



Opening Principles

Quote of the Month: *Before you spend a lot of time learning opening lines, you should first learn opening principles.*

In the archived Novice Nook [Learning Chess Openings](#) we discussed the best ways to study the openings; this month we will present the most important opening principles. Although there are dozens of them, it is much easier to learn *and* understand these principles than to memorize thousands of opening moves! Even when you know the correct opening sequence, as soon as an opponent takes you out of your book, you still must complete your opening moves using principles. So it makes sense, both in efficiency and effectiveness, to learn and understand the principles.

First let's differentiate between opening *goals* and *principles*. A goal is an objective you are trying to achieve; a principle is a "tip" about how to recognize goals and sub-goals, or to more easily or effectively achieve them.

The three major goals in the opening are, in descending order of importance:

- To efficiently and effectively activate your forces, especially the pieces (not pawns). In the opening activating your forces is called *development*.
- To take as much *control* of the center as possible. Note that control and *occupation* are related, but are quite different concepts.
- To place the king as safely as possible for the middlegame – usually castling earlier rather than later to facilitate the first goal.

There are only three main goals, yet there are dozens of supporting principles, and "meta-principles" such as:

Overall principles usually take precedence over phase-specific principles.

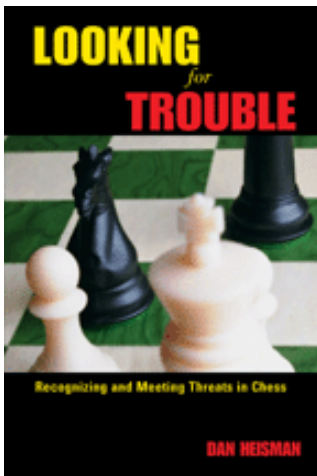
Overall principles can be applied throughout the game, while phase-specific principles such as opening principles are more short term. For example, two overall principles are "if you see a good move, look for a better one" and "safety (tactics) comes first." Therefore, these two principles not only apply in the opening, but usually take precedence over any conflicting opening principles.

Another important issue is that *opening principles do not necessarily apply to book moves! Principles help you figure out which moves to play when you don't know what to do.* For example, if 200 years of grandmaster theory says the best idea in a given position is to move the knight twice and end up "on

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the rim” with 7...Na5 then, assuming you understand why you are doing it, playing 7...Na5 does *not* break opening principles.

Here is another opening “meta-principle” that also needs to be emphasized:

While almost any opening is good if you know it, *the better known and sharper an opening is, the more you need to know specific lines and traps*. For example, playing a main line of a sharp, well-known opening like the Sicilian Dragon or the Marshall Attack of the Ruy Lopez without any knowledge of the ideas and lines can be suicidal against most intermediate and strong players.

Conversely, *the less tactical or less known an opening is, the more you can “wing it” on general principles*. So, if you don’t want to study opening lines and just want to get by on general principles, that is OK, but don’t pick well-known sharp variations.

Let’s differentiate between a *rule* and a principle. A rule can be defined as a statement that is meant to be applied at all times, while a principle is more general and only applies some of the time. For example, how to mate with a king and queen vs. king or how to win a king and pawn endgame when you have the opposition are rules. While rules *can* have occasional exceptions, principles are weaker and are expected to have exceptions. Some principles only apply to very specific types of positions. See the archived Novice Nook [The Six Common Chess States](#) for additional information on how principles vary widely depending upon the type of position.

The key opening principle that supports the first goal dwarfs all of the others. It is similar to one of World Champion Dr. Emmanuel Lasker’s four “rules” from *Common Sense in Chess*:

Move every piece once before you move any piece twice, unless there is a tactic.

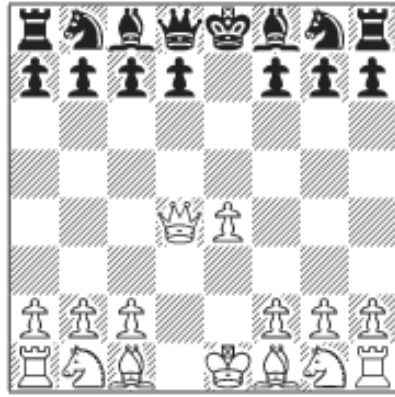
- The word “piece” in this context doesn’t refer to pawns.
- *The caveat “unless there is a tactic” applies to almost all non-tactical principles!* Tactics are that important, and this caveat can be appended to most of the principles below.
- Grandmasters often deviate from this principle, but you have to crawl before you can walk. You will be *much* better off just trying to follow it consistently, rather than looking for exceptions which will only cost you needless time on the clock!
- Until you can develop *all* your pieces every game, you will likely stay below intermediate level play.
- Most lower rated players know this principle, but in my experience less than 1% can initially follow it consistently! However, the sooner you learn to do so, the quicker you progress.

