

# INTERNATIONAL CHESS SCHOOL



**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 cover the correct way to study and train in order to make progress in chess. We also discuss how to enjoy your training, how to put into 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 what to look at and you have more ideas. You find beauty in intelligent moves and plans. Look at masters, for example, and see how much they enjoy analyzing interesting games to 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. This will also improve your chess understanding, which will bring you more satisfaction...

## SET YOUR OBJECTIVES. FORGET ABOUT RATINGS!

First, you need to understand what a chess master wants on the board and, only after that, you can beat him soundly. 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 an objective is tricky and is 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, play some 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 showing that an emphasis on ratings may be tricky is Magnus Carlsen who, when aged 14–15 and in the full process of his chess development, experienced a fall in his rating over more than a year. He then 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 a real chess board**, to use your mind like you would in a real game and to mimic tournament conditions. You should not train in front of the screen, which distorts your visualization of the board 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 in websites and apps made to be used on the screen: *“Solve using a board. Solve [problems] 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 and 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 real confrontation of two minds and you cannot play a single move without thinking first.

## INTENSIVE TRAINING SESSIONS. TRAIN YOUR BRAIN!

The study of lessons and games, or 30–90 minutes spent solving positions without interruption\* and with maximum concentration, is *intensive work*. This intensive work is what trains your brain and improves your chess.

\* Chess players are advised to take breaks every 30 minutes. See the *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 Dr Rahul Jandial, a brain surgeon and neuroscientist.

You should *aim* for intensive training sessions of 30 minutes or longer. However, don’t go over 90 minutes because, normally, our concentration then 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 and for individual work.** 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 to increase a student’s retention of knowledge by twice as much compared with traditional learning and it improves their performance by 25–38%. It is also true that active learners are much less likely to abandon their studies.

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

strategic resources.

When you are in ‘solve mode’, you are mimicking tournament conditions and are **training to put in practice your knowledge** for when you play real games. However, if you don’t study over the board but instead use a screen, your mind knows that it’s a virtual thing. Then you cannot be really involved and your training is not efficient.

## STUDY FAST AND STAY FOCUSED

Prefer *quality* over *quantity* when training, but don’t be slow. People who 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 concentrating more and less likely to be distracted or to think about other things.**

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

Follow the example of children, who care less about the details and yet 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 if you are 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 real games when you are under time pressure.

What’s more is that, when you study and solve exercises quickly, 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 *Grandmaster Package*<sup>™</sup> (free samples on our website). Make a habit to think in the prescribed way. It will help both beginners and experienced players to think simply, make plans correctly, see more moves ahead, avoid mistakes and... approach the game like a strong player.

The final four months of the *Grandmaster Package*<sup>™</sup> offer advanced chess training for the thinking process and prepare the student for master level and beyond. You can spend from 5 to 20 minutes to solve each of these 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 in a notebook or on some flashcards. These bits of preserved knowledge can be helpful later when you are confronted with similar patterns.

Read your notes again when you review each lesson and add any new notes that you consider useful. Review your notes every 2–4 weeks 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 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 or create mental anchors with other lessons and/or with your own games.

**Reviewing a lesson at least once will help you to retain the information.** Chess players often want to memorize some opening or endgame theory as these require accuracy. Reviewing a lesson two or three times at 2- and then 4-week intervals and taking notes are good methods to help you to **MEMORIZE** the material!

## STUDY ADVANCED MATERIALS

Anatoly Karpov ‘complained’ that, in his first match against Kasparov, he gave his opponent ‘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 thing happens 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/her and a Grandmaster, the answer will be: “*Strategy!*” There should be no question as to what is the biggest difference between a club player and a master. Again, it is strategy. There are many masters who 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, they will choose a wrong direction of play. After some moves, they will reach the end of the road and will not see any further logical continuation. At this point, the player usually makes a tactical error. Analysis with a chess engine 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 players concerns strategy. We can only confirm that this is true.

**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 to a weaker player, bring small advantages that accumulate and become a clear strategic advantage. Only a sound positional understanding can make you play better and eventually beat stronger opponents.

CALCULATION: without evaluating our opponent's tactical and strategic resources, our strategy can fail. Thus, we often need to calculate variations. **Calculation, together with tactics, should form one part of a complete chess course.**

Tactical operations or forced lines have to be calculated precisely. However, most of the calculation that we need to do during a game is constituted by unforced lines – to prevent an opponent's dangerous ideas and to choose the best way to realize our own. Positional thinking will help us to predict how the opponent would play against us, and to identify 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' (or 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 constitutes a tactical asset.** A chess player who understands well the quality and dynamics 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 to 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 and strategy, and also train your calculation skills, the better you will become as a chess player. Study various materials about the 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 materials. There are people who try many books and courses, who 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 that they don't have enough time for study. The problem is down to an unorganized approach to chess training and to various other distractions.

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

For example, the *Grandmaster Package*<sup>TM</sup> is almost an all-inclusive chess training scheme, and students who allot around 5 hours a week to work through it manage to finish it in just a year. Completing such a core course should be made a priority of chess training. The results are worth it – some of our students have reached ratings of 2200 and above having used almost exclusively our materials.

## ANNOTATED GAMES

Replaying annotated games is an excellent and pleasant form of chess training. It may be so enjoyable that it could easily replace other 'fun' activities that don't bring real benefits, such as online blitz games.

