

# THE OPENING

## An Ocean of Possibility

*In chess you start with everything you have on the board.  
In Go you start from nothing and build.*  
— Tim Klinger

### Opening Remarks

Someone once said, “The secret to getting ahead is getting started.” The beginning of a Go game is called the opening. The opening moves set the tone for the rest of the game.

On a standard Go board, there are 361 possible first moves. Taking the symmetry of the board into account reduces this to 55 possible first moves. With such a large number of possibilities, Go has plenty of room for creativity, experimentation, and personal preference. It can also leave a person wondering where to begin. Fortunately, there are some principles which will help you play opening moves that lay a good foundation for the rest of the game.

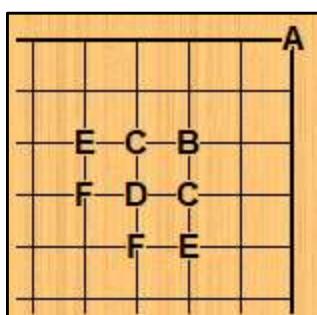
Before diving into opening strategy, we need a little more vocabulary for describing the board.

### Naming Points

Points can be referenced in relative or absolute terms.

#### Relative Points

In relative terms, points are named according to their distance from the edge of the board. Figure 64 shows some points near the corner. Note that there are two of C, E, and F due to symmetry.



- A. 1-1 point
- B. 3-3 point
- C. 3-4 point
- D. 4-4 point (star point)
- E. 5-3 point
- F. 5-4 point

Figure 64: Some points in the corner.

There is no particular reason we say 5-3 rather than 3-5. It is just a matter of convention.

## Absolute Points

Points may also be referenced using their absolute coordinates like in Bingo or Battleship (e.g. C8). The letter “I” is skipped. The center point on the board, also known as tengen, is K10 on a 19x19 board (Figure 65).

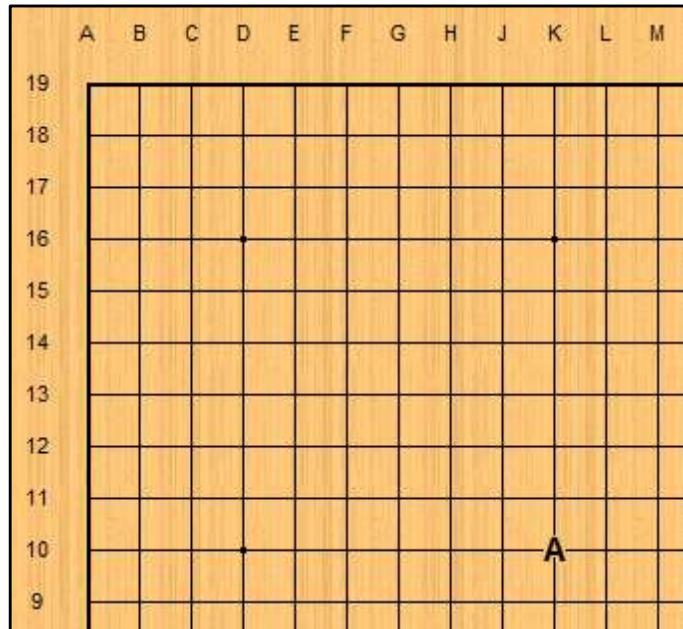


Figure 65: The center point (A) is called tengen.

## Developing Logically

It would be optimal for our first stones to be as secure as possible; otherwise, they are vulnerable to attack. As we have seen, it is easiest to make eyes and secure territory on the edge of the board thanks to the boundary provided by the sides. The corner areas are the most natural place to begin because they offer two automatic boundaries rather than just one on the side of the board. Once stones have secured some eye space for themselves, they can safely venture out from the corners along the sides and finally toward the center. “Corners, Sides, Center” is the most logical progression for developing your position.

On a full-sized board, opening in the very center (tengen) is inefficient. It requires considerably more stones to establish a living group in the center than it does in the corner or on the side. Without protected eye space, our stones would just be floating unsupported on the board, vulnerable to attack. Opening in the center accomplishes little besides giving your opponent an obvious target to attack.

Corners, Sides, Center

## Claiming Corners

The most effective opening moves are generally on the third or fourth lines where the edge of the board provides some security. The first and second lines may seem secure, but they are not very resourceful. For instance, a 1-1 stone (the very corner) surrounds nothing and can be easily surrounded. The 2-2 point is not much better. The 3-3 point, however, is a viable option.

### The 3-3 Point

Playing at the 3-3 point instantly secures a small amount of territory (Figure 66).

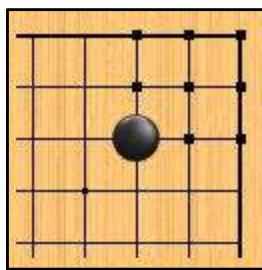


Figure 66: A 3-3 stone secures corner territory.

White cannot invade Black's 3x3 corner without being captured. The downside of the 3-3 is that it does not provide opportunities for a quick development toward the sides and center. The popularity of the 3-3 in professional games ebbs and flows over time.

### The 3-4 Point

The 3-4 point is a common way to begin (Figure 67). It makes a strong claim on the corner, but it has more central influence than the 3-3. The 3-4 stone needs another stone at A or B to completely enclose the corner and secure it as territory. Corner enclosures are an important concept in the opening.

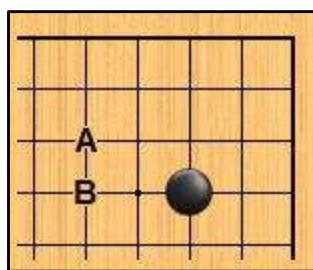


Figure 67: The 3-4 point.

### The 4-4 Point

The 4-4 point is another common way to begin (Figure 68). The 4-4 stone requires two other stones (such as A and B) to completely enclose the corner, but this is not typically a high priority. If a player is more concerned about corner territory, they are likely to start with a 3-4 or even a 3-3 instead.

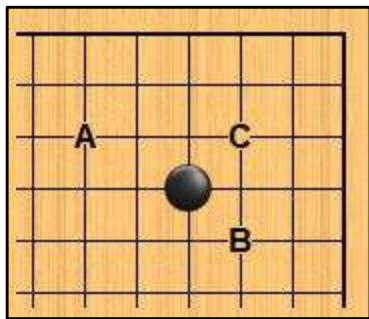


Figure 68: The 4-4 stone leaves C open to invasion.

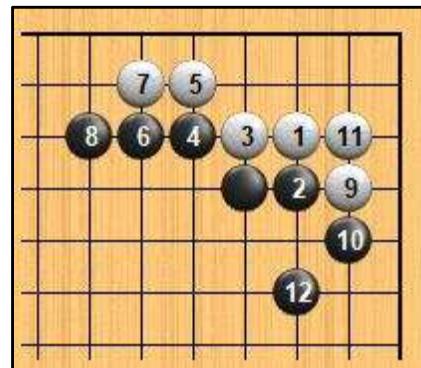


Figure 69: A typical 3-3 invasion.  
White gets corner territory; Black gets central influence.

