



BATSFORD CHESS

500

**CHESS
QUESTIONS
ANSWERED**



Andrew Soltis



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1500



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500 Chess Questions Answered

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Contents

Foreword

Chapter One: Talent

Chapter Two: Material

Chapter Three: Choosing a Move

Chapter Four: Tactics

Chapter Five: Mistakes

Chapter Six: Studying

Chapter Seven: Evaluating

Chapter Eight: Trading

Chapter Nine: Openings

Chapter Ten: Pawns

Chapter Eleven: Calculating

Chapter Twelve: Sacrificing

Chapter Thirteen: Endgames

Chapter Fourteen: How Games End

Chapter Fifteen: Defending

Chapter Sixteen: Style

Chapter Seventeen: Rulebook

Chapter Eighteen: Winning a Won Game

Chapter Nineteen: Training

Chapter Twenty: Technical Terms

Chapter Twenty One: Strategy

Chapter Twenty Two: Practical Matters

Chapter Twenty Three: Tournaments

Chapter Twenty Four: Ratings and Titles

Chapter Twenty Five: Miscellany

Index

Openings Index

Foreword

This is a book for people who are discovering how hard it is to get better at chess. They are learning more. But they are also learning there is much more to learn.

They have scanned Web sites and blogs, browsed books and watched videos. But for every question these resources answer, they have more questions that go unanswered.

I've tried to answer the most often asked questions. Here is some advice before you start.

Don't try to swallow too much in one sitting. A dozen questions may be a lot to absorb. Chess ideas take a while to sink in.

But feel free to open this book on any page when you have a spare moment. Improving is incremental. Allow yourself to take the increments.

For many of the questions and answers, you won't need a board and pieces or a computer. Even for the questions that have diagrams and move analysis, you may benefit by reading the text first and coming back to the page later – when you have time to think about it again and you can see more clearly what the moves mean.

Finally, I'd like to thank my wife, Marcy, and others who helped with this book, including Andras, Debra, Kevin and Lubosh.

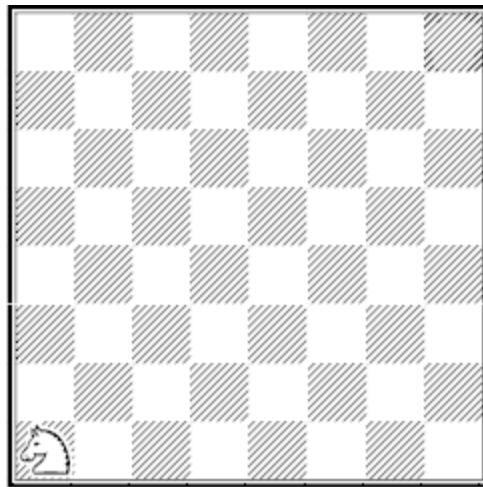
Andrew Soltis
New York 2021

Chapter One: Talent

1. Do I need natural talent to play chess?

No – and there is some doubt natural chess talent exists.

There have been many attempts to detect it. But the results are inconclusive. Perhaps the most famous aptitude tests were created by a Czech scientist, Pavel Cerny, to study his country's young players.



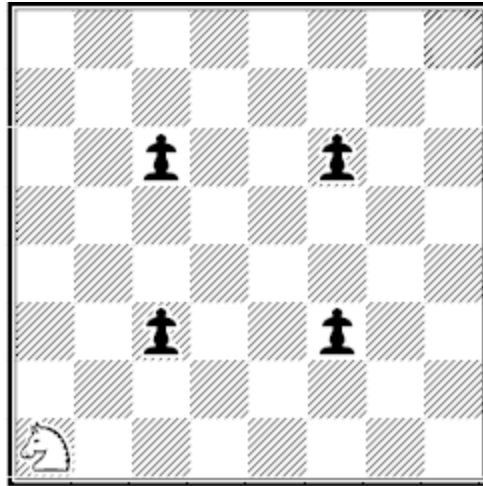
Knight tour to b1

In this first version, he asked subjects to figure out how to get the knight to b1 in the fewest moves. Simple enough.

