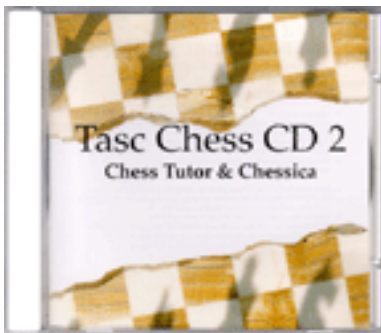




C O L U M N I S T S

Novice Nook

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The Six Common Chess States

California, New York, Texas, ... No, not those type of states!

In his great (and advanced) book *Secrets of Grandmaster Endings*, GM Andrew Soltis correctly notes that many weaker players don't play endgames well because they are not fully aware that in the endgame the "guidelines" have changed; they continue to follow guidelines that make sense in the middlegame but not in the endgame. Examples include centralization of the King (usually good in the endgame but disastrous in the middlegame), use of tempos (crucial not to waste them earlier but sometimes useful to lose one or more in the endgame) or space (useful in the middlegame and often meaningless in the endgame), etc. In this sense the middlegame and the endgame can be thought of as different game "states." Those chess states are also chronological "stages" of the game, but as you will quickly see below, not all game states have to be chronological stages.

I would like to extend Andy's idea to not just those two game states, but the entire game. There are many guidelines that are only used in a very specific game state, such as "play a minority pawn attack with the following pawn formation" or "in the following situations a Knight is often better than a Bishop." However, it seems to me that there are primarily six commonly occurring game states, each with their own set of guidelines:

- 1. Opening
- 2. Endgame
- 3. Castling on opposite sides with queens still on the board
- 4. Middlegames with a closed, fixed center
- 5. Positions where one player is winning easily (this is usually the dominant state even if another state exists)
- 6. Most other positions, especially other middlegames with an open center

If a player learns to recognize these states, understands why each state has special considerations, and learns specific methods of conducting a game when in a state, he is well on his way toward achieving better planning and making more logical moves. While there are some

guidelines that are more or less true at all times, such as “don’t give up the material for no compensation” or “If you see a good move, look for a better one,” many guidelines change dramatically from one state to another.

There are other (primarily more specific) states, but being aware of these six should suffice to cover most general situations. Let us consider each of the common states, providing its key aspects and guidelines:

1. The Opening – From the start of the game until all your pieces are mobilized for middlegame action.

While most students know what the opening guidelines are supposed to be, many weaker players wish to play the opening like State 6: Other middlegames with an open center (they may also treat any of the other five states this way, sometimes with disastrous consequences – hence this article). Under certain conditions this works, but most of the time they end up with a “premature attack” and/or behind in development. The key aspects of the opening are:

A) Efficient development – while many GM’s often move pieces twice or delay castling, they understand these exceptions very well. Beginners and intermediates would be better off just mobilizing their entire armies as quickly as possible, using “Move every piece once before you move any piece twice, unless it wins material or prevents losing material.” Even some intermediate players would be a lot better in this phase if they learned to mobilize their Rooks before starting “action.”

B) Castle your king into safety – it is the only move that “gains” a tempo by developing two pieces at once, as opposed to beginners that think castling “loses” a tempo for the (non-existent) attack.

C) Use your pieces to try to control (or neutralize your opponent’s control of) the center.

D) Often consider developing slow pieces (Knights) before fast pieces.

E) Make moves that you must play before moves which leave you choices – it is more flexible.

F) Don’t take inordinate amounts of time to play opening moves – save your time for later positions that are much more critical (but never play quickly “just to see what happens”).

2. The Endgame – The part of the game where the King can take an active part.

A) Often trying to do something too fast is wrong – repeating the position or outright loss of tempo may even be beneficial.

B) The King must go out and fight – King safety is still important, but the King is more often safe in the fight!

C) The concept of space is often useless, except possibly for pawns threatening to promote. It is usually easy for an opponent's forces to get "behind" advanced pawns and therefore the space advantage in the middlegame turns into vulnerability in the endgame.

D) Pawn structure can be thought of differently in the deep endgame. That weak isolated pawn in the middlegame may be the passed winner in the endgame.