The idea behind the 4-4 is not to secure corner territory but rather to develop quickly along the sides. The 4-4 point leaves the 3-3 point vulnerable to invasion, but it is perfectly fine to allow a 3-3 invasion if that helps the 4-4 to expand its central influence (Figure 69). Influence, by the way, is “power”, the effect stones exert at a distance with regard to connections, living, and making territory. More about that later.

### The First Four Moves

Black traditionally plays first in the upper right corner. Most Go games, both amateur and professional, begin with 4-4 or 3-4 points, but some begin with the 3-3, 5-3, 5-4, or other unusual points. I recommend opening with the 4-4 and 3-4 points before exploring other possibilities.

Each player would like to claim as many corners as possible, so each of the first four moves often takes place in a different corner. When this happens, each pair of friendly stones can occupy adjacent corners (a parallel opening) or opposite corners (a diagonal opening). It is easier to develop your position in a parallel opening. If you are playing White and wish to avoid a more difficult fighting game, you may want to play first in the corner opposite Black (White 2 in Figure 70). Otherwise, Black gets to decide whether the opening will be parallel or diagonal.

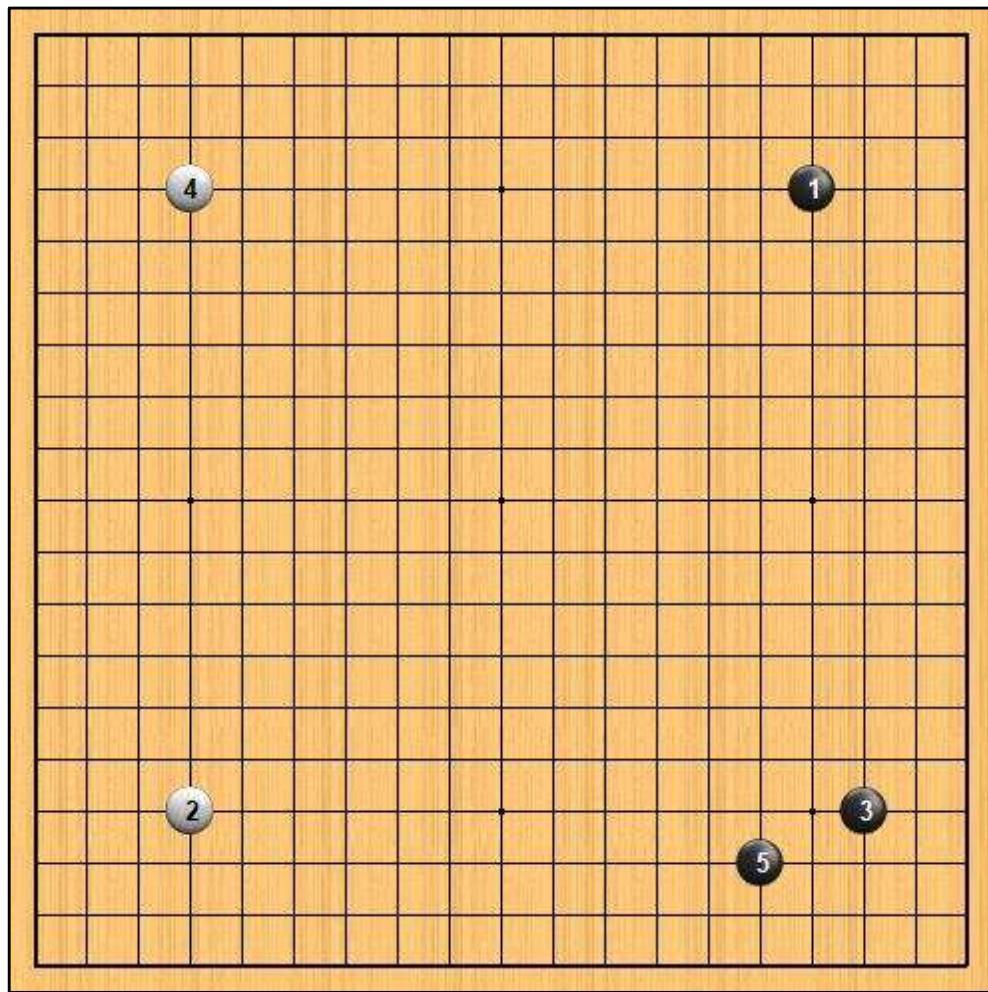


Figure 70: With the first four moves, White and Black claim corners. Black 5 encloses the bottom-right.

After the corners have been claimed, there are some options to consider. If you have an asymmetrical corner, such as a 3-4 stone, you could enclose it to secure corner territory (Black 5 in Figure 70). You can also consider approaching enemy corners to prevent them from enclosing.

## Approaching Corners

Corner approaches are useful, multipurpose moves. A corner approach denies your opponent an ideal corner enclosure. A well-placed approach will expand your framework, reduce the opponent's influence, and gain initiative. (In Go discourse, the initiative is called *sente* [SEN-TAY].) Typically approaches are played one or two spaces away from the enemy stone, usually on the third or fourth line. An approach on the third line is "low"; on the fourth line, "high."

