



C&O Family Chess Center

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How to Learn an Opening (The C&O Way)

After teaching for just a few years I realized that most beginner and intermediate players go about trying to learn an opening by memorizing moves, a way that is not very useful. It was at that time I began to develop the approach that has led to the present “7 Things To Do in the First 10 Moves.” This method relies on learning general principles rather than specific moves.

It has served its purpose well for thirty years, reaching its published form almost a decade ago. However, at some point many students still want to “learn” an opening. To this end I have, in the last few years, tried to develop an approach that is both fun and interesting, and avoids having to study books of endless dry variations and the “memorizing” of hundreds of “lines.”

Here are some important points to remember about playing, or learning, an opening:

- 1. The purpose of the opening is NOT “to win!”**
- 2. The purpose of the opening is to get to the middle-game without being at a disadvantage!**

However... IF your opponent makes a mistake in the opening, then of course you should take advantage to the fullest!

- 3. When you lose it’s ALWAYS because you made a mistake (usually more than one)!**

- 4. When you win it’s ALWAYS because your opponent made a mistake and you took advantage!**

It’s important to learn essential opening principles, strategy and tactics in order to make good opening moves, *but equally important to learn the common mistakes in order to avoid them and to recognize them when made by others!*

The first step toward “learning” a specific opening (for advanced beginners and intermediate players) is to make sure that you can read and write chess notation well. Then determine what openings you actually use by recording several games and researching their names. This can be done by consulting one of the many general opening books, such as MCO (Modern Chess Openings) or ECO (Encyclopedia of Chess Openings), by searching online chess sites like ChessTempo.com and chessville.com, or by asking an experienced player to look at your first few moves and tell you the name of your opening.

Next get hold of some short master games (25 moves or less) using that opening and start playing them over. I recommend short games at first because you are primarily interested in learning the opening moves and short games usually have identifiable mistakes that help you learn what *not* to do as well as what *to* do.

You may collect such games from a number of sources. Computer programs such as Chessmaster and Fritz contain large databases which may be searched and from which games may be downloaded and copied. Many internet sites do as well. Chess books and magazines also contain a wealth of games although it may take a little longer to find them. At C&O we have

prepared a number of individual “opening studies,” downloads for student use, available on-line. They include games won by both sides.

Play over a lot of the games once or twice at first. You will begin to see which moves are common to the opening (and that there are variations within every opening). Then, as you play the games over a third and fourth time, begin to ask: “Why did White (or Black) make that particular move?” “What is Black’s (or White’s) plan?” “Whose plan do I like better?” “Would I be comfortable playing White’s (or Black’s) position?”

It is important to develop openings with which you are comfortable. When you find one (and there may be different ones depending on whether you are playing the White or Black side) begin to build a collection of such games for study (including the longer ones). It is important to record as many of your own games, using that opening, as possible. Now begin to compare your moves to those found in your collected games and, perhaps, in a general opening book such as MCO (Modern Chess Openings), or ECO (The Encyclopedia of Chess Openings), etc. Where they differ, try to figure out if, and why, the “book” move is better (if you think it really is).

With experience you will begin to understand why some moves are better than others. As your games last longer you will also discover that the different openings lead to different types of middle-game and endgame positions. You may want to study individual books on an opening that you feel really drawn to. That is fine, but don’t neglect to play over games using other openings just because they’re new to you.

There are many excellent books for beginners that survey a variety of openings to try. For the more advanced student Reuben Fine’s *The Ideas Behind the Chess Openings* is a good general introduction.

Because not all games end in the opening, it is essential to begin learning about middle- and end-game strategy and tactics. Here, too, it is mistakes which lose rather than “great moves” that win!

This is not to say that there are no great moves, only that they are made possible by an opponent’s mistake (or series of mistakes). If you did not recognize a mistake being made you may still find a great move. So keep looking!

However, because every game begins with the opening it is important not to rush your play. Sure, you may have played this opening dozens of times (as may your opponent have), but you should still watch closely for weak moves and other mistakes and always seek to gain, or increase, an advantage. Spend at least as much time on your opening moves as on the later ones. It’s much better to be in time trouble with an advantage than a disadvantage.

When playing over games to study it’s always instructive to see if anyone was ahead after ten moves. Winning the “Ten Move Game”* often means winning the whole game. An advantage or a weakness gained, or given, in the opening may be used to influence the whole game. Sometimes it is so small it may only become a factor late in an end-game. That’s part of the challenge of chess.

* “Ten Move Game” is a C&O teaching tool used to warm-up in class (see download). It also refers to the first ten moves of any regular game.