimate reasons: a more pressing engagement or they have no desire to improve. But, for the most part, weaker players do not go over the games with their opponents because they don’t realize how much it will help in the long run, or they are afraid they will have a bad social experience, or they don’t know what they are looking for.

**What happens when it is not followed:** An amazing opportunity is lost. I can't tell you how much I learned from the many hours going over my club and tournament games with my opponents and others. I was like a sponge, absorbing what everyone had to say, and comparing it to my feelings during the game. Lacking this vital feedback about your thoughts and play is definitely a drawback in any rapid improvement plans.

**7) The advice:** Study general opening principles, not lots of lines in opening books.

**Why it is helpful:** In almost all the games you ever play, you will find yourself "out of book" – on your own – at some point, no matter how much you try to learn or memorize opening lines. And once you do, your playing strength reverts to your normal rating. I am always amazed at how little my intermediate adult students know about or follow general opening principles: they don't know where to safely put their king or when to push a rook pawn, or when to get their pieces in front of or behind pawns, etc. Yet they think the answer to their problems is to buy another opening book, lock themselves in a closet, and memorize it for the next event (when their opponents either avoid the opening directly or play some rare line that is just bad, but they have no idea how to take advantage of it because "it is not in the book").

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** Learning opening principles seems too vague. Besides, the most palatable way of doing this is to review many annotated master games and, as we have seen in #2, they don't find this interesting either!

**What happens when it is not followed:** Once a player gets out of their "book" they start to play inferior moves and their game often deteriorates. Then they complain either "I need to study the book more" or "I got all my pieces out, but then I did not know what to do." The latter is not uncommon since, by not following good development principles, the pieces are often developed to unpromising or inactive positions.

**8) The advice:** Practice Good Time Management.

**Why it is helpful:** Both micro and macro time management are very underrated in chess literature as to how important they are to proper results. Proper micro time management (allocating more time to critical moves) ensures that you apply more time to the moves where you get more "bang for the buck": critical or complicated tactical positions. Proper macro time management (using up almost all your time each game, assuming it is not a miniature) ensures that you could not have spent any more – or less – effort on the entire game. You did the best you could, using up all your time and avoiding severe time trouble.

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** Many players grew up playing chess without a clock, and so don't understand the importance of the clock in competitive play. Others play way too fast or too slow, and changing these bad habits is sometimes very difficult for them: fast players find slowing down to be boring or don't know what to think about; slow players often have excessive fear of making a mistake, even in non-critical positions where the tenth best move is almost as good as the best move.

**What happens when it is not followed:** The main results are either ruinous time trouble (for players that play too slow), playing way below your potential level (for players that play too fast), or making enormous mistakes on critical moves (for those that can't recognize criticality correctly or play too fast even if they understand the entire game is on the line).

**9) The advice:** Don't worry about your rating or losing rating points.

**Why it is helpful:** Ratings are no more than an accurate reflection of your playing strength. If your rating is too low, it will improve just by normal play. If it is too high, then it is not deserved, so unless you want to quit forever, the only way to get it to that level is to improve. Not worrying about your rating, and instead concentrating on your playing strength, helps you make intelligent decisions about how to improve your game instead of "protecting" or artificially manipulating your rating. In general, playing makes you a better player and eventually raises your rating, while not playing, for whatever reason, is usually counterproductive.

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** Because ratings are so accurate, over-the-board and online chess has become a "class" society, where a player's rating grants prestige and status. Most new players, who start out playing for fun, unfortunately soon

fall victim to the lure of rating status, and begin worrying about their rating instead of playing for fun and learning. It is ironic that *if you play for fun and learning, then your rating will eventually go up and, if you worry about your rating and try to protect it, then it probably won't!*

**What happens when it is not followed:** Players who worry about their ratings often stop playing the kind of players who will help their game or, even worse, stop playing altogether because they become so rating conscious. I had a college roommate, who loved chess, but stopped playing because he got his rating up to 1800 and wanted to maintain it there forever.

