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## The Most Important Tactic

**Quote of the Month:** “Pins and forks and removal of the guard usually occur a few times a game. Counting takes place whenever possible exchanges exist – almost every move after the early opening.”

The five levels of tactics:

1. En Prise – a piece can be captured and it is not guarded
2. Counting – see below!
3. Single Motif – pins, double attacks, back-rank mates, removal of the guard, etc.
4. Non-sacrificial Combinations – combines motifs (including Counting)
5. Sacrificial Combinations – Same as #4 but it involves an investment of material at some point.

Although I covered the topic of counting in my Novice Nook *A Counting Primer*, many players still have a misguided understanding of what counting is. They think that counting is simply knowing the value of the pieces and, for example, understanding not to trade a Rook for a Bishop because a Rook is worth more.

This is a serious shortcoming for the following reason: I claim that players rated less than 1400 USCF make about as many counting errors as they do for all the other tactics put together! That makes counting incredibly important, yet it is dealt with in few texts. I think a reason is that the concept is so simple – and simple to teach by example - and yet so hard to define, that authors feel it is better left for beginner coaches to handle “face-to-face”. Therefore, it is not surprising that less experienced players without good coaching often have trouble keeping their pieces safe from this most basic danger.

In order to clarify matters, the following is a definition of when a piece (here “piece” includes pawns, but not Kings, which are special with regard to safety issues) is safe *with regards to exchanges on its square*. This definition will subsequently allow me to present one for counting.

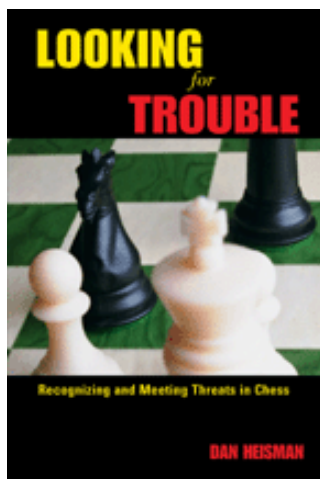
**Safe:** A piece belonging to the defending player is *safe* (with regards to captures only on the square it resides) *if no possible sequence of exchanges on the square where it stands will lose material for the defender, assuming the defender is playing best moves*.

The final clause about assuming best moves is necessary because you can always lose material on any capture just by playing poorly and refusing to recapture! In that case every attacked piece would be unsafe, which is clearly not true.

### COLUMNISTS

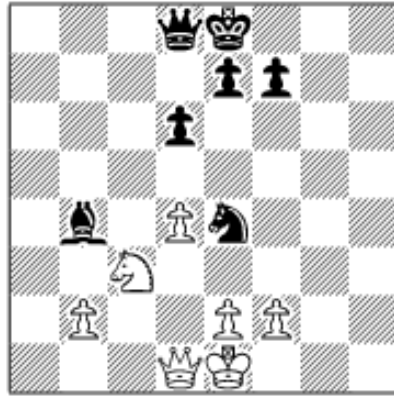
## Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



As a simple example of safety, suppose you can trade pawns. Then both sides' pawns are safe because it is a fair trade and no one loses material.

It is very important to note that if we expand the universe of our definition to the entire board, and not just a square, then the more global definition of safe would involve *all* tactics, and not just exchanges on that square:



With White to move, the black Bishop on b4 is not attacked, so from *just a counting standpoint* it is safe but, of course, White can play the double-attack 1.Qa4+, and thus the Bishop is not safe from a tactic. If it were Black to move then the Knight on c3 is not safe even just by counting since Black could capture twice and win material (a pawn). So, considering the entire board, the expanded definition of safe is as follows:

**Safe:** A piece is safe if no tactic by the opponent involving the capture of that piece (including counting!) can forcibly win material.

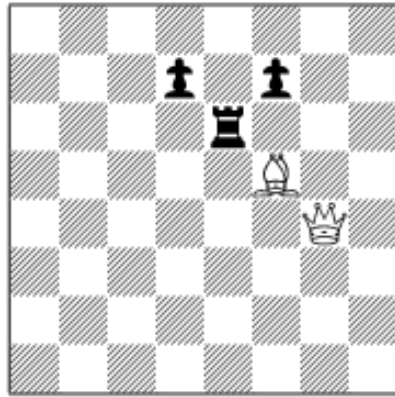
However, showing all the ramifications of this global definition is a very complex topic and well beyond the scope of this article! So back to counting:

**Counting:** The process of determining if each piece on both sides is safe (using only the non-global “on its square” definition) on each move.

