

Choices, choices, choices !

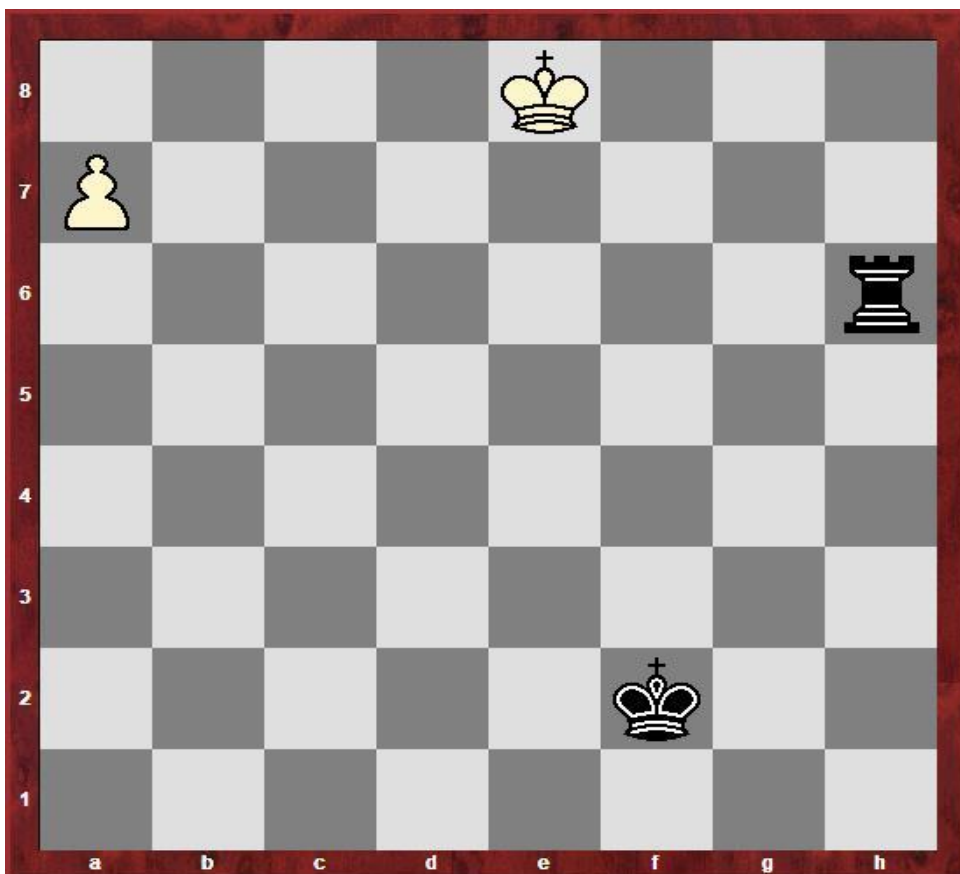
In each game that you play, you will nearly always have a choice of possible moves. The key to playing successfully is to be able to identify the best choice from the usual range of alternatives available. Sometimes, you have little or no choice. For example if you are in check, your choices are limited because you have to deal with the threat to your king. Hopefully you will have the normal 3 options available when in check. Ask yourself if you can:

- (1) **take** the attacking piece; or
- (2) **interpose that is** put a piece or pawn **in between** the attacking piece and your king; or
- (3) **move** the king!

These three options can be easily remembered if you think of “**TIM**”, that is “**T**” for take, “**I**” for interpose or in-between and “**M**” for move the king!

We are now going to look at the position below with the two kings and a pawn and Rook on the board, just 4 pieces in all.

In the position below, it is **black to move**, but before choosing a move, look at the position from each side’s point of view and ask yourself what is good and bad about each side’s position.



First of all check the **material** on both sides. Black has a rook worth 5 points to White's sole remaining pawn, which is worth just 1 point.

Secondly, check the safety of the two kings – Answer is that neither is in immediate danger of a decisive attack.

Thirdly look at the positions of the pieces and pawns. It can be seen that white's pawn is on the seventh rank and is set to move to a8 on white's next move, converting to a queen worth 9 points.

Clearly if white succeeds in moving safely to a8, white will have the advantage.

However, it is black's move first, so what is the best plan for black?

Given that there are so few pieces left, it is easy to see that black has either to stop the pawn from queening or ensure that the pawn is safely captured if it is converted to a queen.

If black succeeds in winning the pawn, then s/he can go on to win the game provided black knows how to checkmate with king and rook against king. If not the result will be a draw due to the 50 move rule, which is that a game is drawn if neither a piece or pawn is captured for 50 moves or because only the two kings are left on the board.

So what are black's options?

Once black realises that the best plan is to capture the pawn the following moves present themselves:

Rh8 putting the white king in check, followed by **ra8** when the king moves and **Rxa7** or **rook h7** checking the king again and then taking the pawn on a7 when the king moves out of check.

