Back to Basics:

Tactics

by

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Table of Contents

Introduction

In chess, if you capture each of your opponent's pieces, winning should be easy. But if you lose all of your pieces, you can't win! Even if you just get ahead by a small amount of material, your chances of winning soar. The way to win your opponent's pieces is through the use of *tactics*. This book is an introduction to the various kinds of basic tactics. I try to comprehensively cover the subject with instructional material, examples, and problems of all types. There are about 500 examples ranging from *too easy* to *very difficult*! Oh, and by the way, tactics are usually why most people find chess fun! I hope this book greatly enhances your enjoyment learning about – and benefiting from – the recurring patterns of tactics.

It does not matter who gets the advantage out of the opening, if one of the players is likely to lose a piece to a simple tactic in the middlegame. Losing a piece from an advantageous position will almost always result in a lost position. So study tactics, not openings, until you almost never lose pieces to simple tactical motifs.

The Importance of Tactics

Chess games are generally won in one of two ways:

(1) Attrition, where one side gets a material advantage and then uses good "technique" to trade down into an easily won endgame; or

(2) A direct mating attack on the opponent's king.

Whichever way the game is won, it's usually a tactic that creates the material advantage or leads to the mating attack. *Of all the skills in chess, the one that correlates highest with how good you are is your tactical ability. Especially among beginning and intermediate players, the one who is the better tactical player almost always wins.* So, until you are fairly proficient, it makes sense to concentrate more on tactics than on any other part of the game. Hence, learning many of the particulars about positional play won't help you if you find yourself overlooking tactics and losing pieces.

Now you might say, "I didn't find that tactic – my opponent just blundered." But what is the very definition of a blunder if it is not to allow some simple tactic? For example, if he places a piece where you can win it with a simple tactic, that is certainly a blunder, but you still had to find the tactic. Even if he just puts a piece where you can capture it outright (this is called putting it *en prise*), then in a trivial sense he has made a tactical mistake (see Appendix A, The Levels of Tactics). Yet, to benefit from his error, you still have to see that you can win that piece.

In his book *Rapid Chess Improvement*, Michael de la Maza suggests that a player might be able to reach the expert level just from the intense study of tactics. I learned from the Russians that

repetitive study of basic tactics is probably *the single most important thing* any beginner can do to improve at chess. This book will help you do that!

Defining Tactics

There are two good definitions of chess tactics:

1. Tactics – "The science of piece safety"

2. Tactics – "Forced maneuvers leading to the gain of material or checkmate." One might add forcing a draw from an otherwise inferior position.

The second definition is more common, and might be extended to include forced maneuvers for other gains, such as exposing the enemy king or ruining the opponent's pawn structure.

No matter what the definition, the intention is clear: to take advantage of the offense, to take advantage of the initiative, to force some advantage. Interestingly, when studying tactics, it is equally important to use the same information to not let the opponent undertake those same tactics against you. So in a very real sense, playing a tactic is only equally effective to preventing that same tactic. If you are one of those players who only studies tactics to find ways you can win, you will remain a weak player until you can use those same skills defensively, to prevent your opponent's tactics. It's nonsensical to only look for tactics for yourself and then let your opponent get a winning advantage. It is much harder to win when you are down material!

A tactical *motif* is a specific idea. When motifs are combined in a tactic, it is called a combination. This book contains mostly single motif problems and elementary combinations. Examples of motifs (discussed at length in Chapter 2) are pins, skewers, removal-of-theguard, and double attacks.

Solving Problems vs. Finding Tactics in Games

One of the most important things to know about studying tactics is that you are looking at examples and problems that have requirements and solutions such as:

1. "White (or Black) to Play and Win" – this means the side to play, assuming best defense, can force a position that is theoretically winning. In other words, the position becomes such that if two very good players were playing, the player to move could win fairly easily from that position.

2. "White (or Black) to Play and Mate" – the side to play can force checkmate, although the number of moves it will take is not specified. This is a forcing sequence of moves that leads to an unstoppable checkmate.

3. "White (or Black) to Play and Mate in N Moves" – in this kind of problem you must force mate in a specific number of moves. Usually finding a mate in more than the required number is very easy, so finding the mate in only N moves is the challenge.

4. "White (or Black) to Play and Draw" – the side to move can force a draw,

usually from a position that is otherwise inferior or lost. The draw is often because of:

(A) Stalemate – the side to move is not in check and has no legal moves with any of his pieces.