An important practical consideration is that in order to determine safety you do *not* have to count on each square on each move! Most experienced players have an unconscious “important squares database” that consists of whether or not all attacked squares (for both sides) are safe, i.e., whether each square upon which all pieces reside (or need to be covered to prevent mate) are adequately guarded. They subconsciously update this database based on the consequences of each move: *only the squares affected by the move are recalculated*. For strong players this database often/usually indicates that everything was safe last move; stronger players less often leave things “hanging” from one move to the next. If everything was safe, then one need only look at the affected squares of a particular move to determine if something has become unsafe. Like many seemingly complex tasks – such as walking – this process becomes fairly routine with adequate practice. Note that if one uses the global definition that includes *all* tactics, then only by more skilled analysis can you tell if all your pieces are safe.

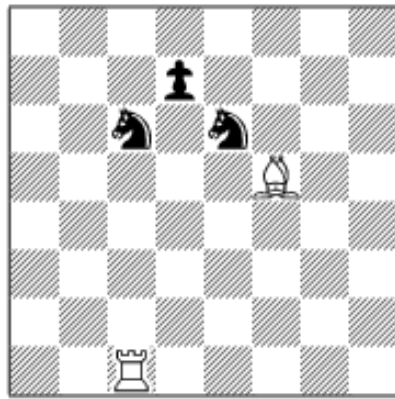
There is a fine line between the tactical motif removal of the guard and its simpler cousin, counting. Removal of the guard involves captures on *multiple* squares so that a defender is captured or has to move, and the defended piece is no longer safe. However, the distinction between the two concepts is somewhat tricky because safety has to be determined on all squares each move, not just one, so multiple squares are often involved even on purely counting issues. The difference is that with removal of the guard, the safety on

one square is directly dependent on the removal of the defender from another square, while in regular counting the safety of each of the multiple squares is determined independently. Confused? Don't worry, clear examples lie ahead!



With White to play, the Rook on e6 is not safe because White can play **1.Bxe6** and even if Black plays the best move and recaptures with a pawn, White still wins the exchange (Rook for Bishop). White does not have to continue with **2.Qxe6??** losing material; chess is not checkers – you don't have to capture!

Contrast the above to a removal of the guard example, with White to move:

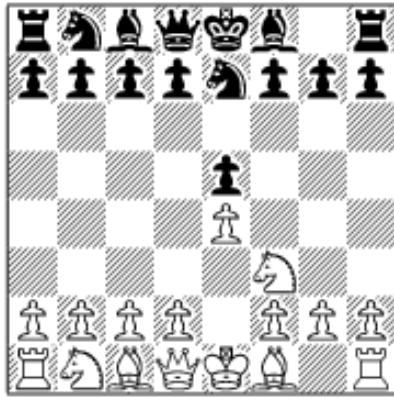


Through simple counting, both Knights appear to be safe: **1.Bxe6 dxe6** is a trade of Bishop for Knight, both roughly worth the same (3¼ pawns), and **1.Rxc6 dxc6** would seem to lose the exchange for White. However, when we combine these two exchanges, we can easily see that the pawn on d7 is *overburdened* or, to use a synonymous term, *overworked*. Overworked pieces (like the pawn) which guard attacked pieces (like the Knights) leads to a removal of the guard tactic. Best

for White is to play **1.Bxe6**. If Black does not recapture, White remains ahead a Knight. But if Black plays **1...dxe6** then White plays **2.Rxc6** since the Knight on c6 is no longer guarded, and again White wins a Knight. So we can see that the safety of the black Knights are really dependent, and this thus becomes a removal of the guard problem, and not just a simple counting issue. Note that the opposite move order **1.Rxc6**, while still winning material, is not as good, because after **1...dxc6 2.Bxe6** White has won only two pieces for a Rook, which is not nearly as good as winning a piece (I calculated that result by counting the traded material, but this is *not* a counting problem – see the difference?!).

Let's follow a game where both players had typical and instructive counting problems, some of which I see even in the play of intermediate level players. It was a fairly slow game, so both players had time to be careful. My student had White.

**1.e4 e5 2.Nf3** This attack on e5 introduces our first count of the game; e5 is now attacked once and defended zero times. As defined above, this is called *en prise* – in take. **2...Ne7??**



Black neither defends his pawn with the usual 2...Nc6, nor with Philidor's Defense 2...d6, nor counterattacks the White e-pawn with 2...Nf6 – Petroff's Defense. Therefore, after White's attack on the pawn and Black's refusal to defend, counting on e5 shows that the pawn is attacked once and defended zero times – it is just en prise.

