



Reviewing Chess Games

Quote of the Month: *Every good chessplayer has played over lots of annotated and unannotated master games, including the most famous games.*

One of the most common questions I am asked is, “What is the best way to play over a chess game to get the most out of it?” This is quite a complex query because the answer depends upon:

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

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1. What are you trying to get out of the game? Maximum improvement? Maximum improvement per unit time? Maximum enjoyment? Try to identify your goals, if not specifically, at least in general.
2. Whose game are you going over? Yours? An amateur player's? A grandmaster's?
3. How heavily annotated is the game? Not at all? Light notes? Lots of voluminous lines? Heavy instructional text?
4. What tools do you have available? A chess engine like Fritz or ChessMaster? Is the game already in electronic format so it can be played over automatically, or is it in a book and if you wish to analyze it electronically you have to enter the game manually.

For the sake of simplicity, let's assume you are playing over the game *for instruction*. We will consider two cases: *Playing over the Games of Others* and *Reviewing Your Own Games*.

Playing over the Games of Others

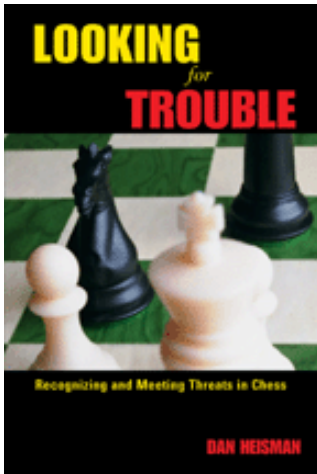
Let's start with two basic premises:

- *The more master level games you play over, the more you intuit how masters play chess.*
- *The more text annotations you read, the more information about chess you receive.*

The following can also be added: The more times you play over the same game, you get diminishing returns on what you learn on each replay.

From these premises we can conclude:

- In a given unit of time, it is better to play over lots of annotated games, each with a certain level of learning, than it is to use that same time to



play over fewer games repeatedly.

- The more annotations you read, the more you learn about how to play certain positions and apply certain principles. So playing over lots of annotated master games is extremely helpful.

There are two extremes to the approach of replaying games, both of which can be very useful if used in moderation:

1. The “Ken Smith” fast-approach. IM Smith suggested in *Chess Digest* magazine that you should gather hundreds of unannotated master games and play them over as quickly as possible to get an “osmotic” feel for where the chess masters put their pieces, especially considering the pawn structure. It is easier than ever to implement this approach if you have a tool like ChessBase because it has what I would call “movie mode” where you can use the menu option Game-Replay to watch a game and you can indicate how long of a pause you want in-between moves. This approach is especially helpful for learning how to play an opening line by using the games of good players.

2. The “Excrutiating Detail” slow-approach. In this approach you take hours to review a game, painstakingly reading each annotation note (sometimes using multiple boards for variations), playing out every annotated variation, guessing the moves of both players, and checking the moves with a computer chess engine, etc. At this extreme you spend lots of time on each position, such as I suggest in my Stoyko Exercise (see the archived Novice Nook [Chess Exercises](#)).

Both of these extremes are definitely helpful – and almost necessary for drastic improvement – if applied cautiously. If you have never done either, you are surely missing something in your chess education.

Despite the obvious advantages of occasionally going to the extreme, I suggest a norm of getting out a chessboard, playing each move, reading what the author has to say about the move, and then making the next move. At this rate, it should only take 20-40 minutes to play over an annotated game. I am often asked, “But should I play out all the analysis lines?” The answer is, “Of course, if you want to, but it is not absolutely necessary.” I would play out any analysis line that answers a question you don’t understand. For example, if you wonder why one player did not capture a pawn, and the variation explains it, then by all means play out the line (use a separate board for analysis moves if that makes things easier or quicker).

At 20-40 minutes per game you should be able to go through most game collection books in a reasonable amount of time. Going through games quickly and efficiently means you can read more annotated game collections and the more, the better. I played through about 30 in my first two years of serious play and it helped me greatly.

