



## The Four Homeworks

**Quote of the Month:** *Practice may not make perfect, but it sure can make you much better!*

[\*The Theory of Chess Improvement\*](#) states that a key to getting better (in almost anything!) is to balance theory and practice. I categorize taking lessons as theory. During lessons, I usually concentrate on “subtracting negatives” (identifying and minimizing mistakes) and teaching students *how* to most efficiently “add positives.” Then I assign homework, so the student can learn new material on his own. Of course, if the student has a problem doing so, I am always there to help.

Therefore, a key question is “what chess homework maximizes the improvement process?” The answer depends upon the individual:

- What he/she knows.
- What his instructional/developmental needs are.
- What his goals are.
- What mistakes he is making.
- How much time he has to devote to chess.

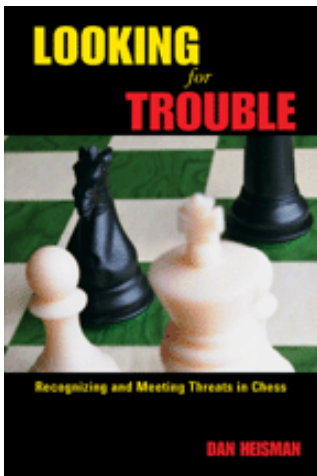
However, there is some common ground for assignments that should benefit most individuals. Here are some ground rules for this “common homework”:

- Homework must include both theory and practice. One must strike a balance between the “learn and try” method, which works very well. If there is no way to promote feedback of “this is what you are doing wrong; try to do this instead,” then you may find the rest of your homework won’t help you get much better.
- Homework must be consistent in level. There is no sense assigning someone to do basic tactics problems and then to read the very advanced *Kramnik’s Best Games*.
- Homework must be eminently realistic, in terms of both difficulty and amount.
- Students should keep in contact with their instructor (or strong chess playing friends) to ensure they are doing work consistent with their changing needs. Sometimes my students begin reading an advanced book that is at best completely inappropriate for their needs – and at worst counterproductive – just because they happen to have it on hand.
- *Homework must be fun.* Chess is a hobby, so assigning homework that is not fun is ultimately going to fail, no matter how much the student wants to improve. In the long run, homework perceived as drudgery will almost always go undone. So if you are doing “chess work” that is not fun, my suggestion is to find a way to make it fun, e.g. timing the problems, keeping track of your results to set new personal records,

### COLUMNISTS

## Novice Nook

Dan Heisman



etc.

- Too few or too similar types of assignments are boring. Once you got tired of doing it, you would not work on chess at all until you “revive” your interest in that particular item.
- Too many items are confusing, difficult to manage, and make it hard to set goals. A person given 20 different items to work upon would have difficulty setting priorities and assigning time to each.

With these factors in mind, I usually assign homework consisting of four generic tasks. Let’s list them and then consider each in detail:

- **Practice**
- **Do tactical (or other) problems appropriate to your level**
- **Read as many annotated master game collections as possible**
- **Read “talky” chess material that discusses how to analyze and evaluate, strategy, how to improve, etc.**

Let your instructor know as you finish each assignment and work together to identify the appropriate next one.

### **Practice**

What: Play as many slow games as possible, augmented with speed games.

Why: Practice makes you “better”!

*Slow games* are the most basic of all homework. The student is instructed to play games to implement the new ideas that were learned and attempt to eliminate the mistakes he/she had been making. Then we will review the most instructive of those games as part of the next lesson. This system is very similar to the tried-and-true classroom instruction of 1) theory on the blackboard, 2) assign homework to practice that theory, 3) check homework to see if the theory is being implemented correctly in practice.

Note that playing slow games means taking almost all your time every game to do the best you can, not just having a slow time limit. *Playing fast with a slow time limit defeats the entire purpose!*

*Competition:* As mentioned in [The Road to Carnegie Hall](#), the best opponents are the one’s rated slightly higher than yourself: high enough to punish your mistakes so you learn not to repeat them, but low enough that you have a good chance to win if you play well. About 65% of your opponents ideally would be 50-200 rating points above your playing strength. If you occasionally want to push yourself harder, go ahead. On the other hand, the other 35% of your opponents should be 0-150 points weaker. Against those players you want to show that you can play fearlessly even though you have more rating points on the line, and you want to practice your technique. Moreover, if you get into a slump (see [Breaking a Slump](#)) you may want to play more lower-rated opponents just to raise your confidence level.