(B) Threefold Repetition of Position – the position (not the moves) can be repeated three times with the same player to move. And example of this might be a "perpetual check" where the side that wishes to draw can continuously check the opposing king until the threefold repetition is reached.

(C) Lack of Mating Material – neither side has enough material to checkmate. For example, a king against a king; a king against a king and bishop; a king against a king and knight; or a king against a king and two knights (in this case checkmate is possible, but not unavoidable).

In problems, the requirements are stated, the author ensures that the solutions are in place, and he provides the correct answers. Unfortunately, this is not the way real chess is played! In a real game, no one stands behind your opponent and holds up a sign saying, "White to Play and Win!" or "Black to Play and Mate in Two." In fact, during a game your thinking process is inherently different because:

1. *In a problem you are looking for the intended solution*. If you don't find it using one move, then you keep searching until you do.

2. *In a game,* instead of looking for a given requirement, *you are trying to find the best move*. If you are unaware that a tactic exists, then your "best" move may miss the tactic or allow your opponent's tactic.

So it's very important to learn to recognize potential tactics. Otherwise you may waste time each move looking for tactics that don't exist. To practice this skill, I have included Chapter 7, *The Seeds of Tactical Destruction*, and Chapter 8, *Is There a Win?*.

Setting Up Tactics for Future Moves

Tactics don't just happen! They flow from superior positions. So if you don't have a tactic, it's best to follow good general guidelines and make your pieces and pawns safe, strong, and active.

Instead of trying to play good moves and create a superior position, many weaker players try to set "traps" by playing poor moves in the hope that their opponent will play an equally poor response that allows a tactic. Such an approach will backfire against better opponents, who will take advantage of your bad moves.

In chess, a "threat" is a move that can do something positive on your *next move* if it's not parried by your opponent. Without going into detail, you should only make a threat when:

1. It cannot be met.
2. You don't improve your opponent's position in meeting your threat.
3. If you are dead lost and have nothing to lose.

So don't get into the habit of making tactical threats that are easily repulsed, thereby causing your move to become worthless. If you have mastered the material in this book and want to learn more, see my more advanced book on threats called *Looking for Trouble*!

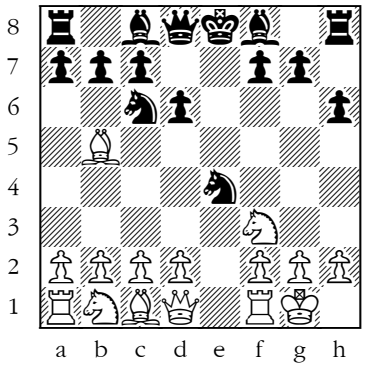
Making Problems Easier vs. More Practical

There are two ways to make a problem harder: add extraneous pieces and provide additional forcing moves.

Fewer Pieces make for Easier Problems

Here is a problem presented with a full board of pieces.

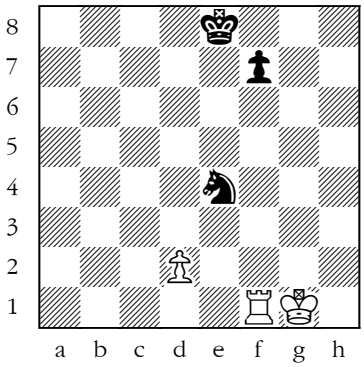
Example I-1: White to play and win



Solution: **1.Re1 f5 2.d3** wins the knight with a pin (see Chapter 2 for pins).

Now the same theme with just the relevant pieces:

Example I-2: White to play and win



Solution: 1.Re1 f5 2.d3 wins the knight with a pin.

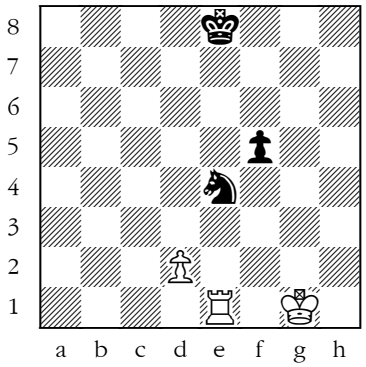
Notice how much simpler it is to solve when you remove the irrelevant pieces. The drawback of presenting the problem in this manner is that the position becomes too easy and less practical, because tactics usually occur with extraneous material on the board. So while Example I-2 is easier, it is also less helpful since you are much more likely to encounter positions similar to Example I-1. In this book, I will use both types of positions, with isolated pieces used for illustrating motifs and easy problems, and complete diagrams used for more practical examples, opening sequences, and slightly harder problems.

