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Introduction

It all started with Will Yu.

Will was a brilliant high school student, later voted Most Likely to Succeed in a high school filled with highly driven students. But in chess everyone has to start at the beginning and at this time Will was pretty much a beginner.

After a few tournaments Will's rating was below 1100. He showed great promise, but it wasn't coming through yet. Then Will played with some of my son's friends on a team at the 1999 US Amateur Team East event and posted a 5-1 record with a solid 1600+ performance rating.

I saw the games – they were no fluke; Will had improved dramatically in almost no time. But how is that possible, that an 1100 player can, all of a sudden, play like a 1600 player? That flew in the face of many things I had believed about chess improvement. So I talked to Will and thought about what I had learned for about three days. During that time I had an epiphany about chess learning and the associated thought process. But how to let others know?

I wrote an article about my findings and called it *The Secrets of Real Chess*. I had been following the new online magazine *ChessCafe*, so I contacted the publisher, Hanon Russell, about putting my article on the web. Thankfully, Hanon did and it got quite favorable feedback. I got several emails from people around the world basically stating “I have been studying chess for 20 years and was never a very good player. However, for the first time your article makes it clear to me why that is – why didn't someone write this a long time ago?”

Over the course of the next several months I wrote two more articles for *ChessCafe*: *Time Management During a Chess Game* and *Applying Steinitz' Laws*. Both were solid, but not the hit of *Real Chess*.

Then around New Year 2001 the phone rang. It was Hanon Russell:

“I am thinking of adding a column to help weaker adults learn how to improve. I think you would do a good job – are you interested?”

It was somewhat like asking Al Gore if he would help with global warming...

I was very grateful to Hanon. He decided to call the column “Novice Nook”.

Of course, Hanon is a very strong player and most improving adults to him are relative novices. However, I quickly found that the ideas which help a player improve at one level can still be extremely helpful when elevated to another level. So Novice Nook ended up helping players of all levels get better.

This was illustrated by an email I received from a USCF expert (2000-2199), who wrote that he learned a lot from Novice Nook, but could not get his three lower-rated sons to read the column because they felt they were not novices! I passed his concern on to Hanon, who reasonably decided that the column had a following and changing the name would not

make much difference. So Novice Nook remained somewhat a misnomer.

Meanwhile the column was attracting a lot of attention around the world. It annually won awards from the Chess Journalists of America. Besides winning the award for *Best Instruction* multiple times, Novice Nook also won the prestigious Cramer Award for *Best Column in Any Media* in 2005.

I think one of the cornerstones to Novice Nook's success is my desire to not pass along ideas that are easily found elsewhere. These include my crusades for Counting, time management, understanding the use of tactics study for determining the safety of candidate moves. There may be some ideas I thought were new but were accidental rehashing of old ideas of which I was unaware. Once my writing started to be compared to Cecil Purdy's, I purposely stopped reading Purdy because I did not want to even subconsciously steal any ideas!

Even the ideas which can easily be found elsewhere I hoped to package in a new or easily compartmentalized way. For example, the Novice Nook *King and Pawn and ? vs. King* tries to encapsulate all the possible exceptions where a king and a pawn and anything else on the board are unable to beat a lone king, because 99% of the time that material wins easily.

Have I succeeded? Well, I will let the reader judge for himself!

What is The Best?

By the time we decided to publish *A Guide to Chess Improvement: The Best of Novice Nook*, Hanon had sold ChessCafe to Mark Donlan, and thus Mark is also to thank for the permission to provide the material in book form. However, by late 2009 there was so much material that *The Complete Novice Nook* could not fit into a regular-sized book. In fact, limiting it to "Best" still only allows for about a third of the material to be presented. How to cut it down and still give the reader the flavor of the column? That led to some very difficult decisions:

- ♣ Less than half the columns are included. I tried to emphasize material that was most novel or helpful. This necessitated including a slightly higher percentage of theoretical vs. practical information but, like the column, there is still a heavy emphasis on what is practical.
- ♣ Out of necessity, material that was covered in some of my previous books was de-emphasized. That meant less tactics due to *Back to Basics: Tactics*, less thought process found in *The Improving Chess Thinker*, and less discussion of threats due to *Looking for Trouble*. All of these topics are still included, but not to the extent they would be if these books did not exist.
- ♣ When multiple Novice Nook columns overlapped a subject or were continuations of the same subject, I tried to combine the material into one column. This not only enabled me to include more original columns, but also allowed me to cut out quite a bit of redundant material. Moreover, combining col-

umns also allowed me to provide some *new text* which properly links these previously separate Novice Nooks. For these reasons the combined columns are the ones most substantially changed from the originals, and I have made every effort to *update information* and provide consistency between columns. When columns were combined, the name of the secondary column is usually retained as a subheader and was also used in cross-references with the main header number. For example, if 3-2 is *The Two Move Triggers* and it contains the essence of the column *The Room Full of Grandmasters*, then *The Room Full of Grandmasters* will be a subheading and a reference to it would note that it is within 3-2.

I was also able to *correct some faulty analysis*, thanks to Mike Montgomery's laborious computer-checking.

Readers who wish to see the original columns can reference the archives of ChessCafe (<http://www.chesscafe.com/archives/archives.htm#Novice Nook>) or the same material crosslinked with comments via my website www.danheisman.com – click on “Novice Nooks”. Similarly, Novice Nooks which are referenced for additional information but not included in this book, are referred to as “archived” and can be found at these websites.

- ‡ All Reader Questions were eliminated. This was a difficult choice because these provided natural clarification for some material. However, the questions usually addressed earlier Novice Nooks, and not always ones chosen to be in this book.

Importantly, some completely new columns, never published elsewhere, have been added. *Is it Safe? Quiz* is a natural extension of my emphasis on Counting and Safety. *The Three Types of Visualization* had been occasionally mentioned in Novice Nook, but never fully discussed. Ditto with *Ask the Right Questions*.

I decided to order the columns via sections, similar to how my website lists them by subject, e.g. General Improvement, Thought Process, and Time Management. Each section contains one or more numbered columns, which have been arranged to promote sequential understanding of material. Even so, there is some overlap in concepts from one section to another. For example, thought processes involving safety could just as well be categorized under tactics, or a time management concept like *The Two Move Triggers* is very helpful in thought process. Online I provided hyperlinks between the columns; for the book these links have converted to cross-references or references to “archived” ChessCafe columns on the web.

All ratings in this book are FIDE/USCF.

Ready for a trip to a place where Real Chess is a commonplace idea, micro and macro time management are key, Counting is the unbelievably overlooked tactic, and the mantra is “Checks, Captures, and Threats”? Then turn the page...

2-1) Making Chess Simple

Some players make chess seem way too difficult.

How does one play “simple” chess? Let’s list some key ingredients:

- ♠ 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 and squares that are no longer guarded.
- ♠ 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 the forcing moves: checks, captures, and threats, for both sides.
- ♠ Look for the Seeds of Tactical Destruction (piece configurations that *may* allow a tactic; see the archived *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. 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 move 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! Let’s list some of the most common errors:

- ♠ 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 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 (page 75).
- ♠ 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 the archived *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 consider 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.

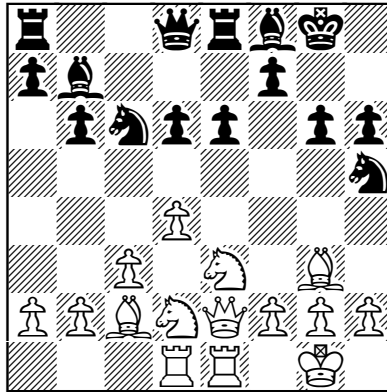
If you find yourself a victim of one or more of the above problems, you are not alone! There are plenty of players out there who are nowhere close to master – or even expert – strength, and there is likely some reason besides just raw talent that they are not as good those rated 2000+. You may think 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 *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.
- ♠ 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* (7-3).

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 slowly at a non-critical juncture of the game:



Miles-Rowson
British Chess League (4NCL) 1996-97
Black to play (18...Rc8)

“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* (see Section 3: Time Management).

