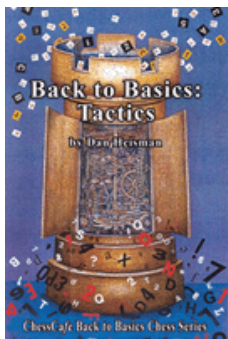




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Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



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Strong Principles vs. Important Principles

Quote of the Month: *One of the most difficult – and important – concepts for a player to learn is how to resolve conflicting principles.*

Principles are short “sayings” or rules of thumb that are designed to help one make decisions, be it identifying possible moves or plans, when to play for a draw, or how to perform time management. *Principles exist primarily to help one decide what to do when there is no “book” knowledge, the position is very quiet with little or no analysis required, analysis fails to reveal a clearly best move, or lack of time precludes the ability to find a good move via analysis. In that sense principles are used to tiebreak equally safe moves or identify candidates from an otherwise innocuous selection of moves.*

Principles can be contrasted with *goals*. A goal identifies *what* you are trying to achieve, while a principle usually gives a “tip” on *how* to best do something. For example, a goal is to make your king as safe as possible, while a corresponding principle might be to castle at the first opportunity.

Players of all levels have difficulty deciding which principles apply in a given position, especially when the principles conflict. I found the existing “tools” for addressing this concern inadequate, so I created the following definitions to clarify these difficulties:

- **Strength** – a principle is *strong* if there are relatively few exceptions, i.e., it applies to a high percentage of potentially applicable positions. Similarly, a principle is *weak* if the percentage of exceptions is relatively high. If the advice always applies, it is not a principle, but a **rule** (see below).
- **Importance** – a principle is *important* if the consequences are often disastrous when violated. Thus a guideline is less important if the consequences of breaking it are not as severe. Similarly, a principle is also important if its application occurs frequently in practical play and, therefore, consistent failure to follow it can accumulate considerable harm in a short period.

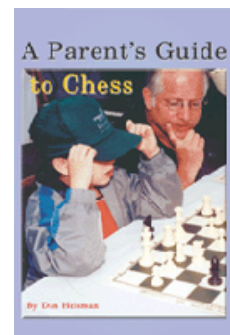
A guideline can be both important and strong, but there is little correlation between strength and importance!

In GM Andrew Soltis’ *Grandmaster Secrets: Openings* he notes that all opening principles have many exceptions (are weaker), except one: *develop a rook to the same file that your opponent develops the queen*. Soltis states that this principle has very few exceptions (and thus is very strong).

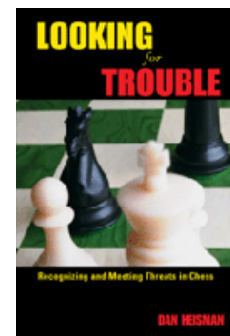
Now consider the principle *when behind in material don’t make even (“fair”) trades of pieces*. This is one of the stronger principles, but it is certainly not a rule, as one could construct some counterexamples. The avoidance of trades when behind is extremely important; when violated the consequences are usually disastrous.

Soltis’ rook-onto-queen’s-file principle is roughly as strong, but not as important as don’t-trade-when-behind. If you don’t develop a rook to the same file as your opponent’s queen, then the rook may be less effective, but failure to do so is hardly as harmful as helping your opponent win a

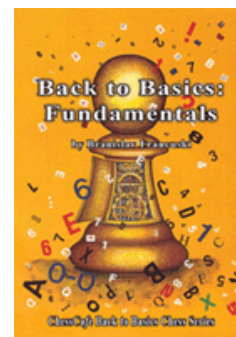
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game by unnecessarily trading down into an easier-to-win position.

One of the most important principles, but not the strongest, is *in the opening move every piece once before you move any piece twice, unless there is a tactic*. The exceptions are numerous, but, as any beginner eventually learns, violating this principle is often disastrous. Therefore, weaker players should treat this principle as very strong until they become proficient enough to consistently and correctly identify exceptions.

