



Making Chess Simple

Quote of the Month: *Some players make chess seem way too difficult.*

How does one play “simple” chess? Let’s list five steps:

- Look at your opponent’s move to see *all* the reasons why it was made. This includes, but is not limited to, “What are his threats?”. Don’t forget to look for discoveries, unguarded squares, etc.
- Look at what moves you might play (candidates) and what might happen after each of those moves, then determine which one leads to the position you like the best. Always assume the best or most dangerous moves by your opponent. When picking candidates, start with checks, captures, and threats for both sides.
- Look for the seeds of tactical destruction for *both* sides. If you have a tactic consider playing it; if your opponent has a tactic, strongly consider stopping it; if there is no tactic, what are you trying to do? If you don’t know, consider improving the placement of your least active piece. Always try to use all your pieces all the time! Similarly, try to minimize the activity of your opponent’s pieces.
- If you see a good move, look for a better one – you are trying to find the best most that you can in a reasonable amount of time.
- Manage your time so that you spend much less than average on non-critical moves (use general principles), which allows you to have more time to spend on critical moves (use precise calculation). Try to use almost all your time in each game.

We can summarize good, simple chess in one (!) sentence: **“First, see if there is a tactic for either side; if so, address it; if not, maximize the activity of your pieces and minimize your opponent’s.”** You can play pretty well, if you just follow that advice! A similar statement is **“Take your time to do the best you can at keeping your pieces as safe and active as possible – while doing the opposite for your opponent’s pieces.”**

What can go wrong in trying to follow this “simple” advice? Everything! There are enough basic problems to write several years of Novice Nook columns.

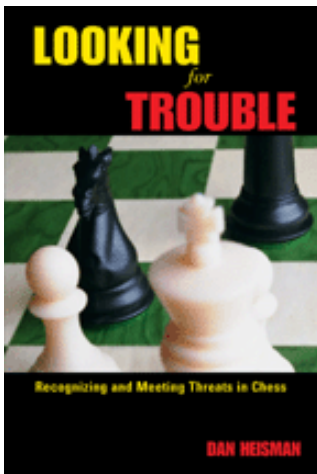
Let’s list some of the most common errors involving these “simple” concepts:

- You don’t consistently look at what your opponent could do in reply to each of your candidate moves. *Result:* You make a move and he replies with a threat you can’t meet. I have dubbed this problem “Hope Chess.” Almost every player rated under 1500 plays Hope Chess at least once or more per game and often gets burned.
- You see a good move and don’t look for a better one. *Result:* You end

COLUMNISTS

Novice Nook

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up playing too fast and making a series of second and third best moves that unnecessarily throw away the game.

- You don't try to activate your whole army. *Result:* You end up moving the same pieces over and over again and never fully get *all* your pieces into action.
- You don't pay attention to your opponent's moves and mostly concentrate on what you are doing. *Result:* Your opponent often surprises you with threats that you are unprepared for – or did not even see.
- You constantly play too fast for the situation. *Result:* Even if you have plenty of time, you overlook simple ideas, often squandering big leads; completely missing what is going on for both sides. Suppose you play a match in which you have 5 minutes and your opponent has 60. What percent of the games would you win? So what makes you think you can play well, if you do not take the time to be consistently careful?
- You play too slow during non-critical stages of the game, agonizing over minutiae, such as whether your bishop belongs on e2 or d3! *Result:* When the game finally does become tense, you find yourself running short on time and have to make a critical move quickly. Too bad; you should have saved some time for when you needed it. See the excerpt by GM Rowson below.
- You don't repetitively study basic tactics, so instead of recognizing these situations when they occur, you count on your renowned ability to "figure them out." *Result:* You take much more time than you should and you're more likely to overlook a basic tactic for your opponent!
- You stop your analysis of candidate moves without trying to determine what your opponent can do to you. *Result:* Your evaluation is superficial and based upon incomplete information. You end up evaluating the wrong positions, come to the wrong conclusions, and make the wrong move. See [Quiescent Errors](#).
- You *misevaluate* the position – you think you have a superior position when you actually have an inferior position. *Result:* Another wrong, possibly disastrous, move.
- You misunderstand why your opponent made a move. *Result:* After you move, your opponent shows you the reason he made his previous move. Oops! This oversight is enough to lose another game. I devoted a chapter to this concept in *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book*.
- You don't considering your opponent's best or most dangerous reply to your move. *Result:* You play bad moves and hope your opponent plays worse ones. Related Problem: You assume your opponent's move is good or safe without doing any analysis. *Result:* You are giving your opponent too much credit! **While analyzing your move, you have to assume your opponent will make the best move; however, when your opponent makes a move, you have to assume it might be a mistake.**
- You don't play enough slow (and possibly fast!) chess to develop the necessary board vision to be able to recognize common patterns and get the experience on how to best play them. *Result:* Both the probability and the effect of many of the previously noted problems are enhanced.

If you find yourself a victim of one or more of the above problems, you are not alone! There are plenty of players out there who are nowhere close to

master – or even expert – strength, and there is likely some reason besides just raw talent that they are not as good those rated 2000+. You may think the reason you are not as good as the titled players is that they know the Caro-Kann better, but I will bet you a dollar to a donut that your problems are more likely one of the above.