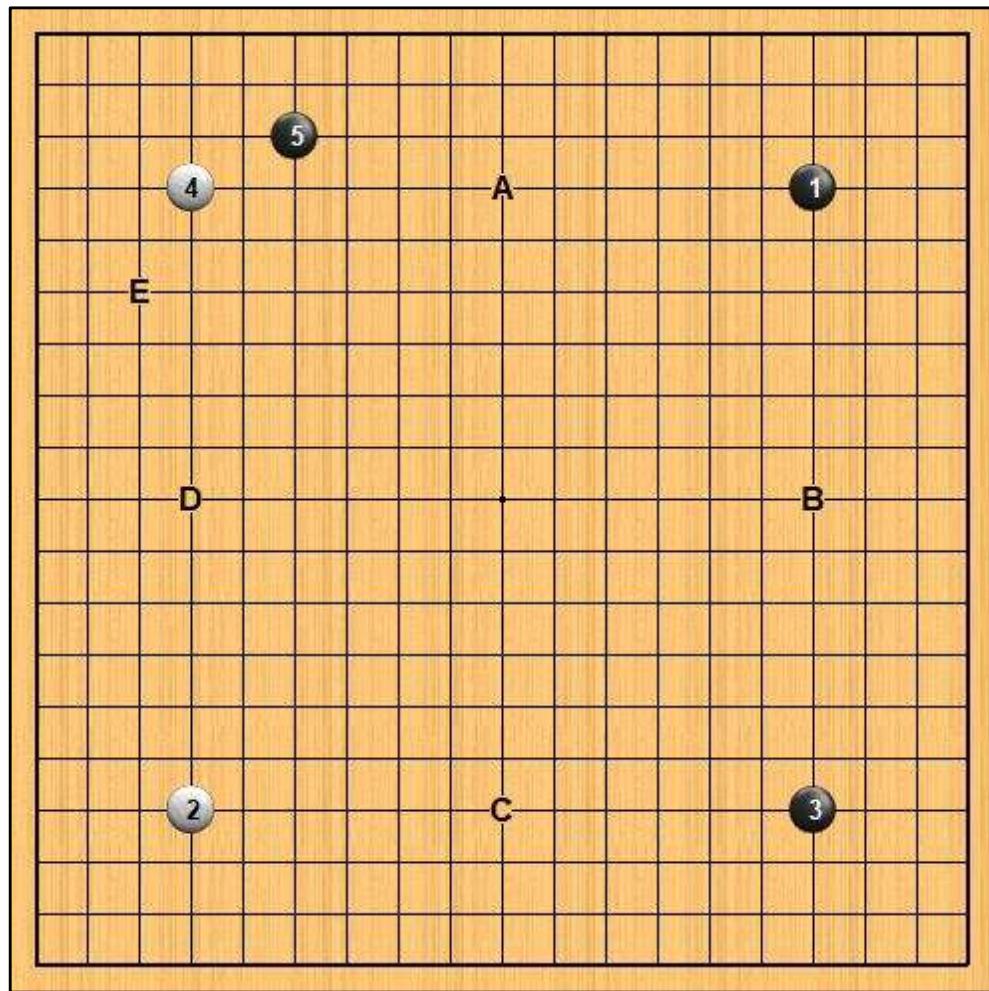


Figure 71: Black plays a low approach at 5, encouraging White to respond.

In Figure 71, Black has played a low approach at 5. White wants to respond to Black 5 because otherwise Black can follow-up at E with a strong attack on the corner (a double approach). If Black instead played 5 at A, B, C, or D, White would be under no pressure to respond and could freely play anywhere. There is nothing wrong with Black 5 at A, but after the move in Figure 71, if White responds at E, Black can follow up at A, creating a nice framework on the top. Black's initiative got an extra move in for free. That is the power of sente.

## Which Corner?

If you plan to approach a corner, keep two things in mind.

- *Approach the largest side.* Count how many intersections are between your stones and the enemy stones. If the stones on one side are further apart, there is more potential for growth on that side, so it is the most efficient corner to approach.
- *Imbalanced before balanced.* If no side is larger than another, approaching an imbalanced corner (like a 3-4 stone) is generally a more severe threat than approaching a balanced corner (like a 4-4 stone). This is because a 3-4 enclosure is more secure than a 4-4 enclosure, and we would like to deprive our opponent of such security.

Figure 72 illustrates these two principles. Black's best options are at A and B.

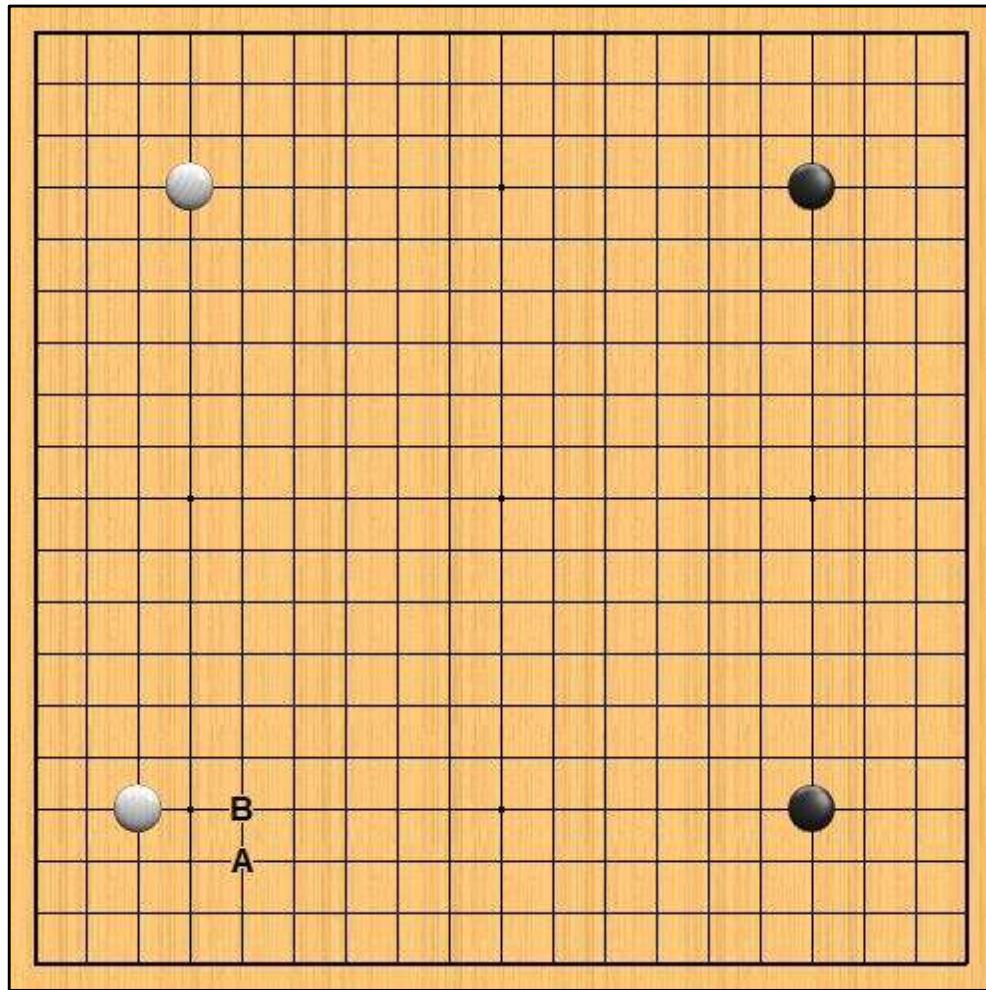


Figure 72: Black's best option is to approach White's 3-4 stone at A or B.

### Side Extensions

After claiming and perhaps securing corners, we want to extend beyond the corners to the sides of the board. A stone played along the side of the board is called a side extension or simply an extension. An extension alone may not secure territory, but it is a step in that direction. Side extensions work with our corners to expand our influence on the board (Figure 73).

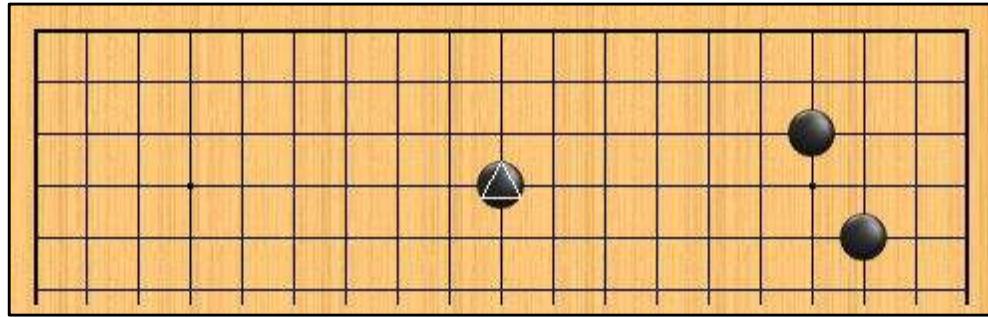


Figure 73: The marked side extension works with the corner enclosure to encompass potential territory.

