Maximize Your Chess Potential

Dan Heisman

POPULAR CHESS

About the Author

Dan Heisman is a United States Chess Federation National Master, author and instructor. He is well regarded for his practical advice on a wide range of key subjects including general improvement, thought processes, planning, strategy, tactics, endgame play and technique.

Also by the Author:

A Guide to Chess Improvement

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Introduction

In 2009 I was hearing more and more about the concept of social media. To me it seemed a way of using the World Wide Web to communicate quickly, and simultaneously, with many people all over the planet with similar interests. As a chess instructor and author, I asked myself: 'How can I best make use of social media to help as many prospective improving chess players as possible?' I came across Twitter and decided that every day I could publish a chess 'tip' and everyone could read it, benefit, and/or comment.

I joined Twitter in 2009 and, since 2011, have been publishing a Chess Tip of the Day at www.twitter.com/danheisman. If you go to that URL on a browser and scroll down, you can find about 4,000 chess 'tips', and growing by one every day. I do tweet about other things on Twitter, so I differentiate my tips by starting them with an abbreviated month/day, e.g. M17 = May 17 or N8 = November 8. In this book the dates are irrelevant, so they have been removed.

In 2021, the Chess Journalists of America voted my Chess Tip of the Day the 'Best Twitter Feed' award. As I write this, I am awaiting to see if my Twitter tips win another award.

What is a chess 'tip'? It is a suggestion; something I think might help a person play chess better, think more efficiently, refer to a website or media for some recommendation, draw attention to something interesting, publicize events, or just enjoy the world of chess better.

In that sense my tips – and thus the contents of this book – differ from similar works such as Alburt and Lawrence's *Chess Rules of Thumb*, which contains primarily principles/rules or Soltis's *The Wisest Things Ever Said About Chess,* which are 'wise', but not necessarily all suggestions. There is some overlap, of course, between this book and those predecessors. I can (and will!) offer some principles as suggestions to improve play, or suggest that a wise statement might contain good advice to follow.

As readers might know, Twitter was originally limited to 140 characters, but a few years ago, expanded to 280 per tweet. However, publishers were not interested in a book of 'The Best of Chess Tip of the Day' that were just hundreds if not thousands of copied and pasted short tips from my Twitter page – especially since they were available online for free! For this reason, I have expanded each tip to 1-4 pages of additional material not found on Twitter.

Therefore, this book is much more than just some of my best tips. I have selected tips that were not just the most helpful, but also ones that could be expanded with additional text and/or examples. I have been teaching chess for over 50(!) years and full-time since 1996, so many of these tips represent ways to highlight and address the most common problems I have found in students of all levels, offering suggested ways they can help mitigate or maybe even avoid these problems and/or improve their play and study. While many players at the same level may have similar problems in a skill-like analysis, they can also differ greatly in other areas, such as playing too fast or slow, or in their knowledge of openings, exact endgames, or principles.

As an instructor, the tips I offer often lean toward general improvement advice, rather than how to play very specific positions. So it is unlikely you will find too many tips comparable to: "When playing Black in the 6 ♗g5 lines in the Najdorf variation of the Sicilian Defense, you will more often develop your queen's knight with ...♘b8-d7 than you would ...♘b8-c6." Or: "In the Lucena endgame if the defending king moves on to the sixth rank, consider using it as a shield for the offensive king to possibly move safely along the eighth rank to threaten promotion." For these types of 'position-specific' tips, perhaps it would be better to consult reference material about how to play the Najdorf or one about 'exact' endgame technique.

When expanding the included tips into a page or more, I was able to turn this manuscript into much more than just suggestions; the expanded tips contain additional helpful material, including illustrative stories and many diagrams with instructive play. Much of this expanded material is either typical of, or verbatim, what I would use as part of a lesson, so in that sense many of the tips can be considered 'Best Mini-Lessons of an Old Coach'!

On that note, the first book I wrote for Everyman was *A Guide to Chess Improvement: the Best of Novice Nook*. I think in every sense a reader will find this book to be a great companion to that one, and consistent in my messaging to players wishing to improve.

Occasionally I hear someone say they initially judge a chess book by flipping through it and glancing at the diagrams to get a feel for the book; I am not sure this is the optimum way to evaluate a new book, but I hope this one at least meets the minimum requirements!

As with all books of this nature, most readers will find some tips more helpful than others. This is only natural, based on each player's playing strength, perceived and actual weaknesses, and areas of interest. In that sense, the book does not have to be read from start to finish, as one might read a novel or, for that matter, many of my other chess books. Instead, you can peruse the book at your leisure, looking for tips that you find interesting or helpful. And it is likely that a tip you find unappealing today might be the key tip in a year or two that will get you out of a rut or slump! In that sense this book can be used either as a reference book or a straight read.

With this many tips, there will naturally be some overlap between tips that address the same subject like good time management, careful analysis, creating active pieces, or trying your best on every move. I have tried to provide adequate cross-references between

tips, but there is going to be some purposeful synergism even between tips without a cross-reference which address similar topics. It is important to note that the text is written so that the great majority of the cross-references are there to be helpful to correlate or augment the suggestions, but it is not necessary to follow those cross-references in order to understand the referencing tip.

Occasionally one tip would lead directly or as a corollary to another tip. If there was sufficient material for the additional tip, I would make this a separate tip but, if not, I sometimes included additional related tips, usually with the note *Tip Alert!*.

