



HOW TO STUDY & IMPROVE AT CHESS

INTRODUCTION

Many chess players read a lot of books or materials but make slow or little progress. The underlying problem is the way in which they study and train.

How you study has the same level of importance as what you study.

In this guide we speak about the correct way to study and train in order to make progress in chess. We will also discuss how to enjoy your training, how to put in practice your knowledge, what can harm your progress, and other useful aspects about chess and brain training.

STUDY brings KNOWLEDGE which brings JOY

Chess reveals its beauty the better you understand it. Let's compare it with walking. Everybody knows that walking is healthy but you can walk inside a small, dark room or you can walk in a nice park with beautiful trees and flowers.

It's the same with chess. When you know more, you know where to look at and you have more ideas. You find beauty in intelligent moves and plans. Look at masters, for example, how much they enjoy to analyze interesting games and look for better ideas.

If chess is your hobby, make proper time for good study. Good lessons, annotated games, and solving positions will offer you a smart, relaxing time. That will also improve your chess understanding which will bring you more satisfaction...

SET YOUR OBJECTIVE. FORGET ABOUT RATING!

First, you need to understand what a chess master wants on the board and only after that you can beat him badly. So, set your objectives based on how much you learn (study) and how much you solve. Improve your chess and results will come for sure.

Setting a certain rating as objective is tricky and not recommended. It's possible that your rating will not reflect how much you improved. You need to give it some time and, of course, tournament games. After working on your chess improvement, at some point,

you will begin to obtain continuous good results, showing your real new strength.

An interesting example that rating may be tricky is Magnus Carlsen who at 14-15 years old, in full process of his chess development, for over one year and a half, scored a decrease in his rating. Then, he made a huge leap forward.

Remember, **knowledge and practice bring results**. That will come sooner or later than you might expect but it will surely happen.

USE THE CHESS BOARD

When you train your chess, you should **study at the real chess board**, to use your mind like in a real game and mimic the tournament conditions. You should not train in front of the screen which distorts your board visualization and, consequently, you'll experience difficulties when you play in a tournament.

Garry Kasparov was very clear about this aspect, especially now when there is a boom of websites and apps made to be used on the screen: *"Solve Using a Board. Solve it at the chess board, a real one, not at the computer screen. If you want to make real improvement, real progress, try to stick with chess pieces. [...] Make sure that you solve everything at the chess board."*

Let's say, you watch cooking lessons on the internet to learn how to make a meal. If you follow the recipe exactly, you can surely make a great meal. In this scenario, you execute something learned, you don't need to think better than another person.

When you play in a chess tournament, you have to think better than your opponent in front of the real chess board. There, it is a permanent confrontation of two minds and you cannot play a single move without thinking first.

INTENSIVE TRAINING SESSIONS. TRAIN YOUR BRAIN!

Study of lessons, games, or solving positions for periods of time of 30-90 minutes without interruption* and at maximum concentration is intensive work. This intensive work is what trains your brain and improves your chess.

* Chess players are advised to take breaks at every 30 minutes. See *Physical Health* chapter.

With each such training session, you will get better at chess. You will also increase your brain power, in general! "*Anything difficult where you have to think is good for your brain*" says doctor Rahul Jandial, brain surgeon and neuroscientist.

You should *aim* for intensive training sessions of 30 minutes or longer. However, don't go over 90 minutes as, normally, our concentration decreases dramatically.

Study chess for as long as it's comfortable for you. When you feel that you don't think clearly anymore, it means you've got over your comfort zone already. One step past your comfort zone is the moment when you should stop your training.

In a real chess game, when the players go over their comfort zone, they start to play weaker moves or even 'blunder'. However, when you train, it makes no sense to go over that comfort zone. Study and train for just as long as you can think clearly. That is how you learn! Your ability to stay focused for longer periods will increase in time.

"SOLVE MODE" - ACTIVE LEARNING METHOD

Chess is a game for solvers, for individual work and if you want to become a strong chess player, you should be in "**solve mode**" when you study and train. The famous chess trainer Mark Dvoretsky used to say: "*stop, concentrate, think and analyze*".

When you are in "solve mode", you are involved and that is *active learning*. Active learning is shown in studies that it increases student retention, students learn twice as much compared with traditional learning and improves their performance by 25-38%. It was also shown that the students are much less likely to abandon their studies.

So, when you study and have a position in front of you, from a lesson or a game, *you should be involved as it would be your own game and try to solve it. Turn on your analytical mind*, make an evaluation of the position and find its tactical and strategic resources.

