Ten Tips To Winning Chess

By International Grandmaster

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Getting Started

Chess is a game of strategy and tactics. Each player commands an army of 16 chessmen—pawns and other pieces (the king, queen, bishops, knights, and rooks).

A well-played chess game has three stages. In the opening, the players bring out their forces in preparation for combat. The middlegame begins as the players maneuver for position and carry out attacks and counterattacks. The final stage is the endgame when, with fewer pawns and pieces left on the board, it is safer for the kings to come out and join the final battle.

As play proceeds, each player will capture some of the opponent's men; often, the capturing pieces are immediately recaptured. As long as the piece a player gives up is generally equal to the piece he gets in return, we say the players are exchanging. If you unintentionally place a piece where it can be captured without getting a piece of equal value in return, we say that you put that piece en prise. (This is a French term that literally means "in take.") Sometimes a player may place a piece en prise in order to trick an opponent. If the opponent captures the offered man, it may leave him open to attack.

You're Ready to Go!

It's time for you to take a look at these ten tips to help you learn some simple ways to win more games:

1. Look at your opponent's move.
2. Make the best possible move.
3. Have a plan.
4. Know what the pieces are worth.
5. Develop quickly and well.
6. Control the center.
7. Keep your king safe.
8. Know when to trade pieces.
9. Think about the endgame.
10. Always be alert.

Bonus: There is a Glossary starting on page 13. Now, don't rush. Take your time and be sure to study the examples carefully. Then go out and practice—and have some fun!
1. Look at your opponent's move!

Every time your opponent makes a move, you should stop and think: Why was that move chosen? Is a piece in danger? Are there any other threats I should watch out for? What sort of plan does my opponent have in mind?

Only by defending against your opponent's threats will you be able to successfully carry out your own strategies. Once you figure out what your opponent is attempting to do, you can play to nip those plans in the bud.

Example A

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Black to move

Pretend you're playing black in this position. White has just moved his queen to f3. What's the threat? How should you move to meet his threat?

2. Make the best possible move.

When you are considering a move, ask yourself these questions:

a. Will the piece I'm moving go to a better square than the one it's on now?
b. Can I improve my position even more by increasing the effectiveness of a different piece?
c. Does this move help to defend against my opponent's threats?
d. Will the piece I move be safe on its new square?
   i. If it's a pawn, consider: Can I keep it protected from attack?
   ii. If it's another piece, consider: Can the enemy drive it away, thus making me lose valuable time?

Even if your intended move has good points, it may not be the best move at that moment. Emanuel Lasker, a former world champion, said: "When you see a good move, wait---look for a better one!"
Following this advice is bound to improve your chess.
You're white in this position. Black has just played cxd4 and is temporarily a pawn ahead. What's the best move you can make? Don't be too hasty!

**Answer** pg. 11

### 3. Have a plan.

If you threaten something here in one move, something over there in the next move, and so forth, your opponent will have an easy time defending. Your pieces have to work together to be effective. Just imagine each instrument in an orchestra playing a different tune!

When you develop a plan, your men can work in harmony. For example, you might plan to attack your opponent's king; one piece alone probably wouldn't be able to do much, but the combined strength of several pieces makes a powerful attacking force. Another plan could be taking control of all the squares in a particular area of the board.

The chess men are your "team"; to be a good "coach," you have to use all of their strengths together.
Example C

4. Know what the pieces are worth.

When you are considering giving up some of your pieces for some of your opponent's, you should think about the values of the men, and not just how many each player possesses. The player whose men add up to a greater value will usually have the advantage. So a crucial step in making decisions is to add up the material, or value, of each player's men.

The pawn is the least valuable piece, so it is a convenient unit of measure. It moves slowly, and can never go backward.

Knights and bishops are approximately equal, worth about three pawns each. The knight is the only piece that can jump over other men. The bishops are speedier, but each one can reach only half the squares.