In Figure 74, each player has a corner with extensions on each side of it. This is called a double wing formation. A double wing encompasses a large amount of potential territory to develop, so it is common to play side extensions which prevent your opponent from securing a double wing.

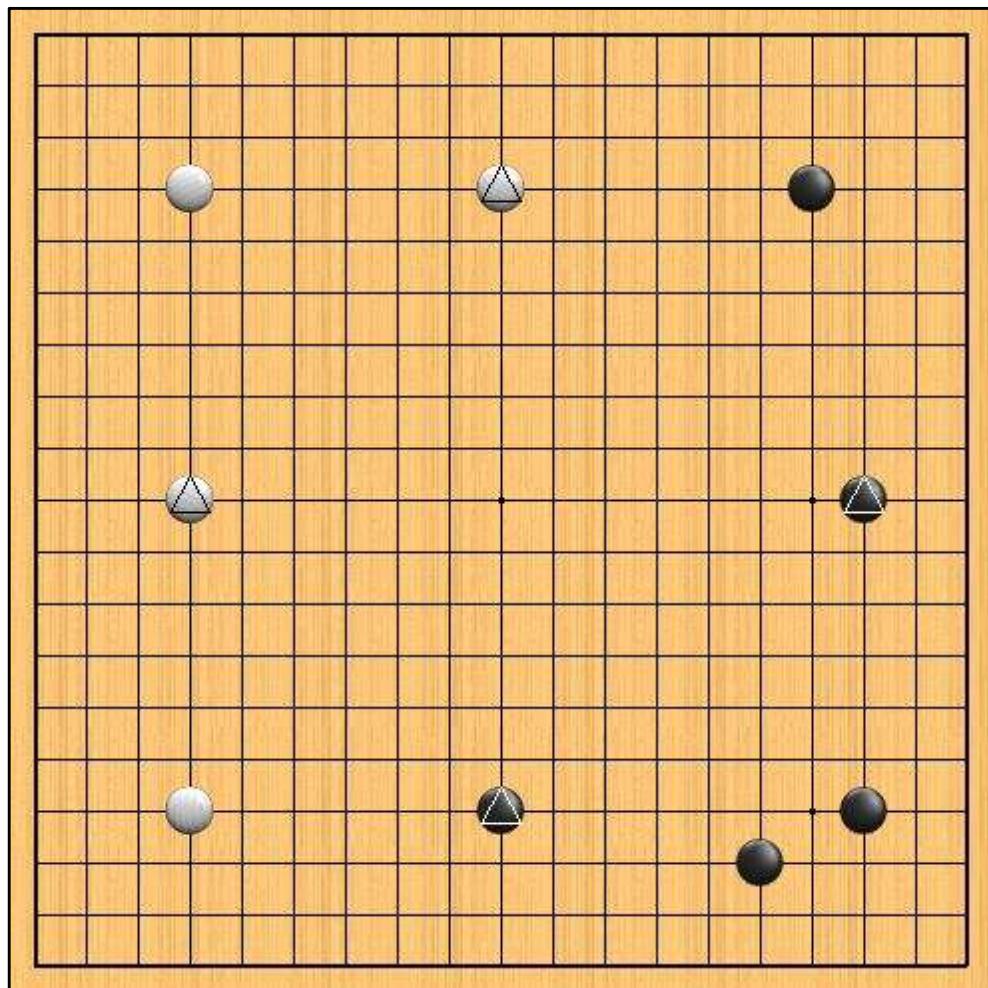


Figure 74: The marked extensions form double wing formations for Black and White.

There is more to say about preventing the opponent from making ideal side extensions, but first we need to consider smaller extensions called bases.

## Bases

When we secure territory in a corner, we call it a corner enclosure. When we secure territory on the side, we call it a base. A base is a small extension which provides a firm foundation to develop along the sides and into the center.

A standard base is a two-space extension on the third line (Figure 75). A two-space extension is a good balance of strength and speed. While a two-space extension is not immediately a living group, it is not easily attacked.

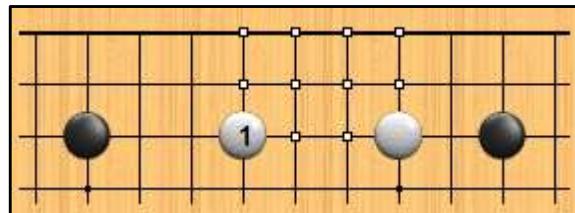


Figure 75: White plays a two-space extension to make a base.

A three-space extension leaves a potential invasion point in the middle (Figure 76). This is playable for White, but it invites complicated fighting.

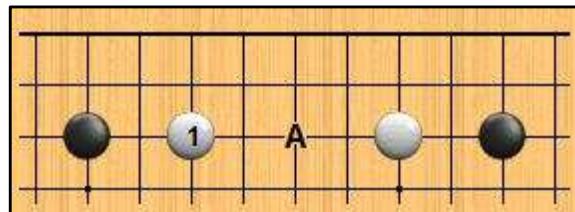


Figure 76: White's three-space extension allows Black to invade.

A one-space extension does not secure space for two eyes, so it is not an ideal base (Figure 77).

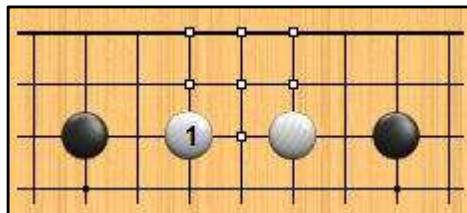


Figure 77: A one-space extension lacks room for two eyes.

## A Splitting Move

In Figure 78, Black has the potential to make a large framework spanning the right side of the board. If White approaches at B, Black's response around C only strengthens his framework. It is better for White to disrupt Black's framework by splitting at A or approaching at C.