**10) The advice:** Repetitively study easy tactics until you can do them quickly and accurately.

**Why it is helpful:** The main reason is defense! In my experience, most intermediate players find basic tactics “too simple” – so long as there is a sign saying “White to play and win” and they are white! But turn that same situation around: don’t put up any signs and make the same tactic *the opponent’s possible reply* to their candidate move. Now the question involves their candidate move: “Is it safe?” and those same intermediate players have to find their opponent’s tactic before committing to their move, without warning, and often miss it. *But if you are so familiar with the pattern that you know it upside down and inside out, then you can see it upside down from your side of the board and won’t play that losing move.*

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** Many players find repetitively drilling basic tactics boring. But one can always make it into a game by taking statistics, trying to break your timing or percentage records, etc. Just as importantly, they may figure such study is unnecessary because “they never miss those tactics,” but they are not missing them *on offense*. However, those tactics are not too easy to study if those players consistently miss them on defense.

**What happens when it is not followed:** From the above, it is apparent that the main problem for intermediates is that players don’t consistently realize which of their moves are not safe (“Hope Chess”). For beginners, of course, a fundamental problem is that they miss these tactics both on offense and defense.

**11) The advice:** Be proactive about attending clubs or becoming involved in chess. Support chess through your national chess federation.

**Why it is helpful:** Chess includes everything from grassroots at the local level through the national federations and grandmasters. While few suggest that average players should start a support fund for a country’s grandmasters, joining a national federation goes a long way toward supporting chess in general. This support extends not only to grandmasters but all the way back to those same grassroots players. For example, players who would never join the USCF still wanted to root for Bobby Fischer in Iceland in 1972 or Hikaru Nakamura today, but don’t stop to think that these players would not be able to represent the US without the members of the USCF supporting them via their dues.

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** They think “it’s not worth the money” or “I don’t play enough over-the-board to justify joining,” instead of “By joining I am supporting chess in my country and around the world.”

**What happens when it is not followed:** National federations need a consistent number of members to develop and support ongoing programs. If programs are constantly being funded and then cut back or cancelled, not only do the targets of those programs suffer, such as scholastic groups, the national magazine, and strong players, but eventually so do all chess players.

**12) The advice:** Create your own personalized study book of positions from your games.

**Why it is helpful:** Most players believe that the primary way to improve is by reading chess books, but that approach only “adds positives” (see [The Theory of Chess Improvement](#)). However, when your rating gets stuck, it is often because you are not subtracting negatives: you repeatedly make the same mistakes and never shed your misconceptions. One way to help minimize the recurrence of mistakes is to identify and study them. So create a unique [study book](#) that contains positions where you made errors

that you don't wish to repeat. Under each position list: what you did, why it was wrong, and what you should have done, and why. Study the book like you would a puzzle book, about once per month. Enter each page in a three-ring binder. If you find that you recognize some errors and would "never do that again," then put those in a second section behind a separator, and only study those every six months (just to make sure!).

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** It takes a little impetus to get started. Today most players either play games online or put their over-the-board games into a computer program, so printing out positions where you made mistakes should be easy. Of course, you need a way to identify your mistakes. For basic tactical patterns a chess engine will do, but other mistakes may be more difficult to recognize. For example, suppose your mistake was taking seven minutes to decide where to put your bishop on move six and then you got into unnecessary time trouble and lost. Hopefully you can recognize that taking that much time was a big mistake and will be able to put that position in your book, noting that taking less time and using general principles to guide your decision as to where the bishop belonged would have left valuable time for later.

**What happens when it is not followed:** The chances of making the same mistakes are increased.

**13) The advice:** Until you get to be a fairly good player, *don't have a "better idea"* (than following well-known principles/guidelines).

**Why it is helpful:** One has to learn how to walk before one can run. In elementary school there is no sense in attempting to learn multiplication before addition. Similarly, in chess there is no sense in spending huge amounts of thinking time figuring out when there are exceptions to general principles if one doesn't understand *and routinely follow* general principles. In my experience, a player has to be fairly highly rated (1700+ FIDE, depending on the principle) before it becomes worthwhile to spend time investigating the violation of principles. Players rated any lower are much better off just learning and following principles than wasting time trying to break them.

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** Because it is more "fun" and "creative" to try to break principles, and more restrictive and methodological to follow them. Unfortunately, if you are trying to improve, it is sometimes better to start with something methodological until you develop enough basic skills to try to be creative. For example, I am not a good enough golfer to try to slice on purpose. I should first learn to try to hit the ball straight as much as possible, and only if I become proficient at that should I try to learn how to intentionally slice or fade, even if the situation calls for a purposeful slice.

