



C O L U M N I S T S

Novice Nook

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Chess Books and Prerequisites

One of the principal ways in which a chess player picks up knowledge is through reading chess books, or via other chess media (software, videos, etc.). It is often debated as to which are the most instructive, good for beginners, most unique, etc. So it is important to understand how this dynamically growing set of material can be comprehended, especially which material either requires (or is better understood) by learning other material first. This knowledge is similar to understanding prerequisites for high school or college courses.

Just because a book contains lots of information that you don't know, it doesn't necessarily mean that it will be extremely helpful in making you better at this point in your chess development. As an analogy, take a student from Spanish I and put him in Spanish IV, or a middle school student studying social studies and put him in graduate school microeconomics. In both cases it is easy to see that the student is now in an environment where there is lots of unknown information, but it will not be very helpful to him.

Much more subtle is the case of chess books, because any intelligent adult can pick up a well written chess book and both understand the material and see that it contains information he does not currently know. The problem is that, unlike Spanish IV, he may not be able to tell that the material, while understandable, is not the right kind of information that will help take him to the next level. This information may even be somewhat counterproductive if the student misperceives that it IS helpful

For example let's consider Jeremy Silman's excellent book *How to Reassess Your Chess*. In my opinion, this book is slightly more advanced than his other similar great work, *The Amateur's Mind*. Both deal with fairly advanced positional and planning subjects – certainly not advanced to a Grandmaster, but advanced for beginning adults - in the sense that these players are still making basic tactical mistakes and will get diminishing returns for studying positional and planning niceties. It would not be possible to fully use these books without having (mis-)absorbed some of the basic positional ideas and thinking guidelines they intend to correct. So, for example, you might first read a text like Pachman's *Modern Chess Strategy* or even Nimzovich's classic *My System* to learn about positional ideas before you read *The Amateur's Mind* to see how beginning and intermediate players often

incorrectly prioritize this information and thus misapply it.

Many players who are not yet ready for *How to Reassess Your Chess* mistakenly think that just because it is well written and contains a lot of good information that they understand and do not already know, that it must be able to help them immensely. As a full-time chess instructor I have run into dozens of players who feel this way about Silman's books (or others), including both students and non-students who wish to discuss improvement with me. However, when I look at their rating and their games, it quickly becomes obvious that they are not sufficiently familiar with "removal of the guard" tactical patterns, or other similar basic tactical motifs, to play a reasonable "intermediate tournament player" level game, say 1500-1700 USCF. Instead they have "adult beginner" ratings of 900-1400.

Yet many of them swear by *How to Reassess Your Chess* because they learned so much from it. The problem is that knowing when a Bishop is superior to a Knight or how to identify the static strengths and weaknesses of your opponent's position is not too much use if you lose pieces regularly, or don't understand the principles you need to win a game when you are ahead a piece. At this point in their development these players would improve more rapidly learning about the more basic guidelines found in my *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book* or from (re-) studying a book on tactical motifs (see my archived [ChessCafe.com](#) column "A Different Approach to Studying Tactics").

There is no universal guide to the intended audience of chess books, nor even unanimous opinions. Most reviewers (and some book introductions) do a good job in describing a book's intended audience. Sometimes internet user groups have interesting discussions on this very point. But it is still more difficult than it may seem for inexperienced chess players to figure out which books they should probably explore next.

While I cannot solve that problem in this column (it is occasionally addressed in book form, like John Grefe's now out-of-date *Progressing Through Chess*), I can aid the reader with some general guidelines regarding reading order – via specific recommendations – for different categories. I have about 600 chess books, give or take a few, so I feel somewhat qualified to suggest – I have even read most of the non-reference books! It is worth repeating the obvious – these are my opinions only and no one agrees 100% with any list like the following...

Opening Books

The first thing to learn about openings are general opening principles. It is of no use to purchase "The XYZ variation of the Caro-Kann" and try to learn it if you can't follow a guideline like "Try to move every

piece once before you move any piece twice, unless moving a piece twice is necessary for safety (good for your safety or bad for his!).” While strong players break this guideline all the time, weak players would be better off following it religiously until they can understand better when not to!

One classic book on general opening principles is “*How to Open a Chess Game*” by seven grandmasters, now out of print. Fine’s vintage *The Ideas Behind the Chess Openings* tells you how each opening’s pawn structure dictates where the pieces should go and what kind of pawn advances would be called for in the middle game. There are other general opening books on the market; I won’t try to recommend one, but if you find one you like, this should be the first opening book you purchase. An advanced book of this type is Suetin’s *Modern Chess Opening Theory*.

