



The Most Important Strategic Decisions

Quote of the Month: *Tactics dominate positional concepts and strategy. Nevertheless, a bad strategic decision can prove disastrous.*

In this month's column we are going to consider the "big" strategic decisions. First we will exclude the short-term strategic decisions that should be made *on every move*:

- Which piece do I want to move?
- What am I trying to accomplish – what are the reasonable plans?
- Where does this piece want to go?
- Given this pawn structure, where should I place my pieces?
- How do I want to arrange my pawns?

We will also exclude decisions that are tactical (Can I save material? Does this combination work?), time management (Am I playing too fast?), and anything else "non-strategic."

That leaves the strategic decisions that can make or break your game, which only occur a few times during each game. There are many strategic decisions that fit this description, but I chose the eight that are most consequential:

- a. Keep the position closed or open?
- b. Trade queens or not?
- c. Trade into a king and pawn endgame?
- d. When to attack?
- e. Where to attack?
- f. Where to put the king?
- g. How should I adjust my strategy for material?
- h. Do I get enough compensation for an uneven exchange/sacrifice?

Honorable Mention: Do I play passively and defend or give up material and counterattack?

For each, let's examine why these decisions are important, which criteria can help you make the decision, and what disasters can befall if you arrive at the wrong conclusion.

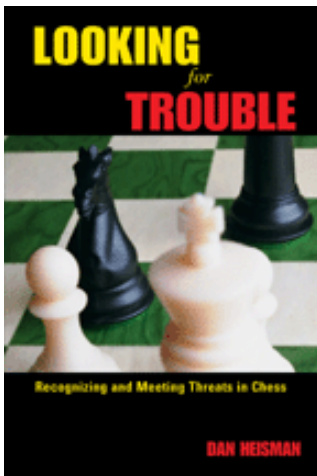
a. Keep the position closed or open?

In many positions a player must decide whether to use pawns (or, less commonly, sacrifice material) to keep the position closed or open. There are several strategic factors which point one way or the other:

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



- Ahead in development? Open it.
- Behind in development? Close it.
- Want to attack on that side? Open it.
- Want to defend? Close it.
- Your king in that area? Close it.
- Opponent's king? Open it.

In the Novice Nook [Chess Master vs. Chess Amateur](#) I played White in each game and was always ahead in development, so I was looking to open the position. Conversely, in the game below, the human playing black was trying to trick the computer (notoriously good in open positions) into closing the center. By clever play – and with help from his “unsuspecting” opponent – he was able to do so:

Shredder, Comp. – Garcia Palermo, C. (2467)

Mercosur Cup, Vicente Lopez ARG 17.07.2005

1.d4 d6 2.e4 g6 3.Nf3 Bg7 4.Nc3 a6 5.a4 b6 6.Bc4 e6 7.0–0 Ne7 8.Re1 Bb7



White to move

Ask yourself, *where is White developing all its pieces? Or what part of the board are White's pieces attacking?* The answer is the center. So White should try to pry open the center and Black should try to lock it (also because he is playing a computer). That is why Black has placed his two center pawns side by side on the sixth rank, opposing White's two pawns on the fourth: with this setup if White

plays d5, Black can respond ...e5, and if White plays e5, Black can play ...d5. If the black knight had been on the f6-square instead of e7, this anti-computer “close-it-up” strategy would not work, as Black could not respond ...d5 to e5 because of exf6.