As for content, the correct approach is to start with master games that are annotated for instruction, and not for historical concerns or for the entertainment of other strong players. Let’s take two extreme examples:

Bobby Fischer's *My Sixty Memorable Games* and Irving Chernev's *Logical Chess Move by Move*. Both are great books for what they aim to accomplish, but far different in those goals.

My Sixty Memorable Games is a classic set of games annotated at the highest level and it assumes a great deal of knowledge. Fischer and co-author GM Larry Evans are writing for historical purposes and to provide state-of-the-art analysis clarity to some of the most important games of Fischer's career. As such their intended audience includes players from mid-tournament range (at least FIDE 1600) up to grandmaster. Many of the games have no notes to the opening moves until Fischer decides which line or variation he wishes to play, within well-known tabiyas. So, there may be no notes for the first five or ten moves of the game. There are some that have earlier notes, but the intention is clear: Fischer and Evans are not trying to teach the reader about opening principles or even why those tabiyas were popular – that is assumed to be common knowledge by the intended readership.

Conversely, *Logical Chess Move by Move* is also a classic, but on the opposite end of the spectrum. Some moderately experienced players are put off by the extremely basic notes found in Games One and Two, but the remainder of the book has a more even tone to its instruction. Yet Chernev's intentions are clear: assume the reader knows the rules and how to move the pieces, and any instruction is fair game. His goal is to teach the reader the basic principles, and why masters play the kind of moves they do in common positions, and he painstakingly walks you through the reasons why these principles apply (or not). As was written in the recent Novice Nook [The Big Five](#), understanding and learning to prioritize general principles is one of the most important things an improving chessplayer can do, and going over annotated master games written for instruction is one of the best ways to learn about general principles.

Since the advent of Chernev's *Logical Chess Move by Move* and its natural successor *The Most Instructive Games of Chess Ever Played* (one of my first chess books), more authors have written game anthologies for instruction. A very recent contender to the "this book has an annotation after every move for the purpose of helping players learn" is Neil McDonald's *Chess: the art of logical thinking*, while *Understanding Chess Move by Move* by GM John Nunn is not, as the title might imply, an updated version of Chernev written for today's beginners, but rather a quite advanced text. In grade school terms, if Chernev is second grade, Nunn is more like ninth grade, as is Igor Stohl's award-winning *Instructive Modern Chess Masterpieces*.

Game collections devoted to one master can vary in intention from essentially non-instructive to very instructive. If I had to select other "biographical" books that were written for reasons other than instruction – or at least not for the purpose of instructing of weaker players – an older example would be Sergeant's *Morphy's Games of Chess* and, from the modern scene, Vladimir Kramnik's *My Life and Games*. The most instructive one would be Paul Keres' *Grandmaster of Chess* series (edited by Harry Golombek) or, more recently, *Jon Speelman's Best Games* by grandmaster Speelman. Of course, these suggestions are very much subjective; each master has his favorite set of annotated game collections (i.e. "How could you leave out Nimzovich!?!...")

Books that contain no text, but just Informator-style symbols are not very good for helping you learn general principles, no matter how in-depth and accurate their analysis. Again, it is worth stating that these books can be excellent for their intended purposes – we are only considering their instructive value for improving players.

Reviewing Your Own Games

The main goal of reviewing your own games for instruction is clear:

To identify your mistakes and take whatever steps necessary to minimize – or eliminate – their recurrence!

Besides going over the games yourself, there are many other aids available: strong players/instructors, chess programs, databases, books, etc. You want to make use of as many of these as possible to achieve your goal.