A principle that is weak and not so important is *avoid doubled pawns*, because the net result of doubled pawns is often positive (see [A Positional Primer](#)) and, even when doubled pawns are weak, they rarely are the primary reason that a beginner – or even an intermediate – loses a game (see [Evaluation Criteria](#)).

An opening principle that is fairly strong and important is *don't move a piece to a square where the opponent can develop by attacking it (usually with a piece of lesser value), and force its retreat*. For example, after 1. Nf3 e6 2.g3 a move like 2...Bc5(?) does not make sense.

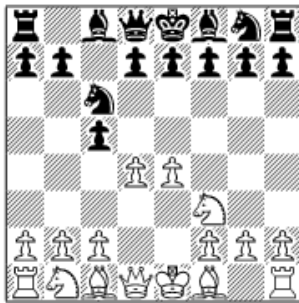


White to Play after 2...Bc5(?)

This encourages 3.d4, which not only forces the bishop to move again, but is additionally a very useful move for White (see [It's Not Really Winning A Tempo](#)).

Another strong – and very helpful – guideline is *whenever a player makes a breaking move with a center (d- or e-)*

pawn and cannot capture back with a pawn, it is usually correct to capture the pawn. If the player making the breaking move can capture back with a pawn, then the capture is not necessarily correct. Here is an example:



Black to Play after 1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4

Although 3.d4 is not strictly a breaking move (since the black c-pawn is not fixed), it has the power of one, since Black cannot pass the d-pawn with 3...c4?. Here White cannot capture back with a pawn, so Black's best move is to trade the c-pawn for the central pawn with 3...cxd4. Instead, the beginner

move 3...e6? is strongly met with 4.d5.

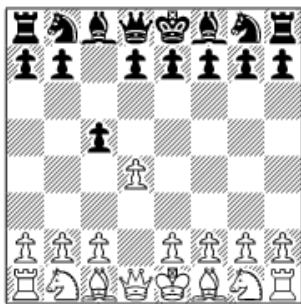
Contrast this with the following:



White to Play after 1.c4 c6 2.g3 d5

Again 3.c5 is not a good move, so 2...d5 has the effect of a breaking move. However, this time the capture 3.cxd5 is not necessarily indicated, because the black d-pawn, the central break, can be replaced with another pawn. White has options other than 3.cxd5, such as 3.Nf3 or 3.Bg2, when Black's capture 3...dxc4 is OK, but the extra pawn is difficult to

hold. Thus 3...dxc4 is not usually played by grandmasters. Note that 3.b3 is not as good because of 3...dxc4 4.bxc4 Qd4, with a double attack on a1 and c4.



White to Play after 1.d4 c5

In the Benoni, we have just the opposite – the pawn attack is not by a central pawn. Furthermore, it does not have the effect of a break, since pushing past is an option. Therefore, the main line is just to grab space with 2.d5.

Resolving Conflicts

One key to *The Big Five* is understanding and prioritizing general principles. The capability to prioritize principles in a given position is probably more difficult than the other four combined! The strength, importance, and overall applicability of principles vary *greatly* depending upon which “game state” you are in (see *The Six Common Chess States*).

Let’s consider some simple examples:

- *Move every piece once before you move any piece twice, unless there is a tactic.*
- *The bishop-pair is worth about 1/2-pawn; don’t give it up unless you get something for it.*

Suppose your opponent threatens to trade a knight for a bishop in the opening and win the bishop-pair. The only way to retain the bishop is to move it again and lose a tempo. Which principle should you obey?

In many opening positions the answer is relatively easy – if everything else is equal, you should move the bishop again and preserve the bishop-pair. There are several reasons for this:

1. Preserving the bishop-pair is a tactic – if the bishop-pair is worth 1/2-pawn that is a material cost, and winning material and mating are the primary aspects of tactics, so keep the bishop.
2. At the start of the game a pawn is worth roughly three tempi, so a tempo is worth about 1/3-pawn and that is less than the 1/2-pawn you lose if you give up the bishop-pair, so move the bishop, and
3. Permanent liabilities are usually more important than transient ones – you might be able to gain back the tempo, but winning back the bishop-pair requires a more concrete achievement.