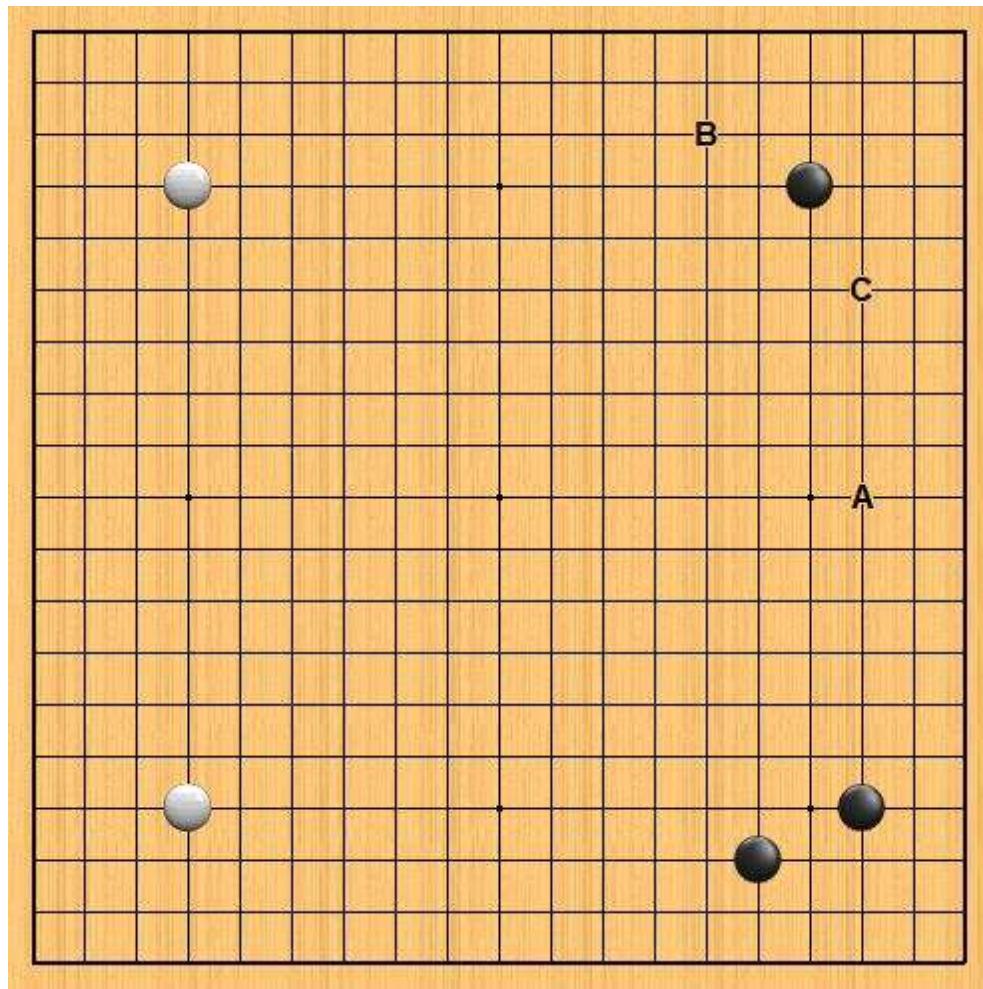


Figure 78: If Black plays at A, Black gets a strong framework on the right side. White wants to prevent this.

If White approaches at 1 in Figure 79, play might proceed as shown. White can probably secure the upper right corner, and Black has prospects on the top and the lower right side.

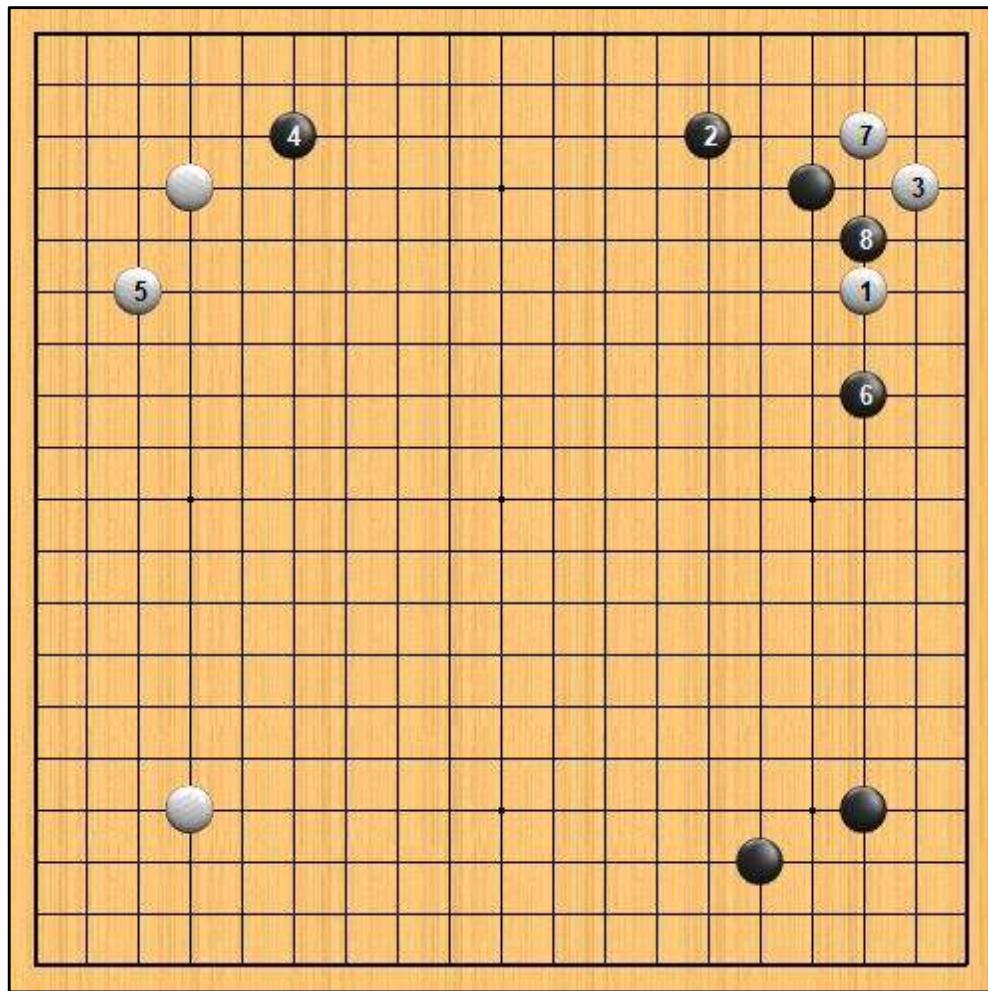


Figure 79: White approaches at 1, creating complications for Black. The position is balanced.

In Figure 80, White has chosen to split Black's potential framework at 1. After White 1, Black 2 threatens to deprive White 1 of a base. White 3 seizes the opportunity to establish a base, and play might proceed as shown.