A rook moves quickly and can reach every square; its value is five pawns. A combination of two minor pieces (knights and bishops) can often subdue a rook.

A queen is worth nine pawns, almost as much as two rooks. It can move to the greatest number of squares in most positions.

The king can be a valuable fighter, too, but we do not evaluate its strength because it cannot be traded.
Example D

Black to move

Here's a harder problem that requires you to use several of the tips you've read about so far. Pretend you're playing black in this position. First of all, what is white's threat? Second, what move should you make to meet this threat? Finally, if white went ahead with his "threat" even after you move, what would be the result?

Answer pg. 11

Example E

We know that a knight and a bishop are usually worth about the same. Which would you say is stronger in this position?

Answer pg. 12
6

White to move

Example F

White is about to make a move here. Is the black knight strong or weak? Would it be better or worse to have a bishop on that square?

Answer pg. 12

5. Develop quickly and well.

Time is a very important element of chess. The player whose men are ready for action sooner will be able to control the course of the game. If you want to be that player, you have to develop your men efficiently to powerful posts.

Many inexperienced players like to move a lot of pawns at the beginning of the game to control space on the chessboard. But you can't win with pawns alone! Since knights, bishops, rooks, and queens can move farther than pawns and threaten more distant targets, it's a good idea to bring them out soon, after you've moved enough pawns to guarantee that your stronger pieces won't be chased back by your opponent's pawns. After all the other pieces are developed, it's easier to see what pawns you should move to fit in with your plans.

It's tempting to bring the queen out very early, because it's the most powerful piece. But your opponent can chase your queen back by threatening it with less valuable pieces. Look at Example A: after 1. . . . Nf6, black threatens to drive the white queen away with either 2. . . . Nd4 or 2. . . . d6 and 3. . . . Bg4.

Instead of just moving pieces out, try to determine the best square for each piece and bring it there in as few moves as possible. This may save you from wasting moves later in the game.

6. Control the center.

In many cases, the person who controls the four squares at the center of the board will have the better game. There are simple reasons for this.
First, a piece in the center controls more of the board than one that is somewhere else. As an example: place one knight on a center square and another in one of the corners of the board. The knight in the center can move to eight different squares, while the "cornered" one only has two possible moves!

Second, control of the center provides an avenue for your pieces to travel from one side of the board to the other. To move a piece across the board, you will often have to take it through the center. If your pieces can get to the other side faster than your opponent's pieces, you will often be able to mount a successful attack there before he can bring over enough pieces to defend.

Example G

Each player has moved two knights and two pawns. Which side has better control of the center? Answer pg. 12

Example H

Once again, think carefully: Which side stands better in the center? Why? Answer pg. 12

7. Keep your king safe.
Everyone knows that the object of the game is to checkmate the opponent’s king. But sometimes a player thinks about his own plans so much that he forgets that his opponent is also king hunting!

It’s generally a good idea to place your king in a safe place by castling early in the game. Once you’ve castled, you should be very careful about advancing the pawns near your king. They are like bodyguards; the farther away they go, the easier it is for your opponent’s pieces to get close to your king. (For this reason, it’s often good to try to force your opponent to move the pawns near his king.)

Example 1

We’ve learned many important objectives: advantage in material, better development, control of the center, and now king safety. Which of these is the most important?  

Answer pg. 12

8. Know when to trade pieces.

The best time to trade men is when you can capture men worth more than the ones you will be giving up, which is called “winning material.” But the opportunity to do this may not arise if your opponent is very careful.

Since you will probably have many chances to exchange men on an "even" basis, it's useful to know when you should or shouldn't do this. There are several important considerations.

As a general rule, if you have the initiative (your pieces are better developed, and you're controlling the game), try not to exchange men unless it increases your advantage in some clear way. The fewer men each player has, the weaker the attacking player's threats become, and the easier it is for the defending side to meet these threats.

