

KING'S SAFETY **Final Theory**

On our way to evaluating a position, a very important element to consider is the safety of the king. We hope you have studied the assigned annotated games and other theoretical lessons with examples. Now, it is time to conclude, add some extra observations, and give the final theory which will help you to make a faster and better assessment of the safety of the king and how it can be attacked or defended.

First, we need to remember that here we do not discuss typical pawn structures (as King's Indian Attack or Defense, positions with isolani pawns, English attack, Keres attack and other systems), but we consider general aspects and discuss positions that arise often in practice. We will discuss the typical attacks on kings in more detail when we treat the first typical pawn structures, in a future ICS course. In addition, we do not consider kings castled on different sides as this is a different chapter of our course, and the essence of such positions is usually based on: "whoever starts the attack first, wins".

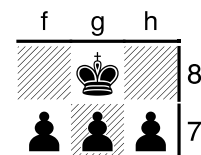
The most frequent case is when the kings are castled on the same side, and this is what we are interested at this moment (king's safety as a criterion of positional evaluation). When you need to evaluate a position from a strategic point of view to decide about a move, the kings are usually castled on the same wing.

For clearer explanations, we refer to the attacker as being White and the defender as being Black. Of course, the roles are simply reversed when Black attacks the white king's position.

PAWN STRUCTURES IN FRONT OF THE KING

1. Pawn structure: f7, g7, h7

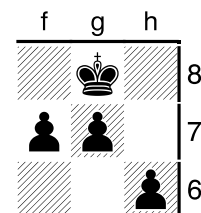
This is the best pawn structure in front of the king. The only drawback is that the black king has no escape against a mate on the back rank. This is why Black plays later h7-h6 or g7-g6.



2. Pawn structure f7, g7, h6

The drawbacks of the pawn structure after h7-h6 is played are:

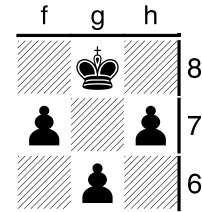
- g6-square is weaker and White can exploit this usually when has the control over the a2-g8 diagonal (pinning f7)
- the g7-pawn is overloaded by defending both the h6-pawn and the f6-square
- White can exploit the fact that Black can no longer advance g7-g6 without weakening the h6-pawn. For example, a knight on f5 cannot be chased away by g7-g6 (as h6 will be hanging).



3. Pawn structure f7, g6, h7

The drawbacks of this pawn structure are:

- the weak squares f6 and h6
- White can control the g5-square as h7-h6 is rarely possible or good.
- if Black has no bishop on g7, White threatens mates as Qh6 and Ng5 with mate on h7, or mate on g7 or h8 with the bishop and queen on the long diagonal
- the g6-pawn (even if it looks well defended) can become a target for White attacks: h2-h4-h5 opening the h-file and, then, by a piece sacrifice on g6, White can destroy black king's protection



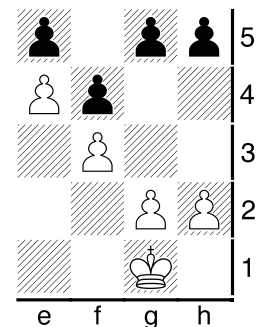
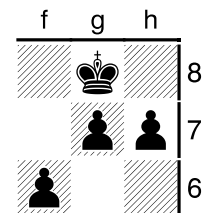
However, if Black has the g7-bishop and knight on f6, this structure is quite solid when the kings are castled on the same side. In this situation, White rarely achieves something by h2-h4-h5.

4. Pawn structure f6(f5), g7, h7

The drawbacks of moving the f-pawn are:

- the e6- and g6- squares are weak
- the a2-g8 diagonal is weak
- the pawn on f6 occupies the position where the black knight usually stays

The positions where the f-pawn is pushed are not so common for Black. We meet this pawn structure more often as White against the King's Indian Defense (closed center), where White advances the f-pawn to prevent f4-f3 and to defend the g2-pawn with a rook on the second rank.



CENTRAL PAWNS and CONTROL

The success of a wing attack (here on the kingside) is tightly connected with the central situation. There are 3 major cases:

1. **The center is closed** (That is, the center is occupied by a chain of pawns which block each other). Attacks on the wings are usually the only possible strategy, so almost surely one of the players will attack on the kingside.