En passant, don’t give up the bishop-pair unless you get something for it is an instance of the more general *never give up something positive for nothing!* If you sacrifice your queen for a rook to go into a winning king and pawn endgame you are giving up material for simplification into an easier endgame. That would not be violating the principle.

The decision to give up the bishop-pair often goes the other way. Consider a typical position from the Advance Variation of the French Defense:



Black to Play

In this type of fixed-center position, it is often incorrect for Black to play 1... Nxe3, even if pressed by g4. Moreover, in support of *doubled pawns aren’t always that bad*, if Black does capture on e3, it is usually incorrect for White to keep his pawn structure intact by playing 2.Qxe3, but instead to purposely double pawns with 2.fxe3.

Let’s consider why White would voluntarily do this:

1. White's bad bishop is the one on e3 – it is blocked from its maximum mobility by the white center pawns. One more readily gives up a bad bishop than a good one.
2. There are no semi-open files on the board, but if Black captures on e3, White will already control the only semi-open file, the f-file, with his rook on f1. This is especially good since the pawn on e5 causes the black pawn on f7 to show signs of backwardness, and thus is more vulnerable than normal.
3. Black's entire play depends upon his breaking move ...c5 and pressure on d4. If White can recapture on e3 with a pawn, then that frees his other pieces, since the d4-pawn would be overprotected via the pawns on e3 and c3, and Black could never break down that square nor generate strong central counterplay.

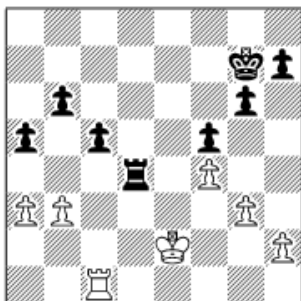
By now you are thinking “Yes, Dan knew all of this, but I only knew some of it.” How can an improving player learn to properly apply the principles? I suggest a several step process:

1. Learn as many principles as you can. I have a Principles/Guidelines page at my website, and any book written for instruction contains many principles. Moreover, two books, Albur and Lawrence's *Chess Rules of Thumb* and the new Soltis' *The Wisest Things Ever Said about Chess*, are devoted entirely to principles. Every annotated game collection is full of principles, so reading these books not only helps with planning, but also the applicability of principles. Make your own list if you think that will be helpful.
2. Once you reach a position where you are “out-of-book,” ask yourself “which principles should apply to this position?” You may not get them all, or get them right, or apply them correctly, but you will learn to do so more effectively. If you don't ask yourself applicable questions about the position, you may forget about something important that would guide you toward the right idea.
3. Learn when specific principles apply. For example, some types of positions call for using (or ignoring) specific principles. This issue was discussed at length in *The Six Common Chess States*.
4. Play many slow games and go over them with strong players – tell them when you are using a principle and get their opinion on whether you are applying it properly.
5. Don't purposely ignore principles. If you think they apply in a particular position, then you should probably follow it. But in slow games always question the principle. Ask “Does it make sense in this position? Are there other guidelines that might have higher priority?” Some principles, even when most applicable, have a very minor impact, while others can be major. It is your job to try and figure out whether a minor one should be ignored, or whether it becomes major in the given situation. *This sometimes takes time, so not only does it pay to play slow to try to get the correct answer, but doing so helps you learn. Therefore, you can apply the same ideas more quickly and accurately to future similar situations.*
6. Use common sense. For example, if a principle tells you to develop your pieces unless there is a tactic, you should do so, and not just ignore your development because weak opponents allow successful premature attacks. To help make these decisions use the meta-principle *principles that involve the result (win, draw, or loss) and/or tactics are more important than principles that involve other issues, such as piece activity* (see *The Principle of Tactical Dominance*).