No matter which aids are available, you should first review the game, preferably with your opponent, and especially if the game was played at a decently slow time limit and your opponent is willing! If your opponent is a much stronger player, reviewing the game together will kill multiple birds with one stone, as not only will you be able to discuss the game when your motivations and thought processes are fresh, but you are also getting a free lesson! If you are not currently in the habit of asking your opponent to review your game, especially your losses, then you are missing out on a golden opportunity. I was lucky enough to acquire this habit when I first started tournament play. I thank all my stronger opponents and higher rated friends, especially at the Germantown Chess Club in the late 1960's, who were patient enough to explain to me why I should not do this or that – I loved it and asked for more! I was never defensive in going over my games; I expected that I made mistakes and I wanted to uncover them, understand them, and minimize them. I was never embarrassed by mistakes unless I made one repeatedly – and I think the fear of repetition made me all the more determined not to do so.

If your opponent is not available to review the game, then you should still do so yourself at least once before showing it to stronger players or submitting it for computer analysis. There are several reasons for this quick private review. First, you should form your own opinions about what you did wrong and what you should have done differently. Initially you won't be too successful, but that is OK; you need to hone your skills at self-evaluation and you will improve each time you do so. Secondly, when you play an over-the-board game, it is important that your scoresheet make sense before showing it to stronger players or an instructor. If I had to count how many games (and how many hours!) I have spent trying to decipher what happened because of bad notation I would have run out of fingers and toes for my entire family a long time ago. One advantage of going over web-based games, from an instructor's standpoint, is that the game is recorded perfectly and every move is time-stamped: both are greatly beneficial in helping me aid my students. Reviewing an over-the-board game while it is fresh in your memory will help you find discrepancies and ambiguities in your scoresheet (which rook went to d1?) so that the better players will be able to help you more efficiently. A third reason to review your game yourself is to solidify your memory of what

happened, so that when/if the stronger player asks you about it, you will feel more comfortable. When I review a game I often ask questions such as, “Why did you take so much time on that move?” and “What was your reason for choosing this move?” or “Did you consider playing this alternative?” If you have already reviewed the game, then your answers are usually both fresher and reinforced.

Whether the “once over” is alone or with your opponent, you are now ready to make use of any aid available. It may be more effective to use a physical board to review games, but sometimes easier to view a game electronically, especially if the game was played and stored on the computer (on-line or against a computer opponent).

With regard to the opening, I will repeat a common *Novice Nook* mantra: After each game (or series of blitz games), review the opening(s) to ascertain, “If a future opponent makes the same moves, where would I differ to improve?”

For example, suppose you opened as White **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6** and then played 4.d3.



White to play

While 4.d3 is a reasonable move, you might find, after investigation, that 4.Ng5 (Classical) or 4.d4 (Max Lange Attack) are both more rigorous.

Or, suppose you play Black in the same opening system and, after **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Nf6 4.Ng5 d5 5.exd5** (see next diagram), you lost multiple blitz games one afternoon after 5...Nxd5 because White played the correct 6.d4! (Lolli).



Black to play

Here any book, database, or article addressing The Two Knight's Defense will show you that the natural-looking 5...Nxd5 is not considered best and that Black should play the theoretically superior 5...Na5, 5...b5, or 5...Nd4.

In either case, you should find the tabiya (main line) of each suggested variation, decide which you want to learn (based on what looks more interesting, or fits your style, or meets whatever criteria you wish), then do whatever is necessary to learn it (such as playing out the line several times) so that if the sequence happens again, you will know it. After this, you should be able to

play the appropriate move(s) next time that sequence arises.

If you can't find the sequence or don't know what to do (a common complaint), you can either analyze the position with a chess playing program or ask a stronger player what you should do. The most likely scenarios are:

A) One player made an innocuous move that causes the opponent no trouble and you can continue to develop unimpeded.

B) The move that can't be found is an outright blunder whose refutation can be spotted by the program/strong player.

C) One player played a rare line that is perfectly acceptable but is not in your book/database. In this case you can either learn the rare line (by getting additional material or following the computer's suggestions) or avoid it by playing a different move.

The archived Novice Nook [*Learning Opening Lines and Ideas*](#) contains additional useful advice on learning openings.