2. **The center is under tension** (when the fight for the center was not yet decided or even begun). In this situation, a wing attack rarely can be successful and many times can lead to losing the game. The center must be well controlled before starting an attack.

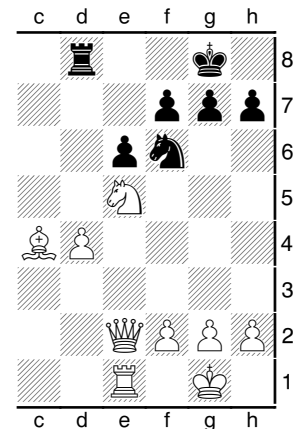
3. **The center is stable**, when both players have control over about half of the center and pawn-advances are less possible (or predictable). In these situations, the re-arrangement of pieces for an attack against the opponent king can lose the control over the center . Therefore, they must be very well analyzed beforehand.

THE CENTRAL E-PAWN

The emplacement of the e-pawns, for both White and Black, has a major importance in assessing the king's safety. There are more typical situations that we discuss here:

1. Black: pawn on e6, White: no pawn on the e-file

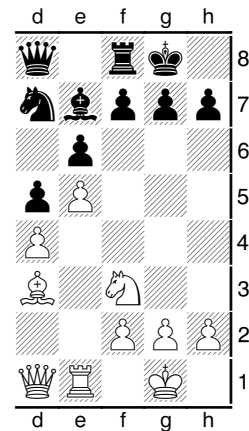
- White controls the e-file and the e5-outpost
- White can usually secure the position of a knight on e5
- White puts pressure on the f7- and e6- pawns threatening a sacrifice on f7
- White's light-square bishop is good on both a2-g8 and b1-h7 diagonals
- The black rook should stay on f8 defending the f7-pawn, in many situations.
- White can use the half-open e-file for a rook lift: Re1-e3-g3



This kind of situation on the e-file is very often met and it is typical of (but not limited to) the Isolated Pawn.

2. Black: pawn on e6, White: pawn on e5

- the e5-pawn gives White a local space advantage
- of course, the black knight is no longer on f6 defending the king, the h7-square is especially weak now
- White controls the f6-square which can be important in the case of the typical sacrifice: 1.Bxh7+ Kxh7 2.Ng5+ Kg6 (and, now, the black king cannot escape on e7 through f6)
- the b1-h7 diagonal is usually controlled by White where he can exert a strong pressure
- after the defensive move g7-g6 (often necessary), the f6-square becomes weak for Black



- In some situations, White can plan a sacrifice on f6 (Nf3-h2-g4-f6+) and after g7xf6, e5xf6, White can attack on the g-file
- the rook lift Re1-e3-g3(h3) is possible.

Black can play f7-f5 with one of two CQS:

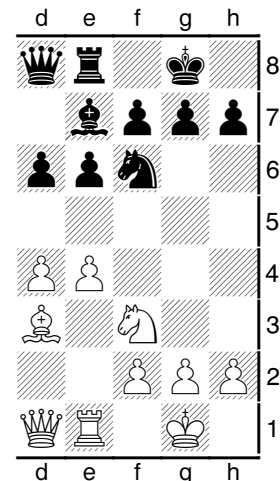
1. If White takes on f6, Black retakes with the knight bringing it back on defense and opens the f-file for his rook; or
2. If White doesn't take on f5, Black blocks White's actions on the kingside.

This advance (f7-f5) must be well calculated as after e5xf6, the e6- and e5- squares might become a problem for Black.

3. Black: pawn on e6, White: pawn on e4

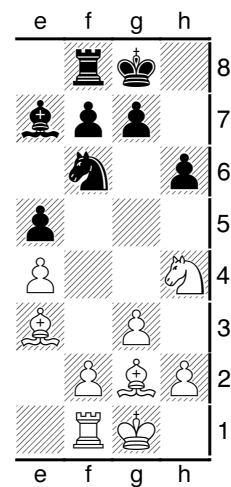
In this situation, White usually tries to find the best moment to advance the e4-pawn on e5 and start the attack. By advancing the pawn, Black usually gains a strong outpost on d5 for his f6-knight. This advance requires a good evaluation of the chances of a successful attack.

Also, the position of the pawns e4 against e6 is typical for the Scheveningen structure of the Sicilian.