Once they did that, he asked them to get it from b1 to c1. The test continued as the subjects had to reach d1, then e1 and so on to h1.

Once the first rank was done, the knight had to reach a2, then b2, c2 and all the second-rank squares. This was followed by the third-rank squares, and so on until the knight had gotten to h8. The subjects were asked to do it as quickly as they could.

Cerny devised a second, more challenging version of his test. He added four Black pawns.



Knight tour to h8

The knight had to perform the same task but without capturing a pawn or landing on a square that allowed a pawn to capture it.

Most experienced players can solve the second version in less than ten minutes.

2. So doing it quickly determines whether you are born with talent?

Not that alone. That is controversial.

One of the subjects, Lubos Kavalek, performed the second task in less than four minutes. He later became a grandmaster. But he called Cerny's project "a stupid test."

What seems clearer is this: If you take the tests a second time and perform the tasks faster than the first time, you have the talent *to learn chess*.

This confirms a long-held belief of chess teachers: The best gauge of ability is how well you can absorb what you study and then apply it.

Lothar Schmid, a grandmaster and world correspondence chess champion, said:

“You can tell if you have talent if you understand what a weak square is, what development really means. If a young player can grasp these things quickly then he has talent.”

3. But what about chess prodigies? They must be born with talent.

A Hungarian psychologist did not believe natural talent existed and realized there was one way to prove it: By turning his children into prodigies.

After studying the biographies of hundreds of great thinkers, he concluded they were not born geniuses. Rather, they had intensely studied a specialized subject when they were young.

The psychologist, László Polgar, tried to do this with his three young daughters. They became the most famous female prodigies in chess history.

And, by the way, the term “chess prodigy” is obsolete.

It made sense when Bobby Fischer became a grandmaster at 15 because he was so unique. But since Fischer did that, more than three generations ago, there have been more than 40 youngsters who earned the grandmaster title at an earlier age. The rarity of a “chess prodigy” has disappeared.

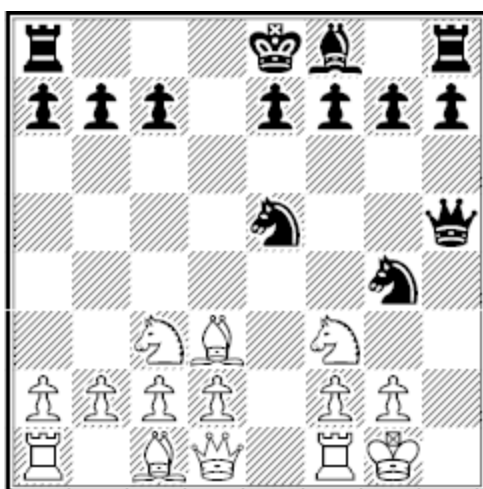
4. Do you have to be smart to play chess well?

There are very good players who have normal IQs. And there are very bright people who are terrible at chess. Bill Gates was mated by Magnus Carlsen in 12 seconds.

Gates – Carlsen

London 2014

1 e4 ♘c6 2 ♘f3 d5 3 ♘d3 ♘f6 4 exd5 ♔xd5 5 ♘c3 ♔h5 6 o-o ♘g4 7 h3? ♘e5?! 8 hxg4 ♘fxg4



White to move

The world chess champion is bluffing a billionaire, with a threat of 9... ♘xf3+ and 10... ♔h2.

Gates would have been winning after 9 ♔e1!.

But the game ended with 9 ♘xe5?? ♔h2 mate.

Some great players showed flashes of brilliance long before they mastered chess. Mikhail Tal, a future world champion, could multiply three-figure digits when he was 5. But many other masters showed no particular gifts when growing up.

5. What personality traits make someone a good chess player?

Masters often say it takes the ability to concentrate, the capacity to work and strong willpower.

Once you begin to compete in tournaments, two other qualities – self-confidence and honesty – are valuable.

But there is one attribute you need to get started.

6. What is that?

Curiosity.