E) Centralization is important sometimes, but "uncentralized" concepts, such as having the "outside" passed pawn, may be the key to victory. A centralized pawn formation can be inferior to the "outside" pawn formation that causes a King to go out of its way to stop.

F) Faster pieces gain more power as the board is cleared, so unless all the pieces are in one area, Knights may become relatively weaker.

G) For the player who is ahead, keeping mating material (such as a final pawn) may become important. So in many cases the Bishop and Knight, which are worth more than 3 pawns in the opening, may become worth much less if few pawns remain on the board.

3. Castling opposite sides with Queens still on the board

This is the most violent type of middlegame. The rules of engagement change; in some cases they are similar to the rarer state where the enemy King is exposed in the Opening (not discussed in this article):

A) You throw the kitchen sink (often led by pawns, but not always) at the enemy King. Whoever gets their first usually wins.

B) Material is less important here than in any other state (endgames are second because of the changing concept of material – see 2G). Often it is helpful to lose a pawn in front of the enemy King, opening files for Rooks and Queens. And piece sacrifices to get to the enemy King are much more likely to be effective.

C) Keeping Queens on the board is a big help to the one whose attack is faster.

D) Pawn moves in front of your King that do not blockade the pawn structure can be disastrous; pawn moves that blockade the pawn structure in front of your King are often wonderful.

4. Middlegames with a closed, fixed center (or at least very stable, such as possibly a Stonewall)

A) This is the one that has the famous guideline, “Look how the center (d and e-pawns) are pointing: If they point toward the kingside, you should expand and attack there; similarly, if they point to the queenside, then queenside action is required.

B) Often in games like this you can “lose” one side of the board and win another. If you win the side of the board with the enemy King, that is usually enough! For example, in the famous Spassky-Geller match in 1968, Spassky played the Closed Sicilian and attacked on the Kingside; Geller on the Queenside. Geller “won” the Queenside, usually first, but still lost when Spassky won the Kingside, where Geller had castled. The story goes that Geller said afterwards, “I did what I was supposed to – I attacked Queenside” and a kibitzer replied, “Yes, but the King is more important!”

C) In closed positions tempos are less crucial. This allows action like extensive knight maneuvers. Due to the closed structure, the Knights may be relatively more effective than the Bishops.

D) Opening files via pawn “break” moves are often crucial to provide mobility for Rooks. The player who can get his Rooks into the action first usually has a big advantage.

5. Positions where one player is winning easily (a condition overriding all other states; for example an opening where one player is winning easily needs to incorporate the guidelines below, possibly even in priority to normal opening guidelines)

What this means varies according to the strength of the players. For intermediate tournament players this may mean being up the exchange or up a piece (+1.75 to +3.25 pawn advantage) with no compensation for his opponent, while weaker players may have to be up a piece or a Rook (+3.25 to +5). This situation is not covered in most books because good players often resign when playing other good players who know how to win, but many beginning and intermediate players are often baffled as to the correct strategy because they don't read about it very much! I cover this with a chapter in my book *Everyone's Second Chess Book*, but a summary is:

A) The player ahead should "Think Defense First!" He should NOT play passively, though. He can play as aggressive as he wishes (with his extra material) so long as he first checks to make sure his candidate move does not let his opponent back into the game by allowing a tactic, unnecessary complications, etc.

B) Speaking of complications, the player ahead should avoid them at all costs unless he is *extremely* sure of himself. Complications favor the player who is losing, who has nothing to lose. For example, the player who is winning should try to castle on the same side, to avoid more complicated games. As another example, if the player who is winning has a piece attacked, he usually should just move it to safety; the worst thing he can usually do is counterattack, since the counterattacked piece may move and attack a second piece, and the player ahead may be unable to defend both attacks. Of course really good players counterattack all the time, but they don't ever lose games up a clear piece for nothing, either, because they know how! You have to learn how to crawl before you learn how to walk, and you have to learn how to walk before you learn how to run. When winning by a large amount, keep the game simple!

