



A Defense Primer

Quote of the Month: *There is nothing dishonorable about good defense.*

If you are a typical chess player, your chess career will be divided equally between having a better position, having an approximately equal position, or having a clearly worse position. So does it make sense to spend almost all your “chess problem” solving work on “play and win” or “play and mate” problems?

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman

The answer is “No,” but with a qualification. If, whenever you solve a tactical problem, you learn to recognize the pattern *and*, when you play, spend time looking to see *if your opponent can execute that tactic*, then you also receive defensive benefits. Your effort to store and recognize these critical patterns is used to play them correctly on offense, but *also to avoid those patterns on defense*, and is doubly rewarded.

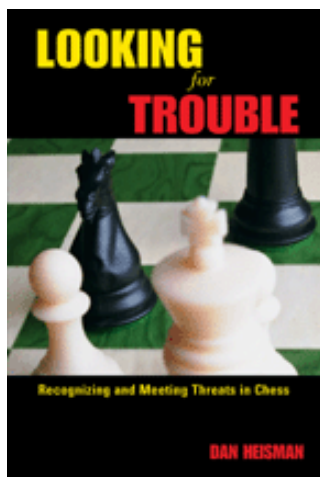
Aside from the recognition of basic tactics, what other ideas can aid you when your trying to draw – or even win – a worse position? We will answer this question below, but not before we clarify the term “defense” as it applies to chess.

Defense does not just apply to “bad” or inferior positions. As a counterexample, you may have a theoretically superior position but your opponent may have the initiative, and so you are currently on the defensive.

In the extreme case, sometimes you need to defend from a winning position! For example, suppose your opponent unsoundly sacrifices a large amount of material for a tricky attack. Then your opponent’s initiative puts you on the defensive, even if, assuming reasonable defense, you are theoretically winning.

Strong players are somewhat less likely to play defensively when they are clearly losing; if for no other reason than strong players usually play other strong players, and they know these opponents will almost always beat them in an easily winning position. Therefore strong players often resign positions against strong opponents that most average players – playing against other average players - would not (and with good reason!). So we often find stronger players defending bad, but not lost, positions for long periods of time, while weaker players often try to defend lost positions.

From the above, we can break down the defensive period into roughly three categories:



- You are better/winning, but the opponent has the initiative, possibly due to an unsound sacrifice,
- You are worse but not losing, and
- You are lost

Each of the defensive guidelines mentioned below should apply to at least one category. We'll start with the granddaddy of defensive tenets, which especially applies to bad positions:

Try your best or resign.

Too many players get a bad position and don't like to defend. They then play quickly, with the idea that they are investing little effort and have little to lose. This is a dangerous habit. Playing fast in a losing position is self-defeating because you are much less likely to bounce back without trying to find good ideas, but it also leads to the kind of lazy thinking that is dangerous when you are not losing. Much better is to try to find the best move you can – given the time constraints – every move, win or lose. That is a much healthier attitude and practices a habit you hope to maintain.

Here is another obvious, but sometimes dangerous, guideline:

The weaker your opponent, the more likely they will let you bounce back.

The effects this should have on your play are not always so clear. For example, one of my guidelines is that you should only make a threatening move if:

- The threat cannot be stopped,
- The threatening move is at least an equal (or preferably better) way to use that tempo than the opponent's use of tempo. In other words, the threatening move helps you more than the defending move helps him, or
- You are badly lost anyway and have nothing to lose, even if it is not the best move.

It is #3 that is affected by the level of play. For example, if your opponent is a very bad player and likely to make mistakes then, although you can get away with "bad move threats" more often, doing so may be unnecessary since, by just making good moves, you are much more likely to be let back into the game. So, paradoxically, when losing badly, only against competent opponents does it usually pay to make subtle threats which are not the best move, since in giving these opponents (tough) problems to solve you are much more likely to induce an error that they would not otherwise make! Yes, this is disputable, but the basic idea that *putting up strong resistance against bad opponents is likely to pay dividends* is not debatable, even if you are not just worse, but losing.