Unlike my *The Improving Chess Thinker* or *Silman's Endgame Course*, the material in this book is not meant to be arranged in any ascending order of difficulty. That is mostly due to the nature or tips and suggestions – they are not normally 'you need to know this tip before you can read the next one.' There are, however, a few tips that do flow naturally from a previous tip; in those few cases I tried to put the tips in consecutive order or at least reference the other tip. Similarly, many of the tips are general or involve overall improvement, so I decided to assign each tip, as best possible, to one of the following chapters:

- General Improvement
- Thought Process
- Psychology
- Tactics/Safety
- Positional Concepts and Strategy
- Openings
- Endgames

Middlegame issues are addressed primarily though Chapters Four (Tactics/Safety) and Five (Positional Concepts/Strategy). Further, because the tips are in subject order and not in order of priority, I have put the label ***Top-10 Tip*** after the ten tips I think might be most helpful to the average reader. However, each reader is invited to pick out their own 'most helpful' set, which will likely differ greatly from mine! Drop me an email via my website www.danheisman.com to let me know your 'top ten'.

It almost goes without saying in modern chess books that, when I use a term like 'best move', it is not my opinion, but the result of engine analysis. For almost all instances where the quality of a move is mentioned, the engine was *Stockfish*.

This is my 13th chess book, so I am trying not to be superstitious and am hoping 13 will turn out to be a lucky number! At my age, I am not sure I will be writing additional books representing a luckier number, so I wanted this book to be instructive, entertaining, and of high quality. I hope the reader agrees!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Byron Jacobs of Popular Chess for agreeing to publish this book and laying out the general groundwork of how a tip should be expanded. I would also not only like to thank all my Twitter followers, but especially those that took the time to suggest which tips were either the most helpful to them or those they felt would be most helpful to include in the book. I would also like to thank my editors, Byron and Richard Palliser; it requires a good editor to make a chess book more readable and instructive!

Dan Heisman,
May 2025

Chapter Two

Thought Process

This chapter deals primarily with the process – more than content – of chess thinking. Process involves which steps are being taken, their order, and priority. Thought process tips deal with areas like analysis, evaluation, and the important but commonly overlooked topic of time management. It also includes tips involving questions to ask during the thought process.#

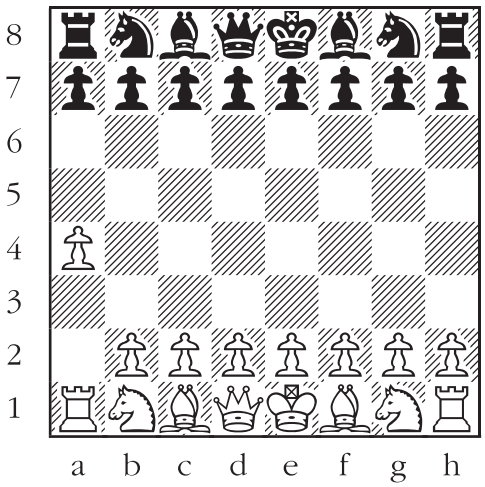
Tip 40

There is not one single correct thought process that would cover all types of positions...

...unless you want it to include a 'meta-thought process' decision of what type of thought process would apply to the current position!

In his interesting book *Move First, Think Later: Sense and Nonsense in Improving Your Chess*, Willy Hendriks suggests that teaching someone to think by giving them instructions like "Do A first then do B" is not the way good players think, and by telling someone that you are likely doing more harm than good.

Hendriks's opinion is comparable to what I am suggesting with this tip. For example, you certainly do not approach highly analytical and completely non-analytical positions the same. A good example of a non-analytical position might occur for Black's move if White opens the game 1 a4.



Black to play after 1 a4 – What is his thought process?

In this and similar non-analytical ('judgmental') positions Black should not necessarily be thinking analytical ideas like 'If I make move x, what will White do to me on the next move and how will I be able to meet that?' Instead, he should be thinking in general terms like 'What openings would make sense reversed with a pawn on a4 since I am effectively playing White?' or 'White is leaving the first thrust in the center up to me; how can I best take advantage of that?'

This latter type of thought process is 'hand-waving' (moving on principles and general observation, but not via detailed analysis), but in a very acceptable way. It is quite different to an analytical situation, for example, a complex position with many checks, captures, and threats for both sides. Then hand-waving is a serious mistake; you must be more analytical.

I agree with Hendriks that no strong player has a strict process they use every move and telling a student that they should have one can be counterproductive. But I will make a general observation from my experience:

The more advanced a player is, the more he can use intuition, judgment, and jump all around searching for what he wants to play; all the ingredients are there. The more a player is towards beginner, the more he needs at least some ingredients that get him off step one and systematically help him find moves that are at least safe.

For example, no one would tell an advanced reader to sound out 't', 'h' and 'e' when reading the word 'the', but it is almost impossible to teach someone how to read English without first helping them recognize letters, their sounds, and how to combine those sounds into words before they can read for meaning, as all advanced readers do.

So, while it is true that teaching inexperienced players rigorous, structured thought processes can not only be unhelpful, but even counter-productive, the opposite extreme of telling them to just 'go with the flow' isn't going to provide any basis for going forward if

they don't have the board vision and tactical vision to spot meaningful patterns to use in the game.

Instead, a practical middle-ground is possible where you can teach someone many of the basic precepts and principles of what needs, as a minimum, to be done at some point in their thought process. For example, you can teach someone to ask first about their opponent's move 'What are *all* the important things that move does?' and 'Is that move safe?' and to ask about each of their own candidate moves, 'Is it safe?'