In *The Most Important Strategic Decisions* it states that *one should never trade down into a king and pawn endgame unless you are sure of getting what you want*. If you are ahead in material, then you want to be sure of winning. And, if you are behind in material, you usually want to be sure of at least drawing. This guideline is, of course, the extreme case of the principle *when behind in material don't make even (“fair”) trades of pieces*. The ultimate simplification is into a king and pawn endgame! That

makes the king and pawn version a very strong and important principle – essentially a rule!

Here is a great example from a game recently played at our chess club:

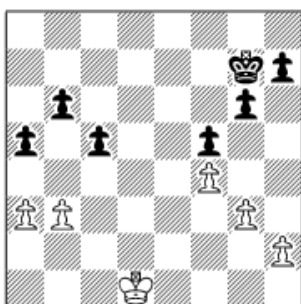


White to Play

In this position, White decided (without much calculation!) that if he trades rooks, he can penetrate with the king on the queenside and cause problems. So against all principle (down a pawn) he played **1.Rd1??** offering the trade of rooks into a king and pawn endgame.

This brings up an interesting meta-principle: *in non-analytical positions you can often play quickly by following principles; if you want to break a principle, then you usually need to analyze the situation carefully to make sure you really have an exception.* It is important to emphasize that one almost never plays an analytical position by following a guideline – roll up your sleeves and do the analysis!

By this meta-principle, White should not play 1.Rd1 without analyzing whether his idea actually works. Assuming it is an exception without analysis not a good idea, because general principles tell you not to. *If there are several pawns on the board in a king and pawn endgame, then, unless something unusual is happening, the player with one extra pawn almost always wins.* In the game, Black could not believe his good fortune and correctly replied **1...Rxd1 2.Kxd1**



Black to Play

Black must decide whether it is more important to advance his king first with 2...Kf6 or play 2...b5 to prevent White from creating a backward pawn with 3.a4. While this type of decision sometimes makes the difference between winning and losing, in this case it turns out the choice “only” determines how easily Black can win, as either is

possible. Here are the main ideas:

2...b5 3.Kd2 The position after the tricky 3.a4!? can transpose: 3...bxa4 4.bxa4 Kf6 5.Kd2 Ke6 6.Kd3 Kd5 wins, as in the main line 3.Kd2. **3...Kf6 4.Kd3 Ke6 5.Kc3** White can mix ideas with 5.a4 bxa4 6.bxa4 Kd5, but it transposes to the 3.a4!? line above. Instead 5.b4 cxb4 6.axb4 loses to both 6...a4, when the a-pawn can be sacrificed to allow the black king to penetrate, and 6...axb4, when White has to spend time gathering the queenside pawns and Black mops up on the kingside. **5...Kd5 6.Kd3** *This is a good position to know how to win (“good technique”), as similar positions occur frequently.* Black can win in more than one way, but the most straightforward is **6...c4+ 7.bxc4 bxc4+ 8.Kc3 Kc5 9.h3 h5 10.a4 Kd5 11.h4 Kc5** White must inevitably give way and Black now has several ways to win. **12.Kc2 Kd4 13.Kd2 c3+ 14.Kc2 Kc4 15.Kc1 Kd3 16.Kd1 c2+ 17.Kc1 Kc3 18.g4 hxg4 19.h5 g3 19...gxh5??** Stalemate. **20.h6 g2 21.h7 g1R#**

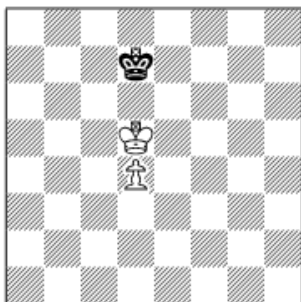
2...Kf6 This is more difficult than 2...b5, but not much more so for an experienced player. **3.a4** White hurries to make the black queenside pawns backward. **3...Ke6 4.Kd2 Kd5 5.Kd3** Now it is easiest to first run White out of kingside pawn moves. **5...h6 6.h3 h5 7.h4** If 7.Ke3, 7...c4 wins. If 7.Kc3!? Ke4 and – have to count! – Black wins the race. **8.Kc4 h4!** More difficult is **8...Kf3 9.Kb5 Kxg3 10.Kxb6 Kxf4 11.Kxa5 g5!** (Not **11...Ke3 12.Kb6 f4 13.a5 f3 14.a6 f2 15.a7 f1Q 16.a8Q**) **12.Kb6 g4**