An extreme example was featured early in the TV series *The Queen's Gambit*. Some viewers questioned how Beth Harmon, the main character, could be so obsessed with chess that she could not sleep. She visualized pieces on the ceiling of her bedroom instead.

László Polgar, that Hungarian psychologist, recalled how one night he found his daughter Sophia in the family bathroom, with the light on and a chessboard in her lap. She was fascinated by a position and her curiosity would not let go.

“Sophia, leave the pieces alone,” he said.

“Daddy, they won’t leave me alone!” she replied.

You don’t need insomnia-inducing curiosity to play well. But you need to be curious to keep learning.

7. How does self-confidence and honesty fit in?

You need self-confidence to overcome doubts when you choose a move. You need to be honest with yourself to recognize your chess

weaknesses when you make bad moves. Then you can correct them.

8. You didn't mention memory. Is there a lot to memorize in chess?

Yes, and it is very important – if you hope to become world champion. But if you just want to become a good player, memory is not very important.

You will need to memorize several opening moves, some common middlegame patterns and a few basic endgame positions.

But there have been several great players who had a poor memory. Richard Réti, one of the most profound chess thinkers of the 20th century, was notoriously absent-minded and regularly lost his briefcase.

A 21st century world champion, Vishy Anand, said his memory helped him early in his chess career – because he used it to pass school tests without doing a lot of homework. This saved him time to study chess instead.

9. Does pure rote learning help?

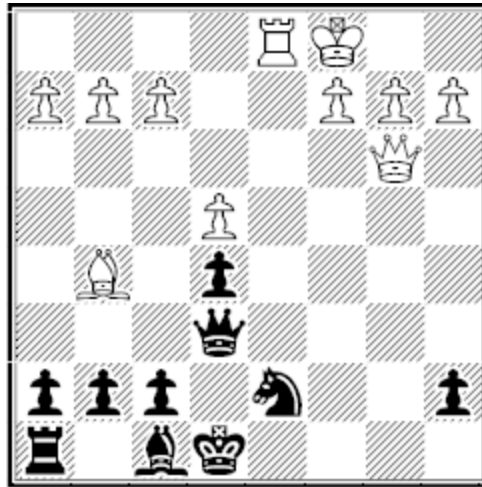
Masters say no. Yet they spend hours before a game memorizing dozens of opening moves.

Rote learning of certain chess material helps. You can master some basic endgame positions, for example, the way you master the multiplication table.

But there is a limit to what you can retain.

There have been young players who memorized dozens of tactical patterns. They could solve a “White to move and win” position.

Yet they did not fully understand the position. When shown the same position with the board reversed they could not find the same win.



White to move and win

This is the finish to one of the most famous games ever played, a brilliancy by the American superstar Paul Morphy. But it is usually presented with the White pieces at the bottom and the Black ones at the top.

The player who can solve it in the original form but not in this one has wasted his time memorizing. (Morphy ended the game with 16 ♖b8+! ♜xb8 17 ♔d8 mate.)

10. How long will it take me to become good at chess?

If you take chess seriously for two months, studying when you can, you should be able to beat an opponent who doesn't study at all.

11. How long will it take to become very good?

Very good should take years. So does being able to speak Mandarin fluently, play a Chopin piano concerto or perform any difficult skill.

Here's a very rough estimate: It typically takes a player seven or eight years to reach about 90 percent of his chess potential.

Magnus Carlsen learned how the chess pieces move when he was 5. He didn't study the game until he had an incentive – to beat his older sister. But once he took the game seriously he reached grandmaster strength in eight years.

12. What can I accomplish if I start later in life?

Chess is easiest to learn when you are young, your mind is most pliable and you have plenty of free time to spend on a board game.

Psychologist Anders Ericsson cited the Polgar sisters in explaining his theory that people can master a subject after at least 10,000 hours of “deliberate practice.” You are not likely to have that many hours and that much productive studying later in life.

Yet many great players – and many more who became merely good players – started later than the Polgars. Akiba Rubinstein did not know how the pieces move until he was 14. Leonid Stein became a master at 24. Both men eventually became candidates for the world championship.