**3.d4??**

You may chuckle at White's missing the "obvious" 3.Nxe5, but I have seen this problem dozens of times among beginners – they confuse simple ideas, messing up basic priorities (Think I am exaggerating? The very next day after I first drafted this, *another* student playing White began 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 c6? 3.Nc3? also bypassing 3.Nxe5!). They correctly think, "The main idea of the opening is to mobilize the forces" but forget that tactics are almost always *much* more important than activity – it just so happens that winning material – especially when material is even – is important throughout the game, and not just in one phase, so *they erroneously believe that the opening phase guideline is more important than the overall game guideline*. Don't try to outsmart yourself; if you are not an advanced player and you have a simple move that follows a well-known and important guideline like '*when the position is close to even, win material unless you see a refutation*', just follow the guideline and don't try to make chess harder than it is!

Think of it this way – one of the main reasons why you mobilize your forces is to be in better position to win – or avoid losing – material. *The two main ways games are won are through mating attacks or by winning material and then eventually mating through attrition* (trade pieces when ahead!) – *but the latter is more common*. So if you can just win material for nothing, it is worth halting your mobilization for a move! As an extreme analogy, suppose someone comes to your office to offer a \$10,000,000 gift for you, and he will leave if you do not pick it up immediately. Then, unless you have a quite unusual job (airline traffic controller?; Bill Gates' right-hand man), you might want to stop working for a minute to get the money even if doing so might upset your boss.

The most important opening guideline (and one often violated by strong players – but that is another story) is '*move every piece (non-pawn) once before you move any piece twice – unless there is a tactic for either side.*' But here the final clause is crucial – you don't give away material just because you don't want to move something twice, nor would you forego winning your opponent's Queen just because you have to move a Knight twice to capture it. Common sense, but you have to follow it!

Another interesting point: a move that looks ridiculously bad at one level just looks normal to a less trained eye at the levels below. I think most players rated 1300 would see **3.d4??** as a terrible move. However, when those same players move a piece to make an easily defendable threat, say 9.Ng5? instead of getting another piece into play with 9.Rad1, a 1300 player sees *that is*

normal when any player over 1800 would “see” an easily defendable (and otherwise time-wasting) threat like 9.Ng5? as just about as bad as **3.d4??** The only difference is that, instead of not gaining material, the 1300 players moving 9.Ng5 are “just” losing time, but losing anything for nothing is not good!

What is “little” is relative to how much advantage someone has in the position: the general rule is that *the closer the game is to even, the more important “little” things are and, conversely, the bigger the advantage, the less important little things are*. For example, if you were ahead a Queen, then stopping to win an ordinary pawn would be unnecessary and likely wasteful because you are already easily far enough ahead to win, and in that case it would be much more important to get all your pieces into the game quickly – then your superior force probably enables you to win all the material you want! As another example: when you are up a piece giving yourself an isolated pawn is a very small price to pay if it enables you to trade Queens. But in the above position the game is even, and winning the first pawn is often enough for a strong player to win the game, so doing so in this case is clearly more important than development. The loss of the pawn after 2...Ne7? is also different than a *gambit*, where often a pawn (or more) is sacrificed purposely to gain development, hopefully enough to compensate for the lost material. In general, at the very start of the game you need to get ahead by two or preferably three tempos for the first pawn you gambit and here, with the Knight on e7 blocking Black’s development, Black will probably be lucky to get ahead by one tempo, if at all.

### **3...exd4 4.Nxd4 d6 5.Be2**

5.Bc4 is a more active move. White’s 5th move raises an important question: in the weak but still useful guideline “Develop Knights before Bishops”, does that mean *both Knights before both Bishops*, or does it mean *the Knight on each side before the corresponding Bishop*? It can mean either, but more often it means the latter, so that you can castle as quickly as possible. So even though 5.Nc3 is a perfectly good move, developing the Bishop (as in the Ruy Lopez, 3.Bb5 or the Italian Game, 3.Bc4) is *not* a violation of this principle.

### **5...Nd7**

Black apparently likes cramped positions!

### **6.Bg5**

This does violate “Develop Knights before Bishops”. While 6.Bg5 is a perfectly good developing move, I would prefer that students who are still learning play 6.O-O or 6.Nc3. After **6.Bg5** it would be easy to envision many White players losing the unguarded Bishop on a sequence like 6...c6 7.e3?? Qa5+ and *Loose Pieces Drop Off!* Note that the attacked Knight on e7 is safe since, if Black does nothing, 7.Bxe7? Bxe7 and it is White who loses material since he just gave up *advantage of the bishop pair* for nothing! (IM Larry Kaufman has calculated that the advantage of having the bishop pair is worth roughly ½-pawn on the average.)