13.hxg4 h4 and Black wins. 7...Kc6 Threatening ...b5. 8.Kc4 b5!
 Anyway! A good trick to know. 9.axb5+ Kb6 Zugzwang! 10.Kd3 Kxb5
 11.Kc3 c4! Another trick to get the outside passed pawn. 12.bxc4+ Kc5
 13.Kb3 a4+ 14.Kxa4 Kxc4 and Black's king is closer to the pawns and
 wins – a good reason to fix the pawns first. With all the tricks involved,
 you can see why Black should play 2...b5 and not allow a4, making the b-
 pawn backward.

The granddaddy of all principles is attributed to World Champion
 Emmanuel Lasker: *when you see a good move, look for a better one*. You
 are trying to find the best move you can, given the circumstances,
 especially the time. This principle is both important – because it can be
 applied on almost every move – and strong, because most of the
 exceptions are trivial, like forced checkmates or book moves.

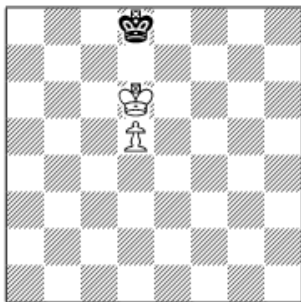
Another important principle is *having more pawns in the center is good
 and its corollary when you have a choice of pawn captures, capture
 toward the center*. When the capture is on the knight files (b- and g-) and
 thus the choice of capture is from the rook or bishop files (a-/c- and f-/h-),
 then on ~90% of the opportunities the principle should be followed.
 Except for obvious tactics, the main exception would be in the deep
 endgame when creating an outside passed pawn may be paramount. When
 the capture is on the bishop file (c- and f-) and the choice of captures is
 from the central or knight files (b-/d- and e-/g-), then one should capture
 toward the center ~70% of the opportunities. Notable exceptions toward
 the outside include the exchange variation of the Ruy Lopez: 1.e4 e5 2.
 Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Bxc6 dxc6 and the topical Nc3 variation of the
 Petroff: 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nf6 3.Nxe5 d6 4.Nf3 Nxe4 5.Nc3 Nxc3 6.dxc3.
 Therefore, *the nearer to the edge, the stronger the principle to capture
 toward the middle!*

In contrast to a principle, a **rule** has either no exceptions or the exceptions
 are easily enumerated.



Either Side to Play (opposition rule)

Here the rule is *if there is only one non-rook's pawn on the board, the offensive king is immediately in front of his pawn, and the opponent's king is on the same file separated by one square/rank, then whoever is not on move has the opposition and with correct play gets the desired result (White to play draws; Black to play loses).*



White to Play wins (opposition rule exception)

Exception: once the offensive king reaches the sixth rank, then opposition no longer matters and the side with the pawn wins no matter who is to move. I have dubbed this the Tic-Tac-Toe rule; see [King and Pawn vs. King](#).

In [Chess for Zebras](#), GM Rowson notes that giving an intermediate player more chess knowledge (such as specific opening or endgame sequences) does not make them a better player. I completely agree. However, some knowledge, especially in the form of general principles, is not only helpful, but somewhat necessary in becoming a better analyst and evaluator, the key skills for improvement.

Tip of the Month: Tactics don't just happen! Good players don't usually move their pieces into pins, or allow their pieces to stay in any potentially dangerous pattern, even if they don't immediately see how their opponent

can take advantage of them. If you leave a tactical pattern (see [The Seeds of Tactical Destruction](#)) on the board long enough, your opponent will likely exploit that pattern eventually. Therefore, in most instances it is better to move your piece out of harm's way before the situation becomes dangerous.

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

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