13. Can a late start in chess be helpful?

Yes, there is less chance of burnout.

There are youngsters who learned to play at six and won trophies in scholastic events four years later. But they never got much beyond what they knew at 10 and gave up chess a few years later.

A late start may also allow you to maintain enthusiasm longer.

“The sooner you start, the quicker you lose your interest or ambition,” said Lajos Portisch. He got his first chess set when he was 12, played in his national championship six years later and remained in the world’s elite for more than 30 years.

14. Are there any other qualities of a good player that aren’t obvious?

Yes, the ability to get over a loss. You are going to lose hundreds of games before you become good at chess. You can’t let them haunt you.

Sunil Weeramantry was an accomplished chess teacher before he taught his two sons to play. He recalled how his younger son, future star Hikaru Nakamura, reacted after this game.

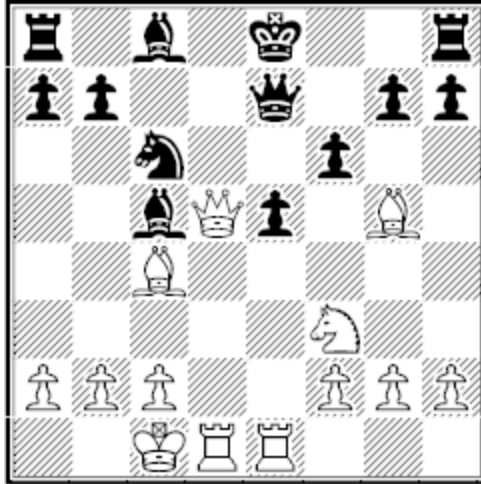
Becerra – Nakamura

US Chess League 2009

1 e4 c5 2 f3 f6 3 e5 d5 4 c3 e6 5 xd5 exd5 6 d4 c6 7 dxc5 xc5 8 xd5 d6 9 c4 e7? 10 g5! f6 11 o-o-o!

Now 11...fxg5 12 exd6 is very bad and so is 11...xe5 12 xe5 dxe5 13 b5+.

Play continued **11...dxe5 12 he1.**



Black to move

This is what a big lead in development looks like. It generates threats such as 13 ♖xe5! ♖xe5 14 ♔xe5! ♔xe5 15 ♔d8 mate.

Black looked at the lost 12...fxg5 13 ♖xe5! and the dismal 12...♗e6 13 ♔xe6 ♔xe6 14 ♖xe6 fxg5 15 ♖xe5. He decided to resign.

“Do you think he was upset?” Weeramantry recalled. “He just laughed and said it won’t happen again.”

You won’t learn something from every game you play. The most meaningful lessons may come in the games that leave you saying to yourself “It won’t happen again.” Appreciating those games is one of the elements of true chess talent.

Chapter Two: Material

15. What is “material” and why do we call it that?

It means the pieces and pawns. We probably adopted the term from the French *matériel*, meaning military equipment.

Like many technical terms in chess it is a bit clumsy but so widely used it would be impossible to change now.

16. When does a material advantage matter most?

In the endgame. Just one extra pawn may be enough to win then.

But that is only a minor, potential factor in the opening. A material edge gradually grows in significance as the game goes on.

17. Every beginners’ book I’ve seen has a chart with numerical values of the pieces. How important is it?

Very important – if you are a beginner.

It is easier to understand if you think of it as a chart of *exchange* values. It is the shorthand way of learning whether giving up one piece for another is a favorable, unfavorable or a balanced transaction.

A typical chart tells you a queen is worth ten points, a rook is worth five, a knight or bishop is worth three and a pawn is worth one.

This is useful to a beginner wondering if he can afford to give up his bishop for a knight, for example. But the real value of a piece depends on whether it can act like it should.