4. Black: pawn on e5, White: pawn on e4

- White has no local space advantage
- White can use the f5-square for his knight (Nf3-h4-f5 or Nc3-e2-g3-f5) especially when Black has already pushed h7-h6 because g7-g6 to chase the knight away is no longer possible (the h6-pawn will be hanging). As a note: White can provoke h7-h6 by Bg5 beforehand to start the knight's maneuver
- Sometimes White can advance f2-f4 with the threat f4-f5 (and, then, even g2-g4-g5) and open the f-file for the rook. Note: sometimes it may be better for the rook to wait some moves before "activation" on another file, to determine whether the advance of the f-pawn works.



PIECES IN ATTACK

In this chapter, we present the attacking pieces and their most common ways to attack the opponent king.

1. The queen

Of course, the queen is the most important piece to use for attacking during the middlegame.

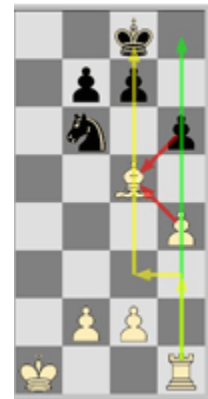
The best attacking positions for the queen are the kingside squares (any of them where she can be safe – not attacked by opponent pieces).

Other common squares for attack are d3 and b3 usually supported by a bishop on the b1-h7 or a2-g8 diagonals (creating the well-known queen + bishop “battery”). An advantage would be to have the 3rd rank clear, to be able to transfer the queen on a more active square on the kingside.

2. The kingside rook

If White has not castled yet, he can use this rook directly from h1 in 3 interesting ways:

- h2-h4 supporting the g5-square and any exchange there would open the h-file for the rook (after h4xg5)
- h2-h4 with the idea Rh1-h3-g3, and
- g2-g4 with idea Rh1-g1 and g4-g5 chasing away the f6-knight with an attack on the g-file followed, if possible, by a knight sacrifice on f6 or h2-h4-h5 and g5-g6 destroying black king's protection.

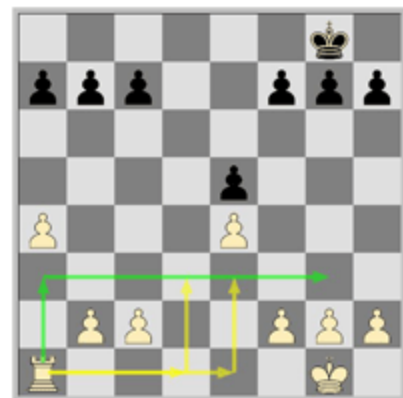


After castling, White can use the rook in attack by the rook-lift Rf1-e1-e3-g3(h3) or, if the f-pawn is pushed on f4, Rf1-f3-g3(h3).

By advancing the f-pawn (f2-f4 and even f4-f5xe6), White also intends to add his rook to the battle by attacking f6 (exchange sacrifices are seriously threatened: Rf1xNf6) and f7.

3. The queenside rook

Usually neglected, the queenside rook can be very powerful in attack and rook lifts such as Ra1-d1(c1)-d3(c3)-g3(h3) give a very strong plus to White's attack.



Besides rook-lifts, an important role of the queenside rook is to assure control and pressure on one of the central files.

While Black will be busy with defensive tasks on the kingside, this rook can exert a lot of pressure and give Black extra problems on the central files.

4. The light-square bishop

The light-square bishop is one of the main attacking pieces. It usually attacks the black king's position using the a2-g8 or b1-h7 diagonals. In other fewer cases, the bishop which was previously fianchettoed can attack on h3 targeting e6.

The bishop collaborates very well with the queen to attack on h7 or f7, or with a knight on g5 attacking on e6, f7, or h7.

5. The dark-square bishop

In most cases, this bishop attacks the black king indirectly by attacking its best defender, Nf6, from g5.

In the diagram from above, we can see the collaboration between the white pieces in attack (1.Bxf6 and 2.Qh7#).

When Black defends his king by playing g7-g6 or when Black has developed his kingside using the fianchetto structure, this bishop attacks the dark-squares or exchanges the opponent's dark-square bishop which may end with total control of these squares in White's favor.



Another position for the bishop in attack is on b2 when the long diagonal is open.

6. The queenside knight

The queenside knight attacks on 2 common routes: Nb1-d2-f1-g3(e3)-f5(h5!) or Nb1-c3-e2-g3. When it is possible, usually after the advance e4-e5 or when Black has no a good control over the center, the knight can jump in to attack using the central squares directly.



