Chess Improvement Ideas

This document lists some standard advice for getting better at chess that I find myself giving repeatedly. This advice might help anyone, but it should be especially useful for players rated below 1700 USCF (maybe ~1900 online, though this depends a lot on the server and time control).

Play Training Games

- Play online or in tournaments.
- Best site to play online for adults: Lichess *(https://lichess.org/)*.
- Best site to play online for kids: either ChessKid (*https://www.chesskid.com/*) or Lichess with kid mode enabled (*username* > preferences > kid mode).
- Play against people rather than bots.
- When playing online, choose time controls with increment (e.g. "15+10" rather than "30+0").
- Play a mixture of time controls, some faster (e.g. "5+3") and some slower (e.g. "45+45"). Don't neglect slower time controls, since they are especially useful for improvement.
- With any time control, try to use most of the time you are given. You should not typically finish a game with a large amount of time remaining on your clock.

Learn from Your Games

- Use an engine to review every game you play.
- Have the engine do a complete analysis of the game (on Lichess: Analysis Board > Computer Analysis > Request a Computer Analysis).
- Do further analysis of your own (with the engine still running to catch mistakes).
- For best results, don't blindly trust the engine. Instead, "argue" with the engine by playing moves that make sense to you and seeing what the engine wants to do in response.
- Finally, try to learn something about the opening that was played in the game.
- Find the earliest move on which you didn't know any opening theory.
- Use the database ("opening explorer") and engine to analyze the position.
- Decide what move you will play the next time someone plays this variation against you.
- Quickly look at a couple of games of strong players that reached the same position. Where do they put their pieces? What are some typical plans in the position?

Study Tactics

- Solve tactics puzzles.
- Puzzle books are better than online puzzles (just my opinion; people disagree on this).
- Don't spend more than 5 minutes trying to solve a puzzle (if rated below ~2000).
- Make sure you understand the solution given by the book.
- Go through the same book more than once.
- At the very least, go through a book three times.
- For best results, especially with easier books, keep going through the book until you can get most problems right quickly (~5 seconds per problem).
- Initially, choose books that are very easy. As you master these, gradually choose harder books.
- Make sure to include some books emphasizing checkmate patterns and some emphasizing motifs (pins, forks, skewers, etc.)

Recommended Tactics Books:
- *Simple Checkmates by A.J. Gilliam (ISBN: 034540307X)*
- *Chess Tactics for Students by John Bain (ISBN: 0963961403)*
- *A World Champion's Guide to Chess by Susan Polgar (ISBN: 1941270328)*
- *Back to Basics: Tactics by Dan Heisman (ISBN: 1888690348)*
- *1001 Deadly Checkmates by John Nunn (ISBN: 1906454256)*
- *Chess Tactics for Champions by Susan Polgar (ISBN: 9780812936711)*
- *Manual of Chess Combinations, Vol. 1b by Sergei Ivashchenko (ISBN: 5946930443)*
- *Winning Chess Exercises for Kids by Jeff Coakley (ISBN: 1895525101)*
- *1000 Checkmate Combinations by Victor Henkin (ISBN: 1849947252)*
- *Combinative Motifs by Maxim Blokh (ISBN: 1889846694)*

Learn Basic Strategy

- Read one or two books that give an overview of basic strategic ideas.
- Unfortunately, many books of this sort are unnecessarily long and complicated. My own book is the first resource listed and is written to be simple and easy. It is also free.
- You only need to read one or maybe two of these sorts of books. I list more books than that just to give you more options.

Recommended Strategy Books:
- *[Introduction to Chess Strategy](#) (my book)*
- *How to Reassess Your Chess 4th ed. by Jeremy Silman (ISBN: 1890085138)*
- *Chess Strategy for Club Players by Herman Grooten (ISBN: 9056917161)*
- *My System by Aaron Nimzowitsch (ISBN: 9056916599)*

Study Complete Games

- Study complete games of stronger players (grandmasters, international masters, etc.).
- Best option for most people: books of lightly annotated games.
- Play through the moves of each game on a board or computer program (e.g. lichess analysis board, Chessbase, etc.)
- Spend about 15-30 minutes in total on a single game.
- Go over each game at least a couple of times.
- Read the author's comments, but don't trust them.
- Try to determine a couple of the biggest mistakes that the players made.
- Find a couple of important moves that don't make sense to you.
- Analyze (by actually moving the pieces around) and try to better understand the things you find confusing.
- As a bonus, see if you can memorize some of the game. Don't try to keep the game memorized in the long term, just see if you can memorize it temporarily.