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 more detail in the archived *A Generic Thought Process* and *The Goal Each Move* (2-2). Here is a five step process based on the “simple” ideas expressed above:

1. *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!* 8-5), and did how did his move parry my previous threat? Don’t forget the important step discussed in *Is it Safe?* (5-3). Also, don’t stop when you find one reason for your opponent’s move, because the ones you miss may cost you the game.
2. *What are all the positive things I want to do?* This step also primarily includes executing or stopping tactics! But it also includes planning; your decisions should be based on both sides’ threats, strengths, and weaknesses. See the archived *A Planning Primer*.
3. *What are all the moves that might accomplish one or more of my goals?* In *Initial and Final Candidate Moves* below, I dub 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.
4. *Which of those initial candidates can I reject immediately because they are not safe?* (See *Is it Safe?* 5-3.) 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* 2-3.)
5. Of the final candidates, which one is best? This requires visualizing the positions each would likely lead to, comparing, and choosing the one that evaluates as best for you.

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! Performing *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.

Initial and Final Candidate Moves

The most important moves to consider – for both sides – are the forcing moves.

A candidate move is any reasonable move that you should consider playing. We can define two sets of candidates which occur as part of a normal thought process during a slow game:

- ♠ The *initial* candidate moves that serve some positive purpose, like stopping a threat, starting a tactic, initiating/continuing a plan, or improving the position of a piece;
- ♠ The *final* set of candidate moves from which you must decide “Which one is best?”

The main difference is that you should perform the check *Is it Safe?* (5-3) on each initial candidate move and, if it is not, discard it. The safe ones make up the final candidate list. Sometimes your analysis might add safe moves to the final list that were not on your initial list.

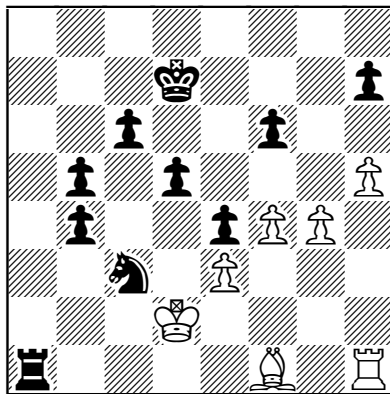
Forcing moves are *checks, captures, and threats*, in roughly descending order of force. Therefore, to be most efficient, they also represent the order in which you should search for candidate moves for both sides: first checks, then captures, then threats, and finally all other moves.

While the phrase “checks, captures, and threats” is snappy, we can delve a little deeper and create a more extensive list of candidate move ordering criteria, roughly in decreasing order of importance:

1. Checks
 - 1a. Checks where there are few possible responses
 - 1b. Checks which bring more pieces into the attack
 - 1c. Checks which bring powerful pieces – especially the queen – closer to the king
2. Moves which meet the *opponent’s* threats to checkmate by force
3. Threats of mate in one or threats of a forced mating sequence – especially if the possibilities to parry it are limited
4. Captures
 - 4a. Captures of unguarded or inadequately guarded pieces
 - 4b. Captures of enemy pieces by pieces of lesser value
 - 4c. Captures of enemy pieces by pieces of equal value
 - 4d. Captures of enemy pieces by pieces of greater value

5. Non-Mate threats
 - 5a. Threats to pieces by pieces of lesser value
 - 5b. Threats to pieces by pieces of equal value
 - 5c. Threats to pieces by pieces of greater value
 - 5d. Threats to make an attack on the king
 - 5e. Positional threats: control files, ruin pawn structures, etc.
6. Moves which meet the *opponent's* non-checkmate threats
7. Moves which are not any of the above, but meet some type of positive goal or plan, like developing a piece in the opening, or making a piece better in the middlegame or endgame, or stopping an opponent's piece from getting better, etc.

Let's see how candidate move identification and selection works in practice via three examples, in increasing order of criticality/difficulty.