It is true that if you are required to think about the process of what you should be thinking that can detract from what your thinking should be. But the other extreme (which I don't think Hendriks is fully espousing) of giving an inexperienced player no guidance for fear of stifling their creativity or causing them to think too mechanically is probably also not optimum. As usual, the best solution probably lies somewhere in the middle.

Tip 41

There's not always a clearly best move or idea, and assuming there is (outside of puzzles, which state a clear goal) might be counterproductive.

In the previous tip I suggested that there's not always one single correct thought process that covers all situations (positions; time control issues), and I will also deal with circumstances when a player states "I reach positions where I don't know what to do" (Tip #46). But there is a third key 'don't know' issue: in many positions there is no single correct move or plan, so those looking for a clear best move won't find one.

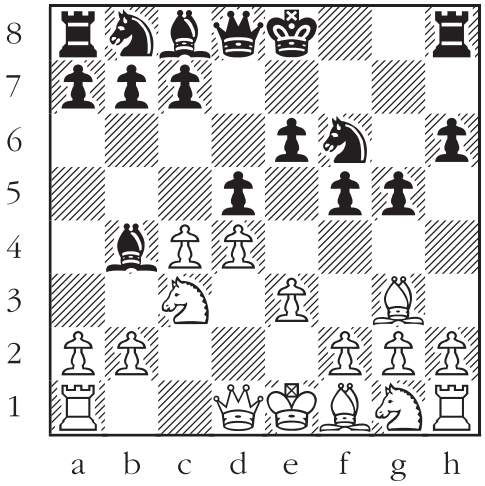
In his wide-ranging book *Chess for Zebras*, GM Rowson has a chapter called 'Psycho-Logics' and, within that chapter there is a section 'The Importance of Not Having a Clue' where he makes a statement in bold which I would like to repeat: "The stronger a player is, the more likely he is to begin by saying 'I don't know' when you ask him what is happening in a position!"

There are several reasons for this, but one is that many positions contain several issues and factors (imbalances, to use the IM Silman term) that could be dealt with by a variety of logical/reasonable moves and ideas. Sometimes the best idea requires a specific move order or plan (most likely in a combination or in the endgame), but other times the position is much more fluid and a variety of moves and plans might all be reasonable. The key is that to assume *a priori* that there is always only one right move and plan is a falsehood that will make your thought process and analysis, not to mention your ability to finally decide on a move, much more difficult.

In the middlegame, if the position is objectively equal, there may be a variety of moves that will keep it about equal. In an endgame which is drawn, there may be multiple paths (with possibly more than one initial move) to achieving that draw. If you give a position to a computer engine, and ask it to display the top several moves and these moves end up

separated by about a tenth of a pawn or less, it is likely that any of them are reasonable and, in most senses, equally good. So, in these situations, if you don't know what to do and end up picking any of these moves, that's quite OK, despite what doing lots of 'Solitaire Chess' (where you are often asked to find the 'right' moves and are penalized if you don't) may lead you to believe.

Here is an example. On several moves in the opening (shown after Black's 7th move) my student, rated 1206 and White, had trouble figuring out what to do against their 1339-rated opponent:



White to play

At the time this game was played I gave this position to an engine and let it show the top six moves. At 22 ply there was about a 0.15 pawn difference between the top move and the sixth move, and it stayed that way for most of the opening.

In all the lines presented by the engine, White eventually got his kingside pieces out and, despite Black's menacing pawn storm, often castled that side. But that is not the point. The point was that on most moves White had a choice of several ideas and continuations that were reasonable and led to a slight advantage. In lines where Black played ...♗xc3+; bxc3 and gave up the bishop-pair, then White eventually playing c4xd5 to undouble the pawns and open the position for the bishops was usually best and logical, but even that was not absolutely necessary. This is not at all surprising for a 'normal' opening position where there are not many threats and several pieces left to activate.

In these types of 'non-critical' positions, for me to suggest to a student that he did not find my (or 'the right') idea would be to send the wrong message. This student wanted me to teach him how to find that right move in this opening, but I had to admit that if he just kept developing his pieces and did it reasonably without wasting time, there were many ways to skin this cat.

Puzzles often psychologically prepare us to find only those 'best' moves and sometimes in games your *criticality assessment* tells you that you must do exactly that. However, it is important to understand that sometimes looking for the exact right move (or plan) will not only waste time, but could be a futile effort since 'any among equals' in many cases might be a more reasonable goal.

Tip 42

More than anything, your ability to analyze and evaluate positions determines your playing strength. Therefore, strengthening those does more than anything else to help you improve.

In Tip #24, we did a thought experiment about swallowing a pill to help you learn openings. That idea applies to this tip as well, in spades.

Why is it that when one attends tournaments, it is likely you can see an 11-year-old rated 2000 beating 40-year-olds rated 1600 who have a lot more experience and, presumably a lot more chess knowledge?

The answer is easy; if chess were all about accumulating knowledge, then as you get older and read more books or watch more videos, you would just get better and better, and 11-year-olds would rarely beat experienced 40-year-olds. But chess is not mostly knowledge. It is mostly skills like analysis, evaluation, time management, stamina, perseverance, ability to learn from losses, ability to take instruction, open-mindedness, concentration, and a few others.

As a refresher, a quick definition of:

Analysis – the part of the thought process that attempts to find the candidate moves for both players, the famous 'If I go there and he goes there, what would I do?' type of thinking.