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

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

If you want to use a game for intensive training, after the opening moves start to think as if it is 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 is used, this means that it's an important moment and so you can spend a little more time thinking

about what you should do. After you have decided the move that you would play, check the actual move that was made along with 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 course.

A chess teacher is, indeed, helpful when you have questions that you have tried to answer by yourself first. Remember the '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 our students sometimes ask us why another solution that they have found is not good. This makes us happy as it shows us that these students work seriously for their chess.

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

## PHYSICAL HEALTH

Physical exercise is very important not just for the body, but for the brain as well. 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 in more information, search online for "neurobiological effects of physical exercise". We also recommend the book *Sitting Kills, Moving Heals* by Joan Vernikos Ph.D., the former director of NASA's Life Sciences Division.

In particular, 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 to relax and to be fresh for the next move.

A good night's sleep of 7–9 hours is also very important. Among many other things, this helps you to memorize or recall information, concentrate well and remain calm.

## Be Careful With...

### TECHNOLOGY – USE IT CORRECTLY

Computers and the Internet are great tools for chess players, from beginners to grandmasters. Having easy access to information and the support of engines is what has made chess so strong today. Through modern technology, we can access all the games played in any important tournament in the world. We can also analyze positions with chess engines that are stronger than any grandmaster.

However, we should not use the computer instead of our brain. It should only be used to help us in certain aspects of our chess training. As with anything that is used too much or inappropriately, technology can also halt your progress.

Top grandmasters like Maxime Vachier-Lagrave never turn on chess engines before their games. They try to rely only on their own brains when preparing for a match. If you want to increase your brain power, you should analyze positions in the way that has already been described in this guide. You should train *your brain* and, if you really want, use the engine only at the end of a game to verify the accuracy of your original analysis.

## MINIMIZE THE USE OF THE SCREEN

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

Good chess coaches and strong players know that **using a screen for chess deforms a player's '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 of blunders.

Remember how clear Garry Kasparov was about NOT using the computer screen: *“Solve [problems] 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* them 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 form of 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 existing 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 playing impulsively, teaching them to think well before moving the pieces. You cannot play good chess if you don't think hard and long enough.

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

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

That is why playing too much blitz, even on a real board, is detrimental to your chess and your efforts to improve your game. Asked if playing blitz is good training for chess, Kramnik 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 – played on a screen with a virtual rating at stake – is addictive. At any time of day and night, you'll find many players online.

People who play online blitz usually fight fiercely for their virtual rating. For that reason, they are so tense that there 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 playing with an opponent in front of you – you often miss out on good manners and respect. In online arenas, there is a general lack of fair play and consideration. Therefore, besides not improving your game, online blitz does not leave very pleasant memories either.

We recommend that everyone plays in real, over-the-board chess tournaments. One or two tournaments a year are a true delight and leave good memories. Even blitz or rapid chess at a local chess club is incomparably 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 good chess training. There is one more important aspect: **you need to be organized and you should follow a plan of study.**

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

- **Avoid irrelevant information.** There is a ton of material nowadays but you need to follow your own plan. Every minute spent on irrelevant information drives you away from your objectives.
- **Avoid multitasking.** Chess is very complex and therefore please remember to focus on only 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 only one aspect of chess preparation, usually tactics or openings. Both these things are important, but not when they don't leave sufficient time for training the other aspects of chess. 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 some 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 good 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 and 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 that you reach.

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 into 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 result in certain 'key positions' in the middlegame. Study these positions, their 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 these key positions.</p> <p>So, <u>an important part of 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 the correct strategy in any given 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 openings.</p>	

After you have built your opening repertoire, you need to review the main or critical variations from time to time. This will help you to refresh your memory.

In our *Opening Repertoire*, 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.

## MIDDLEGAME

4/8–5/8 of your chess time

The middlegame should be the main part of your 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*<sup>™</sup> and good books.
- Middlegame training should also include calculation. A good chess player needs to calculate moves ahead and evaluate 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 constitute for the most part training for the middlegame. Longer games also include endgames and provide excellent training opportunities for this part of the game. All the annotated games from our extra courses include 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 in any



endgame book.

For beginners/intermediates, we recommend Jesus de la Villa's book, *100 Endgames You Must Know*, and, for advanced players, we recommend Mark Dvoretsky's *Endgame Manual* (both books are available to buy on Amazon).

After you know the important theoretical endgames, you may want to train with different endgame positions. This will also improve your calculation skills as 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 titled '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 account for around one-eighth of the total time that you spend training for chess.

Get a book with many tactical positions like the *Encyclopedia of Chess Combinations* (you can buy this from either Amazon or [www.sahovski.com](http://www.sahovski.com)) and solve the exercises over the board. As the exercises are organized into different tactical motifs, you can learn particular motifs well. Another form of training is to choose positions at random so you won't know the tactical motif. Don't mark the solved exercises because solving a position more times will strengthen learned patterns. This way, a book with several thousand positions becomes 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 tournament conditions when you must be *confident* that you've found all the defenses and possibilities before you move, especially when your move involves a sacrifice.

It's important to do tactical training, but don't overdo it otherwise, when you play a game, you'll look far too hard for 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 to see more moves ahead, identify more possibilities and, very importantly, spot tactical weaknesses and prevent blunders. Board visualization training is offered in months 2–4 of the *Grandmaster Package*<sup>™</sup> but you are advised to do it every week for a few minutes at a time.