Recommended Game Collections:
- *Logical Chess: Move by Move by Irving Chernev (ISBN: 0713484640)*
- *Simple Attacking Plans by Fred Wilson (ISBN: 1936277441)*
- *Best Lessons of a Chess Coach by Sunil Weeramantry (ISBN: 1936277905)*
- *50 Essential Chess Lessons by Steve Giddins (ISBN: 1904600417)*
- *Simple Chess by Michael Stean (ISBN: 0486424200)*
- *Understanding Pawn Play in Chess by Drazen Marovic (ISBN: 1911465945)*
- *Chess Structures: A Grandmaster Guide by Mauricio Flores Rios (ISBN: 1784830003)*
- *Chess Secrets: The Giants of Strategy by Neil McDonald (ISBN: 1857445414)*
- *50 Ways to Win at Chess by Steve Giddins (ISBN: 1904600859)*
- *Capablanca's Best Chess Endings by Irving Chernev (ISBN: 0486242498)*

Study the Endgame

- Endgames are less important than many people believe.
- Below ~2000, your goal should be to master a small number of fairly basic endgames.
- Unfortunately, most existing endgame books have some kind of serious drawback. You can either use my endgame book (the first resource below), or combine the other books listed.

Endgame Resources:
- *[Introduction to Chess Endgames](#) (my book)*
- *Silman's Complete Endgame Course by Jeremy Silman (ISBN: 1890085103)*
- *Pandolfini's Endgame Course by Bruce Pandolfini (ISBN: 0671656880)*
- *100 Endgames You Must Know by Jesus de la Villa (ISBN: 908331121X)*

Study Openings

- Don't spend too much time on openings. You will improve much more by focusing on other areas of the game.
- However, don't neglect openings entirely. Every level of player should do a little bit of opening study here and there.
- Choose an opening repertoire for yourself. Choose good openings, keep your repertoire narrow (one choice at each branch), and keep playing the same repertoire for a while until you feel confident in your openings.
- Don't try to memorize large amounts of opening theory all at once. Instead, look at model games from a database and learn a little more theory every time you play a game.
- Develop a general understanding of all opening theory. Get a book that covers all the openings in chess at a shallow, easy level. Study this entire book in a casual way (you don't need to play through the moves on a board, just follow them in your head as much as you can). For example, you could keep this book by your bed and read a little bit before going to sleep each night. The book by van der Sterren below is my recommendation for this.
- When first learning an opening that you intend to include in your repertoire, it can help to go through a dedicated book on that opening. The best books will be those that use model games and are aimed at lower rated players. A few good series in this style are listed in the resources section. These books can be studied with the same approach as recommended for game collections.

Opening Study Resources:
- *Fundamental Chess Openings by Paul van der Sterren (ISBN: 9781906454135)*
- *Starting Out series by Everyman Chess*
- *Chess Explained series by Gambit Publications*
- *Move by Move series by Everyman Chess*

Choose an Opening Repertoire

- You can probably improve while playing almost any normal openings. However, it is important to play openings that are reasonably good (or, at least, not terrible).
- One rough guideline for judging if an opening is good enough involves looking at an engine's evaluation. Let the engine reach a reasonable search depth (at least 30). Any opening you play as white should score >= -0.50 (that's negative 0.50) and any opening you play as black should score <= 0.75.
- A second test is to look in a database/opening explorer and see if strong players are playing the opening. You don't need to limit yourself to the most popular openings, but if an opening isn't being played by strong players at all, there is probably a good reason.
- Choosing variations for a repertoire can be difficult simply because there are so many choices to make when you first start. For this reason, it can be helpful to purchase books and other resources that recommend complete repertoires, with all the choices made for you.