Chess Improvement Ideas

This document outlines some advice on getting better at chess that I find myself giving regularly. This advice might help anyone, but it should be especially useful for players rated below 1800 USCF (maybe ~2000 online, though this depends a lot on the server and time control).

Playing

- Play regularly online or in tournaments.
- Good site to play online for adults: Lichess (*https://lichess.org/*).
- Good site to play online for kids: either ChessKid (*https://www.chesskid.com/*) or Lichess with kid mode enabled (*username* > preferences > kid mode).
- Play games against actual people, rather than exclusively playing engines/bots.
- When playing online, choose time controls with increment (e.g. "15+10" rather than "15+0").
- Play a mixture of time controls, some faster (e.g. "10+5") and some slower (e.g. "30+20"). 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.

Reviewing Your Games

- Use an engine to review every game you play.
- First, have the engine do a complete, automated analysis of the game.
- Next, do further analysis of your own (with the engine running to catch mistakes).
- 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.
- Use an engine and database to decide what you will play the next time you see the same opening.
- Quickly look at a couple of games of strong players that featured the same opening. Where do they put their pieces? What are some typical plans in the position?

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.
- If using a book, go through the same book more than once.
- 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 standard tactical 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)*

Basic Strategy

- Read a book that gives an overview of basic strategic ideas. (I list more than one book below just to give you some options, but you only really need one.)
- You can study these books with a board or just read them casually.
- The important thing is just to get a big picture view of chess strategy.

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)*

Complete Games

- Study complete games of stronger players.
- Initially, use books of lightly annotated games.
- Eventually you can start studying games straight from a database.
- Play through the moves of each game on a physical board or a 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 question them (don't trust them).
- 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.
- Either don't use an engine at all or don't turn it on until you have analyzed the game on your own for a while.
- 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)*
- *Chess Secrets: The Giants of Strategy by Neil McDonald (ISBN: 1857445414)*
- *Understanding Pawn Play in Chess by Drazen Marovic (ISBN: 1911465945)*
- *Chess Structures: A Grandmaster Guide by Mauricio Flores Rios (ISBN: 1784830003)*

Endgames

- 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 introductory endgame books have some kind of serious drawback. You can either use my endgame book (the first resource below), or combine all of 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)*

Openings

- You should have an opening repertoire and learn the basics of the openings you play.
- However, don't spend too much time on openings. They are less important than other things.
- Keep your repertoire narrow and choose reasonably good openings.
- Stick with the same openings long enough to get fairly comfortable with them.
- Don't try to memorize large amounts of opening theory all at once. Instead, learn a little more theory every time you play a game.
- However, studying complete games that feature your preferred openings is never a bad idea, just as long as you study the entire game and not just the opening phase.
- Get a book that covers all the openings in chess at a shallow, easy level. Study this entire book in a casual way. The book by van der Sterren below is my recommendation for this.
- When first learning an opening, study an introductory book on it. 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. These books can be studied with the same approach as recommended for game collections.
- The initial process of choosing a repertoire can be difficult, so you might want to get some books or other resources that recommend complete repertoires with all the decisions made for you. Don't try to learn everything in such a book. Instead, use it as a reference when reviewing the opening from a game you played.
- If you don't have a repertoire yet and just want a decent one to start with you can use the two books by Sielecki listed below.
- I don't generally recommend Chessable or similar products. They put too much emphasis on memorizing things and not enough on analyzing and trying to understand things. They also encourage you to learn too much opening theory all at once.
- However, Chessable courses can provide good repertoires, the same way that repertoire books do. If you use Chessable for this purpose, I recommend that you use it for reference when reviewing your games, rather than studying from it directly.

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*
- *Keep it Simple 1.e4 2.0 by Christof Sielecki (ISBN: 9083328449)*
- *Keep it Simple for Black by Christof Sielecki (ISBN: 9493257517)*