9.d5? This move threatens e6 and blocks in the bishop on b7. Is it a good move? No! It is a terrible move! So Black naturally plays **9...e5**. With the center closed, Black has time to redeploy his light-squared bishop onto the c8-h3 diagonal and support the strong pawn break ...f5. Meanwhile White's indicated pawn break, c5, is almost nonexistent. Black got a good game, later won material and...eventually lost when the game got complicated – tactics dominate! The instructive game finished: **10.Qd2 h6 11.Qd3 Nd7 12.Nh4 0–0 13.b4 Bc8 14.Qe3 Nf6 15.Nf3 Nh7 16.Nd2 f5 17.f3 f4 18.Qd3 g5 19.Bb2 h5 20.b5 a5 21.Kf2 g4 22.Rh1 Ng6 23.Raf1 Bf6 24.Ke1 Kg7 25.Kd1 Ng5 26.Kc1 Qe7 27.Nd1 Bd7 28.Rhg1 Rf7 29.Nf2 g3 30.hxg3 fxg3 31.Nd1 Nf4 32.Qe3 h4 33.Re1 h3 34.Bf1 h2 35.Rh1 Nh7 36.Qc3 Rc8 37.Ne3 Bg5 38.Bc4 Ng6 39.Ndf1 Bf4 40.Kb1 Nh4 41.Bc1 Qg5 42.Rd1 Rcf8 43.Be2 Bc8 44.Ng4 Bxc1 45.Rxc1 Nxf3! 46.gxf3 g2 47.Nfxh2 gxh1Q 48.Rxh1 Rh8? 49.f4! Qxf4 50.Rf1 Qg5 51.Rxf7+ Kxf7 52.Qxc7+ Qe7 53.Nh6+ Kf6 54.N2g4+ Bxg4 55.Nxg4+ Kf7 56.Nh6+ Kf6 57.Qc6 Rd8 58.Nf5 Qd7 59.Qxb6 Ng5 60.Bd3 Nh3 61.c4 Nf4 62.c5 Nxd3 63.c6 Qe8 64.c7 Ra8**

65.Qxd6+ 1-0

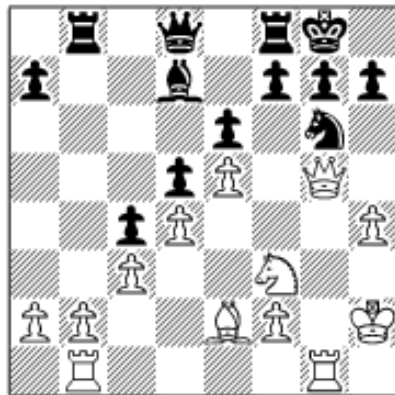
b. Trade queens or not?

Whenever there is a potential trade it can be a crucial decision, but two types of trades stand out as almost always critical: a trade of queens and trading off the final pieces into a king and pawn endgame.

When a queen trade is offered a player always has to ask himself, “Am I better off with the queens on the board or off?” This is crucial because there are many types of positions where one has a dynamic advantage (ahead in tempo, better king safety, attacking chances) and can be better with the queens on the board, but immediately worse (static weaknesses) if queens are traded! Here are some of the considerations with the general tendency:

- If you are attacking – likely leave the queens *on the board*
- If you have the better endgame – Off
- If you are ahead in material – Off
- If you are behind in material – On
- If your king is safer – On
- If you opponent’s king is exposed – On
- If you have structural weaknesses – On
- If the only other piece besides your queen is a knight and your opponent only has a queen and a bishop – On
- If your opponent’s queen is more active or will be – Off

Consider the following position.

**White to move**

Here White has a strong attack along the g-file with a threat of h5 – therefore he should decline Black’s offer to trade queens and play 1.Qg3. Strangely enough, White understood that 1.Qxd8 was bad, but “kept the queens on” with **1.h5?** This *still allows the trade of queens*, so it amounts to the same bad result. Of course, Black does not have to move the knight but, instead, traded queens himself with