Advice that applies to all three "defensive" situations is: *When in a cramped position, seek exchanges*. The rationale behind this common advice is simple – when you have less space, if there are fewer pieces in that space, then the chances that each has a reasonable amount of activity is enhanced if they are

not in each other's way. If the exchanges are trades of pawns, then likely the cramping factor (pawn advances create space) is also alleviated. However, note that because of the guideline *When ahead, everything being equal, trade pieces and not necessarily pawns* would dictate that the player who is losing not trade pieces. So if you are cramped but down in material, trading pieces may help your opponent more than it helps you! That is a tradeoff you would have to weigh, depending upon the position. For example, if you are only down a pawn it may pay to tradeoff a piece or two to have a better defensive position, but if you are down a piece or more, then any trade just contributes to the opponent's attrition plans and that can be a hopeless path. In that case, it is likely better to hold the cramped position and hope the position gets complicated when your opponent decides to exploit his advantage, and possibly you can win back material on a mistake.

That leads to an obvious guideline for the defensive player: *Stay alert!* If you are in a bad position and play too fast, you may miss your opportunity, which is usually only for one move! Even at the grandmaster level, golden bounce back tactical opportunities are missed because they are not in the proper frame of mind to recognize the opportunity to strike unexpectedly from a losing position.

There are many other general guidelines that are especially appropriate in defensive positions:

- *Take your worst piece and make it better (or trade it off).* Often a bad position can be made tolerable if you can find a way to make a bad bishop good – or trade it off!
- *Don't unnecessarily weaken squares.* When you don't know what to do, don't push a pawn – that cannot be taken back and may weaken squares. Instead you can even move a piece back and forth and wait for your opponent to have a (bad?) idea.
- *Make sure the side of the board where your king resides is not dominated by enemy forces.*
- *If your opponent is ahead in time (development), close the position, where time becomes less important.*
- *Trade off your opponent's most active pieces.*
- *Don't give up control of open files (unless there is a tactic).* Most guidelines could be completed with the phrase "...unless there is a tactic!"
- *If everything else is equal, keep your pieces on protected squares.* This helps avoid double attacks and other tactics.
- *Complications favor the player who is losing,* so if your opponent is better, complicate and counterattack.

NM Richard Pariseau once told me that he knows what to do *if he is down a piece: throw all his pieces at his opponent's king* and, if it works, he wins and, if it does not work, he was going to lose anyway! Good advice! One often sees grandmasters do this even if they are only down a pawn, especially if their opposition is strong enough that passive resistance is not likely to succeed. The end result is that even if they don't win, they sometimes are able to draw; for example they may be able to sacrifice a piece and get a perpetual check.

Here is one of my favorite defensive guidelines: *If you are on the defensive, use your time wisely: try to conserve your time on the clock and wait for the complications, or at least the critical positions. If you can just outplay your opponent during the complications you can turn many a game around!*

A granddaddy of defensive suggestions: *If you are down pieces, trade pawns!* In the extreme, if your opponent is up a piece but you can trade off *all* the pawns, it is very unlikely he can win (impossible of course if he has only one piece left). Even if he is up a piece and you can sacrifice your last piece for his last pawn, you can often get either a king vs. king and two knights insufficient mating material draw or see if your opponent can mate with a bishop and a knight! On the other hand, if your opponent has sacrificed a pawn or a piece for the attack and thus you have a material advantage, then trade off his attacking pieces! Often enough, even the threat to trade queens can force your opponent to retreat, and an actual trade of queens usually ruins a very promising attack by removing the most potent attacker from the board (see Example 1 below). Suppose your king is exposed or caught so it cannot castle. One good solution is to trade queens. Then your “exposed” king may be well-placed in the center for the endgame!