What's more, when you are in "solve mode", you are mimicking the tournament conditions and **you train to put in practice your knowledge** for when you'll play real games. However, if we don't study over the board but use the screen for training and can 'skip' or 'undo' whenever you want, your mind knows that it's a virtual thing. Then you cannot be really involved and your training is not efficient.

STUDY FAST AND FOCUSED

Prefer *quality* training over quantity but don't make it slow. People that study slowly, even if they do it rigorously at the beginning, rarely manage to complete their studies!

Be alert and focused when you study. **When you study fast, you are more concentrated and less likely to be distracted or think about other things.**

Study every lesson with much care and attention and try to understand everything. On the other hand, do not worry about getting every detail perfectly from the first reading. We will discuss soon how reviewing of lessons helps.

For example, children care less about the details but they learn and progress quickly.

Also, when you solve exercises, do not spend a lot of time in the hope that you will get all the details of the position as a world champion. It doesn't work like that. Be focused and try to solve any exercise in 2-5 minutes, if not otherwise indicated. When you set a time limit, you also train for the real games when you are under time pressure.

What's more is that when you study and solve fast, you can complete more study materials and more exercises. It's satisfying to get many things done.

THINK LIKE A STRONG PLAYER. ALWAYS.

If you **think in an organized manner when you study and solve positions**, you will do the same when you play. This way you will make progress.

Follow the instructions from the introductory lessons "*How to Think in Chess*" and "*Making Decisions in Chess*" from the beginning of the *Grandmaster Package*™ (free samples on our website). Make a habit to think that way. It will help both beginners and experienced players to think easier, make plans correctly, see more moves ahead, avoid mistakes and... think like a strong player.

The final four months of the *Grandmaster Package*™ are an advanced chess training for the thinking process and prepare the student for the master level and beyond. You can spend from 5 to 20 minutes to solve those positions.

TAKE NOTES

When you study a lesson or annotated game, you will probably come over things that seem important to remember or that you don't understand very well. Please write them down on a notebook or write some flashcards. Those bits of knowledge preserved on the flashcards can be helpful later, when you are confronted with similar patterns.

Read your notes again when you review that lesson and add any notes you consider useful. Review your notes at 2-4 weeks apart until they are clear.

REVIEW YOUR LESSONS AND MEMORIZE

If you review a chess lesson after 2 weeks, you will be amazed by how much you understand this time. You may also observe details that you've missed the first time.

When you review a lesson, it may be useful to do it in a different manner than the previous time. For example, study the examples in more depth, write flashcards, or do your own analysis of positions, writing down your ideas and variations.

Try to make connections, mental anchors, with other lessons or with your own games.

Reviewing a lesson for more times will help you retain the information. Chess players often want to memorize some opening or endgame theory as these require accuracy. Reviewing a lesson for two or three times at 2, then 4 weeks intervals and taking notes is a good method to 'MEMORIZE'!

STUDY ADVANCED MATERIALS

Anatoly Karpov 'complained' that in his first match against Kasparov, he gave Garry "free chess lessons". In the second match, Kasparov won. If you play against stronger opponents, you will improve fast as you need to play like them to avoid losing.

The same, if you study advanced lessons, you will make quicker progress even if it is a bit challenging. Studying advanced lessons and solving hard positions can feel like a big effort but that will pull you up faster. It will be easy when you play!

Beginners may need more explanations but, thorough lessons take care of all readers.

MIDDLEGAME TRAINING: 1. STRATEGY AND 2. CALCULATION

If you ask an International Master what is the main difference between him and a Grandmaster, the answer will be: "*Strategy!*". There should be no question on what is the biggest difference between a club level player and a master. Again, this is strategy. There are many masters that are not good at tactics but they can easily beat club level players.

When a player does not have a good strategic understanding of the position, he will choose a wrong direction of play, a closed road. After some moves, he will reach the end of the road and will not see any logical continuation anymore. At this point, the players usually make tactical errors. Analysis with chess engines cannot identify the weak strategic ideas, just the tactical errors. That is why many players think that their strategic play is good and they only have problems with tactical play. In fact, the weakest part of most of the players is the strategy. We can only confirm

It is the chess strategy that tells you what to do in various positions, how to seize the initiative, construct reliable attacks, have powerful ideas, and obstruct your opponent's play.

During the middlegame, better positional decisions, often imperceptible by the weaker player, bring small advantages which accumulate and become a clear strategic advantage. Only good positional understanding can make you play better and, eventually, win against stronger and stronger opponents.