So, by not properly implementing the basics, many players end up making the game of chess much harder than it is! Someone may think they are being clever, because an advanced positional text tells them not to trade pieces when their opponent has an isolated pawn, but then they overlook a simple trade that would win material! Sound familiar? Unfortunately, I see this kind of “penny wise and pound foolish” thought process all the time. In many cases, it would have been better for the player not to even know about positional weaknesses until their rating got to 1400+!

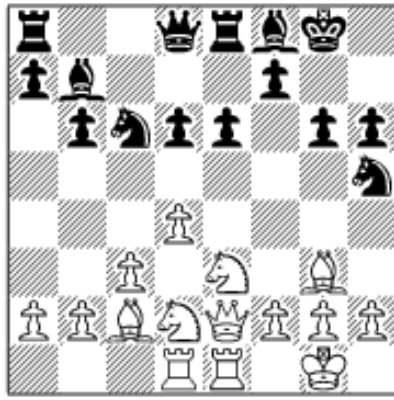
However, this does not mean that chess is an easy game! Let’s list a few of the more difficult tasks:

- Finding a combination that would make Shirov or Kasparov (or Fritz!) proud. These are the kind of tactics featured in [*The Magic of Chess Tactics*](#) by Meyer and Müller or even *Nunn’s Chess Puzzle Book*. There is practically no limit to the difficulty of this part of chess.
- Deciding between two subtle but consequential evaluations between similar-looking positions. Not often easy, but sometimes critical. A slight difference can sometimes determine a winning or losing position. This happens all the time in the endgame. Getting it right requires skill, patience, and a good eye.
- Deciding on the right plan when none look promising or when many look equally so. It takes experience and judgment to choose the right plan. And, if you go down the wrong track, it could be decisive in the other direction. Not easy at all.
- Winning a won game, when the margin for victory is razor-thin, and the opposition is putting up optimum resistance. This is sometimes the equivalent of finding a needle in a haystack. This ability is called *technique*. This is different than the ability to win an *easily* won game, as discussed in [*When You’re Winning It’s A Whole Different Game*](#).

Thus, there are many difficult aspects of chess that give the game its deserved reputation for skill and mental challenge. The problem is that too many players think these situations come up almost every move, and they make easy decisions way too difficult. A good example of how to identify and combat this is illustrated by GM Rowson in his excellent book [*Chess for Zebras*](#), when writing about his choice of 18...Rc8 in the following position. His challenge was to avoid playing too slow at a non-critical juncture of the game:

Rowson – Miles

British Chess League (4NCL) 1996-97



Generally quite useful, but my opponent was playing very quickly, and it's important not to fall too far behind on the clock without good reason. In this case I have lots of decent moves, and the key is just to play them, and not worry, at this stage, about getting them in the right order. Any problem resulting from getting the order wrong is likely to be less significant than a serious time-shortage later in the game.

Great practical advice! The point is that White is not threatening anything serious – the two armies are still somewhat at arm's length. What Black needs to do is to activate *all* his pieces. His rook on a8 is his least active piece. It can either go to d8 (after the queen moves) or to the semi-open file on c8. Rowson quickly chooses the latter. Notice that if he had chosen a committal move like 18...e5, then there is no way he could have played it as quickly as he did 18...Rc8. The important point is that Rowson identified that he needed something simple and solid and he played it quickly.

If a strong GM like Rowson is not worried about making a minor inaccuracy early in the game against a world-class opponent, can you see how ineffective it is if lesser players spend too much time worrying about the same thing? So don't make chess harder than it needs to be – sometimes playing reasonably good chess is relatively easy. Of course, *if you are not sure your move is non-critical, you must assume the worst case – that it may be critical – and play slowly and carefully.*

Moreover, for every Novice Nook reader who plays too slowly there are likely two that play too quickly and carelessly. You know who you are! Those who play too fast have probably been burned hundreds of times! And no fair crying, "I didn't see it!" afterwards; of course you didn't see it – at the speed you were playing! Too fast, too bad!

The moral of the story is clear: there are two main skills to learn to become a better chess player:

- Become a *better* analyst, a strong component being tactical recognition and solving (see the section below and [Improving Analysis Skills](#)), and
- Learn to recognize *how much* analysis you need to do in each position. Recognize when your decision is critical. Also, see [The Most Important Strategic Decisions](#). The consequences of taking too little or too much time was chronicled in one of my favorite Novice Nooks, [The Two Move Triggers](#).

If the position is critical, take your time and try to analyze carefully. Make a conscious effort to do all the simple things right.

In addressing “non-critical” positions, if tactics and analysis is not required, it is probably best to use general principles and play relatively quickly. See

Reader Question #2 at the end of [Activity is the Real Goal](#).

There is no sense in studying all kinds of esoteric nuances, if you can't consistently do the basic ones.