## 6...Nc5

An attack on e4. The pawn will be *en prise* unless White responds by somehow making it safe.

## 7.Nd2

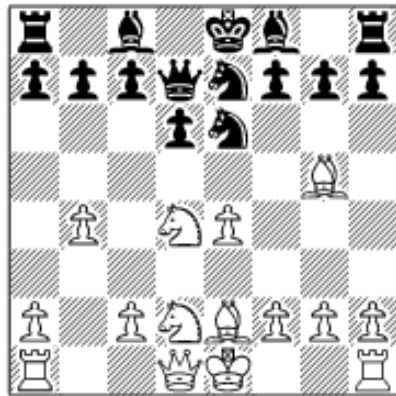
Unnecessarily blocking the Queen and subsequently the Rooks. The more centralizing 7.Nc3 was better – both moves make the pawn on e4 safe. *When you see a good move, look for a better one.*

## 7...Qd7 8.b4

My criticism of this move is similar to that of 6.Bg5. While it is a good (but relatively advanced!) idea to use pawns to remove Knights from good squares (see Silman's books *How to Reassess Your Chess* and *The Amateur's Mind*!), doing so before you complete your development can be dangerous. The simple 8.O-O was preferable: *Castle early and often!* is a humorous aphorism that strikes home the point – castling is such a good move that if you were allowed more moves that get two pieces into place instead of one, you would! The move 8.b4 also weakens the squares a3, a4, c3, and c4 permanently since the d-pawn is already gone.

8.b4 also leads to a trivial example of counting. White is threatening to trade a pawn for a Knight on c5, so since the Knight is worth more, it is not safe!

## 8...Ne6



A double attack on d4 and g5, both containing unguarded pieces. White has to be a little careful in meeting both threats.

## 9.Be3

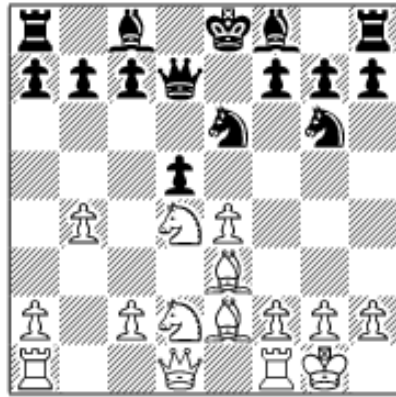
The simplest way to make everything safe is often just to capture the attacking piece! Here 9.Nxe6 is a good example. In general, defending/guarding pieces leads to tying down your pieces in passive defense and the possibility of – you

guessed it – removal of the guard! Moving a piece to a safe square, blocking, and counterattacking are the other three ways to make an attacked piece safe.

*I often hear inexperienced players say they did not want to trade off a piece because they did not want to “lose” that piece!* This is a bad way of thinking about it – if you make a *fair trade*, for example here 9.Nxe6, then you are not “losing” that Knight – you are trading it for something of equal value. This would be similar to saying you “lost” \$300,000 when you bought a good house. This negative thinking can adversely affect your judgement - you might tend to make a bad move to avoid “losing” something when in fact you are not losing anything at all. So think “fair trade”, not “lose”!

**9...Ng6 10.0-0**

Finally!

**10...d5**

This move sets off the first complex sequence of tactics in the game, a combination of basic motifs (a discovered attack on b4 by the Bishop on f8 plus potential discovered pressure on d4 after a later...dxe4) and counting (via the direct attack on e4). White needs to make sure that, when he makes the pawn on b4 safe, he will also keep the pawn on e4 safe and the future discovered attack on d4 covered! That is a lot to ask an inexperienced player to see – and even

more to ask him to meet it!

**11.Bb5**

This would be a terrific counterattack, winning the Queen for a Bishop, *if* the pawn could not move to c6 – but it can, so instead the move is terrible – little differences in a position can make a big difference in evaluation!

Counterattacks are the most dangerous ways to defend against an attack, if for no other reason that the following:

Suppose your opponent's piece A attacks your piece B. You counter by using piece C to attack piece D. He counters by saving D, moving it to attack your piece E. Then you have gone from needing to defend one attack (B against A) to two attacks (B against A and D against E). Meeting both attacks may be impossible.

In this case White needed to defend the pawn on b4 from the Bishop on f8. Instead he counterattacked the Queen on d7 with the Bishop on b5. But ...c6 saves the Queen and attacks the Bishop on b5! So now the Bishop and the pawn are both attacked. A very common mistake – I see it all the time! 11.exd5 is best, but even the simple 11.a3 is much better.