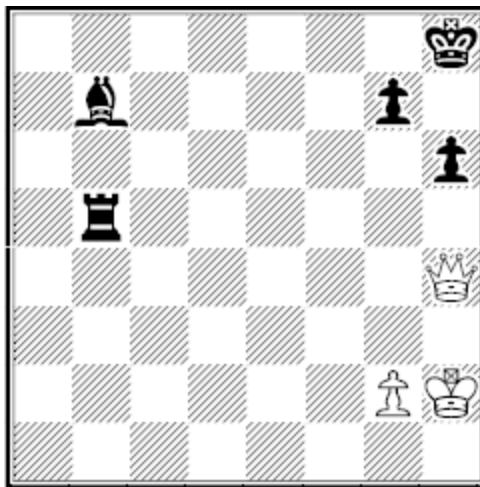
A bishop that can't act like a bishop – because it is severely restricted in movement – is not worth a knight. It is sometimes derided as “a big pawn.”

18. A queen can move like a rook and a bishop. Why is it worth more than having those two pieces?

This is one of the first difficult concepts for a beginner. There are two conflicting ways of evaluating material.

The first is to judge a piece's ability to perform tasks on its own.

Most tactics are based on attacking two targets at once. The queen is far better than any other piece at making such a double attack.



White to move and win

White can capture the rook with **1 ♔d8+**, **2 ♔d3+** and **3 ♔xb5**.

The queen moved like three pieces. The first move was that of a dark-squared bishop. The second was like a rook. The third was that

of a light-squared bishop.

However, if it was Black's move in the diagram, neither side should win.

19. Why?

Because of that second way of evaluating material:

When two or more pieces cooperate, they increase in value. The sum is greater than the separate parts.

Black can play **1...♖g5!** and threaten ...♖xg2+ or ...♗xg2.

White can defend g2 with 2 g3. But he cannot win because Black's pieces also cooperate in defense. They can protect one another: Draw.

20. How often should I think about that chart during a game?

Rarely, once you've graduated from the ranks of beginner.

As you gain experience, the potential exchanges – such as a queen for two rooks – become as embedded in your consciousness as the alphabet.

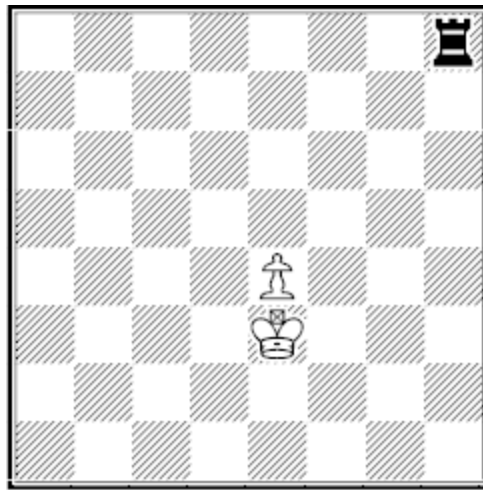
You won't need the chart because other trades are somewhat rare. Even if you play 1,000 games, you will probably never need to know that a rook is worth five pawns, for example.

21. I know a king can't be exchanged. But how powerful is it?

More than most players know. One of the secrets of good endgame players is understanding that a king's offensive power is closest to that of a rook.

The king and rook are “natural enemies in the endgame,” endgame composer Robert Burger said.

A rook can easily stop a passed pawn if its only support is a minor piece. But a rook has to play exactly to stop a pawn if it is near a king.



Black to move

White would make progress by advancing the pawn. For example, after 1... ♖h4 2 ♔d4, with the idea of 3 ♔d5 and 4 e5.

But 1... ♜e8! thwarts him, 2 ♔d4 ♜d8+ 3 ♔c4 ♜e8! 4 ♔d5 ♜d8+.

The king/rook rivalry is unique and only matters in endgames.