A Simplified Thought Process

I am occasionally asked to describe a simple thought *process* for slow chess that covers all the possibilities. While this is impossible, interested readers can see [A Generic Thought Process](#) and [The Goal Each Move](#). Here is a five step process based on the “simple” ideas expressed above, augmented with references to archived Novice Nooks:

- *What are all the things my opponent's move does?* In other words, what are all the things he can do now that he can't do before, what are his threats (see [It's Not Really Winning A Tempo](#)), and did how did his move parry my previous threat? Don't forget the important step discussed two months ago, [Is it Safe?](#). Also, don't stop when you find one reason for your opponent's move, because the ones you miss may cost you the game.
- *What are all the positive things I want to do?* This is often called planning, and your decisions should be based on both sides' threats, strengths, and weaknesses. This step also – importantly – includes executing or stopping tactics! See [A Planning Primer](#).
- *What are all the moves that might accomplish one or more of my goals?* In my [Initial and Final Candidate Moves](#), I dubbed these the initial candidate moves. I believe World Champion Alexander Alekhine once stated “Don't look for the best move; look for the best plan and the moves that accomplish those goals.” He was describing steps 2 and 3.
- *Which of those initial candidates can I reject immediately because they are not safe?* (See [Is It Safe?](#)) In other words, are there any checks, captures, or threats that can quickly defeat an initial candidate? Once you have eliminated these “unsafe” candidates, the remaining candidate moves are final candidates. I call doing this step consistently *Real Chess*. Not doing it is *Hope Chess*. (See [Real Chess, Time Management, and Care: Putting it All Together](#).)
- Of the final candidate moves, which one is best? Good players usually find this the hardest step by far!

Interestingly, strong players usually perform steps 1-4 very quickly and then spend the overwhelming majority of their time on step 5. In a sense, many “improvement” chess books (except those on planning) are about performing step 5. However, most weak players omit one or more crucial steps, or else spend way too much time on them! Achieving all the steps at least moderately well in a reasonable amount of time usually means you are on your way to becoming a good player.

Definition: *Board vision* – your brain's capability to interpret a chess position and see what is *legal and/or possible* on the chess board. Board vision tells you what is possible, but does not differentiate what is good or bad. For example, quickly seeing that a bishop in one corner

of the board attacks squares at the other corner is good board vision (even if the possible moves to those squares are unsafe or the attack is inconsequential). Both board vision and tactical vision are related – but board vision usually comes first. Tactical vision shows you when there is a tactic available and whether it is good or bad. Remember: *If you don't see it, you can't play it!*

Reader Question #1 *I read a web article about learning that listed four “mental makeups”:*

- 1: Learning/Acquiring/Reinforcing information by Visual Means
- 2: Learning/Acquiring/Reinforcing information by Aural Means
- 3: Learning/Acquiring/Reinforcing information by Writing things out
- 4: Learning/Acquiring/Reinforcing information by Doing by example

I couldn't help but see a parallel to the way people learn chess. Would this categorization be the reason that:

- *Some people, but not others can get away with just reading and burning patterns into their head?*
- *Some people, but not others need more actual “play time” than others to learn to apply a concept?*
- *Some people, but not others can do a whole lot of good by annotating their own games?*
- *Some people, but not others need a human voice “telling” them things for it to seep into their head?*

Answer This is a broad subject, but here is a quick and dirty answer. Yes, of course people learn differently. Also, there is the idea that some people understand and accept what an instructor says intellectually, but not emotionally. So they don't fully believe it or can't fully implement it until they make a mistake and repeatedly get burned. Some may never learn a particular idea, no matter how many times they are burned.

Reader Question #2 *At the end of [last month's](#) NN you listed 23 recommended questions to ask oneself in each position. No habit is going to get 23 questions asked per turn. I think the problem is that weaker players have not been able to develop **efficient** ways to conduct the survey. Focusing on one position outside the context of a live game can make it seem otherwise.*

Answer I did not mean to imply that you should ask yourself all those questions each move! Moreover, the list was not meant to be complete; there are many more questions you could ask in slow games. The ones listed were meant to be examples.

As a player gains experience, one of the things he learns is which questions are relevant. As discussed in [The Six Common Chess States](#), many questions are completely irrelevant in some positions, while being far more important in another. Strong players use the position and the opponent's previous move as triggers to indicate which questions are relevant. Sometimes I don't ask myself any questions at all, and other times I have many. One of the best things anyone can do to improve their chess is to hang around good players

while they are analyzing games. If you do, you will often hear them voice the triggered questions aloud!

The point of my advice about asking questions was to highlight the types of questions that should be asked and to help the student to ask the right questions in order to improve their game!

Reader's Question #3 Thanks for all you give to the world of chess. The lessons I have learned from your many Novice Nooks are staying with me and helping me play better "real" chess. Perhaps I can take my 1382(P) over 1400! Even if I don't, I will play "real" chess and have a great time. Recently, I was playing online and a friend that was watching the game thought I had blundered when I swapped my knight and queen for a queen. I explained that it didn't matter what you gave up, as long as you still had the advantage. I then swapped the last two pieces on the board, promoted a pawn and won handily.

Answer Thanks! Much appreciated; an email like yours can make it all worthwhile. When my son was a beginner, he would sacrifice all the time in the endgame, but it often made the win harder (!); thus I dubbed this misguided attempt the "Delen sacrifice."

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

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