C) All things being even, the player ahead should trade pieces. Generally you are not trying to trade pawns, but don't go out of your way to avoid pawn exchanges so long as you still have a few pawns left to promote after you do. Progress in a chess game is often measured by how many pieces are left, just as progress in a football game is measured by time and in a baseball game by outs. If you trade, you both get closer to the end and simultaneously rid

your opponent of pieces that may be used to regain material. The opponent's Queen you could have traded off would not have come back to make that double attack (or mate!) that put him back in the game! Most endgames up a piece are won even with a pawn or two left, and most common endgames up a healthy pawn with no pieces left are won if there the player up a pawn has two or pawns.

D) The player who is ahead can afford to make “luft” and do other things to avoid surprise mates. He does not have to win now; he just has to ensure that his opponent cannot win at all. You don't get extra points for winning quickly – in fact, some won positions on move 20 are easily reach positions where your opponent should resign in 40 moves but almost impossible to get to such a position in 30, so be patient!

E) The player who is winning should not become materialistic and try to get further ahead until all his major forces are deployed. Just as a hockey team on the power play naturally uses their extra man, the whole idea of being ahead is that you need to deploy all your pieces to make that extra force felt. Not using all your pieces when you are ahead is just silly. I have often seen players up a piece use their Queen to go around picking off pawns while their Rooks never move. This is like a football team up two touchdowns in the fourth quarter throwing long bombs instead of trying to run the clock out...

F) The “guidelines” you know so well for other states are often relatively worthless. For example, if you are up a piece and can trade Queens, it does not matter so much if the trade isolates or doubles your pawns, or even prevents you from castling. Those otherwise important issues are relatively meaningless if you are up a piece! For example, a doubled pawn might be worth 80% of a normal pawn in a given position, but that loss of 0.2 pawns is small compared to the +3.25 pawn lead you have with a piece, and taking the Queens off the board usually far outweighs the relatively insignificant -0.2 pawns.

6) All other positions, especially middlegames with relatively open centers – This is the “plurality” of positions – the ones that occur the most often. Most of the guidelines you know and read about are about usually apply best to these wide-ranging positions, so my “special” notes below are few.

A) Weak pawn structures are often more of a liability, since they can be easily accessed by the enemy and can become vulnerable.

B) Piece values are more towards the norm.

C) Trades or pawn maneuvers can change the state from this state to one of the others, so you have to be mentally ready to shift gears, *à la* Soltis, etc.

Game State Conclusion: Recognizing these states and understanding the underlying principles and guidelines can help put you on the correct path towards better planning and candidate move selection. After all, it was World Champion Alexander Alekhine who said something like, “The idea is not to find the correct move, but to find the correct plan and then the move which best implements it.” I agree with modern theorists who think this emphasis on “general planning” may be a little too strong (not pragmatic enough), but it remains a legitimate concept.

The Four Levels of Tactics

In an earlier Novice Nook I listed the four levels of tactics with only a brief discussion. Understanding these levels and how to study them is so important I thought I would re-visit the idea.

First, it is important to note that *the science of chess piece safety is called tactics!* Sometimes even experienced players fail to recognize this connection. Here are my four levels, from the most basic to the most complex:

- 1. En-prise
- 2. Counting
- 3. Single-Motif
- 4. Combinations (non-sacrificial and sacrificial)

En-prise means that a piece is attacked but is not guarded. Beginners often have trouble recognizing not only when they are putting a piece en-prise, but also when their opponent is leaving one en-prise since they concentrate more on their possibilities than their opponent's. At a slightly more advanced level, near-beginners still have trouble determining when a discovered attack causes a piece to be en-prise.

Counting takes place when a piece is both attacked and defended on a square. The question is whether the piece is safe, i.e., is there ANY forcible sequence of captures on that square that would leave you behind in material? Usually counting is fairly straightforward, but

sometimes it can actually be tricky. I included a section on counting in my *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book* because it is so important and so poorly covered in many beginner's books.

Single-motif tactics are the pure tactical maneuvers that enable a player to win material, achieve a mate, or possibly a forced draw from an inferior-looking position (not strictly "safety", but classified this way because checkmate is really the ultimate King safety tactic). Examples of tactical motifs are double attacks (forks for Knights and pawns), discovered attacks (and discovered checks), pins, skewers, removal of the guard, back-rank mates, etc.

I believe combinations are so named because they combine tactical motifs. So a combination might be to start with a pin, and if the opponent tries to save material, you can achieve a back-rank mate. Or you can start with a skewer, but when the opponent tries to counterattack, you end up with a double attack.