No matter the rating of your opponent, always offer to review a slow game afterwards. Even a somewhat lower-rated opponent may know quite a bit

more about certain aspects of the game. An added bonus is that the process of mutually trying to find out where you both made mistakes is a great learning experience. If you don't review the games with your opponent, you are missing a wonderful opportunity. Of course, you should always take the opportunity to have a strong player review your games as well. *Reviewing games – even someone else's – with a very strong player is probably the single best thing you can do to improve your game.* If you hate to review your losses, then you are overlooking the best chance to learn what you are doing wrong. If you are trying to improve, then it is better to review your losses than your wins!

You can save your most instructive games to go over with your instructor. Choose games where you did not know what to do, or don't know why you didn't win, or made a bad mistake that must not be repeated. Students will often "hide" games where they made big blunders, thinking that "I know why I lost my queen; because I did not see his bishop." This often begs the questions, "Exactly why didn't you see the bishop?" and "How can you increase your chances of not doing the same thing?" Such problems can be corrected if brought to the forefront. Why work on your small problems if you keep making big ones?

If you are trying to improve, never avoid an event just to protect your rating. Players often become infatuated with their rating and skip events because the opponents' ratings are too low or too high. The only thing that will improve your rating in the long run is if you become a better player. And, in general, the more you play, the more you learn; unless you have no feedback loop and repeatedly make the same mistakes! Ironically, a player usually learns more from his losses than his wins. So if you take two players with identical ratings and skills, and one loses 100 games in a row to superior opponents, while the other wins 100 in a row from inferior opponents, then the latter will have a higher rating, but the former will likely be the better player in the long run, especially if he reviewed the games with his opponents!

*Where:* Anywhere can be acceptable, but don't forget to write down your moves for later review! Tournaments, clubs, and Internet servers are all popular venues.

*Time Control:* G60/5 or slower (sixty+ minutes for the game with a five second time delay/increment). Always practice good time management (allocate more time to critical moves; pace yourself to use almost all your time every game). Moreover, the practice of visualizing the pieces moving during "long" moves (for example, thinks of 10 minutes or more), eventually improves your "board vision" so that you can analyze more accurately and quickly. No, you may never become a Garry Kasparov and practice may not make perfect, but it sure will make you quite a bit better!

*Fast games* practice openings, time management, and quick tactical vision.

As much as possible, one should always look up your openings and ask "What would I do differently next time in this same position?" The key point is that *with regard to this function, fast games are just as good as slow games* and, in some ways better, because the cost of misplaying the opening is much less and

the number of possible games is greater. An opening book does not care whether the source of your game is slow or fast; therefore, *if* you play an abundance of slow games *and* take the time to find your opening mistakes, then the time to learn an opening is greatly reduced. A good one-volume encyclopedia for chess openings is *Modern Chess Openings-14* by GM deFirmian or *Nunn's Chess Openings* by – you guessed it – GM John Nunn.

Note: For players wishing to become titled (Expert, Master, Senior Master) players in the U.S., it is a great idea to become accustomed to a five-second time delay, which is the standard for slow chess. Therefore, it is easy to conclude that *all fast chess should be played using the same five-second delay or increment* to maximize your familiarity with the speed at which crucial over-the-board time scrambles will be played. For example, instead of playing five minute chess, it is better to play with two minutes for the game and a five second increment. Each game will last approximately the same amount of time as a five minute game, but your practice to properly pace crucial over-the-board “time trouble” play is greatly enhanced.

### **Do tactical (or other) problems appropriate to your level**

What: Doing tactics (and other) problems

Why: Because safety is the number one issue on the chessboard. By doing problems, you not only learn to recognize when your opponent's pieces are not safe (offense), but you learn when to avoid a move because your pieces are unsafe (defense).