Additional Opening Principles

The following is a list of opening principles. It is not comprehensive, but it should form a good basis for study.

— *Don't move your queen out early if it can be attacked by lesser pieces, thus losing "time."*

The center game has a weak reputation because after **1.e4 e5 2.d4?! cxd4 3.Qd4**



Black to play

Black can attack the queen with **3...Nc6**, placing the knight on a good square and forcing the queen to move again. Contrast this to the sequence in the Scotch game after **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4 cxd4 4.Nxd4** where the common beginner mistake **4...Nxd4?** is bad, since after **5.Qxd4** the queen is well placed. *Understanding the difference between these two queen development sequences is a strong step forward!*

forward!

— *The player who uses his rooks best probably wins the opening. Alternately, a main goal of the opening is to properly develop your rooks.*

— A good metric is *how many moves it takes for you to develop all your pieces* (not pawns): 13-17 is normal. If you use much more than that you are probably neglecting your development; most likely your rooks.

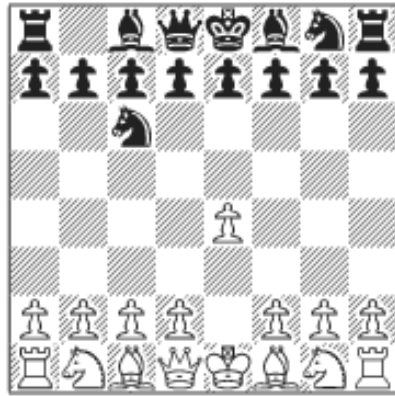
— *If you can push a pawn up and safely drive a knight out of the center, it is probably good to do so, especially if in doing so you don't weaken any squares.* For example, in the Vienna Game: **1.e4 e5 2.Nc3 Nf6 3.f4 exf4?** is a known mistake because of...



White to play

4.e5! and Black has to retreat his knight to g8 with a very bad position. Inserting **4...Qe7 5.Qe2** does not help Black.

— *If you are White set up the "little center" (e4 and d4) whenever your opponent allows it.* For example, after **1.e4 Nc6**, the Nimzovitch Defense ...

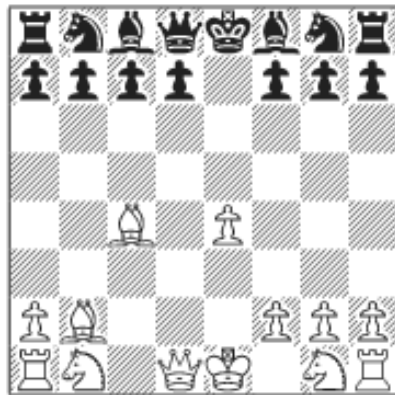


White to play

2.Nf3 offering to transpose into a double-knight's pawn game with 2...e5 is fine, but the main line is **2.d4**. There is a slightly less effective, but similar, principle that states that Black should play his pawns to e5 and d5 if White allows it.

— *The best way to refute a gambit is to accept it.*

— *Sometimes the best way to play a gambit is to accept the material and then give it back at the appropriate time.* For example, a main line in the Danish Gambit is **1.e4 e5 2.d4 exd4 3.c3 dxc3 3...Qe7!? is a move I like. 4.Bc4 cxb2 5.Bb2**



Black to play

White has a big lead in development for two pawns, but a common way to combat White's pressure is to give both pawns back immediately! **5...d5! 6.Bxd5 Nf6 7.Bxf7+ Kxf7 8.Qxd8 Bb4+ 9.Qd2 Bxd2+ 10.N1xd2 c5** with approximate equality and chances for both sides.

— *Don't panic if your opponent plays something you don't know. Just follow the general principles (such as the ones in this article!).*

— *Lower rated players should play sharp, tactical openings to improve their tactics.*

— *Moving just two pawns in the opening is usually not enough to give your pieces space; on the other hand, moving six or more pawns is usually too weakening and takes too much time.*

— *Don't put your knight in front of your c-pawn in double d-pawn openings. In general, don't block your break moves and place your rooks behind your break moves.*

— *Put your pieces on the 'proper' side of the pawns (usually meaning behind them!). For example, it is usually correct to put your queen's knight behind your c-pawn, like c4/Nc3 or ...c5/...Nc6.*

— *Castling is often the most important move in the opening. It is the only*

move which may save a tempo by moving two pieces at once! The other major candidate for “most important move in the opening” is *the first move out of your “book,” which you should play slowly, and with a plan to finish developing all your pieces.*

— *Don’t start a fight until your king is safe, especially if your opponent’s king is already safe.*

— *Don’t start a fight until either all your pieces are ready or at least you have many more pieces active than your opponent.*

— *Any opening that you know well is a good one, no matter what its reputation.*

— *Bd2 is usually bad for White in almost any opening unless it is tactically required.*

— *Develop knights before bishops.* This usually means the knight before the bishop on the same side, *not necessarily both knights before both bishops.* Of course, in many openings you do develop both knights before both bishops so, like all principles, this is just good general advice.