If you don't take the steps to learn what is correct **you will repeatedly make the same opening mistakes, or innocuous moves, and will improve at a much slower rate**. Repetition of opening miscues also makes it difficult to compete with others who may be currently competitive with you, but are doing more to identify and minimize their errors. Moreover, it is just as effective to perform the instructive opening search after fast games; since researching opening moves is not dependent on the speed of the finished game and, with quick games, you can play more frequently and experiment more freely with the openings than you can in "more important" slow games.

No matter how much players want to improve, many don't do the simple tasks that would be quite beneficial. My suggestion to "look up each game after you play it, to make sure you are not repeating your mistakes" is also one of my most ignored pieces of advice. I am not a big fan of weaker players memorizing lots of opening lines they will never play. However, it is quite a different issue to spend a small amount of time learning how to play your openings a little better each time they occur. A long journey begins with a single step.

Recently a prospective student admitted that he had played thousands of online speed games, but his rating had remained about the same. It turned out that he owned *Modern Chess Openings* (MCO-14), but had never researched *any* of those games to see where he could improve. Contrast that to my chess beginning: when I was 16 and played in my first tournaments, I bought MCO-10, then *the* English language Opening Bible, and it was *de rigueur* to "look up your opening in MCO." Subsequently my copy became overwritten with notes; someday it may become a collector's item...! So which one of us was doing a better job of learning from our games and improving more rapidly?

As for the reviewing the remainder of the game, there are several helpful hints:

1. If you have recorded the remaining time after each move, you can review your time management to see if you were playing too fast, too slow, or not recognizing critical moves and giving them the proper allocation of your time.
2. If you own a program like Fritz, which has an overnight analysis mode (see the archived [ChessCafe](#) article [The Fritz Fairy Analyzes and Annotates While You Sleep](#) you can use this great feature, which is especially helpful for identifying tactical errors. For more general advice about using the computer, reference the archived Novice Nook [Using the Computer to Improve](#).
3. Suppose that during a game you chose a continuation without sufficient thought because of time restrictions. Then, after the game is a great time to mull over these decisions, especially for non-critical but interesting positions. The principle is common sense, but logical and powerful:

The closer the decision, the more time and effort it takes to differentiate on what you should do – yet *the closer the decision, then the less difference it makes and the less time you should take!*

Admittedly there are two problems with this truism: First, if you are an international level player, then making a series of second best decisions may be enough to cost you the game. So, on that level, even close decisions have to be taken very seriously. Secondly, weak players often don't recognize when a decision is clear cut or close. Because of this misevaluation, they may end up making a bad move quickly, believing the decision does not matter when it actually is critical. Nevertheless, you should save a reasonable amount of your time for critical decisions – especially when there is a large penalty for playing the second best move. So, if you want to learn something by spending a lot of time studying those close non-critical decisions, the proper time to do so is after the game!

4. When reviewing games with a strong player or instructor, indicate the moves where you had difficulty choosing, analyzing, or evaluating, even if you eventually arrived at the correct decision. The strong player may have some useful guidelines or tips on how you could have come to the decision more quickly, accurately, or easily. You should also analyze the most complicated tactics with the stronger player, so they can show you key patterns that are likely to recur in future games when you find yourself facing a similar attack – or defense! Sometimes good players like to spend hours trying to find the “truth” of the position: whether an attack was sound or a sacrifice could have been made. Whenever possible, it is both fun and educational to go along for the ride.
5. Another post-game agenda is to identify all the moves where the evaluation changed drastically. The last point where the game changed from drawing/winning to losing is called *The Losing Move*. If it is a move that takes you from drawing/winning to losing (it is impossible for you to make a move that takes you from drawing to winning or losing to drawing; see the archived article [Applying Steinitz' Laws](#): but later your opponent blunders and lets you off the hook, then your previous error is only a Would Have Been the Losing Move! The attempt to prove all of these transition points is usually very

beneficial, as it requires careful analysis using instructive logic such as, “Is that move really forced” or “Is that move really best” and “Is the position no longer salvageable with best play?” You can benefit enormously by doing these investigations with stronger players!