Evaluation – determining in a position who stands better, how much better, and why. Evaluation is usually done at the end of analysis when the position becomes quiescent (no more pertinent checks, captures, or threats which could likely change the evaluation of the quiescent position).

In most positions outside the opening and deep endgame, a player is not dealing solely with memory. It is true that knowledge of how to play similar positions plays a big part in analysis, but it is just a part. A player's ability to analyze an unfamiliar position, to generate candidate moves for both sides, and then determine likely sequences and then evaluate them to choose the best move possible is the core of anyone's playing strength.

Therefore, in order to truly improve, a player not only has to acquire more chess knowledge, but also work on improving those skills.

Tip 43

Top-10 Tip

There is more than one way to play better moves.

One of my YouTube videos won the award for 'Best Instruction' by the Chess Journalists of America when I addressed this obvious, but little-discussed fact. In order to become a better player, you must make better moves than you did before, but there is more than one way you can do this! The main ways are:

- Analyze more accurately (skill).
- Evaluate resulting positions better (skill).
- Memorize more opening and endgame patterns/sequences (knowledge).
- Learn more tactical patterns/sequences (knowledge).
- Learn more principles and how to apply them better (knowledge).
- Become more consistent in thought process (skill).
- Manage your time better (skill).

I would call the first two bullets above 'finding' better moves, as opposed to knowing them. When I discussed in the video that playing better moves often means you cannot just memorize more openings and endgames, but rather that you must be able to 'find' better moves, I was criticized by a viewer or two that I was just playing semantics. I respect everyone's opinion, but I think they missed the point.

In Tip #14 I told the story of a player who had been improving steadily up to about 1500 just with the paradigm of accumulating more chess knowledge. But then he started to realize that he would begin to get diminishing returns on his chess work if he did not start learning how to analyze and evaluate positions better. I complimented him on his insight, but I fear that many others are stuck forever in the 'I have to memorize more stuff to become a titled player' mindset.

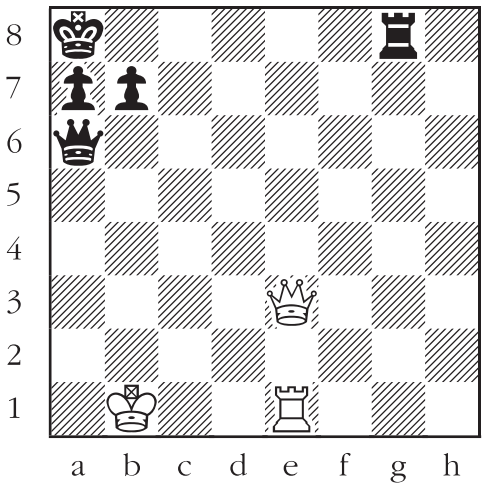
On the day I wrote this page, GM Noel Studer tweeted: "The most important skill in chess improvement: consistency. Be consistent in your training and you will improve. Be consistent during the game and you will pick up many points..." I replied:

"You are correct about the importance of consistency. If you play like a 1600 for 39 moves and then like a 700 for one, your playing strength is a lot lower than the average (mean) of the moves: ((1600x39)+(1x700))/40."

Tip 44

One of the most common causes of thought process errors among amateurs rated under 1800 is quiescent errors.

My bet is that you can find White's best move in this diagram:



White to play

What do you think is the average rating of players that might make a quiescent error and think 'I can't play 1 ♕e8+ because I will lose my queen to 1...♖xe8'? Possibly about 700 or below? Almost no one with any experience would miss this either in a game, or especially in a puzzle if we change this to 'White to play and win' or even easier, 'White to play and mate in two'.

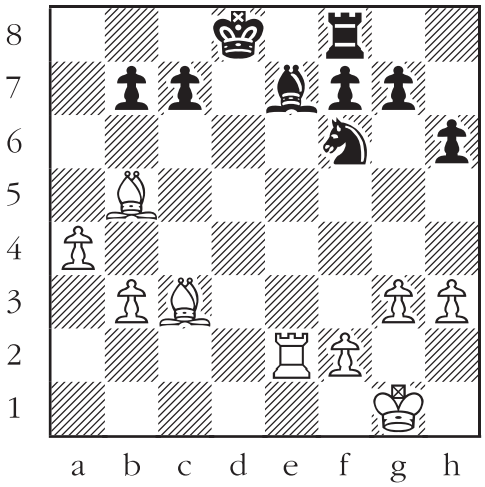
So, what is a quiescence error?

Quiescence error: A common thought process error made (mostly by lower-rated players) where a player stops analyzing and evaluates a position as 'quiet' when there are still further forcing moves (Tips #63 and #93) which would likely (or will) change that evaluation.

From teaching over 1,000 players private one-to-one and discussing the causes of their mistakes and hearing them think out loud, I can say for certain that quiescence errors are not only one of the main causes of amateur errors, but they also answer their common question "Why is it that I do so well in puzzles, but I miss those same continuations in my games?"

When someone holds up a sign (puzzle requirement) "White to play and win" then players don't stop looking until they find it. In games, lower rated players often stop as soon as they see possible material loss, superficially thinking a move is not safe.

Let's consider a more typical example using a problem from John Bain's *Chess Tactics for Students*:



White to play and win

Solution: **1 ♖xe7!** and if **1...♔xe7** (1...c6!? 2 ♖xb7! cxb5 3 ♖b8+ ♔e7 4 ♗b4+ wins the rook) **2 ♗b4+** not only skewers the black king and rook, but the black king has no squares to guard the rook, so it is also a type of removal of the guard.