22. Are there “best” squares for pieces?

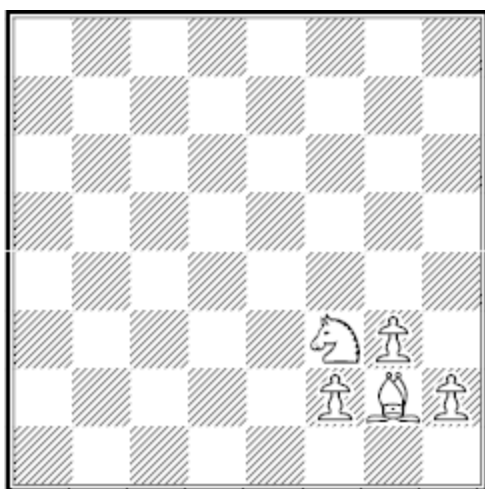
Not squares but areas of the board.

The most important squares are usually in the center. Since the knight is a short-range piece, it does its best work in or near those

center squares.

The rook and bishop are long-range pieces. They perform best when they are near the edges of the board because of a natural principle of chess: The stronger the piece, the more it is vulnerable to capture by a weaker piece.

As a result, rooks rarely occupy center squares until the endgame. Bishops often operate best from a near-edge square. A common example is ♖g2 by White after 1 ♘f3 and 2 g3.



A good formation

Note how well protected White's pieces and pawns are – while they control central squares: d4 and e5 by his knight, e3 by the f2-pawn and e4 and d5 by the bishop, once the knight moves.

The two remaining pieces to consider are the queen, a long-range piece, and the king, a short-range one. Both usually perform well in the center. But they are so valuable that they are kept protectively distant from it before the endgame.

23. Do the pieces change in value during a game?

This is another of the hardest of concepts to appreciate. They don't change much in *exchange* value. But they grow or decline in *offensive power*.

The knight is at its peak power in the opening and is the only piece that declines in strength. The rooks and bishops become stronger because the pawns that obstruct them are gradually captured.

Chess has a lot of maxims and one of them is "The future belongs to he who owns the bishops."

24. When is that future?

Computer analyses of hundreds of thousands of games have determined that the knight is superior to the bishop when each side has five or more pawns.

That's a generalization, of course, and it's not something you need to remember. But it is worth knowing that a bishop almost always gets better as the game goes on.

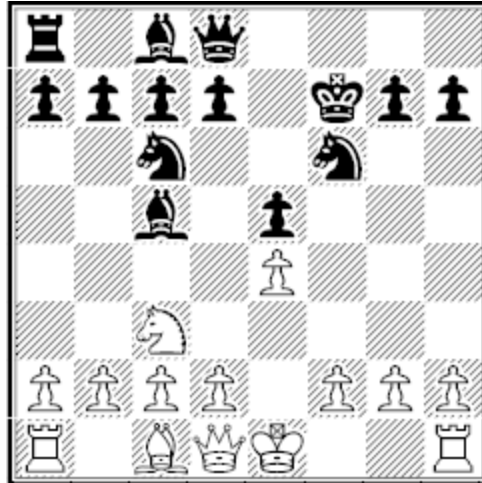
The same for a rook. It plays a minor role in the opening, joins the cast in the middlegame and assumes a leading role in a typical endgame.

25. What does that mean for me?

The best takeaway is: A rook is only worth its chart value when it can play like a rook.

Without open files to use, a rook may not play as well as a minor piece. Novices often discover this in games that begin something like **1 e4 e5 2 ♖f3 ♗c6 3 ♘c4 ♙c5 4 ♗c3 ♖f6.**

They can go astray with **5 ♖g5 0-0 6 ♗xf7? ♜xf7 7 ♕xf7+ ♔xf7**.



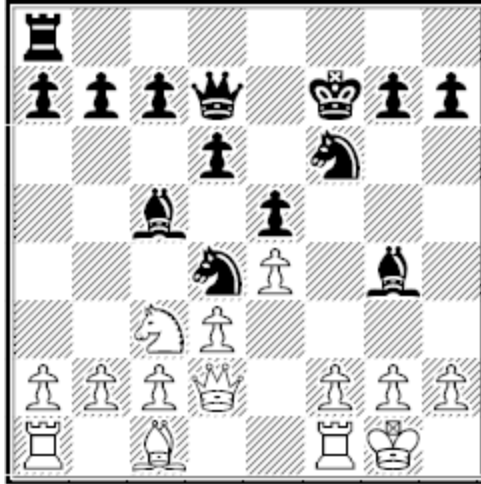
White to move

According to the chart, material is equal.