Another time not to trade pieces is when your opponent has a cramped position with little space for the pieces to maneuver. It's tough to move a lot of pieces around in a cramped position, but easier to move just a few.

One sort of advantage you can often gain by trading pieces is a weakening of your opponent’s pawn structure. If, for example, you can capture with a piece that your opponent can only recapture in a way that will give him doubled pawns it will often be to your advantage to make that trade.

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The player who is ahead in material will usually benefit from trades. It's sort of like basketball or soccer; five players will sometimes have trouble scoring against four opposing players, but take away three from each side and the stronger team will find it easier to score with two players against one.

So, to summarize: It's usually good to trade pieces if your opponent has the initiative, if you have a cramped position, if you can weaken your opponent's pawn structure, or if you are ahead in material. There are exceptions, of course, but following these rules should bring you considerable success.

9. Think about the endgame.

From the time the game begins, you should remember that every move you make may affect your chances in the endgame. For instance, in the earlier parts of the game, a knight and a bishop are about equally powerful. Toward the end of the game, though, when there are fewer men in the way, the bishop can exert its influence in all parts of the board at once, while the knight still takes a long time to get anywhere. So before you trade a bishop for a knight, think not just about the next few moves but also about the endgame.

Pawn structure is crucial in the endgame. When you capture one of your opponent's men with a pawn, you'll often create an open file that will help your rooks and queen to reach your opponent's side of the board, but you may also get doubled pawns. Since doubled pawns cannot defend each other, they are liability in the endgame. If your opponent survives the middlegame, you may have an uphill fight later.

Concentrate on your immediate plans, as well as your opponent's---but always keep the endgame in mind!

Example J

From the very first moves of the game, it's important to have a good pawn formation. How would you assess white's pawn structure in this position?  

Answer pg. 12
In the endgame, it's common to see a pawn run to the end of the board and promoted to a queen. So, pawns are a great thing to hang on to. Study this diagram. Who has the "healthier" pawns, white or black?

**Example K**

![Chess Diagram](image)

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10. Always be alert.

There is a tendency for people to relax once they have reached a good position or to give up hope if their position is very bad. These attitudes are natural, but both lead to bad results.

Many players—even world champions—have achieved winning positions, only to lose because they relaxed too soon. Even the best position won't win by itself; you have to give it some help! In almost any position, the "losing" player will still be able to make threats. The "winning" player has to be alert enough to prevent these positions.

Advice: If you have a better position, watch out! One careless move could throw away your hard-won advantage. Even as you're carrying out your winning plans, you must watch out for your opponent's threats.

Conversely, if you have a worse position, don't give up! Keep making strong moves, and try to complicate the position as much as possible. If your opponent slips, you may get the chance to make a comeback. Remember: Where there's life, there's hope.

So be alert all the time, no matter what the position is like. A little bit of extra care can pay off in a big way.
Example L

Pretend that you're the general of the black army in the position shown above. You have, as you can see, an easily won game—since you are four pawns ahead. But white has just moved his knight to e5. This looks like a silly move, since you could capture this knight with your own knight or with your queen.

But look again. Don't relax because you're winning too easily! If you captured white's knight with your knight, what would be his best (and surprising) move?

**Answer** pg. 13

**Answers**

**Example A:**
White is threatening to play Qxf7 checkmate! Black defends best by moving 1... Nf6. This move meets the threat and develops the knight to a good square.

**Example B:**
White can win his pawn back immediately with a move like 1. Nbxd4. But did you look for a better move? By playing 1. Nc7+, you can win black's queen!

**Example C:**
One good plan for white here would be an attack on black's king. Once he has decided to do this, white should figure out how to bring his pieces to that area of the board. After 1. f4, for example, white can bring his rook to f3 and then to g3 or h3, where it would exert pressure around black's king.