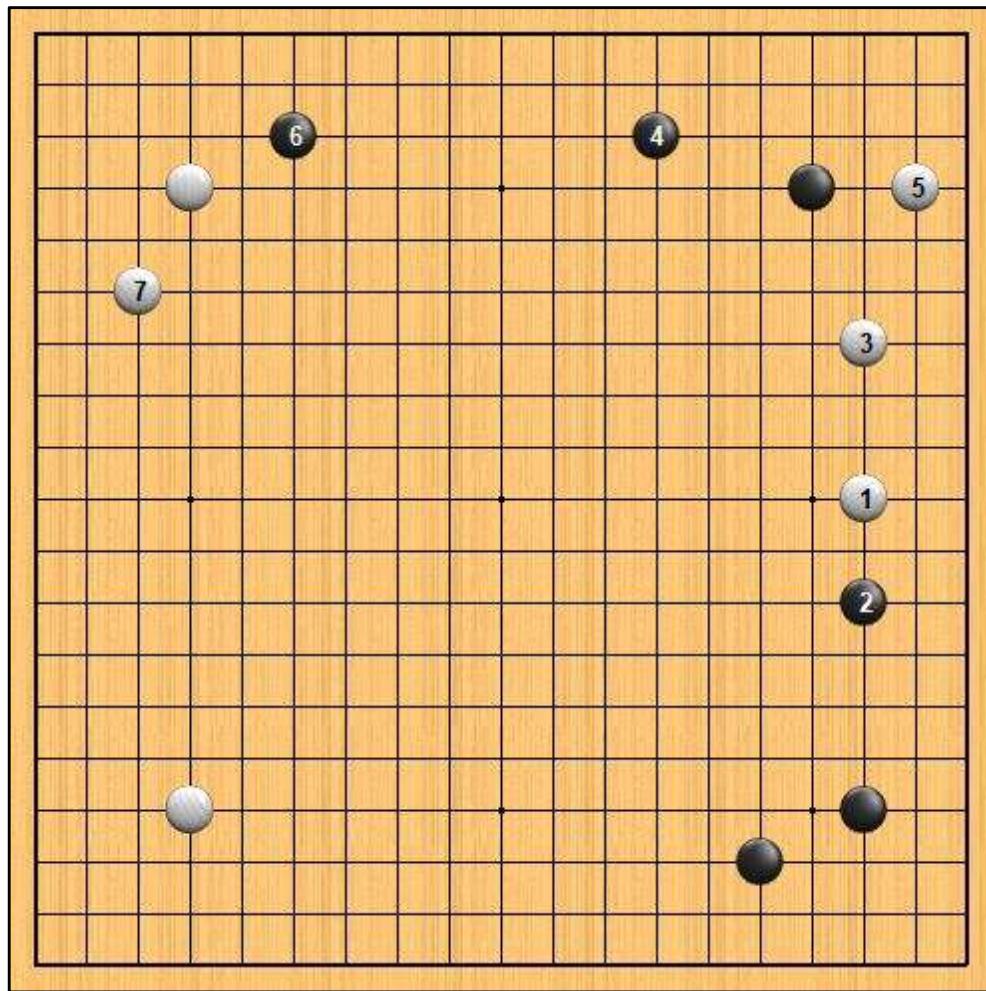


Figure 80: White 1 splits Black's potential framework. When Black 2 pressures White, White 3 makes a base.

If Black 2 had approached White's splitting stone from the other side, White would have made a base the other direction. When there are two options to take, they are called miai; if Black takes one, White takes the other, and vice versa. Since Black took the bottom with 2, White took the top with 3. This flexibility in making a base is what allowed White 1 to be successful.

A good rule of thumb: if your opponent has a corner enclosure, block their side extension. If your opponent has a side extension, block their enclosure.

In Figure 81, White has chosen to make a three-space extension at 3 instead of a two-space extension. This is a playable move, but it gives Black the option of invading at 4, creating a more complicated position where fighting seems inevitable. White can jump out at 5 to put more pressure on Black 4. After Black 6, White has good follow-ups at A and B.

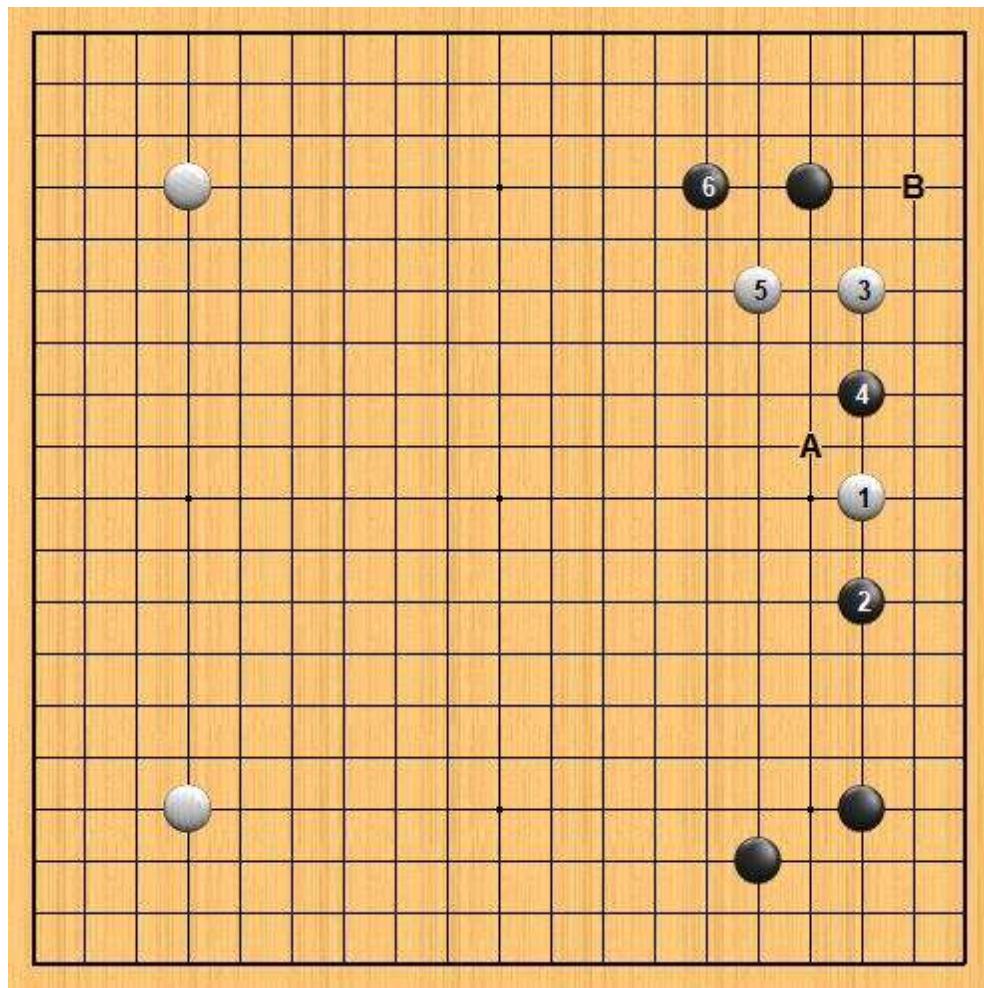


Figure 81: White splits and makes a three-point extension.

## The Base Battle

As we saw with the splitting move, a base can be established between enemy corners. Sometimes a base can even be established between a side extension and a corner if the extension is wide enough. When you make large side extensions, aim for a five-space extension (Figure 82). Any extension larger than five spaces leaves room for an enemy base.