**11...c6 12.Ba4**

Another common mistake! It is not that this move is bad – it is probably not any worse than 12.Be2, but inexperienced players often use the bad logic: “My piece just came from e2, so it can't be right to go back there!” But that logic would only make some sense if 11.Bb5 were a good move – instead, it is very likely that when you make a bad move and have to retreat, retreating back to the original square is often the best choice – but beginners often reject it just because they falsely believe it is psychologically defeating to go back. I once observed a player leave his piece *en prise* rather than make the only retreat back to where it had been!

**12...Bxb4 13.Qf3??**

A “good” development move, but a bad tactical error. Can you recognize a very similar pattern to one we examined earlier in this column that would win material for Black on the next move?

The problem is that the Bishop on e3 is overworked. It cannot successfully guard both the Knight at d4 and the Knight at d2! *When you are counting how many pieces are guarding something, any piece that is “removable” must not be counted!*

So the correct sequence for Black to win material is to now play 13...Nxd4 first! This hits the white Queen and leaves White with little choice: 14.Bxd4 Bxd2 and Black wins a piece with removal of the guard! 13...Bxd2 is not as effective since White can try 14.Nxe6 (not the automatic recapture 14.Bxd2? Nxd4) with some counterplay. *Remember, when your opponent takes a piece, you usually have to take a piece back, but it does not always have to be the recapture!*

**13...dxe4?**

But now White has two recaptures. Which one should he choose? Count carefully! *Too many players play fast in this type of position, thinking that how they recapture does not matter much, when in fact it often matters more than most of your decisions in the rest of the game!* Be very careful on moves involving checks, captures, and threats: one miscalculation could be enough to cause a loss.

**14.Nxe4**

While White is in bad shape either way, 14.Qxe4 is superior because the discovered attack on d4 has left two attackers (Queen and Knight) on it, while after the actually played 14.Nxe4 White has only one defender, the Bishop on e3. 14.Qxe4 allows the Queen to also guard d4. Counting! Of course, there is more to this than just counting since White can play Nxe6 at some point, but hopefully you get the idea.

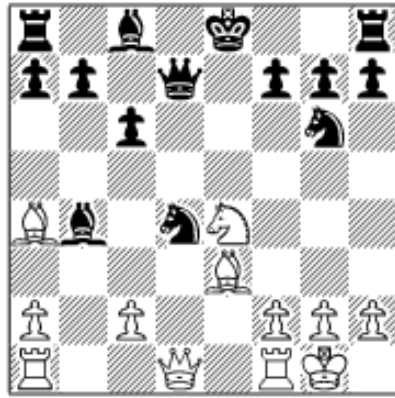
**14...Nxd4**

The Queen on f3 is not safe.

**15.Qd1?**

White is in trouble, but he can greatly minimize the damage. The white Queen is best made safe by capturing the attacker, which also lures the black Queen into a pawn fork: 15.Bxd4 Qxd4 16.c3 winning back his piece. The immediate fork 15.c3 fails to 15...Nxf3+ winning the white Queen.

Now it is White who has the counting threat. The Queen's retreat to d1 has now added an attacker to d4, so the Black Knight is not safe. 15.Qd1 is not anywhere as good as finding the fork, but at least it is a threat!



### 15...Qd5??

Throwing away almost all his advantage on one move! Black falls for the common mistake, "I know why he moved his Queen to d1 – to save the Queen from ...Nxf3+", failing to realize that a move can have more than one purpose. Just because White is saving the Queen does not mean the Queen cannot also have a threat, and here it is to win the Knight on d4.

### 16.Rb1??

Ouch! White does not take the free Knight, but instead attacks the Bishop. Why attack a piece when you can get one for free? Another large counting error! On top of all that, 16.Qxd4 not only wins the Knight, but also guards the attacked Knight on e4.

### 16...Qc4??

Black should have played the simple 16...Qxe4 or even the unnecessarily tricky 16...Nf4.

### 17.Nd6+??

This is not only a counting error, but a very simple logic error as well. If this fork truly wins the Queen, then likely White will be winning easily. *Any time you see a move you think checkmates or win easily, take some extra time to make sure you are right! If you are, you won't need a lot of extra time, but if you are not, you want to know before you make the move!*

### 17...Kd7??

Black is probably in shock and believes that his lower rated opponent has won the Queen. If Black stopped to look around to find the best way out of check, he would probably have found the "of course" move 17...Bxd6. *Never touch your King before looking around to see if there is a better way to get out of check – it is usually hard to top the method where another piece can capture the checking piece for free!*

### 18.Nxc4

You were expecting that! White went on to win easily. Yes he did!

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

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