

Improve Your Chess

By William Li for GeniusProphecy Chess



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Welcome to my Improve Your Chess ebook. I would like to go through a program that you can implement yourself to improve your chess. The program comprises of three critical steps. These steps are by no means secret and would be obvious to any competent chess teacher or titled player. I am confident that continual dedication to these three factors will steadily improve your game.

Play Chess

First of all, in order to improve, you must play, preferably in tournaments with longer time controls. The current standard time control is 90 minutes + 30 seconds every move. It may seem like a lot of time, but as you get stronger, you will start to find that it is not much time at all. It is not uncommon to find a handful of time trouble addicts in any chess club. Some positions require deep calculations that require a long period of time. You might think 60 minutes about a sacrifice that could win the game.

Playing long games will improve both your tactical and positional prowess as you start to see many nuances at the board that you would not notice in a game with a faster time limit. You can find long games at your local chess club, which typically runs weekly rounds for tournaments, or you can wait for a weekender, which is a whole tournament held over one weekend. There are much stronger tournaments which are held over more than a week with normally one round a day, which are also good tournaments to play.

In general, you should try to play tournaments where there are many players stronger than you. Playing

against weaker players all the time will only serve to develop your ego. The best way to improve is to play and learn from your games against stronger players.

The amount of games you should optimally play varies from player to player. Some players, such as 8th World Champion Soviet-Latvian GM Mikhail Tal were not happy unless they played frequently throughout the year; whereas other players, such as leading American GM Samuel Reshevsky, would get tired after playing "more than a few tournaments a year".

American Grandmaster Edmar Mednis recommends a player should play around 50 competitive games a year. Preferably, in the time a person allocates to chess, he should play as many games as they can whilst leaving adequate time for the thorough review of their games and general chess study.

Many chess players supplement their over-the-board (OTB) play with internet chess, and I recommend you do this as well. I play at the [Internet Chess Club](#) (ICC), one of the two strongest internet clubs in the world (the other is [PlayChess](#)). Many of my [YouTube videos](#) are based on my games on ICC. I think the 5-minute time limit is the most useful tool as a way to improve your chess. You can train how quickly you see tactics and also check up on where you deviated from theory in the opening. A time limit such as 1-minute does not leave time to consider nuances and tends to attract rubbish openings as well.

If you're thinking about joining an internet chess club, purchasing a chess engine such as [Fritz](#) gets you one year free membership with PlayChess. You can also try out the 7-day free trial of the Internet Chess Club and

consider purchasing full membership. [Yahoo! Chess](#) is the most popular free online chess club, which is popular amongst beginners. [FreeChess](#) is a wonderful medium-strength free option for casual players. Many of its features try to emulate ICC (or sometimes, ICC emulates them!). For more details, [see my introduction to online chess](#).

Thorough Review of Your Games

*"By strictly observing Botvinnik's rule regarding the thorough analysis of one's own games, with the years I have come to realise that this provides the foundation for the continuous development of chess mastery" - 13th World Champion Garry Kasparov, arguably the strongest player in history, in his book *The Test of Time**

Of course, just playing tonnes of games won't make you better unless you know what you're doing wrong. You may notice that there are many players at the local chess club who play and play, and never get better. This is because they don't review their games. It is sort of like playing tennis with the rules of basketball – it does not matter how much practice you obtain if you do not adjust fundamental aspects of your play.

You should thoroughly annotate every tournament game you play using software such as Fritz or SCID. Taking losses as a learning experience is very important; do not be disheartened when you lose a game.

"Winning feels good. Winning feels really, really good, but losing is what makes us better. It's very important for you, as a player, to take yourself on when you lose, to study the games that you lose." – American International Master and former junior prodigy Joshua

Waitzkin ([Searching for Bobby Fischer](#)); Waitzkin later channeled his experiences in chess to form a 'learning philosophy' and went on to become a martial arts world champion

Analysing your games includes, adding plenty of textual annotations, checking where you or your opponent deviated from theory, entering the variations that you calculated during the game, checking whether your assessments were accurate with a chess engine, and checking the game for tactical and deeper strategical errors (e.g. trading a bishop for a knight at the wrong time). Such annotations can even be fun to do, particularly if you can publish them on a chess forum or show your annotated games to friends. [If you would like to learn more about how to use software such as Fritz, see my chess software tutorial.](#)

"Playing without a concurrent critical review of one's skills will simply get you nowhere." – GM Edmar Mednis

I would say that blitz games are less important to analyse. This is because you have far less time to make deeper calculations. Of course, some games will be particularly interesting, e.g. a game with lots of fireworks or a game where a strong out-posted knight is worth more than a rook, and these should probably be analysed. ICC's Dasher interface allows a player to turn on a chess engine straight after the game so that players can see where they went wrong tactically and the assessment of the position at certain points in the game. [See my article on how to analyse chess games.](#)

Study Chess

Sure, it is possible to reach a very high standard of play with only the first two points I have mentioned; but actually doing some study will fast-track your improvement. By reading books by strong players, you add an extra layer of experience to your arsenal by learning from other people's mistakes.