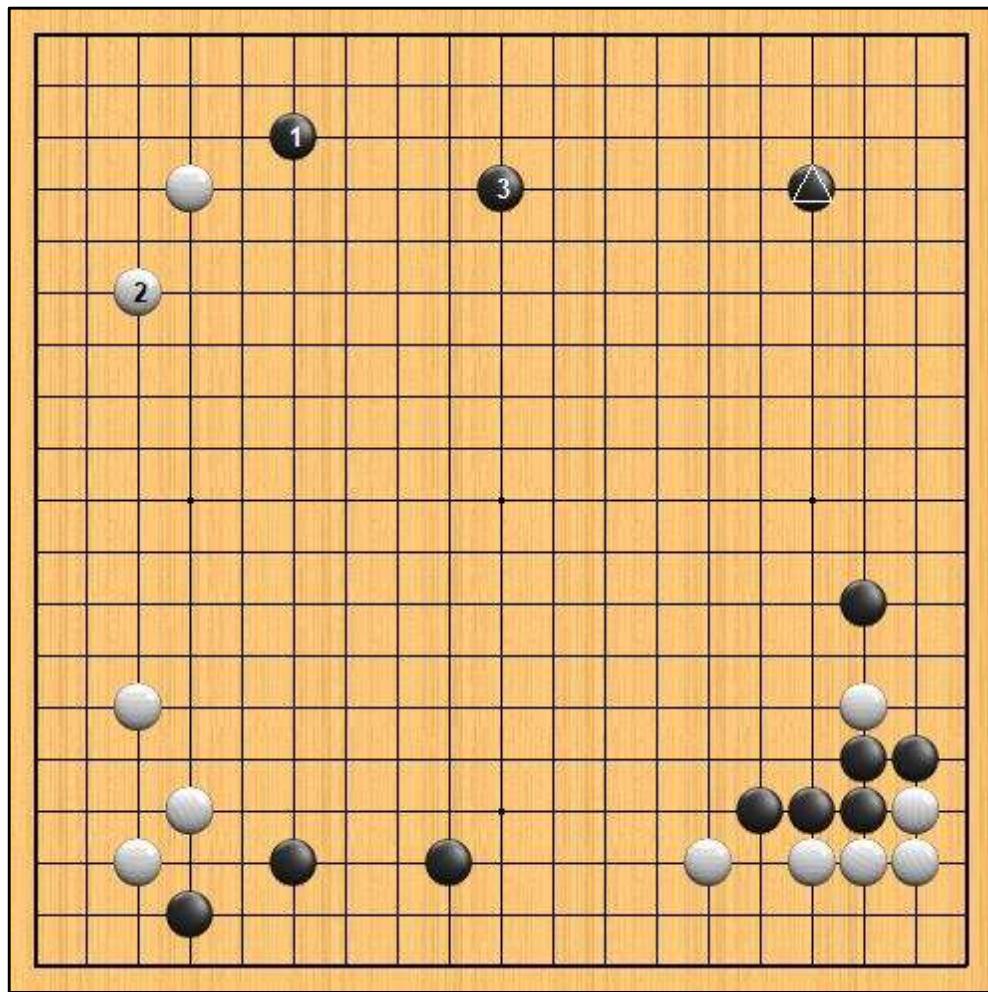


Figure 82: After Black 1 approaches, White 2 backs off, and Black 3 forms a five-space extension from the marked stone.

As the opening unfolds, be mindful of potential bases for your opponent as well as for yourself. You cannot prevent your opponent from making any bases at all, but you may have opportunities to deprive some enemy stones of a base. Stones without a base must either be left alone to die, engage in a risky fight for their life, or “run out” toward the center in hopes of finding some security there.

### Pincers

When your opponent approaches your corner, you have the option of playing a pincer. A pincer approaches the approaching stone from the other direction. It is an aggressive move that prevents the opponent from forming a base with the approaching stone. Like approaches, pincers can be low or high (third or fourth line, respectively). They can also be near or far, ranging from a one-space to a three-space pincer. A one-space pincer is a severe attack, but it may be more susceptible to a counterattack (such as a counter-pincer). Two- and three-space pincers apply pressure more loosely. More distant pincers tend to function more like a side extension, and they allow the opponent to form a base.

Figure 83 shows a one-space low pincer at Black 2. White will likely respond at A, invading the 3-3 and aiming to live in the corner.

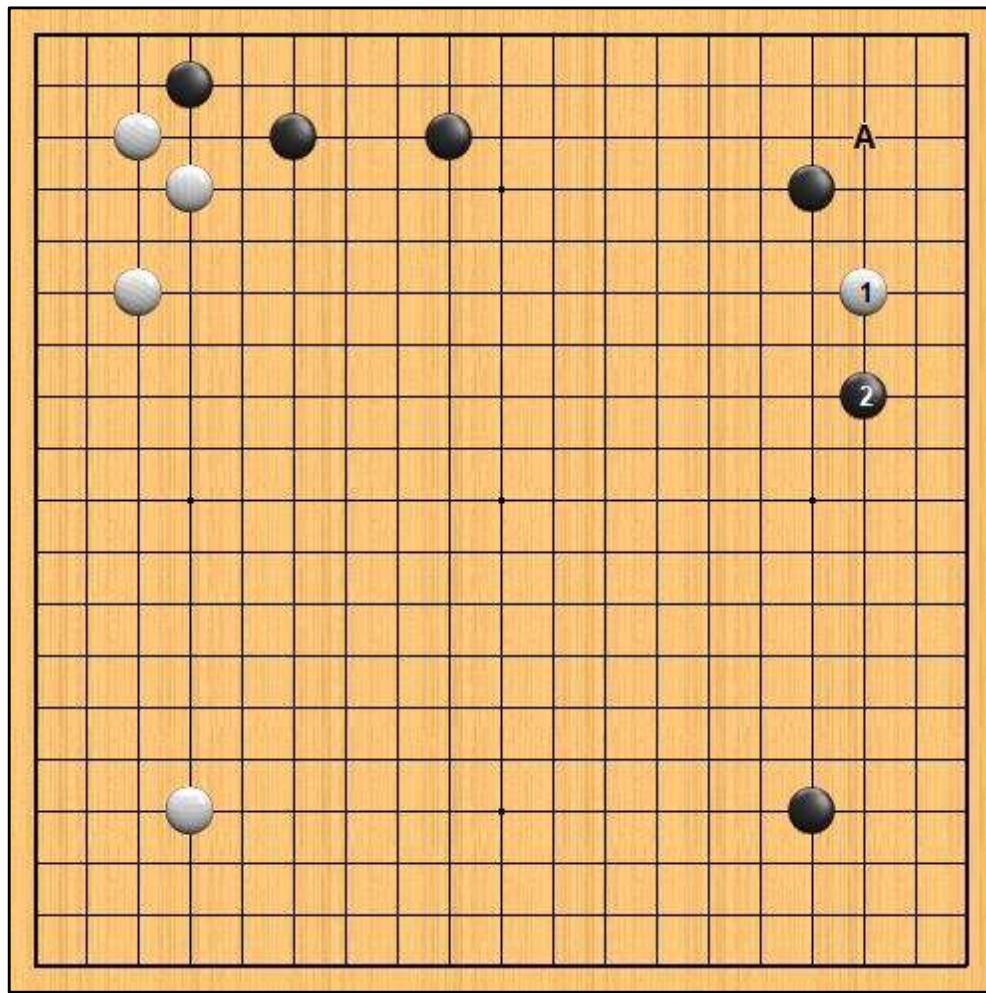


Figure 83: White 1 approaches the corner, and Black 2 is a one-space low pincer.

In Figure 84, Black plays a two-space high pincer against White 1. White has good responses at A and B and can even consider a counter-pincer at C.