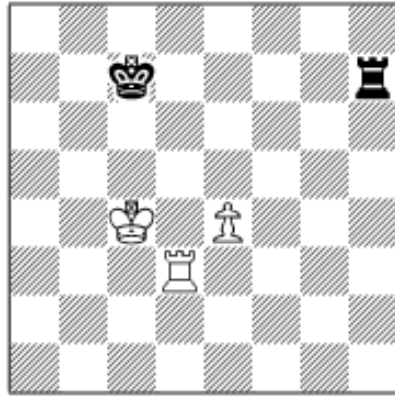
1...Qxg5 when after **2.Rxg5 Ne7 3.R1g1 g6** Black had pressure along the b-file and eventually won the endgame, although Black is probably not winning yet. If instead White had avoided the trade of queens by playing the correct 1.Qg3!, threatening 2.h5 Ne7? 3.Qxg7#, then after 1...h5 2.Ng5 threatens the unstoppable 3.Bxh5 with a big attack. Notice that 1.Qg4 is not as accurate as 1.Qg3! because 1...f5 is a good defense. This last line is a good example of how proper analysis must back up proper strategy or the strategy may fail.

c. Trade into a king and pawn endgame?

For most positions where the outcome is unclear, human evaluation is often subjective, such as “White is a little better” or “Black is distinctly better.” But king and pawn endgames are different because detailed analysis is required, and the evaluation should be either “win, lose, or draw.” No shades of

advantage are useful.

Therefore, it is extremely critical that you make the correct evaluation when deciding to head into a king and pawn endgame. For example, if you have a rook and pawn against a rook, you should never trade rooks if the resulting king and pawn endgame is trivially drawn. Similarly, if you have the rook against the rook and pawn, you should never trade rooks if the king and pawn endgame is trivially won. In the following position, is 1...Rd7 a good move?



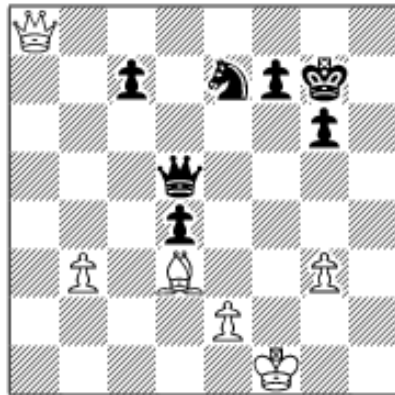
Black to move

No, it is not, as after 2.Rxd7! Kxd7 3.Kd5! White has the opposition and wins (see the Novice Nook [King + Pawn vs. King](#)).

Instead Black could try 1...Rh5, when White cannot play 2.Rd5? since 2...Rxd5 leads to a draw, e.g. 3.Kxd5 Kd7! Or 3.exd5 Kd6 and Black draws the king and pawn endgame. Black's goal is to get his king in front of the pawn. The computer program Fritz prefers the straightforward

1...Re7!, when it is difficult for White to guard the pawn and prevent the black king from getting in front, e.g. 2.Rc3 Kd6 but not 2...Rxe4+?? 3.Kd5+ winning (tactics!), or 2.Kd4 Rd7+ 3.Ke3 Rxd3 with a draw.

In the following position White has to decide whether to trade queens or allow 1...Qh1+.



White to move

White was afraid of 1...Qh1+, and so played 1.Qxd5, but that is dubious. However, he compounded the error after 1...Nxd5 with 2.Bc4? Disastrous! 2...Ne3+ 3.Kf2 Nxc4+ with a winning king and pawn endgame and White soon resigned! So any idea was better for White than trading off the queen *and* the bishop! *Often it is better to allow an attack or even a loss of material than to trade into a king and*

pawn endgame that is easily won for your opponent. The king and pawn endgame is the greater of two evils.

d. When to attack?

Of the questions, “who, what, where, when, how, and why?” the three that most apply to attack are “when, where, and how.” But “how” is a difficult question, worthy of many entire books. So “how” is not a “one-time” strategic question at all, but a matter of technique, knowledge, and skill.

On the other hand, “when to attack” is legitimate. Everyone should know the famous dictum: *a premature attack is doomed to failure*, but many fail to heed that advice. Applying the adages *don't attack unless you have an advantage*

and *don't start a fight until your army is ready* will help prevent you from attacking too soon. Finally, if you have an advantage, you must act to use it, because delaying action is, by definition, insufficient. It requires experience and good guidance to learn the nuances of when to attack but, in general, if you avoid premature attacks you are 80% of the way there.

e. Where to attack?