This puzzle is also an excellent example of the type that players under 1800 FIDE often miss in games since 1 ♖xe7 is not superficially safe (it loses the exchange – a rook for a bishop or knight) and they reject this candidate move, making a quiescence error.

Strong players rarely make basic quiescence errors because they don't simply think "I can't play move X because it isn't safe", but rather "If I play move x and give up material are there further moves (almost always forcing moves: checks, captures, or threats) which would indicate that further analysis is suggested which possibly could change my initial evaluation?

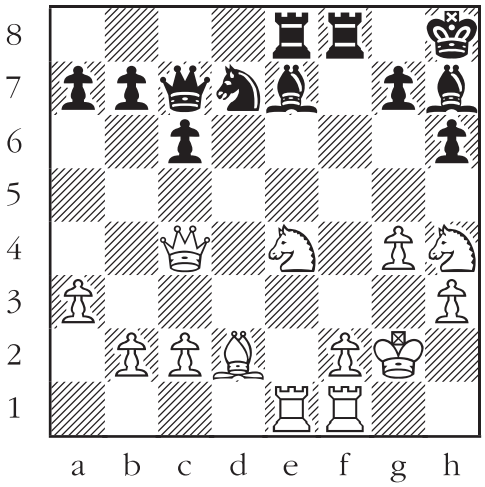
In this case 1 ♖xe7 ♔xe7 is not quiet. The check 2 ♗b4+ initiates a skewer indicating that White may regain his material or even more, and thus White should not stop, but instead continue to analyze to get a more accurate evaluation of 1 ♖xe7.

In puzzles, players rated 1000-1800 usually get these solutions correctly because of the sign next to the position that says "White to play and win". That tells them that something is there and they should not stop looking until they find it. So when doing a puzzle like this, they are much more likely to think 'If I play 1 ♖xe7 and Black captures 1...♔xe7 and wins the exchange, is there something there that might actually be the solution to the puzzle even though 1 ♖xe7 is not a safe move?'

That type of thought process will be adequate for puzzles with a defined requirement or goal, but in a game they are much more likely to superficially reject moves like 1 ♖xe7

because they lose material, despite doing puzzles of analogous positions which indicate these types of moves often require further investigation.

I have given the following puzzle to hundreds of my students. I start with the question: "Black is threatening 1...♗xh4. What are all the moves that might not just lose the knight?" The main three answer are 1 ♘f3, 1 ♘f5, and 1 g5. Then I ask, "List these three moves in order of safety," so I ask the reader to do that also:



List 1 ♘f3, 1 ♘f5 and 1 g5 in order of safety

By far the most common answer is 1 ♘f3 is the safest, 1 g5 is second, and 1 ♘f5 is third because it clearly loses a pawn. But then I tell students that 1 ♘f3 is the least safe(!), and ask them: why? With that new information, it is now more like a puzzle because I have given them a defined goal, and many finally realize 1 ♘f3? loses a piece to 1...♖xf3! and if 2 ♔xf3? ♘e5+ wins the queen! When I quiz them on why they thought 1 ♘f3 was safe, about 70% admit they simply stopped after 1...♖xf3 2 ♔xf3 as losing material, making a quiescence error. But if you want to be a good player, you need to be able to recognize that a move like 1 ♘f3? is not safe.

Final note: When I first saw this position in a student game, I said immediately that 1 ♘f3 was not safe! How? Because the only possible capture of the moving knight, 1...♖xf3, was the first candidate I considered (no quiescence error!), and then immediately I saw the fork (tactical vision!) if the only recapture, 2 ♔xf3, was attempted.

Chapter Four

Tactics/Safety

This chapter provides tips that address what I consider the most important 'on-the-board' issues – determining if candidate moves (including, of course, the one you play) are safe, and whether opponent's moves are safe. Of course, tactical tips include those addressing win of material and checkmate – how to study/recognize/analyze the patterns, and also some general tips on attacking.

Tip 91

Top-10 Tip

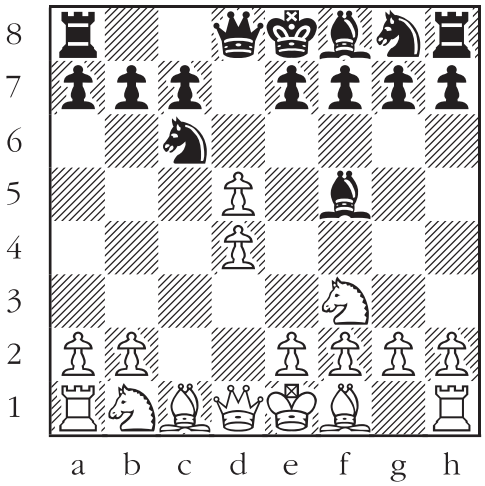
The purpose of doing basic tactics is not to just to win material/mate, but also to reject candidates which lose material/allow mate. Moreover, a principal goal of studying basic tactics is to *recognize* common tactical patterns, not just be able to solve them.