As mentioned in many previous columns, mastering basic tactics is akin to learning the multiplication tables in math – it not only builds a foundation, but the goal of recognizing patterns almost instantly is just about as important as recognizing that  $7 \times 8 = 56$  without have to “do the math.”

What makes for a good, basic tactics set?

- All of the problems have to be easy enough to eventually be solved by recognition (within reason). They also have to be basic enough to either be single motif, or very easy multiple motif combinations. The set should be a building block for more difficult problems.
- Most of the problems are to win material, not checkmate. In chess the overwhelming majority of games are won by attrition, not checkmates with equal material. So one gets the most out of a problem set that is roughly 75% material wins and 25% checkmates.
- Most of the problems are from normal looking positions with tactical patterns *that can occur frequently in actual games*. These should include many of the most frequently occurring tactics such as trapped pieces, removal of the guard, double attacks – normal stuff, not too many queen sacrifices, etc.

The form is not as important: great sets can come in books, CD's, DVD's, or flashcards. However, interactive software can add effectiveness to any level of content.

I like to start almost all non-advanced students with John Bain's workbook *Chess Tactics for Students*, which contains a very good tactics set (just don't look at the "Hints"). Other books with basic tactical patterns that meet the above criteria include (but are not limited to!) Woolum's *Chess Tactics Workbook*, Coakley's [\*Winning Chess Strategy for Kids\*](#) (also a great primer in basic chess strategy and positional ideas), and Pandolfini's *The Winning Way*. There are some good sites online, many of my students enjoy the [Chess Tactics Server](#), which times and rates each solver, and contains over 5½ million (!) problems in all levels of difficulty. There are also many sites that offer comprehensive basic tactics instruction; one fee-based site with a trial membership is [Chess Magnet School](#). Software programs include [Chess Mentor](#), [CT-ART](#), and several others.

For your first problem set, I suggest something along the lines of [Michael de la Maza's](#) recommendation to set a time limit of about six minutes per problem and do the set seven times, cutting the time in half each time through the set. If you do not solve the problem in the time limit, look at the hint (or the answer) and then, after getting the solution, go to the next problem. The first four times through the set you are mostly working on your solving capability, while on the final three passes you are working more on recognition. After doing your first set, I recommend staying on the same level of difficulty but going to a new set, not only to get more basic patterns into your memory, but also to test your newfound ability to solve problems more quickly at that level.

When you decide to go to the next level of difficulty, a superb second-level book is Coakley's [\*Winning Chess Exercises for Kids\*](#). Don't let the title fool you – this excellent problem set is not only geared for players in the mid-1000's, but it also has a great answer set that does more than just provide the solution. A more generic second level book is GM John Nunn's [\*Learn Chess Tactics\*](#), which has excellent explanations of what each tactic is and how it works. The problems range from fairly simple to quite tricky.

Tired of tactics? Try endgame problems like [Pandolfini's Endgame Book](#) or planning problems in Ward's [\*It's Your Move\*](#).

In order to build board vision, *never move the pieces when solving problems* – try to visualize them in your head. Only when you think you have found the answer can you help verify it by moving pieces. On the other hand, *always* use a board and move the pieces when doing the next homework...

### **Read as many annotated master game collections as possible**

What: Books with many games (usually master vs. master but occasionally master vs. amateur) that include extensive instructive annotations.

Why: Reading a good instructional book is like getting a one-way lesson where the main drawback is that you can't ask questions!

The key aspects that make a [game collection](#) worthy are:

- The text should be instructive. The author should explain why something is good or bad, and not just list variations. Since grandmasters don't usually write books about their games for beginners, it is better to start with instructive anthologies and work your way up to individual game collections. A book such as Sergeant's *Morphy's Games of Chess* is not very helpful because it does not have much explanatory text.
- Start with books that explain basic concepts and work your way up to more advanced ideas. A good suggestion is to *study the "old masters" first and work your way up to more modern play*. For example, to study tacticians, it makes sense to start with Morphy or Marshall and then work your way up to Alekhine, Tal, and Kasparov. For positional play it could be Capablanca followed by Smyslov, Petrosian, and Karpov. For technical fighting play try Lasker followed by Botvinnik, Fischer, and Korchnoi. Another good observation is that all things being equal, it is better to read a book of games authored by the player than by a third party, so *Marshall's Best Games* by Marshall would likely be superior to *Marshall's Best Games of Chess* by Hoobley. However, there are many fine [biographical](#) books written by third parties and some bad game collections written by the player!
- Play over the games rather quickly. Get out a board and make the moves and read the notes and go to the next move. Don't play the game over and over. If you need to play out a side variation to understand what is going on, go ahead, but you don't need to play out every side variation – the explanatory text for the positions are the main source of instruction. I timed myself in playing out games while reading a recent book and I averaged 8 minutes per game. So 20-30 minutes should be enough for most players. It is much better to read 1,000 annotated master games and have a 5-10% retention rate than read 50 annotated master games and have a 40% retention rate. I have probably read 4,000+ annotated master games and the only one I have memorized is Morphy vs. Count Isouard and the Duke of Brunswick! But the information I retained helped me attain the master title.

The following is a good, but certainly not complete, list of game collections.

Game Anthologies written for instruction in roughly ascending order of intended audience:

- [Logical Chess Move by Move](#) – Chernev
- *Most Instructive Games of Chess Ever Played* – Chernev
- *Chess Master vs. Chess Amateur* – Euwe and Meiden
- [Chess: The Art of Logical Thinking](#) – McDonald
- [50 Essential Chess Lessons](#) – Giddins
- [Understanding Chess Move by Move](#) – Nunn
- [Instructive Modern Chess Masterpieces](#) – Stohl
- [Zurich International Chess Tournament 1953](#) – Bronstein
- *The Art of Analysis* – Timman

Individual Game Collections – in chronological order:

- [Paul Morphy – A Modern Perspective](#) – Beim
- *Marshall's Best Games of Chess* (alternately titled *My 50 Years in Chess*) – Marshall
- [Why Lasker Matters](#) – Soltis
- *Capablanca's Best Games* – Golombek
- *Alekhine's Best Games of Chess* (2 volumes) – Alekhine
- [The Road to the Top](#) and [The Quest for Perfection](#) – Keres
- *My Sixty Memorable Games* – Fischer
- *Larsen's Best Games of Chess* – Larsen
- [Jon Speelman's Best Games](#) – Speelman
- [Garry Kasparov on My Great Predecessors](#) – Kasparov

**Read “talky” chess stuff that discusses chess strategy, how to improve, how to evaluate and analyze, etc.**

What: This is the miscellaneous category, which includes all other material from basic up to advanced concepts.

Why: Because there are many important concepts that do not fall into the above categories.

### Online

*Novice Nook* contains all kinds of advice to get better. You can even consider the complete [Novice Nook](#) collection as “The Adult Guide to Chess Improvement.” Once place to begin is with the *Novice Nook* Counting Trilogy (and most intermediate players are not as good at this as they think!):

- [A Counting Primer](#)
- [The Most Important Tactic](#)
- [Is It Safe?](#)

My online columns ([Novice Nook](#) and [Thinking Cap](#)) cover the thought process. Of course, **ChessCafe** and other online websites do a great job of covering a multitude of chess improvement issues.

### Books

For absolute beginners, I suggest Patrick Wolff's excellent *A Complete Idiot's Guide to Chess*. After that is the natural *Everyone's 2<sup>nd</sup> Chess Book* by this author.

Some good places for intermediates to start are Hans Kmoch's book [Pawn Power in Chess](#) (the terminology is archaic, but it is a great book), and the more advanced [Pawn Structure Chess](#) by Soltis. Other books include Jeremy Silman's [The Amateur's Mind](#), Soltis' [How to Choose a Chess Move](#), and Vukovic's *The Art of Attack*. Miscellaneous “How To” books are [Chess for Tigers](#) by Webb and the more advanced [Chess for Zebras](#) by Rowson – especially if you are an animal! Or *Win at Chess* by Curry, *The Logical Approach to Chess* by Euwe, Blaine, and Rumble, and any book by C.J. Purdy.