I would also recommend a one-stop encyclopedic book like *Nunn’s Chess Openings* or *Modern Chess Openings 14*. These books won’t tell you how to understand the chess openings, but they can’t be beat if you don’t know what you should have played and want a recommendation as to which moves might have been better. Many of my students do not know how to use these books; it takes a little practice. After you learn how to look something up in them, my suggestion is to use an encyclopedia consistently to slowly build up your opening tree.

Once you identify an opening you really like and wish to learn in more depth, then should you pick up a book on a particular opening or variation. Start with ones that explain the opening variations and are not just meant for advanced players. Be aware of the difference between a repertoire book and a regular one. A repertoire book champions either the Black or White side of an opening and only gives one (or possibly two) recommendations for moves in a particular position for that side, while showing most of the opponent’s possibilities. A regular opening book does not champion a side, and may show multiple possibilities for either player on each move, while still pointing out which of those possibilities it thinks may be best. Thus a repertoire book can be “thinner” while concentrating on the themes for the player of one color.

Finally, I cannot resist mentioning the advanced opening book of which IM John Watson said in his review, “This may be the most thorough work ever on a particular subject!” He was referring to *The Traxler Counterattack*, my e-book available on CD-ROM. I spent about 2,000 hours doing computer analysis to revise and even refute current theory on this sharpest of openings. I now have a second similar work, *The Computer Analyzes the Fried Liver/Lolli*, which

continues the analysis of sharp lines in the Two Knights Defense.

Tactics

I have covered this subject in previous columns, but to summarize: Buy a book (Bain's *Tactics for Students* or Wollum's *The Chess Tactics Workbook*) or software (*Chess Mentor 2.0* or *Chess Tactics for Beginners* by Convekta) with hundreds of basic tactical motif problems (pins, double attacks, removal of the guard, etc.) and study it until you can do each problem quickly. I recommend non-mate books first, since checkmates are rarer than tactics, which can occur on almost every move! For checkmates, Polgar's *Chess: 5334 Problems, Combinations, and Games* and Renaud and Kahn's *The Art of the Checkmate* are great, in different ways. Only then are you ready for books that combine motifs ("combinations"). At the intermediate level (but in descriptive) is Reinfeld's *1,001 Sacrifices and Combinations* and a recent very good one is Albur's *Chess Training Pocket Book*. Software at that level includes Convekta's *CT-ART 3.0*. For advanced players, Nunn's *Chess Puzzle Book* and Vukovic's *The Art of Attack* are highly recommended.

Personal Game Collections

The general theory, which I believe is correct, is that individuals learn chess ideas in roughly the same order that these ideas were discovered by the top players over the past few centuries. Following that reasoning, beginners should start their studies with players who lived in simpler chess times, but also players with a tactical style. Therefore, starting with the games of Morphy is not a bad idea. I would recommend Frank Marshall next before moving to modern tactical players like Tal. To study players with a more universal style, start with Lasker and Tarrasch, and then Spassky and Fischer. The more dynamic school might follow the order Alekhine, Botvinnik, and Kasparov. Finally, the more subtle positional school starts with Steinitz, followed by the clear play of Capablanca, and then the murkier Petrosian and Karpov. There are many other very fine game collections: Korchnoi, Bronstein, Larsen, Gligoric, Kramnik, Shirov, Speelman, Anand, Timman, and Nunn, to name a few. If you get through all of those, you are probably quite a good player just from osmosis!

Note: game collections authored by the player himself are almost always superior to those written by others, and some authors have multiple books/collections, so in this section I have not named individual works.

General Game Collections

There are many good general game collections. A classic one to start is Chernev's *Logical Chess Move by Move* (mentioned below as also a

good positional primer). A next step would be the same author's *The Most Instructive Games Ever Played*. Euwe and Meiden's *Chess Master vs. Chess Amateur* is a classic. For an up-to-date and great advanced book, try Nunn's *Understanding Chess Move by Move*. A more general work, Nunn and Burgess' *The Greatest Chess Games Ever Played* is also, well, great. Bronstein's *Zurich 1953* is considered by many to be the best chess book ever written; it is good.