7. The kingside knight

Instead of the typical attack Nf3-g5, the kingside knight can also attack from f5 (Nf3-h4-f5 or Nf3-d4-f5, Ng1-e2-g3-f5), a very strong square for the knight when the black pawn is not on e6.

Other interesting routes for the knights are:

- Ng1-f3, pawn h2-h3, Nf3-h2-**g4** exchanging the f6-knight or with threats like Nf6+
- Ng1-e2-g3(f4)-**h5** attacking on g7!

HOW TO DEFEND

While the safety of the king is a very important element to be considered during the chess game, it is important to know that an overly defensive strategy for the king is far from good. A superiority of forces with defensive tasks results in a minority of forces which can fight for the initiative. So, we will end the king's safety presentation by giving ways to defend the king, directly or indirectly.

1. Usually, positions where Black has the pawn structure f7, g7, h7 (or h6), with knight on f6 are not easily broken as long as Black conducts an active strategy on the center.
2. **The fianchetto structure (f7, g6, h7, Bg7) and Nf6** is also usually enough as long as Black can react in the center.
3. **The light-square bishop** is a very strong defender when it arrives on the kingside by Bc8-f5 or Bc8-g4-(h5). The bishop will neutralize the white light-square bishop or will pin the f3-knight. At the end of its journey, the bishop can go on g6 defending the light-squares around the king and blocking any access to g7. However, moving the bishop on the kingside may create other problems on the queenside's light-squares.

In not a few cases, Black defends his kingside at the last moment (when the position already looks hopeless) by defending the kingside (especially h7) with moves like: Ba6-d3 or Bb7-e4.

Also, the bishop on the c8-h3 diagonal impedes White's possible rook lifts to the h3-square.



4. **The dark-square bishop** often defends the Nf6 against Bg5, by not allowing pawn structures to be disturbed after Bg5xf6, g7xf6.

Also, when White is able to provoke the advancement of g7-g6, the dark-squares in Black's camp should have their defender, the bishop.



Of course, the dark-square bishop plays a very important role in systems based upon a fianchetto on the kingside when Black tries to protect it from exchanges for White's bishop.

A common way to avoid the exchange of bishops is to play h7-h6 and Kh7 in time, immediately after White's Be3 intending Qd2 and Bh6. Of course, the weakening of pawn structure with h7-h6 is not recommended when White has castled on the other side.

Another method to avoid the exchange of the fianchettoed bishop is to move the rook on f8-e and after Be3(g5)-h6 to respond with the retreat to Bg7-h8.



5. **The kingside rook** can be a very important defender for the f7-pawn which White can attack by means of Ng5 or Ne5, Qh5, B on a2-g8 diagonal or by opening the f-file. Also, the rook on f8 can support the advance of the f7-pawn on f5 in some cases.

However, the rook is not always good on f8 because it also restricts the mobility of the king which could find a safe place on f8.

In other cases, the f8-square can be better used by a knight. For example, if White attacks the knight on f6 with e4-e5, Black can still defend the kingside with Nf6-d7-f8.



6. **The queenside rook** can defend the king's position by two methods:
- defending the 7th rank (usually from a7 or c7), especially when the f7-pawn has been pushed forward
 - controlling an advanced rank (4th or 5th ranks) if this is open thereby obstructing the play of the white pieces



7. **The queen** is a bad defender especially when White attacks with more pieces. However, the queen can end the attack if she finds a way to exchange the opponent queen.

Another method of defending is by using the queen indirectly: when White has his pieces attacking on the kingside, the black queen can find ways to enter the opponent's unprotected camp. Usually such an entrance ends badly for the attacking player who has left undefended and un-coordinated minor pieces behind.



8. **The queenside knight** can be used for defense with success as we know that the knights are excellent defenders. For example, the knight can stay on d7 defending the f6 knight or come right to the kingside via: Nd7-f8-g6(e6) or Nc6-e7.

However, in many cases, Black can use the queenside knight in active actions on the queenside (as the black queen), creating unpleasant problems for the unprotected white camp.

Together with the comments on the given annotated games and the other two theoretical lessons, you should have all the information necessary to assess the safety of the king during the middlegame. Moreover, you can gather more information by studying the typical strategies of attack and defense of typical positions (that we will discuss further in our course) as well as specifics of the openings you are playing.