Many famous combinations involve sacrifice of material for eventual greater gain, so some theoreticians have deemed that a combination, by definition, requires a sacrifice. However, grammatically the idea of "combining" motifs, or elements, seems to make more sense. There is no doubt, however, that a high percentage of combinations (and even single motif tactics), including most of the beautiful ones, involve one or more sacrifices. So a reasonable compromise would be to say that there are five levels of tactics, with the highest level, combinations, divided into "basic" combinations, which involve multiple motifs without sacrifice, while "advanced" combinations include sacrifice.

Players need to study and learn tactics in increasing order of complexity. Especially important is the observation that the ability to play combinations in a timed game is highly dependent upon the player's ability to recognize the basic, underlying motifs accurately and extremely quickly. This has led myself and others to conclude that rather than studying individual motifs "once-over" and then proceeding to more difficult combinations, it is more study-efficient to learn individual motifs extremely well by repetition (similar to learning multiplication tables) so that the player has the possibility of recognizing *both the possibility and the solution* to more complex combinations. An earlier *Novice Nook* column on The Seeds of Tactical Destruction discussed the bases for recognizing the existence of combination *possibilities*, and many combination books discuss learning how to recognize the *solution*, should it exist. As mentioned in earlier *Novice Nooks*, the big differences between doing problems and playing a real game are the time element and, more importantly, the possibility that the combination may not exist.

Thinking about the above topics has leads to my conclusion that in

chess the big three subjects to emphasize in instructing chess are Piece Safety, Time Management, and Piece Activity. Next month's article will discuss how you can combine these so that your chess learning can focus on areas that will provide maximum benefit. If you want to prepare for this, review my archived [ChessCafe.com](#) articles "Time Management" and "The Secrets of Real Chess", which was voted runner-up for best Web Article of 2000 by the Chess Journalists of America.

Tip of the Month: Many of my students like to primarily play fast chess on the Internet and want to improve their speed play. One thing that usually helps them is learning better "speed" time management, but *the best way to improve your fast chess is to play lots of slow chess, especially against somewhat superior opposition!* Only slow chess teaches you how to think, how to recognize and minimize mistakes, and "burns in" pattern recognition. Want proof? All the best fast players in the world are also the best "slow" players, and they primarily got that way by becoming great slow players!

Reader Question:

"In last month's column you said 'With practice, this kind of safety check should not take more than a few seconds; good players do it "naturally" in a fraction of a second.' One of my problems is that my safety check probably takes me closer to a minute (and I still miss things), which is probably why I sometimes subconsciously neglect it. When I remember to be really careful, I try to use the 'move-counting' technique and that takes me time. Are there specific things that can be done to improve the ability to execute a safety check? If someone asks how to get better at tactics, there is an answer like, "work the Bain book over and over until you have instant recognition of the positions". Is there anything like that for sanity checks and board vision in general?"

Answer: There is a difference between a safety check and a sanity check.

A *safety check* is when you are considering a candidate move, you have to first check to see if it loses material before you can decide how (otherwise) good it is. So if you put a piece where it can just be taken, or is attacked more than it is defended, or is subject to a double attack, etc. it is not safe, and that candidate move can be eliminated.

A *sanity check* is done after you have decided which move to make but before you actually make it. That is when you write your move on your scoresheet (or blink your eyes your eyes, etc.), step back, and take a fresh look at the position for a very short while to make sure the move is not crazy - the piece you are going to move is safe, you are not leaving your Queen en prise, there is no back-rank mate, etc. The

move should be physically made only after passing your sanity check.

Both of these “checks” involve analysis for possible material loss. The capability to do this quickly is a function of a lot of things, like the speed at which you can recognize single motif tactics and the Seeds of Tactical Destruction (see my earlier [ChessCafe.com](#) article by that name). This is also a main reason why developing “board vision” is so important. You get quicker board vision with 1) more slow-game experience, 2) Doing single tactical motif problems (as in John Bain’s or Al Wollum's books) until you can do them almost instantly, and 3) also doing board vision problems like those I suggest in my *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book* or in Michael de la Maza's award winning [ChessCafe.com](#) article “400 Points in 400 Days”.

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