**Example D:**
White's threat here is to play Nxf7, with a double attack on black's queen and rook. Black should simply castle (0-0). Now if white continues with his "threat," black merely captures the knight and the bishop. That continuation would be
1. . . 0-0 2. Nxf7 Rxf7 3. Bxf7+ Kxf7

You can see that white has traded bishop and knight for black's rook and pawn. That's about an even exchange, except—in the early part of the game especially—these two pieces are often handier than the rook. Note that white has exchanged his only developed pieces, while black has a bishop and two knights ready to attack.

**Example E:**
Here is an example where a knight is better than a bishop. The bishop is trapped behind its own pawns, while the knight is free to hop in and out of black's position. It will be easy to maneuver the knight to f6, and if black defends the pawn at h7 with his king, white's king will enter black's position by way of c5 or e5, with decisive effect.

**Example F:**
The tables turn; black's knight moves so slowly that after 1. h6, the pawn cannot be prevented from reaching the eighth rank and being promoted. If black has a bishop on b6 instead of the knight, he could answer 1. h6 with 1. . . . Bd4+, when the bishop would control the crucial square h8.

**Example G:**
It is easy to see that white has control of the center in this position. His pawns occupy center squares, while black's pawns are not yet involved in the struggle. Note how easy it will be for white to develop his bishops to squares that help control the center, while black's bishops are hemmed in by his own pawns.

**Example H:**
There, too, white has more central control and a freer game. The pawn at e4 attacks two squares on black's half of the board and helps control d5, preventing the pawn on d6 from advancing while providing protection in the event that white plays Nd5. White can put a rook on d1 later to put pressure on the d-file.

**Example I:**
This example shows why king safety is the most important factor. Black is ahead in material by a bishop and a pawn, has control of the center, and has more pieces developed, but this is all worthless because he is unable to prevent white from playing Qxh7, checkmate!

**Example J:**
White has doubled pawns on the e-file, normally a disadvantage. Here, though, the pawn on e3 controls the vital squares d4 and f4. Also, white can mount an attack by putting his rooks and queen on the f-file, which is no longer blocked by one of his pawns.

These doubled pawns could turn out to be weak in the endgame. Therefore, white should avoid unnecessary exchanges and concentrate on winning in the middlegame.

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Example K:
Black has the "healthier" set of pawns here, since white has doubled pawns on both the a- and c-files. Such pawns cannot protect each other. Also, notice that the trailing or "caboose" pawn must stay forever behind his leader. A set of doubled pawns are worth little more than one pawn.

Example L:
Did you get this one? It's a toughie. As black in this superior position, if you capture white's knight on e5 with your knight (1 . . . Nxe5) instead of your queen (1 . . . Qxe5), then white should move 2. Qf2+!

As you can see, this forces black's queen to capture white's queen, placing the white king in stalemate. The game would be a draw!

So stay alert. This type of surprising sacrifice can happen surprisingly often!

Glossary

**Center**: The four squares in the middle of the board.

**Development**: The process of moving pieces from their original squares to positions where they can better aid the player's plans.

**Doubled Pawns**: Two pawns of the same color both on the same file. This is generally considered a disadvantage because the pawns cannot defend each other.

**Endgame**: Also called "ending," it is the third and final phase of the game, in which each player has relatively few pieces remaining. The promotion of pawns is a common goal in the endgame.

**File**: A vertical (up and down) row of squares. The players' kings start the game on the same file.

**Initiative**: Control of the game, usually due to better placement of men and easier access to weaknesses in the opponent's position.

**Material**: The chess pieces. The player whose remaining pieces are of greater value is said to have a "material advantage."

**Middlegame**: The second phase of the game, in which development of the pieces has mostly been completed and many pieces are captured or traded as the players pursue their plans.

**Opening**: The first phase of the game, in which players concentrate on development, gaining room for their pieces to maneuver, and on bringing their kings to safety.

**Promotion**: When a pawn reaches the eighth (last) rank, the player "promotes" it to his choice of a queen, rook, bishop, or knight.

**Rank**: A horizontal (left to right) row of squares. The pawns start the game on each player's second rank.