

A Quick Guide to Improving Your Chess

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Available Online at: <http://knightschessclub.org/chess-links-and-resources.html> Under heading "Printable Items"

The Three Essentials

To play winning chess it is important to understand that the game can be divided into three parts:

1. Knowledge
2. Discipline
3. Endurance

Each of the above are equally important: **33.3% each**.

Knowledge

Most players will devote about 70% (over attention) of their time toward gaining knowledge, which I will define as the study of openings, defenses, and line memorization for the purpose of understanding strategy and tactics.

Discipline

In contrast to knowledge, most players devote about 20% (under attention) of their time to discipline training, which I will define as following a rigid set of rules during each move of a game designed to reduce error and increase move quality.

Endurance

In contrast to knowledge and discipline, most players will devote about 10% (under attention) of their time to recognizing the signs of fatigue during a game, and taking steps to improve their stamina before critical game errors occur.

The Problem

There is an imbalance in the amount of attention being devoted to each part of the game. Remember that knowledge, discipline, and endurance are an equally important 33.3% each. Therefore the problem is often that too much attention is given to knowledge, and too little to discipline and endurance.

This is why so many players will spend countless hours studying chess books in an attempt to acquire ever more knowledge, and then still experience mixed results. After that follows a feeling of discouragement since studying so hard seems to be causing no improvement. The problem is usually **NOT** with knowledge, but an indication that discipline and/or endurance training is being neglected.

Understanding the Theme of an Opening or Defense

Many players will invest great amounts of time memorizing countless lines for many openings and defenses. Yet no matter how much one memorizes there are always opportunities for an opponent to deviate from a memorized line and leave you completely on your own anyway. That is why I believe that memorizing lines is a total waste of time and effort for the average player rated under 2100, consuming time and leading to frustration and mixed results.

So what is important? Understanding the Theme!

Get familiar with your opening or defense! Learn the goals of what your opening or defense is intended to accomplish, and the different directions it might take during a game. If you understand what your opening or defense is intended to accomplish, and how, you can work towards those goals as you play without worrying what you will do if the game does not follow a memorized line.

You can then make solid moves each turn no matter how your opponent plays, and advance toward the opening or defenses intended results. This is much better than investing great amounts of time attempting to memorize dozens of lines.

Have a Plan!

It is not enough to analyze a position after each move and attempt to make the best move each time, yet this is precisely what most players do. This is another reason why so many players experience discouraging results. You need a plan!

We know that during the opening the goal of both players is to develop their pieces quickly, while keeping within the opening or defenses THEME (see above). Then as development is nearing completion you need to form a PLAN, and have a basic idea of how you are going to accomplish your plan.

Lets Form a Plan

Lets pretend for a moment that you can make your next 8 moves without your opponent making any moves. What moves would you make?

In order to begin down that road you would need to form a plan, right?

Lets form a plan. As an example, lets say that after some analysis you decide that your best chances are with a queen site attack. The next questions to be answered are:

1. What pawns and/or pieces will be involved in the attack?
2. Where would you like those pawns and/or pieces to be placed as the attack proceeds?
3. In what order would you make your moves to advance your pawns and/or pieces to achieve your attack?

Next make those 8 moves in your mind and watch as your plan takes shape. Remember only you are moving, not your opponent. When you are done, behold, you have a plan!

Naturally during the game your opponent will have an equal number of moves that may well hinder or cause you to change your plan, but you still have a plan to work towards, and this is an important key for success.

Discipline

For most players not observing the disciplines is a much bigger reason for poor results than lacking book knowledge. Giving serious attention to mastering the disciplines provided below **WILL** result in a large rating increase by players of all levels. Though critical for success the disciplines are often ignored or given too little attention.

The disciplines MUST be observed every move of the game whether it is your move or your opponents.