Positional Texts

This is where it gets more difficult. There are two major sub-categories to consider:

- Static considerations such as pawn structures
- Planning (and evaluation)

Neither subject lends itself well to beginner books, so there are not many of these. Some books attempt to cover the whole range from beginner to advanced, and Nimzovich's rightfully-famous *My System* is at the head of the list – it even covers non-positional topics.

Probably the best “beginner” positional books are the most general chess instruction books. So Patrick Wolff's great “first” chess book, *Complete Idiot's Guide to Chess*, would qualify, as would Chernev's classic *Logical Chess Move by Move*, and I might humbly add my *Everyone's 2nd Chess Book* to this list. Anyone who starts with these three simple, different, and incisive chess books and progresses to basic tactics books is getting a great start in chess! Several classics, such as Emmanuel Lasker's *Common Sense in Chess* and Capablanca's *Chess Primer*, are in this category (Yes, I know there are the diehard Tarrasch, Reti, and Tartakower fans...)

There are several classic “intermediate” positional texts. One of the most basic and unjustly maligned is Horowitz and Mott-Smith's *Point Count Chess*. If you ignore the point count method and just study its examples, it is a great, but alas out-of-print text. A terrific book (with never-adopted nomenclature) is Kmoch's *Pawn Power in Chess*. Other well-known works are Pachman's *Modern Chess Strategy* and Euwe and Kramer's two-volume set, *The Middle Game*, covering static and dynamic features.

Once you understand the basic positional texts, then you are ready for a more modern treatment of the subject, starting with Evans' interesting *New Ideas in Chess*, my *Elements of Positional Evaluation* (originally written in the 1970's), and the modern work with a similar theme but great scope and examples, Watson's superb *Secrets of Modern Chess Strategy*. Watson's book is one of the most advanced of any in this article.

A “pure” planning book is Euwe’s *Judgement and Planning in Chess*. A recent one that does it by example is Chris Ward’s *It’s Your Move*.

Thinking Process

This is a broad category which could include many works. In a sense all beginner’s books attempt to tell you what to think about, but not necessarily how; I definitely touch on this in *Everyone’s 2nd Chess Book*. Given that premise, if the subject is purely thinking, then the book should probably be classified at least at the intermediate level. The following are varied works that I found interesting: the best known is Kotov’s series, which starts with *Think Like a Grandmaster*; Abrahams’ *The Chess Mind*, the new Przewoznik and Marek’s *How to Think in Chess*, Rowson’s recently acclaimed *The Seven Deadly Chess Sins* (which I am reading now), the opening chapters of Dvoretsky and Yusupov’s *Attack and Defense*, and the granddaddy of them all, deGroot’s thesis-like *Thought and Choice in Chess*. Even a book about the non-chessboard side of thinking, like Webb’s practical *Chess for Tigers*, can be very helpful.

Endgames

A good beginner endgame book is *Pandolfini’s Endgame Course*. I told this to Bruce and he of course was flattered and he said he wanted to update it, but that his publisher told him it was too popular as it was! I wish I could have such problems. Hall’s *Endgame Challenge* contains many crucial positions, and many of these basic ideas are explained in Averbach’s *Essential Chess Endgames*. More advanced players would love Soltis’ *Grandmaster Secrets of the Endgame* and of course Fine’s encyclopedic *Basic Chess Endgames* is the classic.

Others

There are lots of chess books - and many more types! Most can be read in almost any order. Everyone might enjoy some of the following: Chernev’s *Fireside Book of Chess* or *Bright Side of Chess*, Assaic’s *The Pleasures of Chess*, Soltis’ *The Art of Defense in Chess*, Rimmer’s *Castling to Win* (aka *Fantastic Castling*), Tim Krabbé’s award-winning and wonderful *Chess Curiosities*, or even my *The Improving Annotator*. Oh, it might be a good idea to have a copy of *The Official Rules of Chess*. The US Chess Federation will be coming out with their fifth edition soon.

Authors

For my money, Dr. John Nunn is the best of the prolific chess authors. All of Andrew Soltis’ serious works (usually his non-opening books) are excellent. I have already expressed my admiration for Silman. Some earlier authors like Ludek Pachman and Max Euwe are justly renowned.

Did I leave out any great books and authors? Of course, but this is

only a column...! Do I suggest you read all these books? Heavens, no! – I would substitute *The Best of Calvin and Hobbes* or the chess novel *The Eight* for some variety. But I hope this information helps you figure out which ones will more “smoothly” aid your improvement, and postpone those for which you do not yet have the prerequisites.

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