CALCULATION: Without evaluating our opponent's tactical and strategic resource, our strategy can fail, thus we often need to calculate variations. **Calculation together with tactics should make part of a complete chess training.**

Tactical operation or forced lines have to be calculated precisely. However, most of the calculation we need to do during the game is constituted by unforced lines - to prevent opponent's dangerous ideas and to choose the best way to realize our own. Positional thinking will help us predict how the opponent would play against us and what moves and plans are dangerous and need to be considered. It also helps us to distinguish real threats from the rest. That is why, **stronger players calculate less!** They also 'feel' (know) when calculating lines is critical for the outcome of the game or when they can simply follow their plan.

A good understanding or feeling for the position also constitute a tactical asset. A

chess player that understands well the quality and dynamic of the pieces, has a good sense of danger and a keen eye for tactics. **Strategic weaknesses are the source of tactical possibilities.** Developing a good strategic vision will help you spot tactical possibilities.

The study of the middlegame and strategy, in general, should be the main part of a good chess training program. You cannot be good enough at strategy! The more you study the middlegame, strategy and train your calculation skills, the better you become as a chess player. Study various materials about middlegame and strategy, go through annotated games, and solve many positions.

COMPLETE YOUR MAIN STUDY MATERIAL

An evident but very frequent problem is of not finishing the study of the material. There are people that try many books and courses, start to read a little from everything but do not complete anything. Many get to the second chapter of a book, then give up as they say they don't have enough time for study. The problem is an unorganized chess training and various distractions.

If you want to make progress, **make a priority to complete the main training material.** Allot at least half of your total time for chess and make a clear schedule. If you do follow a schedule and you study fast and focused, you will manage to finish your books/courses!

For example, the *Grandmaster Package* is almost an all-inclusive chess training and students that allot around 5 hours a week for it manage to finish it in just a year. Such a core course should be made a priority of the chess training. The results are worth it, some of our students reaching well over 2200 and even 2300 rating having used almost exclusively our materials.

ANNOTATED GAMES

Replaying annotated games is an excellent and pleasant chess training. It may be so enjoyable that can easily replace other 'fun' activities but which don't bring real benefits, like online blitz, for example.

To enjoy this training, first of all, follow Kasparov's recommendations: "*stick with chess pieces*" and "*solve everything at the chess board*".

The pace you go through the moves makes a difference. If you just want to relax and enjoy the game and comments, replay at a fast pace. You will also improve by simply observing the game of the stronger player and going through the comments.

If you want to use the game for intensive training, after the first opening moves, start to think as it would be your own game. Look only at the last move of your opponent and cover/hide the rest. Think for 1-3 minutes and try to find the best move. When a diagram appears it means it's an important moment, so you can use a little more time. After you are decided about what move you would play, check the text move and the annotator's comments. Many times, there is a lesson to learn... Then, check the opponent's reply and start the process again.

CHESS COACH

When you are supervised by somebody, a chess teacher or just a friend, *you* are more serious and work harder. However, a chess teacher cannot normally offer you the same quantity and quality of information as you can find in a well-written book or material.

A chess teacher is, indeed, helpful when you have questions that you have tried to answer by yourself first. Remember "solve mode". A chess teacher may also help if you have studied chess correctly, have played in several tournaments and have made only little progress. Then, an analysis of your games may reveal hidden problems.

We offer free teacher support and, sometimes, our students ask us why another solution, found by them, is not good either. This makes us happy as it shows that those students work seriously for their chess.

After you have tried to answer by yourself to certain problems, you can have an elevated discussion with your teacher which will really solve specific doubts.

PHYSICAL HEALTH

Physical exercise is very important for the brain too, not just for the body. Walking, biking or any physical activity that you enjoy will help your brain, increase your creativity, memory, and ability to concentrate. If you are interested for more info, look for "neurobiological effects of physical exercise".

We also recommend the book "*Sitting Kills, Moving Heals*" by Joan Vernikos, PhD., former director of NASA's life sciences division.

Especially chess players should pay attention to this aspect as they sit for long periods of time without moving. It's important for your health to **stand up often and move regularly**. We recommend to stand up at least every 30 minutes and walk or do some exercise for a couple of minutes or more. In chess tournaments, players usually stand up and move a little after they play their moves. This also helps them relax and be fresh for the next move.

A good night's sleep of 7-9 hours is very important too. Among many others, it helps your memory, concentration, and calmness.

Be Careful With...

TECHNOLOGY - USE IT CORRECTLY

Computers and Internet are a great tool for chess players, from beginners to grandmasters. Having easy access to information and the aid of engines is what made chess so strong today. We can get all the games played in any important tournament in the world. We can also analyze positions with chess engines which are stronger than grandmasters.