This last example shows that sometimes when you are worse, salvation can be found in the endgame. This is because:

- The general guidelines for good play are different in the endgame than in the other phases of the game, and you may understand this better than your opponent, and
- It is much easier in the endgame for one fast move to throw away the win, and so mistakes by your “attacking” opponent in the endgame may be extremely costly.

Your opponent is attacking on a flank? Then *an attack on the flank is best met by a counterattack in the center!* Remember, if your opponent is attacking, he is often weakening squares or ignoring one part of the board, so if you can take advantage of the weak squares – or the ignored ones – that often causes a problem. See Example 2 below.

Sometimes when you have a bad position and can snatch a pawn it is good to do so, even if it looks dangerous. After all, you may have little to lose even if the lost time in taking the pawn helps your opponent. As GM Andrew Soltis once stated, “It is better to be up a pawn in a bad position than to be even in material and have a bad position!” Similarly, if you get a passed pawn and don’t have anything better to do, sometimes just pushing it down the board may either cause your opponent to pause his attack or perhaps even panic. Remember, it only takes five tempi to promote a pawn that has not yet moved, and after the first push or two it often becomes obvious to the opponent that he better do something quickly!

This one is very helpful: *Suppose your opponent wins a small amount of material – say a pawn – very early in the game, before you have castled. Then you might want to do as much as possible to see that you castle on opposite sides!* The reason is easy: castling on opposite sides is a dangerous type of game where everything usually hinges on who gets there “firstest with the

mostest.” *Criteria that normally make a big difference in balanced positions become much less important when things are imbalanced.* So if you castle on opposite sides, being down a pawn may not mean much – especially if you can get your attack in first!

For the same reason, if you are losing material and have a choice what to lose, *it is much better to lose material in such a way that you don’t have a complete subset of your opponent’s material.* For example, suppose you have the choice of losing a pawn or losing the exchange for a pawn. Although losing the exchange for a pawn is usually slightly better anyway, in this case it is much better since the material remaining is somewhat unbalanced and that is better than just being down a pawn. Or it might be better to lose a queen for a bishop and rook than just lose a pawn, especially if the queen does not have a lot of double-attacking possibilities. In general, *the imbalanced material is better for the defender than a similar ‘subset’ disadvantage* is true in most situations.

Enough abstract defensive theory. Let’s see some of this put into action!



Example 1: White to Move

In this position from a recent fun game White looks worse; he has not castled, can’t currently castle kingside, and castling queenside is dangerous, e.g. 1.O-O-O?! a4 2.b4 Nd7 followed by 3...c5! with a big attack for Black.

So White should calmly play **1.Qe2!** when he can turn his centralized king into an asset; remember the earlier guideline: *If*

your king is stuck in the center, look to trade queens. For example, if 1...Nd3+? 2.Kd2 and White is better, with the pin on the black knight gaining time. So Black either has to trade queens or retreat off the diagonal. Either way, White is at least equal, but without 1.Qe2 he would remain on the defensive.

Instead of 1.Qe2, White played the erroneous 1.c4? when 1...dxc4 left White in a quandary. After 2.bxc4 Black would have a good move – what is it?

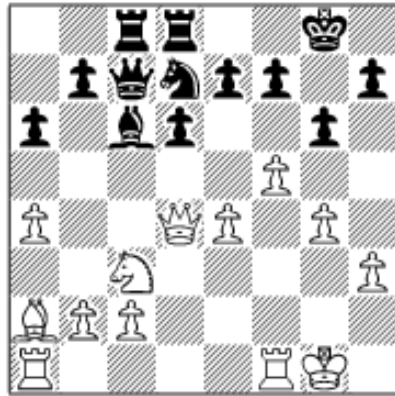


Black to play

The answer is **2...Rb2!** If 3.Qxb2?? Nd3+ wins the queen. *Sometimes little tactical tricks justify a position!* But if, instead of 2.bxc4, White plays 2.Qxc4, as he did in the game, then 2...Nd3+ wins a pawn. After 3.Kd2 Qxc4 4.bxc4 Nxe5 5.Rhc1 Kd7 6.Kc4? Rb4 Black snatched another pawn and won the endgame easily. Fritz suggested 2.O-O but, of course, Black is still up a pawn and stands better.