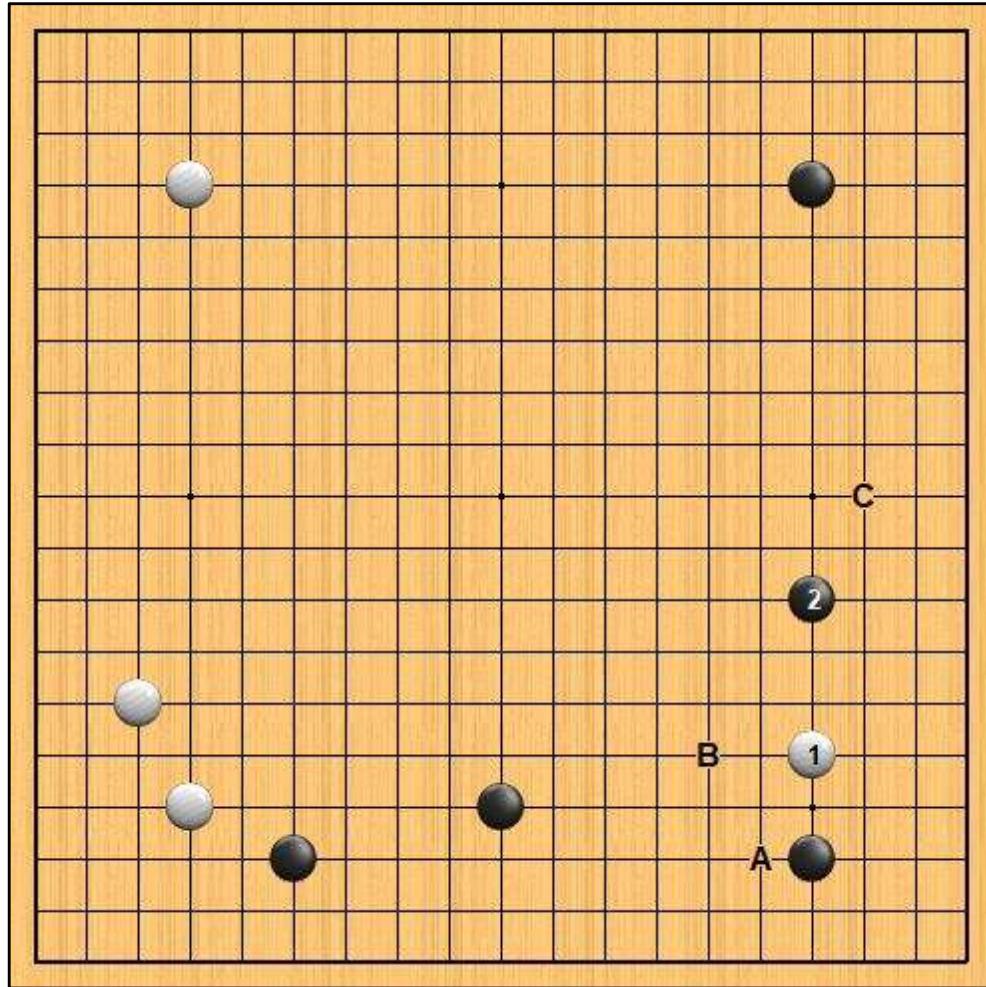


Figure 84: White 1 approaches the corner. Black 2 is a two-space high pincer.

### To Pincer or Not To Pincer?

The effectiveness of a pincer depends on the context. Pincers can be multipurpose moves which work like a side extension (expanding from another corner enclosure) while attacking an enemy stone. Pincers can also help a weak stone or group on the side.

Sometimes, pincering is not beneficial. Don't pincer when you can play elsewhere to easily develop territory. Pincers can invite a double approach, which makes development harder. Don't pincer where opponent is strong. This allows your opponent to develop territory and attack at same time. Don't pincer when it invites a counter-pincer that attacks weak stones.

## An Exercise in Balance

### The Low-High Balance

Third-line stones are good for securing territory and forming bases. They can also be effective at disrupting your opponent's goals through splitting moves, invasions, and the like. Although third-line stones are very useful, they can easily be kept low and surrounded.

Fourth-line stones are good for developing quickly and building large frameworks, but they are slower to secure territory. It is usually best to play a combination of third-line and fourth-line stones. This will give you the best chances for securing territory while developing efficiently.

### The Territory-Influence Balance

Your choice of opening moves will depend largely on which of two approaches you adopt toward the game. The first way is to secure territory immediately, often by playing more stones on the third line. This requires careful calculation and skill in invading and reducing.

The second way is to build influence which you can use to make territory later. Using influence will involve playing higher stones (fourth line and above), creating and defending large frameworks, and attacking in ways that secure territory.

Both territorial and influential approaches are playable, so it is entirely up to your preference which to employ. Have a plan, and carry it out flexibly but consistently. Pay attention to the balance of territory and influence. Passive play will allow your opponent to gain enough central influence to crush your prospects of gaining sufficient territory.

### The Surrounding Game

There are many things to think about in the opening: claiming corners, securing bases, and the balance of territory and influence. As you use stones to develop your opening position, keep an eye on your groups' potential to grow. If you play passively, you may find that your opponent has surrounded your group, ruining its chances to develop further. Remember: Go is the "surrounding game." As we develop our position, we should make every effort to stay ahead of our opponent lest we allow them to surround us and cut us off.

## A Word about Joseki

Joseki are established sequences of optimal play, usually near a corner. They can be useful to know, but there is no need to learn joseki before understanding the basic principles of tactics and strategy. I have included some joseki in the Reference section, so I will show only one joseki here.

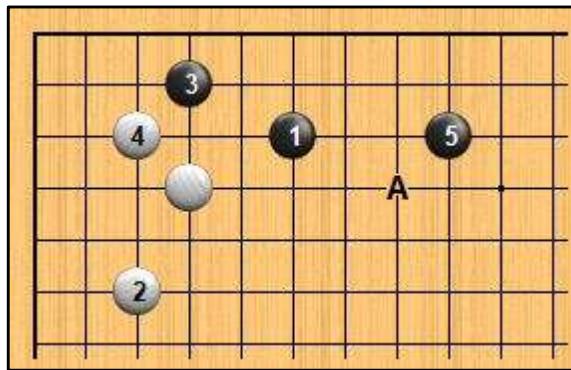


Figure 85: A common joseki when approaching a 4-4.

In Figure 85, Black 1 is a low approach to White's 4-4 stone. White has several ways to respond, and the most common is the low extension at White 2. Black 3 shows an interest in corner territory and adds support to Black 1. If White wants to hold on to the corner, White 4 secures it. Since White has a strong position, Black makes a two-space extension with Black 5, securing a base. (Sometimes Black will play 5 at A, depending on nearby stones.) The position is balanced.

If there were two joseki commandments, they would be:

1. Do not memorize joseki without understanding each move. When you study joseki, play through them slowly, and try to understand the purpose of each move. Consider alternative moves and imagine what the best response would be to them.
2. Do not play joseki without taking the whole board into account. One can execute a particular joseki flawlessly only to find that it gave the opponent exactly the influence they needed.

Perhaps the greatest benefit to studying joseki is a better understanding of shape, which is the topic of our next chapter.