6. Make note of areas for further study when reviewing your game. For example, you may lose an easily drawn king and pawn endgame because you have never studied king and pawn endgames. This may be a good time to do so! Or you may miss a common *removal of the guard* tactic, so it is likely time to hone up on that particular type of tactic. If you got into unnecessary time trouble, try to identify the causes, so that your future time management is better. Remember, your goal is to minimize repetition of future mistakes!

7. Catalog the mistakes you have identified and wish to avoid repeating in your own “Hall of Shame” three ring binder. This practice can result in a great personalized study book. For more on how to do this, refer to the end of the archived Novice Nook [*The Case for Time Management*](#).

8. Identify what type of annotated master games would be beneficial for future study. For example, if you are making basic mistakes, try Irving Chernev’s *Logical Chess Move by Move*. If you need to play more speculative sacrifices, try Tal’s games. Not getting your pieces out efficiently? Paul Morphy may be the one. Need to play more straightforward and logical? Try Capablanca. Give up too easily in bad positions? Then Emmanuel Lasker or Victor Korchnoi might be for you. If you are already a very good player but need to understand modern grandmaster play? Then I recommend Watson’s *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*. One word of warning: don’t study a book which is over your head, even if it contains something indicated. For example, a well-annotated Morphy game might be helpful for everyone, while Watson’s book is not really recommended until you are tactically sound and can implement all the basic guidelines well, say a minimum FIDE rating of 1800.

In conclusion, studying your games and annotated master games can be one of the best ways to improve. Of course, continue to evenly mix theory (study) and practice. Going over games is great, but if you don’t consistently try to apply what you have learned – to see if you can minimize those same mistakes – may yield diminished returns on your time. So play lots of slow chess – and throw in some fast chess as well – to enhance and reap the benefits as well as providing more fuel for future study.

Reader Question: *My friend has played significantly more fast games than I have and, despite my superior chess knowledge and generally equal intelligence, has a much higher chess rating. So isn’t that because of his playing more fast games?*

Answer: I think you may be confusing the effect of your friend’s large *number* of games with the more relevant effect of his large amount of *time* playing chess. Someone who has spent more total time playing is usually better, all other things being equal, than a similarly talented player with less experience, especially if the total time difference is significant.

If two players, who are both equally talented, start at the same level and play an equal number of hours, but one plays exclusively slow and the other exclusively fast chess, then the player with the slow games would be the superior player in general. We should also assume the players spend equal amounts of time looking at games afterwards and equal study time, etc. (usually slow game players spend more time studying those games).

Of course, ignoring this “thought experiment,” a better practical course for anyone wishing to improve would be to play slow games *and* augment them with fast games to practice the openings, learning how to better play in time trouble, practice risky attacks, etc. *It is always better to play a mix of time controls, as most good players do.*

The Hidden Secret of Tactics

When you study basic tactics, their primary use – eventually – will be *defensive*, not offensive, even though all the problems are set up from the offensive perspective (e.g., “White to play and win”). Because when both players are decent tacticians, they will think, “If I go here, what can he do to me? What are all his checks, captures, and threats?” If even one of these possible forcing replies is a tactic that would win, then that potential reply eliminates the move they are considering as a candidate. When both players do this effectively, their mutual caution eliminates most of the opponent’s offensive tactics, so neither player gets to execute a basic tactic. Therefore, among good players almost 100% of the easy tactics that are involved in their thinking do *not* occur as tactics against their opponents. Instead, the easy tactics remain unseen as part of the defensive thought process that prevented their opponent from using such tactics against them! The moral of the story is to make sure to use your tactical knowledge to prevent your opponent from utilizing easy tactics against you – knowing how to win a piece in a certain position is not very helpful if your opponent never allows it, but you do!

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


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