**What happens if it is not followed:** Players waste too much time looking for "creative exceptions" to the principles, which just usually results in taking too much time for moves *and* choosing inferior moves. So I often find myself telling my students: "If you know the principle, then, at least at first, just try to show me you can consistently follow it and, at least for now, 'don't have a better idea.'"

Last but not least...

**14) The advice:** If you are a fairly weak player, you can almost completely forget about positional nuances like weak pawns and concentrate solely on safety/tactics (material and king safety), especially from the side of defense.

**Why it is helpful:** Too many weak players read advanced books and decide to follow Capablanca's or Karpov's lead by subtly trying to pressure his opponent's isolated pawn, but then make an oversight that allows their opponent a basic winning combination. On the average, an isolated pawn might lose a tenth or two (-0.2 pawn) of its value, while even a small amount of material, like the advantage of the bishop-pair, is worth much more: on the average, about half a pawn. Therefore, tactics dominate play until both players are very strong. This was the theme of *The Principal of Tactical Dominance*. Instead, it is much more helpful to follow the advice written in *Is It Safe?*. Most weaker players are OK at finding basic combinations, but are terrible at taking the effort to make sure their move does not allow their opponent those same combinations.

**Why players are sometimes reluctant to follow it:** There are almost no chess books about how to prevent simple combinations ("Can my candidate move be defeated by any

check, capture, or threat?), but chess literature is filled with wonderful master victories over great opponents, who would never allow a simple tactic to win the game. Those games feature superb tactical play and/or subtle positional finesses. Readers get the erroneous idea that the way for *everyone* to win chess games is to be a brilliant tactician or great strategist. Nothing could be further from the truth when weaker players are involved. In that case the proper – and most effective – approach is to mostly concentrate on safety, and follow basic strategy and principles. The important, and misunderstood, point is that safety means not only looking out for winning material but making sure each of your moves does not allow a simple tactic for your opponent.

**What happens if it is not followed:** A player ends up spending most of their time looking for subtle positional and strategic ideas and then loses game after game to simple tactics they would have seen if they had looked for them. This misplaced emphasis on nuances also leads to bad thought process habits, as a weak player thinks anything but safety first, and has to learn to prioritize the more important issues.

### Reader Question

*Just been reading about teaching students to slow down when making a move. Would a chess clock that flag falls if moves were played too fast be a useful training aid?*

### Answer

The answer to your question is based upon one of the key ideas discussed in *Novice Nook* and provides me an excellent opportunity to summarize:

A major time management problem for average players is determining what is “too fast” or “too slow” for a given move. The ideal time to think on move is based upon the:

- Position,
- Time control (plus current move number, if not sudden death), and
- How much time remaining on your clock.

The position aspect (the first item above) of how much time to take is *criticality analysis*. *Micro time management* takes into consideration both the criticality analysis *and* the time situation (items two and three) and outputs a reasonable time to take on that move. When that reasonable time “expires” is what I call Trigger 2, which means:

*Even if you have not found the absolute best move (“Trigger 1”), it’s probably time to make the best move you have found so far.*

To take longer would get diminishing returns on your time, both on this move and on the time you have remaining to think about future moves. If you are good at micro time management, you are probably a good player!

Several *Novice Nooks* address the theory of what is too fast or too slow, including [The Two Move Triggers](#), [Criticality Quiz](#), [The Case for Time Management](#), etc. I wrote about the psychological aspects of playing too fast in [Slowing Down](#).

To consistently move before Trigger 2, or to do so by a large margin, would constitute *playing too fast*. To consistently move much later than Trigger 2, or to do so by a large margin, would constitute *playing too slow*.

There are two other common errors you can make with Trigger 2:

- You can badly estimate how much time is reasonable for the circumstances, or
- You know approximately how much time would be reasonable for the move, but you become too absorbed in the position and do not realize how much time has passed.

So to answer your question, if you think you have the second problem – you are able to determine Trigger 2, but have difficulty sensing when you have used that amount of time – using a separate clock or “alarm” might be a helpful aide during practice games. Try it and let me know.

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

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