1. Be aware of ALL your and your opponents unprotected pieces.
2. Remember that any unprotected piece is a potential target in some way. Use it against your opponent if you can.
3. Remember that your unprotected pieces are targets for your opponent to use against you.
4. When your opponent makes a move **ALWAYS** ask yourself "**Why did they do that?**" Whether the move is good or bad your opponent always has some reason for the move they choose. Discovering that reason can save you from disaster, or perhaps hand you a victory. REMEMBER that their reason may not be only one move away, but the first move of a plan two, three or four moves down the road. Many players never bother to wonder what their opponent is doing and live to regret it.
5. **Do not fear your opponent!** Your opponent is nothing more than flesh and blood, just like you. They eat, drink, sleep and get dressed just like you. They are only human, and a human can be beaten! When you sit across from your opponent their rating should play no part in your thinking. You must know that you are in charge, and that you are going to win! It is just a matter of making the moves. Believe in yourself, this is very important. You can do nothing without faith! You need to eat lightning, and crap thunder!
6. **Don't force it!** When you don't know what to do, don't do anything. Wait for your opponent to get an idea, it's sure to be wrong! Make a waiting move of some kind, but do not force a questionable move when you have no ideas. That is usually just what your opponent is waiting for and usually ends in disaster.
7. **When you find a good move, STOP, DON'T MAKE IT, there might be a better one.** Do not be overly eager to jump at the first good move you spot. Pull your hand back and sit on it if necessary. Take some added time to examine the move, and other moves. You may well find a better move, or that the move you thought to be good was not.
8. **Take note of over worked pieces.** For example, your opponents Knight may be protecting two separate things at one time, but if drawn to one (capturing for example) the other thing is left unprotected and weak. Over worked pieces are a weakness you can take advantage of. Use it against your opponent if you can.

Don't Fear Sacrificing a Pawn for an Advantage

When is the best time to win a game; the opening, middle game or end game? The answer is the sooner the better! The longer a game continues the longer your opponent has of finding a way to win.

While it is true that a good player can take a single pawn advantage and win by promoting it to a queen, usually late in the end game, the player must first survive that long. If you are victorious before your opponent has that opportunity a small material advantage is of little use.

If you play a sound gambit to obtain an advantage in position, development, and gain of tempos there are two ways to keep your opponent on a leash.

1. If the advantage enables you to win the gambit pawn back.
2. If the advantage provides you with a winning edge enabling you to beat your opponent.

Many players do not fully understand the **POWER** of gaining tempo's (free moves), and in my estimation a pawn is equal to 2 tempos. Gain enough tempos and the victory will fall into your lap.

It really does not matter if your opponent is a pawn ahead early if they can not survive long enough to take advantage, or are unable to keep the pawn.

In the end if you are unable to at least win the gambit pawn back with all of that advantage, how would you have won with no advantage? You were probably not going to win the game anyway and as a result lost nothing for the attempt.

Endurance

When your mind begins to grow tired your sharpness fades, you miss good moves you would have found earlier, you miss dangers and threats you would have noticed earlier, and you make mistakes. In most cases when your endurance starts to fail your odds of a win go down dramatically.

Endurance varies from individual to individual, and is also affected by age. But there are ways to combat this as the game presses on, when your mind begins to get fuzzy, and your clarity of thought begins to fade.

- 1) **Break away.** If time permits leave the chess board, stick your head out the window and get some fresh air. Do not walk around the room looking at other games, but walk away from chess completely for a few minutes allowing your mind to drift and rest. Work place studies have shown that a short break increases productivity and mental clarity. There is no difference when playing chess. Give your mind a short rest.
- 2) Look around the room periodically and take a few **deep breathes**. Those particularly involved in the martial arts will testify that being well oxygenated increases mental clarity and strength. **Breathe!** A few slow deep breathes will help refresh your mind. Do this repeatedly as needed.
- 3) If you recognize that you are growing fatigued, pay extra attention to the disciplines mentioned earlier. This will help you to avoid error.
- 4) **Avoid all substances that will affect mental clarity prior to the game.** Coffee, alcohol, smoking, etc., are all things that affect mental clarity and hinder clear thinking. These and similar negatives should be avoided for at least 48 hours prior to a game. Healthy eating, a good nights rest, and drinking only water before a game will all contribute to a clear, healthy mind and how well you will play.

Professional athletes know that exercise and taking good care of their physical body makes a big difference in their performance. Chess is a game of the mind and body requiring the same good habits for top performance and clear thinking. Yes, it does matter.

Critical Positions

A critical position can occur when you are on the offense, defense, or at a crucial point in the game. In most cases we realize when we have arrived at a critical position and the pressure of the moment threatens to affect our decisions in a negative way. This is the moment when we need clarity!

When you find yourself in a critical position rather than allowing emotion to influence your move making decisions, becoming overly cautious, over zealous, or inclined to not think things through, it is time to kick back and be cool.

When the moment arrives fold your hands on your lap, lean back in your chair, and put on your calm and calculating face. Methodically take all the time you need to calmly analyze the position and sort it out. Do not feel rushed, or threatened by the position. Rather be as calm and clear minded as you would sitting on the shore of a glassy lake at sunset, cool and without distraction. Keep the disciplines in mind, take a few deep breaths and think things through logically. You will find the best moves a much greater percentage of the time.