Playing safe moves requires the ability to recognize and analyze dangerous moves that the opponent can do in reply, and to make sure all of the opponent's dangerous moves can be safely met next turn. The foundation for the ability to play safe moves is the study and recognition of basic safety patterns. Many new students think that repetitious study of basic problems is not helpful because they can solve them so easily. But the goal should be quick and accurate recognition, not just solving. Take the analogy of learning 6x7. You can add six 7s by going 7+7 =14 + 7 =21 +7 =28 +7 =35 + 7 =42. You can probably do that fairly quickly with a good deal of accuracy. But you can't compete with someone who recognizes 6x7 is 42 instantly.

Moreover, if you are playing a competent opponent, your opportunities to win material will be limited, but if careless you could *lose* material on almost every move after the first

few. Therefore, a majority of your use of basic tactics is to recognize/analyze when your *own* moves are not safe!

Let's take a simple example. In the following game my student was Black and he had already misplayed the opening a little when he had to answer White's **4 cxd5**:



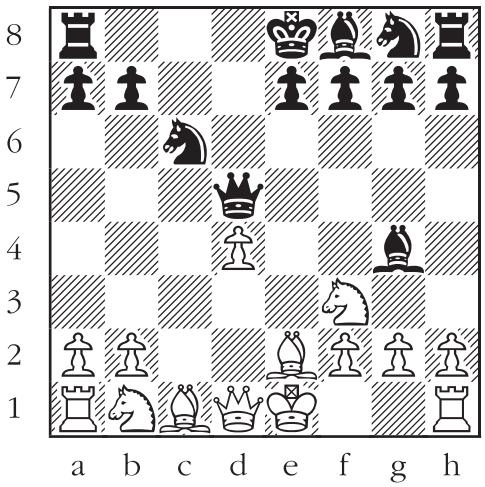
Black to play

After 4...♕xd5, 5 ♘c3 gives White a big advantage, but Black has nothing better. However, my student quickly played **4...♘b4??**. When I asked him after the game why he played that move, he not unexpectedly replied that he was only thinking of the threat of 5...♘c2+.

But 4...♘b4?? is a combination of Hope Chess (not analyzing your opponent's possible checks, captures, or threats in reply to your move to see if you can safely meet them), hand-waving (moving on principle or idea, and not based on analysis), and a silly threat (Tip #97). Of course, White can safely meet the threat with 5 ♘a3?, but he correctly played his only check **5 ♕a4+**, won the knight and the game. The pattern of 5 ♕a4+ double-attacking the knight and the king is common and basic.

I am not going to claim that knowing basic tactic patterns better would have prevented Black from playing Hope Chess and losing the knight, but it would have given him a better chance. You can't just rely on your tactical vision to determine if a move is safe; you have to analyze your opponent's possible replies of dangerous forcing moves as well. Knowing more tactical patterns is an aid to your analysis to determine whether your move is safe, not the sole determinator.

The following well-known position occurs in the Alapin Sicilian after **1 e4 c5 2 c3 d5 3 exd5 ♕xd5 4 d4 cxd4 5 cxd4 ♘c6 5 ♘f3 ♗g4 6 ♗e2**. If Black is not an experienced player, he might notice that the d-pawn has two guards and two attackers, but one of the attackers, the knight on f3, is 'removable' so a removal of the guard tactic starting with 6...♗xf3 is worth investigating.



Black to play after 6 ♗e2

If Black now makes a quiescence error, he could conclude he would win a pawn after **6... ♗xf3? 7 ♗xf3 ♕xd4??**. But if so, White's only check, **8 ♗xc6+**, would win the queen with a much more powerful removal of the guard after **8...bxc6 9 ♕xd4.** When my son Delen was a beginning player, he fell for this tactic – twice! He did not calculate it correctly the first time, and he also did not remember it the second.

Strong players would not make this mistake not because they don't usually make easy quiescence errors – they don't – but because this is a well-known tactic and they would just recognize the position and know about the trap. If you are not a strong player, it is much easier to misplay this position if you need to figure it out than it would be if you just recognize the pattern. This is the kind of benefit you get when you study basic tactics repetitiously.

Which type of tactics are the best to study? The kind that occur frequently in games, and ones that win some material – a pawn, the exchange, a piece, a rook. That is why I recommend books such as Giannatos's *Everyone's First Chess Workbook* or Bain's *Chess Tactics for Students* for repetitious study.

Interestingly, at the other end of the difficulty spectrum of tactical puzzles are endgame studies and composed mating problems, such as clever mate in two positions. In the Introduction to *Tactical Training in the Endgame*, author IM Lakdawala strongly recommends that intermediate players, even as low as 1200 FIDE, can greatly benefit from the imagination generated by even attempting to solve these difficult problems. He suggests these players incorporate these puzzles as part of their study plan.

In summary, I suggest that repetitious study of basic tactics, such as those in Giannatos and Bain, should be part of everyone's study program until they are at least rated about 1900 FIDE. That does not mean players under 1900 can't study more advanced tactics or other types of puzzles – as they get stronger, they should augment their basic tactics study

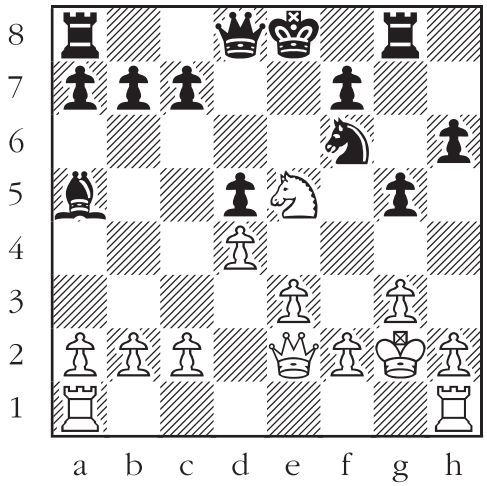
with puzzles of a variety of types and levels, like the composed ones Lakdawala recommends or just intermediate tactics in a set like Coakley's excellent *Winning Chess Exercises for Kids* – but it does mean that even when some puzzle sets seem 'too easy' those easy puzzles can still provide a big benefit.