The missing White pieces are his bishop (three points) and knight (three). That totals six points, the same as the missing Black rook (five) and pawn (one).

But White's extra rook won't get to make itself felt for a while. Black's minor pieces will, for example, after **8 d3 d6 9 0-0 ♕g4!**.

The game can draw to an early close after **10 ♔e1? ♗d4!**, threatening ...♗xc2. Then **11 ♔d2 ♔d7**.



White to move

Black could win in a few moves by using his two extra minor pieces, **12 b3 h6 13 ♖b2? ♗f3+! 14 gxf3 ♗xf3** and mate after ... ♔g4 or ... ♔h3-g2.

26. I know the stronger pieces are good at capturing. Is there anything else they do especially well?

They are splendid at restricting.

Here is an example of how a minor material advantage is decisive. White wins if he can capture the knight or the pawn. The key is restricting the knight.

Znosko-Borovsky, Evgeny [424](#)

Zugzwang [291-3](#), [298](#), [410](#), [418](#), [423](#)

Zwischenzug [71](#)

Zysk, Robert [90](#)

Openings Index

(Numbers refer to questions).

Albin Countergambit [206](#)

Alekhine's Defense [343](#)

Belgrade Gambit [209](#)

Bird's Opening [193](#)

Bishop's Opening [178](#)

Blackmar-Diemer Gambit [209](#)

Bogo-Indian Defense [210](#)

Caro-Kann Defense [208](#), [212](#), [380](#)

Catalan Opening [147](#)

Center Counter Defense [27](#), [212](#)

Center Game [146](#), [176](#)

Colle System [210](#), [397](#)

Danish Gambit [209](#)

English Opening [162](#)

Falkbeer Countergambit [191](#), [206](#)

Four Knights Opening [190](#)

French Defense [210-1](#), [313](#)

French Defense, Advance Variation [158](#), [415](#), [430](#), [474](#)

French Defense, Winawer Variation [86](#), [180](#), [212](#)

Giuoco Piano [16](#), [195](#)
Göring Gambit [209](#)
Grünfeld Defense [343](#)
Irregular Opening (1 a3) [170](#)
King's Gambit [182](#), [191](#), [200](#), [256](#), [342](#)
King's Indian Defense [215](#), [343](#)
King's Indian Reversed [193](#)
Modern Defense [60](#), [192](#)
Morra Gambit [209](#)
Muzio Gambit [198](#)
Nimzo-Indian Defense [174](#), [212](#), [343](#)
Nimzo-Larsen Opening [55](#)
Owen's Defense [59](#)
Petroff Defense [148](#), [196](#), [231](#)
Philidor's Defense [232](#)
Pirc Defense [159](#)
Queen's Gambit Accepted [260](#), [485](#)
Queen's Gambit Declined [183](#), [189-90](#), [215](#), [419](#)
Queen's Gambit Declined, Semi-Slav Defense [378](#)
Queen's Gambit Declined, Semi-Tarrasch Defense [207](#)
Queen's Indian Defense [221](#), [343](#)
Réti Opening [343](#)
Ruy Lopez [69](#), [145](#), [215](#)
Ruy Lopez, Berlin Defense [148](#)

Ruy Lopez, Exchange Variation [202](#), [247](#)

Scotch Game [73](#), [398](#), [457](#)

Sicilian Defense [210](#), [228](#), [235](#), [339](#), [370](#), [453](#)

Sicilian Defense, Alapin Variation [72](#)

Sicilian Defense, Dragon Variation [210](#)

Sicilian Defense, Najdorf Variation [210](#), [215](#)

Sicilian Defense, Nimzovich Variation [14](#), [433](#)

Sicilian Defense, Rossolimo Variation [165](#)

Sicilian Defense, Taimanov Variation [407](#)

Slav Defense [208](#)

Two Knights Defense [81](#)