However, we should not use the computer instead of our brain but to assist us in certain aspects of our chess training. As anything used too much or inappropriately, technology too can halt your progress.

Top grandmasters, like Maxime Vachier-Lagrave, never turn on the chess engines before the games and try to rely only on their brain when rehearsing for the game. If you want to increase your brain power, you should analyze positions as we have said above in this guide. You should train *your brain* and, if you really want, use the engine only at the end to verify the correctness of your analysis.

MINIMIZE THE USE OF THE SCREEN

As we have said so many times already, try to minimize the computer or smartphone screen for chess training.

Good chess coaches and strong players know that **using the screen for chess deforms the 'board visualization'**. When you play real chess, over the board, you'll realize that things are not as you know them from the screen. This is also a cause for 'blunders'.

Remember how clear was Garry Kasparov about NOT using the computer screen: "*Solve it at the chess board, a real one, not at the computer screen. If you want to make real improvement, real progress, try to stick with chess pieces.*"

If you do not want to print out our lessons, you can use the computer or smartphone to *read* the lessons but please *study* over the board.

BLITZ

Blitz or rapid chess can be a pleasant way for chess fans to spend their time together with friends, colleagues, or other chess lovers. However, it is not a chess training.

Here is what the strongest players in the world say about blitz or rapid chess:

- Magnus Carlsen: "*Rapid and blitz chess are first of all for enjoyment*";
- Hikaru Nakamura: "*Blitz is not chess*";
- Vladimir Kramnik: "*Training for the hand*";
- Bobby Fischer: "*Blitz chess kills your ideas*".

The problem is that when you play fast, most of the decisions are made using the old thinking patterns so you just deepen your playing habits. However, if you want to improve, you need to change a lot of your habits.

Even worse is when beginners play fast. For example, chess teachers fight hard against children's impulsive play, teaching them to think well before moving the pieces. You cannot play good chess if you don't think enough.

To put into practice new knowledge, you need enough time to retrieve learned ideas, think, make connections, and evaluate. If you do not take enough time, you just mess up the new information.

Moreover, you will not be able to analyze your game so you won't know how you really played. The players usually make mistakes in blitz games which, often, are not exploited by their opponents. The winners usually believe that they played very well and therefore they will remain with the false impression that their play was good.

That is why, playing too much blitz, even on the real board, is detrimental to your chess and your efforts to improve your game... Asked if playing blitz is good training for chess, Vladimir Kramnik, former world champion, answered: *"No, no [...] if a player has big aims, he should limit his rapid play in favor of serious chess."*

ONLINE BLITZ

Like any other computer game, online blitz is an addictive game, played in front of the screen, with a virtual rating as a stake. At any time of day and night, you'll find many players online.

People that play online blitz usually fight fiercely for their virtual rating. For that reason, they are so tense that it remains little room for joy. Anyway, after many games, their rating is almost the same.

Playing blitz in front of the screen is far worse than classical blitz. You don't only miss the person in front of you but you often miss their manners too. In online arenas there is a general lack of fair-play and consideration. Therefore, beside not improving your game, online blitz does not leave very pleasant memories either.

We recommend everyone to play in real, over-the-board, chess tournaments. One or two tournaments per year are a true delight which leave good memories. Even blitz or rapid chess at a local chess club is incomparable better than spending hours every week in front of the screen.



FOLLOW A PLAN OF STUDY

ORGANIZED CHESS TRAINING

In this guide we have detailed many aspects of a good chess training. There is one more important aspect: to **be organized and follow a plan of study**.

Besides following a plan, you need to AVOID certain things that mess up students' plans:

- **Avoid irrelevant information.** There is a ton of material nowadays but you need to follow your plan. Every minute spent on irrelevant information drives you away from your objectives.
- **Avoid multitasking.** Chess is very complex and please focus on one thing at a time. As we have said in "intensive training sessions", try to concentrate for 30 minutes or more and avoid any distraction.
- **Avoid too much training of one kind.** Many players spend too much time on one aspect only of chess preparation. Preferred are usually tactics or openings. Both are important but not when they don't leave proper time for the other parts of the training. A chain is only as strong as its weakest link...

PLAN OF STUDY

You may want to **set your objectives on what materials you want to study in a year** and before your planned tournaments.

When you are organized and study the right way, even 30 minutes a day can be enough to make sensible progress. If weekends are the only option for you, that's fine too, if you can allot longer time slots. Try to allot time for chess study every week.

