

Making Decisions in Chess

"How can I find the best move in a position?" This is a question that every chess player would like to have answered. Playing the best move in all positions would make someone invincible. Of course, such a thing is impossible and not even a computer is going to achieve perfection in chess. So, is it a waste of time to look for the best move in every position? The answer is firmly NO. Certainly you will not find the best move every time, but looking for the best move involves a particular process that will help you better understand the position. Understanding the peculiarities of a position will always help you play "acceptable" moves even if they won't always be the best. The more often you are able to find and use the best moves, the higher your chess level will be.

This first lesson will teach you an original, but effective method to improve your chess thinking. Upon first reading, the process may seem complicated, but we promise that all that you need to understand this method is patience. You don't have to be a chess expert to understand the following algorithm for making decisions in chess, you just need to think logically. Let's start!

1. What's the objective of a chess move?

According to our method, every chess move has a quite simple goal. *With every move, we try to accumulate a certain advantage for ourselves or to reduce a certain advantage already accumulated by our opponent.* The greater the advantage gained, the better the move.

Is there anything illogical so far? we don't think so.

But what about the so-called "waiting move"? Our answer is: forget about it! You will make no progress by waiting for the opponent to make a mistake. Such a playing style could sometimes help you, but most of the time it will negatively affect you.

A player's attitude during the game is essential in chess.

Someone who always tries to create problems for his opponent can be a successful player even if his chess knowledge is limited. On the other hand, someone who waits for an opponent's mistake and makes "waiting moves" has no chance to substantially improve his chess.

So, keep in mind: **WITH EVERY MOVE, YOU MUST LOOK FOR SOMETHING!** And that "something" is normally a certain advantage in your position.

2. What are the advantages in chess?

OK, we agree that it is worth trying to reach an advantage with every move, but what are the advantages in chess? The first chess player to classify the advantages in chess was Wilhelm Steinitz who claimed that there are nine advantages: lead in development, mobility of the pieces, seizure of the center, the position of the enemy king, weak squares in the opponent's position,

superior pawn formation, a pawn majority on the queenside, open files, and the advantage of the two bishops. Nowadays, opinions have shifted slightly and the pawn majority on the queenside and the two bishops are no longer considered general positional advantages.

The classification of the advantages in chess that we are proposing to you is somewhat different, but we think it fits better with modern thinking. Look around you and you will see that the value of any product depends on two things: **quantity and quality**. Why would chess be any different?

There are two main categories of advantages in chess: quantitative advantages and qualitative advantages. Consciously or not, we always try to reach at least one of them. All we expect from you is to do it consciously and logically.

3. The quantitative advantages in chess

The quantitative advantages are **the material advantage** and **the local superiority of forces**.

The importance of the material advantage is well known and it's not our intention to describe to you the importance of being a knight or a pawn up.

The superiority of forces has a huge importance too. A chess game usually consists of several local battles. It is always convenient to fight in battles by having a superiority of forces in that area. But if you wish to have a local superiority of forces, you must create it, because nobody will do it for you.

Creating a local superiority of forces is directly correlated to finding the best plan of play. How? Very simple. When you look for a plan of play, you must always ask yourself *“Where would it be better to challenge my opponent for a local battle?”* The logical answer is something like *“The battle must be on the queenside (or in the center or on the kingside) because I have (or I can create) a superiority of forces there”*.

One more example: Let's imagine that while analyzing a position, you discover that your opponent's pieces are gathered on one side and can hardly be transferred to the opposite side. You immediately start thinking about challenging your opponent to a battle on his weak side. What's the next step in your logical thinking process? Of course, you will start thinking about how to bring more pieces there in order to create a local superiority of forces.

So, do you understand how the quantitative advantage of the superiority of forces and making the plan of play are directly correlated? We are confident you do.

4. The qualitative advantages in chess

For a spectator who doesn't know the rules of chess, any qualitative advantage is imperceptible. A qualitative advantage is the result of the dynamics of the pieces during the chess game. To

correctly understand what a qualitative advantage is, you must consider the chess pieces as beings.

First, we are going to mention the five qualitative advantages and then, we will deal with each and every one of them.

- a. King's safety
- b. The qualitative value of the pieces
- c. The qualitative value of the pawn structure
- d. Space advantage
- e. Seizure of initiative

4.a. King's safety

There is nothing more important in chess than the king's safety. A moment is enough to forget about it and for the effect to be fatal.

When you decide the plan of play, you must always be careful to have your king well protected. Moreover, you must try to endanger the position of the opponent king.

4.b. The qualitative value of the pieces

During their first steps of learning chess, every chess player comes to know that every piece has a "quantitative" value: a knight = a bishop ~3 points, a rook ~ 4 ½ -5 points, a queen ~ 9 points.