Tip 92

Tactics and safety dominate positional and strategic aspects.

Another way of saying this is strategy is the tiebreak of equally safe moves. Of course, you can purposely play an unsafe move – we call these sacrifices! But sacrifices are more the exception than the rule. While positional and strategic aspects may often point toward certain candidate moves, if those candidates are not safe, they usually (but not always!) must be discarded, no matter their benefit.

I once had a student who was Black in a position that was roughly comparable to:



Black to play

When we got to this point while reviewing the game, I said: "OK, you are ahead a piece and should have an easy win. But your king is a little unsafe in the middle of the board so you should try to castle queenside. However, if you play a move like 1...♕e7? immediately, then White has 2 ♕b5+ picking up the bishop, so I would first play a move like 1...♗b6 and then move the queen and castle and you should win easily."

My student replied: "Dan, I went through the entire same logic that you did, but I skipped the step where you checked to see if the queen move was safe so, for the same reason, I played 1...♕e7?? and after 2 ♕b5+ I lost my bishop and ended up losing the game!"

Strategically it was clear what Black should do, but he had to first ensure his intended move was safe. He skipped the most important step of the process!

Tip 93

The forcing moves are checks, captures, and threats. So almost all tactics (except possibly zugzwang) involve checks, captures, and/or threats.

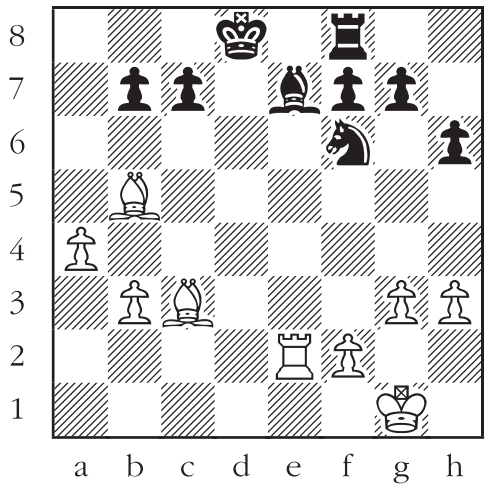
I have used the phrase 'checks, captures, and threats' (CCT) for so long and so repeatedly that it may only be second to 'Hope Chess' among chess ideas I have named that have caught on with the general public. CCT may have existed before I started using it, but I do not remember getting it from another source.

Amusingly, I used CCT so much in the lectures at our chess club that one of our members went to Café Press and designed hats with 'checks, captures, and threats' on it! Of course, if you wear the hat, it may help your opponent more than it helps you!

The functional use of CCT is very clear: either side cannot initiate a tactic unless the move is one of those three types. One problem I have found over my years of teaching this is that everyone knows what a check or capture is, but they can only vaguely describe a threat, so here goes:

Threat: A move which can win material, checkmate, or do something positive *next move* if the opponent does not stop it. Attacks on under-defended pieces are examples of a threat.

Note that a check or capture can also be a threat. Let's return (from Tip #44) to the following 'White to Play and Win' position from Bain's *Chess Tactics for Students*. The winning move was a capture, but can you find all the white moves that are *not* checks or captures, but can be categorized as threats?



Find all the White moves that are threats

The key to getting this correct is to understand that just as not all checks and captures are good moves, not all threats are good moves either. Here are all the threats:

- 1 ♗b4 – this makes the strong threats of both 2 ♖xe7 and 2 ♗xe7+. Is it a good move? Of course not, since Black can counter the threat with 1...♗xb4.
- 1 ♗a6 – this unsafe move has the clear threat of 2 ♗xb7 winning a pawn.
- 1 ♗c6 – also threatens 2 ♗xb7.
- 1 ♗a5 threatens the 'overworked piece' tactic 2 ♗xc7+, winning a pawn.
- 1 ♗e5 also threatens 2 ♗xc7+, winning a pawn.

Other moves that are not checks or captures are not immediate threats to do something positive *next move*. For example, 1 a5 is not a threat, but it does threaten to make the threat 2 a6 on the next move. Similarly, 1 g4 doesn't threaten anything; if Black does nothing, he's safe, but next move it would allow White to make the Attack with something Worth Less ('AWL'; see the next Tip, #94) threat of 2 g5, so it 'threatens to threaten'. Can these long-term ('threaten to threaten' or even 'threaten to threaten to threaten' in three moves) 'threats' be strong moves which require the opponent to take notice or even take preventative action? Of course, but we have to draw the definition line somewhere reasonable or else moves like the first move of the game already become threats as after 1 e4 we would could say White is 'threatening' 2 ♕f3 and 3 ♗c4 and 4 ♕xf7#!

The exceptions to the CCT moves initiating most tactics would primarily be endgame moves that either create immediate zugzwang opportunities or long-term promotion threats. When someone plays a strong tactical move that 'threatens to threaten', but does not immediately perform a CCT, we usually call that a 'quiet move'. Quiet moves are more difficult to find for the very reason they are not the 'loud' CCTs and don't catch our eye as easily, and are often award an '!' by the annotator.