Example #1: Black to play

The first level candidate moves are the ones that carry out some plan or goal. In the above position Black has such a strong position that he might have several plans or goals with corresponding initial candidate moves:

Plan 1: Push the white king into a possible mating net or force a tactic. Candidates: 1...Ra2+ 1...Rd1+, 1...Nb1+

Plan 2: Get the black pawns rolling. Candidates: 1...b3, 1...c5, 1...d4

Plan 3: Get the king into a better position to help the pawns. Candidates: 1...Kd6, 1...Ke6

Plan 4: Stop the white pawns from creating counterthreats. Candidates: 1...h6, 1...Ke7, 1...Ke8, 1...Ke6

Of these choices, Plan 1 would be the most attractive, primarily if it results in an immediate tactical win. Otherwise, the second, which can also win right away, and the fourth, which follows the dictum *when winning easily, think defense first*, are the most attractive. If

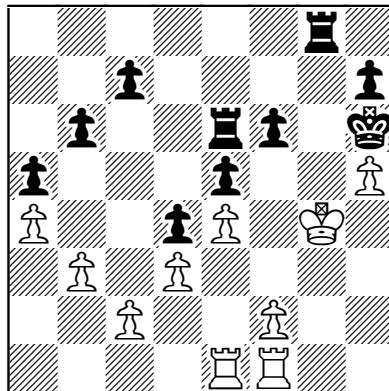
Black can stop White from mobilizing his kingside pawn majority he should, with a little care, be able to win as he pleases on the queenside.

However, not all of the initial candidates are viable, even the ones which correspond to the most positive plans. For example, it should be easy to see that although pushing the most advanced passed pawn $1...b3??$ would be nice, the immediate reply $2 Kxc3$, which also stops $2...b2$, puts an end to further consideration and knocks $1...b3??$ off the final candidate list. It does, however, introduce a new candidate, $1...Na4$, which would allow a safe $2...b3$ next move. Another pawn push, $1...d4$, initially *looks* refuted because of $2 exd4$. However, that is superficial analysis, since after $1...d4 2 exd4$, $2...e3+$ is a winner as either the b-pawn promotes or the bishop is lost because of the deflection of the king or a further $3...e2$. Missing this, and thus dismissing $1...d4$ as a viable candidate moves, would be a quiescence error (see the archived *Quiescence Errors*).

In the actual game Black spent three minutes on his move and played $1...c5??$, not checking to see if it should have gotten onto the final list at all (Hope Chess!). Black woke up quickly when White made the not-too-difficult reply, $2 Bxb5+$. This discovered attack won the exchange and a pawn after $2...Nxb5 3 Rxa1$, turning an easy Black win into a difficult fight!

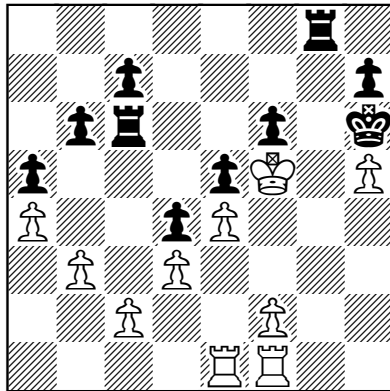
Yet it should not have been. Why spend three minutes on a move if you are not going to spend at least a few seconds to ask: *Is my proposed move safe?* i.e. *if I make this move, what are all his checks, captures, and threats, and can I meet them?* All the other time spent may be wasted if you don't develop the discipline to ask this on every move. In this case $1...c5$ fails to *the only check the opponent has in reply, which therefore should have been the first reply Black considered when deciding if $1...c5$ was viable*. But he missed it completely! With a proper thought process, $1...c5$ should have been quickly eliminated and never placed on the final candidate list! This failure to consider even the most obvious reply is a common problem of weaker players, so it follows that they must not be consistently asking themselves the most basic, required question.

Black has many winning ideas, but the computer's choice for best move is the straightforward $1...Ra2+$.



White to play

In this position White is in check, and plays the “active” move 1 Kf5, without seeing if this is safe. Why might it not be? Black replies by saving the rook and attacking the c-pawn with 1...Rc6. This leads to our second example. What does White do now?



Example #2: White to play

White wrote 2 Rc1 on his scoresheet and then did a sanity check, causing him to erase 2 Rc1 and instead play 2 Rg1, with a total thinking time of about three minutes. This indicated that White had a serious error in his thought process. Why?