> Tactics is the science of chess safety. If you can't keep your pieces safe, then strategy does not matter. Never make a move without first investigating whether it fails to a potential enemy check, capture, or threat.

One Move Solutions vs. MultipleMove Solutions

Another way to make a problem easier or harder is to show part of the solution. Suppose I wanted to make problem I-2 even easier. Then I could omit the first move and you would only have to find the second move:

Example I-3: White to play and win



Solution: **1.d3** wins the knight because of the pin.

Again, I will include some examples and problems requiring fewer moves to make an idea clearer. However, it is more practical to complete the entire forcing sequence and not just the final move. Therefore, you will find some of the problems in this book "too easy," but others with similar themes will seem much harder! Such diversity will help you recognize these patterns in real play.

Checks, Captures, and Threats

Almost all of the examples and problems in this book contain forcing moves that leave the opponent little choice. In descending order of force, these are *checks, captures, and threats*. In a real game, the best move is often one that "just" makes a piece more effective, but those moves are seldom seen in the solutions to tactical problems. Therefore, in tactical situations, both in a real game and when solving a problem, look at both side's *checks, captures, and threats*, usually in that order!

Scope

This book covers all "safety" issues, starting with counting, proceeding to basic single-tactic motifs (pin, skewer, removal of the guard, etc.), together with some basic combinations. The goal is to illustrate the basic tactical positions that recur in games between beginning players. Less than half the book is checkmates because most games are won on attrition. It is also likelier that if you lose material early in the game because of a non-checkmate tactic, you eventually will be checkmated. Besides, non-checkmate motifs are much more common and can occur throughout the game, while checkmates are comparatively rare. But not so rare that you shouldn't study them, too!

This book is written for beginning players who have never played tournament chess or who possess a U.S. Chess Federation rating lower than 1500. There are definitely some problems in this book that would challenge players above 1500, but those players are not the primary audience of the book. Similarly, if you only play on-line chess and your rating is below 1700, then this book can definitely help because on-line ratings often differ

from over-the-board tournament ratings. This book is also useful for younger players who read at or near an adult level or who are aided by an older reader, and the diagrams are large enough for younger and more inexperienced readers to see them clearly.

The games from this book are primarily taken from three sources:

(1) Games played by my students;
(2) Well-known, public domain problems, games, and opening sequences; and
(3) Problems composed by me to illustrate a theme.

Because most of the problems are from my student's games, it's only natural that the amount of problems for each motif is represented in approximately the same frequency that they occur in practice. Three tactical motifs predominate:

(1) Double attacks (including knight and pawn forks and double threats);
(2) Removal of the guard (including the overworked piece); and
(3) Pins

By mostly using positions that occurred in real games, the problems are both practical and challenging for players at the targeted level.

How to Use this Book

The best way to study tactics is to become extremely familiar with the basic tactical motifs. It is very similar to memorizing your multiplication tables before you attempt algebra or calculus. Therefore, the problems in this book, especially the easier basic ones, *are meant to be done repeatedly until you can solve them almost by recognition*. The answers to each problem are given at the end of the section where it appears. Enjoy!

Chapter 1 introduces the value of the pieces, the concept of piece safety, and the very important basic motif of counting. Emphasizing the ideas of safety and counting before introducing the common tactical motifs is one of the unique and important aspects of this book. Counting problems are included at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 2 has examples and problems by motif (non-checkmates) such as pins, double attacks, skewers, removal of the guard, etc. A separate section is included for each motif.

Chapter 3 covers some basic checkmate patterns and endgame checkmate sequences with problems.

Chapter 4 contains some well-known opening traps, as well as some basic opening tactics encountered by my students. Hopefully, readers will take the time to work through all of the instructive text and examples.

Chapter 5 covers defensive problems – those where you must find the right move to prevent yourself from losing material or being checkmated.

Chapter 6 contains only problems. These are somewhat more difficult than the ones in other chapters, partly because the motif is not given.

Chapter 7 is a detailed discussion of the *Seeds of Tactical Destruction*, or how you can recognize when to look for tactics during a game, and what to do once you find them**.** Examples range from extremely easy to very difficult.

Chapter 8 contains 15 problems with positions that look as though they *might* have a tactic. You have to discover if there really is a quick knockout, just like in a real game.

Appendix A briefly defines the levels of tactics.

Appendix B contains some guidelines and principles about tactics and chess in general.

NM Dan Heisman
January 2007

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