Let's take a look at the following position.



Diagram 1. White to move

You don't have to be a chess expert to see there is a difference between the pieces of the two sides. For instance, look at the two knights. While the white knight has a dominant position in the center from where it can quickly arrive anywhere on the chessboard, the black knight has a

passive position and can make only one move to a8. Therefore, it's clear that we cannot even compare the two knights.

The same qualitative difference is visible when we compare the bishops and the rooks. White's bishop and rook have a higher freedom of movement than those of their black opponent. They occupy open lines and put pressure on weak points in the opponent's position.

In the position in diagram one, these qualitative advantages can be immediately converted into quantitative advantages by playing 1.Kf2 followed by 2.Rg1. A superiority of forces is thus created on the kingside and Black's passive pieces can't intervene in time to defend the g6-pawn.

As a rule, the qualitative value of a piece depends on 4 characteristics:

1. The mobility of the piece;
2. The positioning of the piece;
3. The role played by the piece;
4. The stability of the piece.

Let's see what each of the terms mentioned above means.

The **mobility** of a piece represents its capacity to move over a big number of squares and to move quickly (namely in few moves) anywhere on the chessboard.



Diagram 2. White to move

In diagram 2, we can see how the mobility of a piece can be restrained by both one's own and the opponent's pieces. For instance, the mobility of Nh6 is restrained by the white pawns which control the squares g4 and f5 and the black pieces which occupy the squares f7 and g8.

Comparing the two bishops, we observe that the white bishop has mobility superior to that of his black opponent. The latter has only two move possibilities and it needs many moves to get to the central area of the board.

Also, White's rook has better mobility than Black's rook.

White has more possibilities to transform his huge qualitative advantage into a quantitative advantage, for instance 1.Rd7 Rb8 2.Na5.

The **positioning** of a piece is also a very important characteristic.

Usually, a knight placed in the center of the board controls more squares than a knight placed on the edge of the board, while the linear pieces (the queen, the rooks and the bishops) have a better positioning when occupying an open line.

However, a linear piece is also very strong in the center, as you can see in diagram 3.



Diagram 3. Black to move

Better positioning of a piece increases its qualitative value.

In diagram 3, the qualitative advantage is transformed into a quantitative advantage by 1...Qe2. After the exchange of the queens, Black wins the b3-pawn by force due to the awful position of Nb2.

It's important to note that the linear pieces usually have their mobility restrained by their own pawns placed in their lines of action. This can be observed in all three analyzed examples.

The role played by a piece has a great importance. On a scale sorted from the worst to the best, there are four main situations:

- 1. A piece out of play.** This is the worst situation and it occurs when a piece is far away from a local battlefield and it is unable to quickly arrive there.
- 2. A piece that plays a defensive role,** namely a piece whose main task is to protect a certain objective.
- 3. A piece that plays an offensive role,** namely an attacking piece whose objective is in the opponent's field..
- 4. A piece that simultaneously plays an offensive role and one or more defensive roles.** This is the best case, better than the third one. While defending an objective, a

piece can have a supplementary role as it indirectly helps another piece by freeing it from its defensive task.



Diagram 4. White to move

In diagram 4, we can notice a clear difference in White's favor from the perspective of the role of the pieces. The battlefield is on the kingside and, thus, Ra2 and, particularly, Ba8 are out of play. White's pieces play offensive roles and 1.Qh2 immediately decides the game. We must note the double role played by Bd4 which helps the attack on the kingside and simultaneously protects the pawn on b2, thereby preventing a black counterattack.

Stability of a piece becomes an important factor when that piece occupies an important square. If the piece has no stability on the square where it is positioned, the opponent can easily remove it, thus decreasing its qualitative value. On the contrary, when a piece is well placed and has stability (that is, when the opponent cannot remove it from there under good conditions), its qualitative value increases.



Diagram 5. White to move

In diagram 5, the two knights have equivalent positioning in the center of the board. Still, White's knight has a superior qualitative value because it has greater stability, while Black's knight can be removed from its central position by 1.f4.

We hope you understand how important the qualitative value of the pieces is. Consequently, during a chess game, we must try to do two things:

- 1. Improve the qualitative value of our pieces** (by increasing their mobility and placing them on good squares where they are stable and play offensive roles).
- 2. Reduce the qualitative value of the opponent's pieces** (by restricting their mobility, not allowing them to occupy strong and stable positions, and forcing them to play defensive roles or, if possible, getting them out of play).