This is another pertinent attack question.

Assuming material is equal, the answer is usually either:

- 1. Where the opponent has an *exploitable* weakness,
- 2. Where you have the predominance of forces,
- 3. Where you have a pawn majority,
- 4. Where your opponent's king resides (assuming it can be attacked),
- 5. (In a locked center) Where your *locked* d- and e-pawns point, and/or
- 6. (In other locked pawn positions) Where the base of your opponent's pawn chain lies.

Learn these simple principles! These can often provide powerful results by correctly indicating where you want the action to be. For example, if you castle on opposite sides, then #4 says to play where his king is, not yours!

If you are in a typical locked center: King's Indian or French pawn formations, then use #5 to find your pawn break. For example, in the main line of the King's Indian after **1.d4 Nf6 2.c4 g6 3.Nc3 Bg7 4.e4 d6 5.Be2 O-O 6.Nf3 e5 7.O-O Nc6 8.d5 Ne7**:



White to move

White's locked d- and e-pawns point to the queenside, so his break move is c5 and White wants to play on the queenside. Black's locked d- and e-pawns point toward the kingside, so his most useful break move is ...f5 and he wants to play on the kingside. Note that both answers are also consistent with #6, attacking toward the base of a pawn chain. In the "Bayonet Attack" both sides strive for their goals

with **9.b4 Nh5** and a later **...f5**.

f. Where to place the king?

The five possibilities are:

- 1. Kingside
- 2. Queenside
- 3. In the center
- 4. The same side as the opponent's king
- 5. The opposite side as the opponent's king

For example, suppose you win a pawn in the opening, and your opponent has

no compensation. Then, assuming that neither side has castled and everything else is equal, where should you castle?

Easy! The *same side* as the opponent's king. Because if you castle first, your opponent should follow the strategy of what to do when behind – see the Novice Nook [When You Are Winning, It's a Whole Different Game](#), and complicate. Therefore, he should castle on the opposite side and start a complex game where his pawn deficit is not nearly as important. You, on the other hand, should do all you can to avoid such a situation (within reason), and try to make the game as simple and calm as possible by castling on the same side, when you are just up a pawn with pleasant prospects.

This “common sense” strategic decision-making will make your job much easier!

Next question: “What is the most common reason why you would *not* have to make a strategic decision as to where to place your king?”

Answer: When it is a book move! For example, suppose you have chosen to play the Ruy Lopez as white and your opponent plays the main line of the Closed Variation. Then, assuming you have studied that line and wish to play it, you answer 4...Nf6 with 5.O-O not because you are “deciding” to castle kingside, but because that is the recommended move. Of course, here the strategic decision was not *where to put your king during the game*, but instead *what opening you would study before the game*!

g. How should I adjust my strategy for material?

This is another important strategic consideration that only occurs when one side is playing with a material advantage. For example, when you are ahead, that same Novice Nook [When You Are Winning, It's a Whole Different Game](#) tells how you should adjust your strategy, mainly the Big Six:

- 1. Think Defense First (*not* play defensively or passively!)
- 2. Keep It Simple (complications favor the losing player)
- 3. Everything else being equal, trade pieces but not necessarily pawns
- 4. Make sure *all* your pieces are active (like the power play in hockey)
- 5. Don't worry about the little things, and
- 6. Don't get into time trouble, where you can make huge errors

Many players make a big mistake by playing uneven positions using the same principles as in even positions, yet #5 states that this is often unnecessary or counterproductive. For example, if you are ahead a knight, then you should trade queens even if this creates a pawn weakness, because a pawn weakness is not very important when compared to the benefit of trading queens with a large material advantage. To make a football analogy, field position is important in a tie game, but not if it is 70-0!