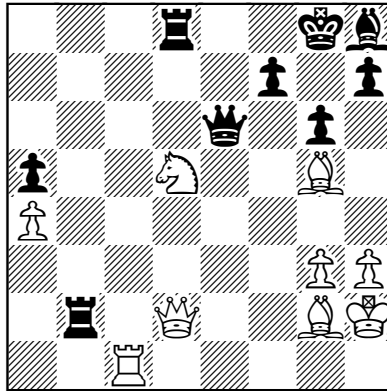
Although moves that guard the c-pawn like 2 Rc1 and 2 Re2 should make your *initial* candidate list, you should immediately look for forcing replies and discover that they both fail to Black's only check, 2...Rg5 mate! Therefore, *only moves which prevent mate should make the final candidate list*. For the move 2 Rc1 to make White's scoresheet indicated he did not find 2...Rg5 mate until his sanity check. This is way too late for an efficient thought process. Much better would have been to think:

1...Rc6, what does that do? It saves the rook and attacks the c-pawn, but it also removes my king's only flight square, e6. Suppose I save the pawn on c2. What happens then? What are all Black's checks, captures, and threats? His only check is 2...Rg5+. But that's checkmate! Whoops! That means my only moves are ones that stop checkmate. Which are those? 2 f4 and 2 Rg1. Now what would Black do after each of those, so I can figure out which is better...?

With this correct thought process White would discover 2...Rg5 mate *early* in his thought process and save lots of valuable time by quickly identifying his final candidates as 2 f4 or 2 Rg1, both preventing checkmate. Moreover, with a good thought process, he would have seen 2...Rg5 mate on the *previous move* and made sure he had a good defense; e.g.

If I play 1 Kf5, Black has to save his rook. He will probably move 1...Rc6, also attacking my pawn on c2. Then suppose I try to save my pawn. What would be all Black's checks, captures, and threats? His only check would be 2...Rg5+. But that is checkmate! Whoops! That means my only 2nd moves are ones that stop checkmate. If I don't have one, then 1 Kf5 cannot be played! Also, Black is threatening both checkmate and the pawn on c2, so I had better be careful about playing 1 Kf5 because even if I don't get checkmated I am allowing a double threat which may lose a pawn...

The first two examples were from a weaker player, but, of course, even strong players mistakenly eliminate initial candidate moves, often because of faulty analysis.



Example #3: White to play – what would you do?

Black has just played **1...Rb2**. The game was played at a G/70 time limit with a five second time delay. White's time was running short and he had 7+ minutes left to complete the game! Let's see what White was able to do in the three minutes or so he took to make this move, which he recognized as very critical.

Material is unbalanced, but with all the hanging material and pins, the "plan" is clear: *Find which tactic – or forcing sequence – gets you the most material (or loses you the least!)*. This is not the kind of position where you look for something subtle!

Existing threats: White had threatened Bxd8 with his previous move, and Black had countered by threatening White's queen with ...Rb2, so any move that White considers should either save the queen, give check or checkmate, or attempt to win equal or more material for the queen.

Initial Candidates:

- ♠ Checks: 2 Nf6+ and 2 Ne7+
- ♠ Captures: 2 Qxb2, 2 Qxa5, and 2 Bxd8
- ♠ Threats: 2 Re1, 2 Rc2, 2 Nc7, 2 Nf4
- ♠ Moves that save the queen: 2 Qd3, 2 Qe1, 2 Qe3, 2 Qf4, 2 Qd1

Whew! How to proceed with such an array of potential tactics? Well, *in tactical positions almost always start with checks!* One principle is "Always check, it might be mate" but that's bogus. Better is "Always consider a check – it might be the best move." The opposite principle "patzer sees check, patzer gives check" is also not very helpful, although it describes the penchant for weak players to give check, no matter how awful the result. Nevertheless, if a check works, it is very forcing and perhaps no other move can match it. So it's best to check those first (pun intended).