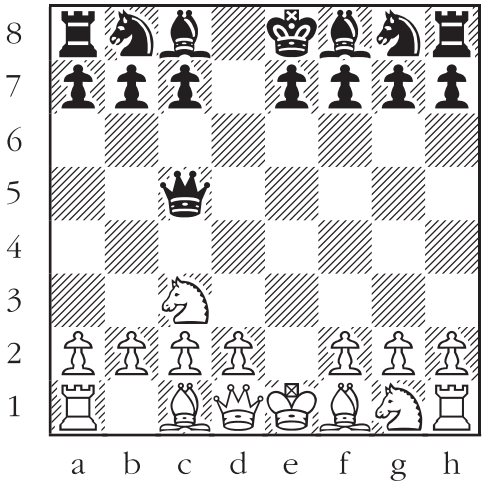
Tip 94

AWL (Attacking With a Lesser valued piece) is an important chess concept, and often a constructive threat.

There are often many ways to deal with a threatened piece: move it, guard it, block the attack, capture the attacking piece, counterattack. But when the threat is an Attack with Something Worth Less (AWL), concepts like 'guarding it' are removed or at least strongly diminished, making the AWL threat 'more forcing'.

When AWL is used in the opening to develop a piece plus the piece being attacked cannot go to a clearly better square, this is the well-known concept of 'winning a tempo'.

For example, after **1 e4 d5 2 exd5 ♕xd5** we consider the AWL **3 ♘c3** to be winning a tempo because the knight is developed from b1 to the good square c3, while the black queen on d5 has to move to another reasonable square (usually a5, d6, or maybe d8). To contrast, let's say Black plays the inferior move **3...♕c5?**.



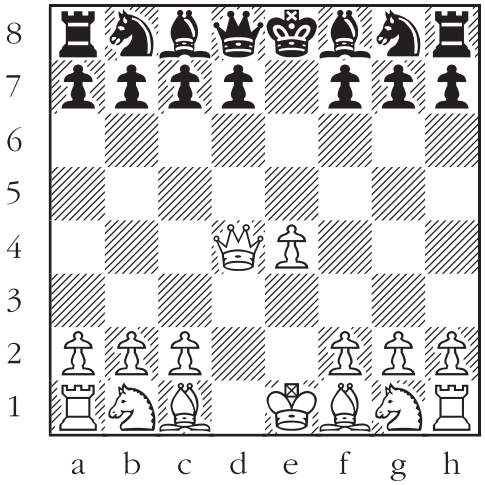
White to play after 3...♕c5?

Now 4 ♘a4? is clearly another AWL, but it's *not* winning a tempo! In fact, we could consider 4 ♘a4 to be *losing* a tempo since the knight will be going to an inferior square while the black queen will be going to an acceptable square, say 4...♕a5.

But White did have a different AWL that *would* win a tempo. Do you see it? Of course, it is **4 d4**, which is a good developing move, and now the black queen will have to move again, and White is gaining more time.

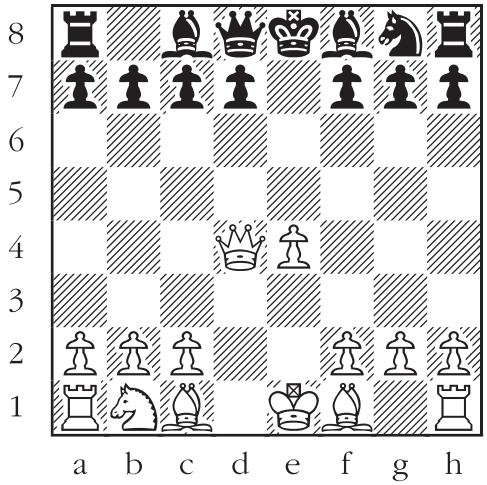
To further illustrate this point, let's consider two similar-looking move sequences: 1 e4 e5 2 d4 exd4 3 ♕xd4 and 1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 exd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘xd4 5 ♕xd4.

The first line is the rare Center Game. Why is it rare for White to play this?



Black to play after 3 ♕xd4

Answer: White does not wish to expose his queen to the AWL 3...♘c6. But if so, why is the second sequence 1 e4 e5 2 ♘f3 ♘c6 3 d4 exd4 4 ♘xd4 ♘xd4 5 ♕xd4 also rare, but in this case avoided by Black? Because 4...♘xd4(?) 5 ♕xd4 also attracts the queen to the center, but now there is no good AWL to win a tempo:



Black to play after 5 ♕xd4

The missing knights make all the difference. In the previous diagram Black has 3...♘c6, but in the current diagram the only AWL to attack the queen is 5...c5, a move I see beginners make sometimes, but it doesn't 'win a tempo' because moving the pawn to c5 is not only not a developing move, it actually has some negative consequences as it both blocks Black's dark-squared bishop, makes the d-pawn somewhat backward, and weakens the squares d5 and d6.

Therefore, in the previous diagram where White played 1 e4 e5 2 d4 exd4 3 ♕xd4 ♘c6 Black is doing well, whereas in the last diagram after 4...♘xd4(?) 5 ♕xd4 White's queen is well-placed in the center (not developing it 'too soon'!), and thus it is White that is doing better than normal.

Because AWL moves are more forcing than most other types of threats, it makes sense to prioritize them when looking for dangerous moves (e.g. checks, captures, and threats of consequence) for both attacking ideas on offense and safety issues, primarily when determining if your own moves are safe...