Similarly, when you are behind, you need to turn the Big Six around: Think offense first, attack, complicate, don't trade pieces but if possible eliminate pawns, etc.

h. Do I get enough compensation for an uneven exchange/sacrifice?

The decision to give up material “long-term” is usually an interesting one. For example, the material sacrificed might be small – you might give up the bishop pair to create a pawn weakness or get an outpost square for a knight. More dramatically, you may be making a large investment – for example, sacrificing a piece for a long-term, unclear attack. In any case, such a big strategic decision is usually critical, so take some time and use your experience and judgment to decide if the risk is worth it.

Note that your evaluation of how good the position would be if you do *not* make the sacrifice is important. For example, suppose you can sacrifice a bishop for what looks like an unclear attack. If you analyze that you are otherwise equal if you *don't* sacrifice, then the sacrifice is likely a reasonable or at least instructive idea. But if you are winning easily or at least much better without the sacrifice, then why go into an unclear position?

The strategic consideration about real material sacrifices does not include *pseudo-sacrifices*, where you temporarily give up material to forcibly win it back shortly thereafter. Such “sacrifices” entail no risk nor judgment, as proper analysis will simply reveal these as good tactics.

Honorable Mention: Play passively and defend or give up material and counterattack?

This is almost the opposite of “h.” In this case your opponent is threatening to win material. You have to decide whether to passively place your pieces to defend or to jettison some small amount of material – usually a pawn, but sometimes the exchange or more – to keep your army active.

For example, in rook and pawn endgames it is often better to sacrifice a pawn and play a pawn down with an active rook than it is to passively guard all your pawns and tie down both your rook and king. One way to decide is to ask yourself: “If I passively defend can I do anything at all? If not, *and* my opponent gets many tempi to bring up his king and add pressure, will I be able to do nothing and draw?” If your opponent gets such a free position *and* can make progress, then passive defense is useless and active defense, which likely may require a pawn sacrifice, is required.

The “1+1 = 3” Super-Principle

Let's take two important principles:

1. *If you see a good move, look for a better one; you are trying to find the best one* (given the time constraints), and

2. Time Management:

- a. *Try to pace yourself to take almost all your time every game*
- b. *Take more time on critical moves and less time on non-critical moves.*

Now let's combine 1 and 2b into a “Super-Principle” where the whole is

greater than the sum of the parts:

Learn to recognize critical positions and, when they occur, realize that there may be a large difference between the best move and the second best one. Therefore, play such moves very carefully and, when you see a good continuation, it is usually quite cost effective time-wise to make sure you look for a better one. Doing so is much more time effective than spending lots of time trying to find slightly better lines on non-critical moves. Conversely, play non-critical moves relatively quickly to save extra time for critical moves, but don't be careless!

For example, using computer evaluation values, let's take a position where it is your move and your best 5 moves would be valued at +3.1, +1.4, +.6, -.3, and -1.5. Then, if you feel the position may be critical and you find the move that is valued at 0.6, it is a very effective use of your time to find the 3.1 or the 1.4. But in a non-critical situation where the best 5 moves are valued at +0.23, +0.21, +0.16, +0.14, +0.11 it may not be worth 5 minutes of your time to try and identify the two better ones. With experience, you develop a "feel" that a position is complex or critical enough that such swings are possible. Most intermediate players do develop this capability, even if they can't subsequently find the right move(s).

A *critical move* is one where the best move gives you a much better chance of winning or drawing than the second best move, *excluding* trivial recaptures where the best move is obvious.

For example, if your opponent captures your queen with check, and there are two ways to get out of check, but only one recaptures the queen, then recapturing the queen is very likely easy and correct. In this case the queen recapture is *not* critical, and you shouldn't spend too much time on it. *Once you are 100% sure you have found the best move, play it without further loss of time, almost no matter what the situation.*

Examples of types of positions where the move *is* likely critical: complicated positions or ones which require important strategic decisions – as covered in this *Novice Nook*!

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



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