Find the times when you are not distracted by anything and make your weekly chess schedule. At the beginning, you will probably change your schedule a few times until you get to the best form.

If you **study at the same time of day**, you will form a habit. Your mind and body will adapt for this planned mental workout and, eventually, they will ask for it. When you feel that way, it means you genuinely enjoy your study time and make progress!

Have a training journal where you write down your plan of study for a year, the tournaments where you intend to play and set your objectives (the materials/chapters you want to finish). It's useful to keep a record of your work. Here, you can also analyze your own games and write down the conclusions in words.

Now, we give a **general plan of study** where we indicate how much time we recommend for all the aspects of a complete chess training. These recommendations are good for the majority of chess students under master level.

For convenience, we have divided the week in 8 equal parts. So, for example, if you have 8 hours available for chess in a week, you can allot 1 to 2 hours for the study of openings.

OPENINGS	1/8 - 2/8 of your chess time
<p>The important opening lines end up in the middlegame in certain 'key positions'. Study these positions, pawn structures and corresponding placement of pieces, and learn to play them well. When you do that, it will also become easy to 'memorize' the opening moves, because you'll know what moves lead to that learned key positions.</p> <p>So, <u>an important part of the openings training is the study of the middlegame</u>. That is why you can spend more time on your opening preparation. This can also include the study of <i>model</i> games (illustrative for correct strategy in that variation).</p> <p><u>After you know the main opening lines, add new ones</u> until your repertoire is complete. That's the logical and easy way to learn the openings.</p> <p>After you built your opening repertoire, you need to review the main or critical variations from time to time. That will help you refresh your memory.</p> <p>In our <i>Opening Repertoire</i>, we give the evaluation of the positions and the TO DO list at the end of the main opening lines, so you will know how to play the middlegame.</p>	

MIDDLEGAME

4/8 - 5/8 of your chess time

The middlegame should be the main part of the chess training. Besides, it is the most beautiful part of the game due to its complexity and the fact that you can be creative!

- Through middlegame training, we understand foremost the study of strategy (also possibly called positional play). Study advanced chess strategy from *Grandmaster Package*™ and good books.
- Middlegame training should also include calculation. A good chess player needs to calculate moves ahead and evaluate correctly the final positions in order to choose the best move. Beside the exercises we give throughout the full course, the final 4 months focus on the aspect of calculation and analysis. It is given in the second part as the student should have a good strategic understanding and evaluate positions correctly.
- Annotated games have the largest part constituted by the middlegame. Longer games also include endgames which is an excellent training for this part of the game too. All the annotated games from our extra courses includes instructive endgames.

ENDGAME

1/8 of your chess time

Every player should learn basic theoretical endgames. The most common are the pawn and rook endings which are not hard to learn and can be found on any endgame book.

For beginners-intermediate, we recommend Jesus de la Villa's endgame book and for advanced players "Endgame Manual" by Mark Dvoretsky (available on Amazon).

After you know the important theoretical endgames, you may want to train with different endgames positions. That will also improve your calculation as the endgames require precise calculation and a small mistake can change the result.

We study complex endgames in the second part of the core course, in the section "Playing Technique".

TACTICS**1/8 of your chess time**

If you start your chess training sessions with tactics, you'll sharpen your brain for the rest of your training day. Tactics should be trained at around 1/8 from the total time you have for chess.

Get a book with many tactical positions like "*Encyclopedia of Chess Combinations*" (you can buy it from Amazon or sahovski.com) and solve the exercises over the board. As the exercises are organized on different tactical motifs, you can learn well particular motifs. Another form of training is choosing positions at random so you won't know the tactical motif. Don't mark the solved exercises as solving a position more times will strengthen learned patterns. This way, a book with several thousands of positions become an inexhaustible resource for tactical training.

Always solve tactical exercises without touching the pieces! Solve more exercises (5-10) and only afterwards, look at the solutions. This way you mimic the tournament conditions when you must be *confident* that you've found all the defences and possibilities before you move, especially when it's a sacrifice.

It's important to do tactical training but don't overdo it, otherwise when you'll play a game, you'll look too much after 'something' tactical. In reality, tactical possibilities do not happen so often and do not always work.

BOARD VISUALIZATION TRAINING is excellent to improve your tactical skills. It also helps you see more moves ahead, see more possibilities and, very importantly, spot tactical weaknesses and prevent blunders. Board visualization training is offered in the Months 2-4 of the *Grandmaster Package*™ but you are advised to do it every week for a few minutes.