4.c. The qualitative value of the pawn structure

Like the other pieces, pawns have their qualitative value too. You must not treat a pawn as an individual entity; the pawns act together as a unit. When referring to the qualitative value of the pawns, we talk about the qualitative value of the pawn structure. Indeed, the qualitative value of the pawn structure is influenced by the presence of doubled pawns or isolated pawns or islands of pawns, but your goal is to have a strong pawn formation and not strong individual pawns.

We will study in detail pawn qualitative value and pawn structures in the following months. All we expect from you after this lesson is that you consider the pawns what they are, namely a unit. If you see the pawn structure as a unit, you will notice that its qualitative value is influenced by the same four characteristics mentioned above: **mobility, positioning, role and stability**. In this case, by good positioning we mean that it has both a healthy pawn structure as well as ensuring good control of the center.

4.d. Space advantage

By space advantage we mean that one of the two players better controls a certain area of the chessboard. Normally the space advantage is obtained by advancing the pawns in that area. Why is the space advantage important? Simply because the space advantage indirectly influences the qualitative value of the pieces.

Let's take a look at the following position.



Diagram 6. White to move

In diagram 6, White has a space advantage on the kingside and can further increase it by f4-f5. The qualitative value of White's pieces is better because they have great mobility on the kingside, while Black's pieces are forced to occupy passive positions due to the lack of space. White can create a superiority of forces on the kingside (i.e. the local area where he has a space advantage) by Nc3-e2-g3-h5 (or Nc3-e2-f4 after f4-f5 is played), Rf1-f2, Ra1-f1.

So, the main trait of the space advantage is its influence over the qualitative value of the pieces.

The space has less influence over the qualitative value of the pieces when the material on the board is reduced (after more exchanges of pieces).



Diagram 7. White to move

Compare diagram 7 with diagram 6. White has the same space advantage on the kingside, but it is useless now. Without pieces, there is no beneficial influence of the space advantage on the qualitative value of the pieces.

We will study this spatial advantage more deeply in a special chapter.

4.e. Seizure of initiative

The seizure of initiative, that is the possibility to create immediate threats, is very important as well. An opponent under pressure must first parry the threats facing him and only then deal with improving his position. Therefore, his alternatives are reduced.

The importance of seizing the initiative is illustrated in the following example.



Diagram 8. White to move
Em.Lasker-Marshall, St.Petersburg 1914

In diagram 8. Black only needs a tempo to solve his opening problems by castling queenside. But it is White's turn to move and the former world champion immediately seizes the initiative by playing **1.Qb5!**

The pawns b7 and d5 are simultaneously attacked, therefore Marshall sets a cunning trap:

1...0-0-0

We must note that 1...Qb4 loses in view of 2.Nxd5!

2.Qa5!

Of course not 2.Nxd5?? Bxd5 3.Qxd5 Qg5! 4.Qxg5 hxg5 and Black wins. Now the new threat Qxa7 forces Black to weaken his position because after 2...Kb8, 3.Nb5 would be decisive.

2...a6 3.Bxa6! bxa6 4.Qxa6+ Kb8 5.Nb5 Nb6 6.Rd3 with the idea Rb3 and a2-a4-a5 and a decisive attack.

You can see how Black's alternatives were limited because White, move by move, created new, strong threats and obliged Black to parry them.

5. Making the plan of play & choosing the best move

If you understand the subjects analyzed above, making a correct plan of play and choosing the best move in a position will be easier. All you need is to follow an orderly pattern of thinking.

Looking for the best plan of play means searching for the best way to improve your position. It involves looking for the possibilities to achieve one of the advantages mentioned above or trying to annihilate these advantages if they belong to your opponent.

Here are some questions you must ask and answer to find the potentially best plans and moves:

- Is my king safe? How could I ensure its defense?
- Is my opponent's king safe? How could I benefit from its weakened position?
- Is my opponent threatening to achieve a material advantage?
- Can I achieve a material advantage by force?
- Where could I create a superiority of forces in order to challenge a local battle? How about my opponent?
- How could I increase the qualitative value of my pieces and pawn structure?
- How could I reduce the qualitative value of my opponent's pieces and pawn structure?
- Where could I achieve/increase a space advantage? How about my opponent?
- How could I use the space advantage I have in order to increase the qualitative value of my pieces and create a local superiority of forces?
- What pieces must I exchange in order to reduce the importance of the space advantage my opponent has?
- Could I create immediate threats or seize a long-term initiative? How about my opponent?

By answering such questions, you will be able to find the most interesting ideas (plans of play) that can improve your position as well as some candidate moves in the spirit of the plans you found. Then, all you need to do is to compare the candidate moves by calculating concrete lines and assessing the resulting positions. Eureka, the best move is found!