— *Don’t pin the adverse king’s knight to the queen before the opponent has castled.* (One of Emmanuel Lasker’s “rules.”) This principle holds strongly in double e-pawn openings, which were popular in Lasker’s day! Here is a cute trap illustrating the dangers of pinning too early from Irving Chernev’s *Winning Chess Traps*: **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.d3 d6 5.O-O Nf6 6.Bg5?! h6 7.Bh4 g5 8.Bg3 h5?! 8...Na5!?** grabs the bishop pair. **9.Nxg5 h4 10.Nxf7 hxg3?! 10...Qe7**, with a fighting game, and it avoids the improvement on move 13. **11.Nxd8 Bg4 12.Qd2 Nd4 13.Nc3?** Chernev would have loved to own Fritz, which spoilsports 13.h3! when after **13...Ne2+ 14.Qxe2 Bxe2 15.Ne6** White is doing fine! Maybe in Chernev’s second edition...



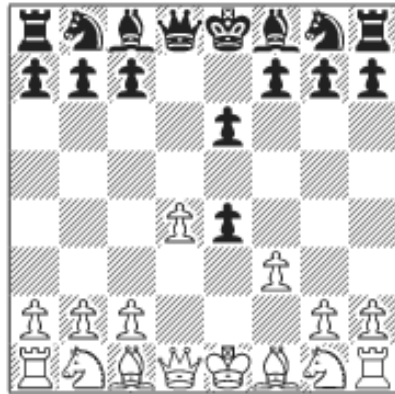
Black to play

13...Nf3+! 14.gxf3 Bxf3 and White cannot avoid mate: **15.hxg3 Rh1#** or **15.Nc3 gxh2#**.

— *Develop the pieces on the side you are going to castle before the pieces on the other side.* Or as a corollary, *develop the bishop on the side you wish to castle before developing the other bishop.* Yes, there may seem to be many exceptions to

this one. For example, the main line of the Queen’s Gambit Declined! But remember that principles don’t necessarily apply to book moves.

— *Don't play your f-pawn forward one square (f3/f6) unless your opponent's queen is off the board, you are already castled, or are soon going to castle the opposite side.* Especially avoid guarding the e-pawn from a pawn capture by f3 if you are subject to possible queen checks, e.g. **1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.f3?! dxe4**



White to play

4.fxex4?? Better is 4.Nc3 with a Black-Diemar Gambit, or even 4.Be3?! **4...Qh4+ 5.g3??** Losing material, but obviously 5.Kd2 Qxe4 is good for Black, too. **5...Qxe4+** and **6...Qxh1**.

— *Don't prevent pins with h3/h6 and a3/a6 unless the attacked square is the only good one for the bishop; on the other hand, playing h3/h6 to prevent a knight from harassing a well-placed bishop on e3/e6 is often correct.* See the archived Novice Nook: [A Guide to P-R3](#).

— *If a bishop plays Bg5/g4 and is not threatening to take a knight (it can do so, but it is not a threat), it is often correct to hit it with ...h3 or ...h6 to force a decision about which diagonal it should control.* This is a common theme in Bg5 variations of the King's Indian, where Black plays ...h6.

— *Don't play Bg5/b5 or ...Bg4/b4 if you are fianchettoed on the same side unless you intend to give up the bishop for a knight if you are attacked by a pawn.* For example, after **1.d4 d5 2.g3 Nf6 3.Bg2 e6 4.Bg5(?) h6**



White to play

5.Bh4?? g5 traps the bishop because of the pawn on g3. The "better" 5.Bxf6 gives up the bishop pair and retreating the bishop (best) shows 4.Bg5 to be toothless.

— *Don't move all your pawns (in one area) onto the same color squares as this creates weak squares of the opposite color.* For example, in the opening if black plays ...g6, then often ...d6 is correct as it opens the way for the other bishop and does not weaken any squares. (For White, this is g3/d3.) On the other hand ...e6 is often wrong as it weakens f6 and blocks the other bishop. Similarly, the move set ...e6 and ...b6 (or e3 and b3) often go together.

— *If you move a pawn to open up a diagonal for a bishop, then you usually should not move up another pawn to develop the same bishop on the other diagonal. It should be developed on the original diagonal without wasting time to push the second pawn (pushing the second pawn also weakens*

squares).