So the first check is 2 Nf6+, then 2...Qxf6 seems bad for Black because of 3 Qxd8+. Notice how the bishop guards the queen right through the opposing queen! That's easy to miss. After 3...Qxd8 4 Bxd8 White is up a piece. But just because one line is good doesn't mean they all are. We need to find Black's best reply to 2 Nf6+ and, of course, it is the natural 2...Bxf6. Now 3 Qxd8+ Bxd8 4 Bxd8 is completely winning for Black. White's other third move try, 3 Bxf6, fails miserably to 3...R2xd2 4 Bxd8 Rxd8. And finally, 2 Nf6+ Bxf6 3 Qxb2 is just a piece worse than the immediate 2 Qxb2, so 2 Nf6+ is a terrible move.

How about the other check 2 Ne7+, does that make a difference? Moving the king in response can quickly be eliminated as either king move allows a rook to be taken with check: 2...Kg7?? 3 Qxb2+ and 2...Kf8?? 3 Qxd8+. So Black must play 2...Qxe7. After this capture, it may seem that recapturing the queen is reasonable for White, but 3 Bxe7 loses to 3...R8xd2 since 4 Rc8+ Kg7 wins for Black. So instead of capturing Black's queen, White needs to look for something better. Because White's queen is also attacked, it makes sense to look at capturing a rook and capturing the black queen afterwards. White considered 3 Qxb2 but he saw that after 3...Qxg5 Black is nicely up a pawn and threatening White's queen – not the bad 3...Bxb2? 4 Bxe7 Bxc1 5 Bxd8 when White is up a piece. That only left the capture of the other rook with 3 Qxd8+, which White, in time trouble, dismissed because of the superficial guarding of the d8 by Black's queen. That caused White to abandon the entire 2 Ne7+ line, dismissing this check from his candidate list. But that was the fatal error! If White had more time, he would have seen that the g5-bishop is – again – guarding the d8-square *through* the opponent's queen. So 3 Qxd8+ Qxd8 4 Bxd8 would leave White up a piece for a pawn. Thus 2 Ne7+! would have been the winning move. Instead, it was eliminated from the final candidate list!

After that mistake, it turned out the less forcing candidate moves also failed. The capture 2 Bxd8 is not very promising, as after 2...Rxd2 White has no great continuation, e.g. 3 Ne7+ Kf8 or possibly even 3...Kg7 should work.

A counterattack with 2 Nc7 would allow Black to play 2...R8xd2 3 Nxe6 Rxc2+ 4 Kh1 and now the simple 4...fxe6 is more than sufficient. So this type of counterattack is out. Even the similar 2 Nf4 R8xd2 3 Rc8+ fails to 3...Qxc8, while 3 Nxe6 transposes into the above losing line.

So White thought the checks and counterattacks did not work. However, he also correctly concluded that saving the queen by moving it off the second rank would allow combinations on d5, since then the rook on b2 would pin the bishop on g2. For example, 2 Qxa5? allows 2...Rxd5 since the pinned bishop is not able to capture. Therefore, White decided he could not check nor move the queen, and thus had to settle for the purely defensive final candidate **2 Rc2?**, even though he saw this would lead to a draw after the forced sequence **2...Rxc2 3 Qxc2 Rxd5 4 Bxd5 Qxd5 5 Qc8+ Kg7 6 Qc3+ Kg8**, which is what quickly followed. After a short, but less than perfect time scramble, the game was soon drawn with 17 seconds remaining for White and 13 for Black.

In this example White considered the candidates in the correct order, but came to the wrong conclusion in his hasty analysis and the correct move was not even on the final list! Moral of the story:

Even if you find all the candidate moves correctly and analyze them in the correct order,

you can still make mistakes if you don't do the analysis correctly!

By the way, I was White in this game and was not a happy camper when the overlooked tactic was discovered! Even though I am an "old master" and my clock was running down, I should not miss something of this level of difficulty. But it only takes one mistake to cost you a game and in this instance I gave away a half point – let's attribute it to rust!

Finally, note that although a candidate move must pass the "Real Chess" test to keep it under consideration, *passing that test is not sufficient to make the move*. In order to play a final candidate, you should prove that it is at least as good as the other final candidates, and doing so is a different story...