The following was a problem in my book *Looking for Trouble*.

Example #2: Black to move:



Here White would seem to have an enormous advantage:

- White has much more space on the kingside.
- Black's pieces are cramped together in a small area.
- Black's dark squares around the king are weak and Black has no dark-square bishop to guard them.
- Black has no pieces near his king.

It would seem a massive kingside attack is possible for White, and it is. But *an attack on the flank is met by a counterattack in the center*. Black played the only idea possible, but a good one:

1...d5!

A typical defensive thrust to explode his pieces into play. Even though the d5-square is adequately guarded by White, the threat of 2...Qg3+ causes White to take care.

2.Kg2?

White immediately goes wrong! Better is 2.Qe2 dxe4 3.Bxf7+ (3.fxg6 Ne5 4.gxf7+ Kg8 and Black has a good counterattack) 3...Kh8! 4.Be6 Ne5! 5.Rfd1 and while Black is doing fine, it is still a fight.

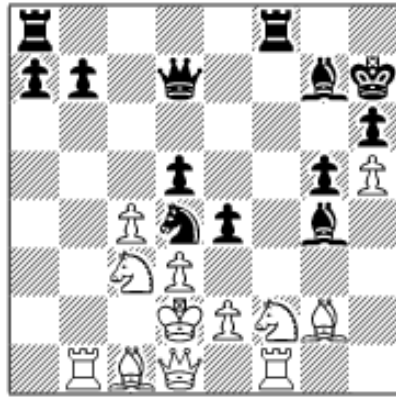
2...dxe4 3.Bxf7+ White is already desperate, but after the better 3.Qe3 Ne5 Black has a big advantage.

3...Kxf7! Looks dangerous to allow a double-check, but *sometimes you have to play dangerous-looking moves if your analysis shows them to be safe*.

4.fxg6+ Kxg6 5.Qe3 White has nothing better. **5...Rf8** Black is ahead a piece and his pieces dominate the board. Black won after **6.h4 Qe5 7.h5+ Kg7 8.h6+ Kh8 9.Ne2 Rf3** **White resigns**

Example #3: White to move

White seems to be under great pressure:

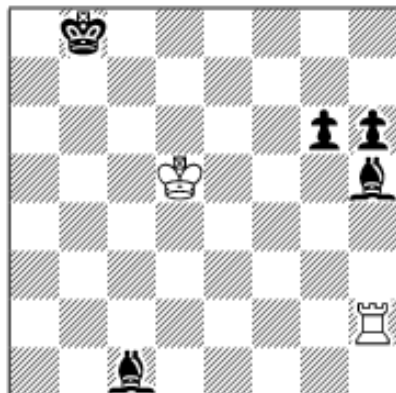


- Black is blasting open the center, where White's king is wandering, with no clear path to safety.
- Black only has two pawns for the knight, but the h5-pawn is a target and his king is safer.
- White's pieces are uncomfortably squished together in the center.

Let's see how FM Peter Fleischer, one of the best defensive players I know, handles the White pieces:

1.cxd5 A very good move, forcing clarifications. Note how White's plan includes stabilizing – and controlling – the central light squares. Also good is 1.Nxg4, removing a key attacker and winning the bishop pair. All other moves leave Black better! **1...e3+** Black forces White's king out. If 1...exd3 2.Be4+ (2.Nxg4 is still also good – *when you are being attacked, trade off the attackers!*) 2...Kh8 (2...Bf5 3.Bxd3 Bxd3 4.Kxd3 is also OK for White) 3.Kxd3! keeps the light squares under control and provides haven for the white king. **2.Kxe3 Nf5+ 3.Kd2 Rac8?** Black saw the removal of the guard 3...Ng3, attacking the rook which guards to the knight on f2, and thus winning the exchange. But he also saw that White would still be OK and tried for a win. Unfortunately 3...Ng3 was best and was Black's last chance! **4.Nfe4** White's pieces start to come into the game with great force. Notice how this knight is impregnable. **4...Bxh5 5.Qb3** Black's attack is gone and now White is winning, as all his pieces will easily find good squares and he is just up a piece for a pawn. Peter made it look easy, but many a fine player might have crumbled.

Our final example is a "simple" endgame defensive idea, also shown in *Looking for Trouble*.

**Example 4: White is to play**

Black looks to have a stranglehold on the position with his bishop pair and connected passed pawns against the lone rook. But one defensive move by White completely changes the picture:

1.Rxh5! And just like that, White is OK, since if 1...gxh5 2.Ke4 and White runs into the h1 corner. If Black does not take the rook White should be able to defend, if

nothing else just by running his king into the h1 corner anyway and sacrificing his rook for the g-pawn! One cannot win with a bishop and any number of rook pawns that promote on the opposite color, should the opposing king can get to the corner. So when you are faced with an otherwise losing position, don't be afraid to give up material if that leaves your opponent unable to win!

Next time you are under attack or have a bad position, try to keep in mind some of the guidelines in this article – and likely your “defensive” results will improve!

Readers Question

Several readers asked if they could use last month's Novice Nook, *Chess, Learning, and Fun*, to determine how good a player they could become (see the [ChessCafe Archives](#)). The answer is no, but the combination of that article and the archived Novice Nook *Traits of a Good Chessplayer* should get you close, because using both you could combine the two key elements of *skill* and *enjoyment*. Note that in scoring yourself from *Traits of a Good Chessplayer* you must not have any “killer” skills lacking. For example, you must be willing to learn from your losses (including the opportunity to identify your mistakes and the ability to *not make the same mistakes over and over again!*), a burning determination to improve no matter what it takes, and have the dogged perseverance to put up with all the reversals that happen during a budding chess career. Lots of players have determination but not perseverance; they get discouraged when the trail is long and filled with roadblocks! If you do have the requisite skills and the enjoyment of the key aspects of chess, then the final parts of the equation are lots of *time* and *opportunity*. Luckily, thanks to the internet and large live chess events, today there is plenty of opportunity to find and consistently play strong opposition and to get advice from strong players if you have that time. Skill, enjoyment, time, and opportunity – that's “all” you need!

Definitions

It is surprising that many experienced players, especially ones who have read dozens if not hundreds of books, have a misunderstanding of what the common term *winning the exchange* means. Some misunderstand it to mean “coming out on the favorable side of a trade,” but that is not the “chess” definition. For example, if you win a queen for a bishop and a pawn, that is *not* “winning the exchange.” In chess “the exchange” means, by definition, trading a knight or bishop for a rook. “Winning the exchange” means you are on the favorable side of that trade, so you have won a rook for a bishop or knight. In the context of discussing material, the word “piece” means “bishop or knight” so the definition of “winning the exchange” can be further shortened to “winning a rook for a piece.” Similarly, “losing the exchange” means to lose a rook for a piece. Note that being “up” (winning or “ahead”) *the exchange is worth about half a piece* (slightly more). So next time you win a queen for a rook, don't say that you have won the exchange – an experienced tournament player would likely just say he won “a queen for a rook” but if you want to say that in doing so you “came out ahead on the trade” that is OK. So in every chess book when they say “If Black does this, and then he loses the exchange” they mean “...Black loses a rook for a bishop or knight.” A similar and understandable misconception is that having the

bishop pair means a player has two bishops; but the phrase *bishop pair* is really a shortened form of *the advantage of the bishop pair*, meaning a player has two bishops and his opponent does not.

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



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