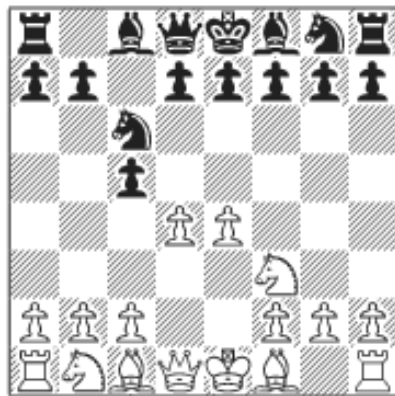
— *A premature attack is doomed to failure.*

— *If you castle on opposite sides and the queens are still on the board, the side that gets to the opponent's king first with the most usually wins! This principle indirectly leads to the middlegame corollary: an attack on the flank is best met by a counterattack in the center.*

— *If you are already winning, try to castle on the same side as your opponent. Castling on the opposite side tends to make the game sharp and minimizes any material advantage.*

— *Play a piece to the square where you know it must go before you play another piece to a square where you think it might go. The extra move might help you determine to which square the latter piece should move.*

— *If the opponent makes a "break" move with a center (d- or e-) pawn, it is usually correct to capture it with your pawn. For example, in the Sicilian after **1.e4 c5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.d4** it is correct to play **3...cxd4** to trade a flank pawn for a central one and leave Black with two center pawns to White's one. If instead...*



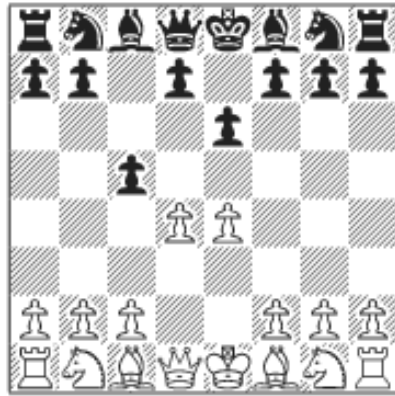
Black to play

3...e6? 4.d5! leads to a big advantage for White, e.g. **4...exd5 5.exd5 Ne7? 6.d6 Ng6 7.Qe2+** wins a piece.

— *You don't always need to castle if the queens are already exchanged. Often castling is still wise, but not nearly as necessary as when queens are on the board, especially if the center is easily opened.*

— *Any time you develop your minor pieces by Nc3, Bd2, Be2, and Nf3 (or for Black Nc6, Bd7, Be7, Nf6) you know you have probably done something wrong!*

— *Don't help your opponent develop his pieces. For example after **1.e4 e6 2.d4 c5** it is usually incorrect to play a move like...*

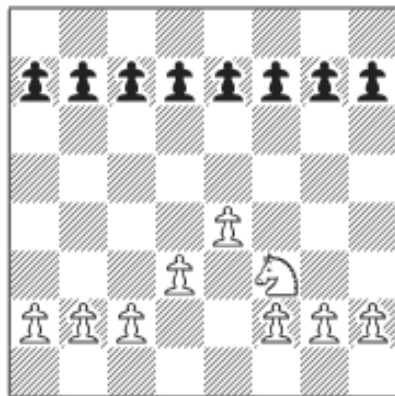


White to play

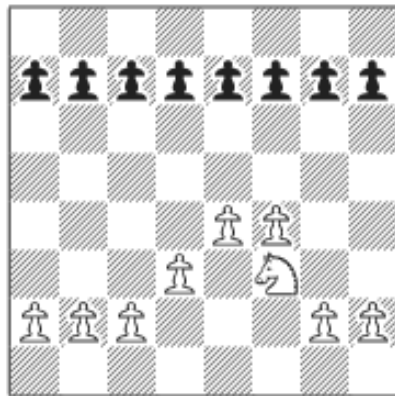
3.dxc5(?) Instead 3.d5, 3.Nf3, and even 3.c3 are all better. **3...Bxc5** and Black is happy to get his bishop into the game with a recapture. You can probably think of a hundred more examples like this one!

— *Advance your pawns in a smooth manner, preferably with your lead two pawns side-by-side.* For example, the pawn

structure...



is *inferior* for White, in general, to this pawn structure...



...all other things being equal. Not only does White have more space in the latter diagram, but also more flexibility. Note how the pawn on f4 allows a castled rook on f1 to control f3 and f4, and support future expansion.

Conclusion: Studying main lines to form a basis for future study is a very effective way to learn openings. Looking up your games in an opening book or database to

see what you should do differently and avoid repeating mistakes is a great habit. But memorizing tons of lines you will never play – or remember – is vastly inferior to understanding opening principles. Oh, and don't forget: these are just guidelines, which means there are exceptions...chess is not an easy game!

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



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