This area typically involves going through chess books, DVDs, videos, software and learning from a chess coach. Edmar Mednis recommended that chess players divide up their training into 50% openings, 25% endgames and 25% general chess or "learning chess" (e.g. tactics, strategy, attacking chess, defensive chess and more practical aspects). It is only logical to spend the most time on openings. If a person is always destroyed in the opening every game, then his knowledge of the middlegame and endgame would be useless.

1. The openings phase should be dedicated to creating and maintaining a watertight opening repertoire. Some players have a collection of openings that they commonly use, but their assortment may not form a harmonious repertoire, i.e. it is easy to expose a hole in their repertoire, which they are completely unprepared for.

For more seasoned players, checking the newest publications or studying the newest chess games for opening advances may become important. Of course, depending on the openings a player chooses, this could be a lot of work (for a high reward!) or little work at all. Some players' repertoires will be very strict - one opening move as White and one line against each White

move when playing as Black, while others may have two or three opening setups as White and several responses to 1.e4 and 1.d4 as Black. It is a matter of taste, although the amount of time you are able to dedicate to chess also contributes to this. [For a deeper look at opening study, see my building a chess repertoire article.](#) I give specific recommendations in my [opening repertoire suggestions](#) page.

2. There is an argument for focusing most on endgames when a player first starts out. This is advocated by 3rd World Champion José Raúl Capablanca, IM Josh Waitzkin and renowned coach Bruce Pandolfini, among others.

"[I]n order to improve your game you must study the endgame before anything else; for, whereas the endings can be studied and mastered by themselves, the middlegame and the opening must be studied in relation to the endgame." – Grandmaster José Raúl Capablanca

This may sound strange to a new player who typically loves to learn opening tricks. However, endgames allow you to study specific pieces in isolation. You are able to understand the true potential of the pieces on a barren board, giving you a greater ability to coordinate them in phases of the game where there are more pieces on the board. For a beginner, a sound knowledge of opening principles should suffice for their early development. I discuss opening principles in my [beginner article](#).

Endgames can be broken down into three categories – theoretical, practical and artistic. The third category will not be important for more than 99% of chess players, as it is to do with problem composition and problem solvers. Theoretical endgames are positions where the result of the position is easily known and has been well

analysed, e.g. a rook and king vs king endgame. Practical endgames are all other types of endgames. Practical endgames become theoretical endgames with skillful play.

Beginners should concentrate on theoretical endgames, such as checkmating with a bishop and a knight or how to draw a king and pawn endgame with a pawn down. Endgame expert and Grandmaster Karsten Müller has made some great DVDs on technical endgames. More advanced players should consider dabbling into strategic endgames, such as why a knight dominates a bishop in certain positions. For this topic, you can't look past the classic *Endgame Strategy* by Mikhail Shereshevsky.

3. "Learning chess" mainly includes tactics and strategies, defensive and attacking chess, and knowledge of 'chess nuances'.

a) Tactics are best trained using specialist books, for example, [*Beat the Grandmasters*](#) by Christian Kongsted or *John Nunn's Chess Puzzle Book* by John Nunn. Your tactical play will naturally improve when you play in tournaments and analyse your games.

Your beginning chess strategies can only be learnt, as far as I know, by digesting chess materials or through a coach. Good chess books on this topic include the [*Complete Book of Chess Strategy*](#) by Jeremy Silman and *Modern Chess Strategy* by John Watson. Of course, you can also go for the classic *My System* by Aron Nimzowitsch.

Defensive or attacking chess is really the natural style of a player, but such things can still be studied, for example in Vladimir Vuković's *Art of Attack*. Well known

American International Master John Watson suggests "getting extremely used to solving tactical problems (from one of those *1001 Combinations* sort of books) would be the appropriate preparation for a later study of Vuković". Note that the book he is referring to, I suspect, is *1001 Brilliant Ways to Checkmate* by Fred Reinfeld.

b) What I mean by 'chess nuances' is the ins and outs of chess that piece it together, such as how and when to offer a draw, or how to claim a draw by repetition. [*The Survival Guide to Competitive Chess*](#) by John Emms and [*Secrets of Practical Chess*](#) by John Nunn go through some of these intricacies quite well.

Some players do not have lots of time to dedicate to studying chess. For most players, a daily effort of anywhere between 5 to 60 minutes is sufficient. Edmar Mednis suggests that strong enthusiasts should study one hour a day. Although that does not seem like much, it will add up to 360 hours in a year. Mednis emphasised, "I guarantee you will learn a lot in 360 hours!"

Thanks for reading this ebook. I hope it has provided some useful insights.

About the Author

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