There are also many good endgame books – two basic classics are [Chess](#)

[Endings: Essential Knowledge](#) by Averbakh and Irving Chernev's *Practical Chess Endings*. For more comprehensive reading, a recent award winning one is [Just the Facts](#) by Alburt and the encyclopedic [Fundamental Chess Endings](#) by Müller and Lamprecht, or the modern classic [Dvoretsky's Endgame Manual](#) by Dvoretsky.

### Other Homework

Do "board vision" or other exercises to enhance your skills, especially the key analytical ability. See [Chess Exercises](#) for examples and how to perform them. Goals include:

- Seeing everything as quickly as possible (i.e. avoid "I didn't see the bishop over there."),
- Recognizing critical patterns, such as potential tactics and key strategic positions (and thus assign more clock time to these moves),
- Analyzing as quickly and accurately as possible, and
- Evaluating more accurately.

### Summary

There are always many activities to choose from in doing chess homework. It is best to balance practice and theory that is appropriate to your level. Try to create a feedback mechanism that helps diagnose what you are doing wrong to minimize future occurrences, which is often even more important than acquiring new chess knowledge.

### Reader's Question #1

*I read your Novice Nook on playing with the lead ... but I don't think I understand what it means to "think defense first." Specifically, I don't seem to understand defensive tactics. I have noticed a very disturbing trend in my games of gaining an advantage and then letting it dissipate. Sometimes it's a conspicuous blunder, sometimes a more subtle tactical error, sometimes the loss of a couple of pawns. I also seem slow in defending against pawn promotion threats. This kind of play is causing me to lose from winning positions, which is the worst kind of loss, as you point out.*

### Answer

The maxim "Think Defense First" does *not* mean to play defensively, it refers to the order and priority of your thinking. It means first make sure your opponent can't do anything to you before you think about what you can do to him, e.g. "If I were him, how could I get back in the game? What are all my Seeds of Tactical Destruction and how can I dissipate them?" Then find what your opponent might do and make sure it does not happen. On any given move, if you want to think 5% defense and 95% offense – that's fine, but do the 5% first and make sure there is no danger before proceeding to think about your attack. Of course, if you cannot recognize tactics (for you or for your opponent), you need to work on basic tactical problems to spot dangerous patterns. Remember, LPDO: Loose Pieces Drop Off. For the most part, defensive tactics are just the same as offensive tactics, except instead of executing them, you don't allow them.

### Reader's Question #2

*I have read and re-read your column [Analysis and Evaluation](#). My interest in “[a] few recent problem books [which] now include positions that do not have tactical solutions, and that keep the reader ‘on their toes’” as you describe them has been rekindled. Could you please provide me with a couple references to such books?*

### **Answer**

First, let’s differentiate between A) books with all tactical positions where some purposely have “There is no winning move” as an answer and B) Books that contain problems, all with solutions, but they are not looking for a tactical solution (rather strategic or positional).

There is a big difference between these two ideas, and in that column I was referring to category B. For example, in Coakley’s excellent [Winning Chess Exercises for Kids](#) (actually good for all ages) there is one problem on each page that focuses on planning. There are also excellent positional exercise books such as Silman’s [How to Reassess Your Chess Workbook](#) and Dunnington’s [Can You Be A Positional Chess Genius?](#) Those would all be recommended books, the two most basic ones are Coakley’s book and Ward’s [It’s Your Move](#).

I don’t think I was referring to “A,” but it’s an intriguing idea. Since in real games you don’t know if there is a tactic, it makes sense to study positions where we have the seeds of Tactical Destruction, but possibly no winning tactic (which can happen in real games!). My column [Is There a Win?](#) contains such problems. I also covered this in greater detail in my upcoming book on tactics. *John Nunn's Chess Puzzle Book* has many “missed combinations” and Mullen and Moss’s *Blunders and Brilliances* has an entire chapter of problems where a strong player resigned when there was a saving defensive idea he missed.

Also, in about 60 days or so **ChessCafe** will be releasing *The ChessCafe Puzzle Book 2* (a CD in ChessBase format) by Karsten Müller. It is subtitled *Improve Your Positional Intuition* and offers a collection of positions that have strategic solutions.

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

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[TOP OF PAGE](#)



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[ARCHIVES](#)



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