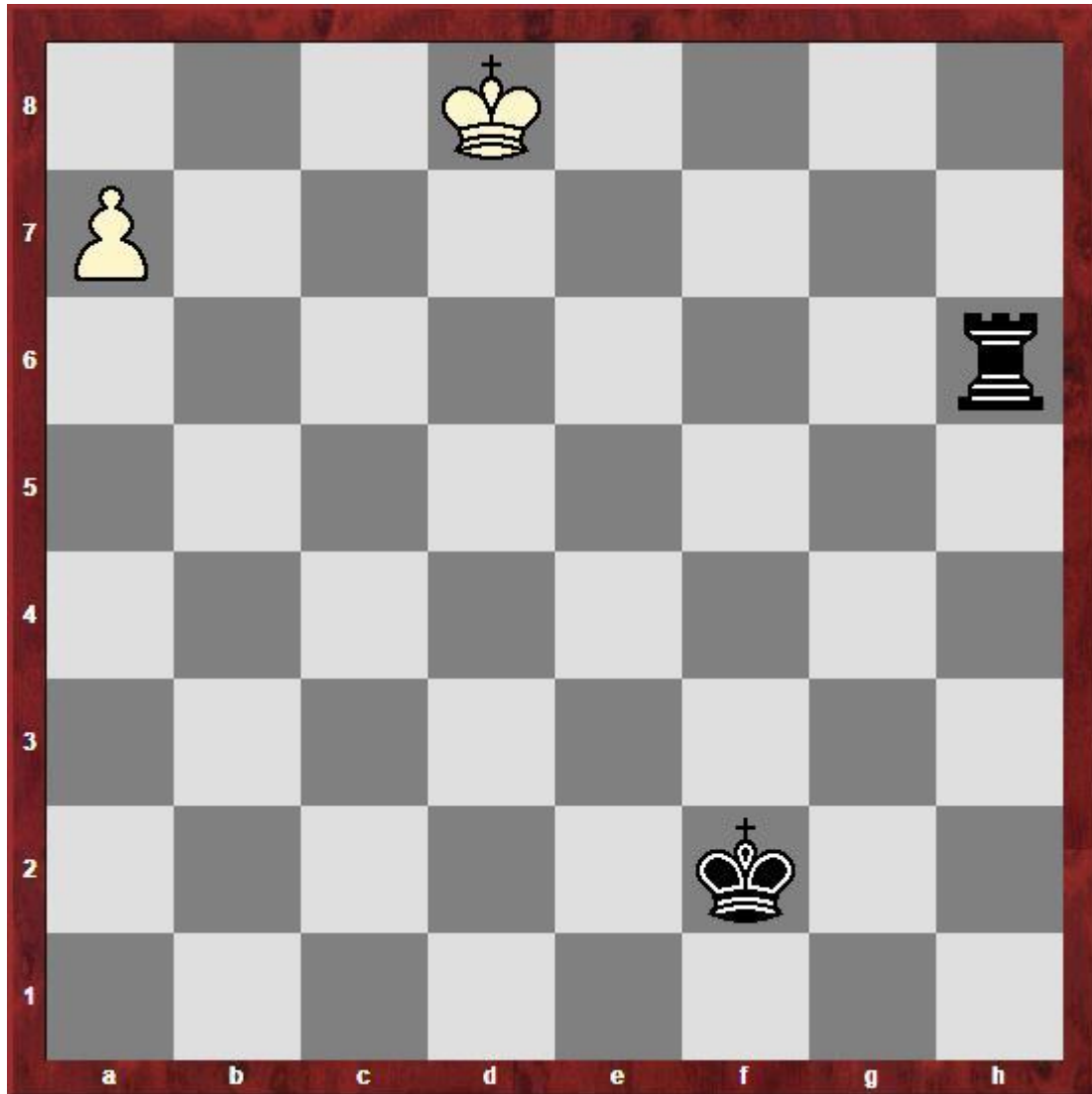
An alternative would be to simply move the rook to a6 and take the pawn on the next move.

A third option would be to make another move, with either the black king or rook. If white's response is to move the pawn to a8 and exchanging it for a queen, black can check the king on the back rank, so that when the king moves, the queen on a8 can be safely captured by the rook.

So what is the best option and more importantly why? The answer is an immediate move by the rook to a6 as this is the most forcing move. It will take Black just 2 moves instead of 3 to capture the pawn so that black can then concentrate on check-mating the white king with rook and king. The other options above take 3 moves.

So it is generally better to achieve your plan as quickly as possible as this limits your opponent's possibilities for counter-play.

For example, let us look at a similar position only this time the white king is on d8. Depending on which of the above options black now chooses, white can escape with a draw!



If the best initial choice (**Ra6**) is made, the outcome should be the same- black gets the pawn in two moves and then sets about winning with King and Rook versus King provided he knows how to do this properly.

If the king on d8 is checked by the rook on **h8** first, the white king can then move to c7 to escape the check.

If this happens, the game will be drawn. Can you see why?

This is because black can check the king again this time by moving the rook to h7. The white king can go to b8 from where the pawn can be protected. If Black does not check the king repeatedly from h7 or h8, white will move the pawn to a8 promoting it

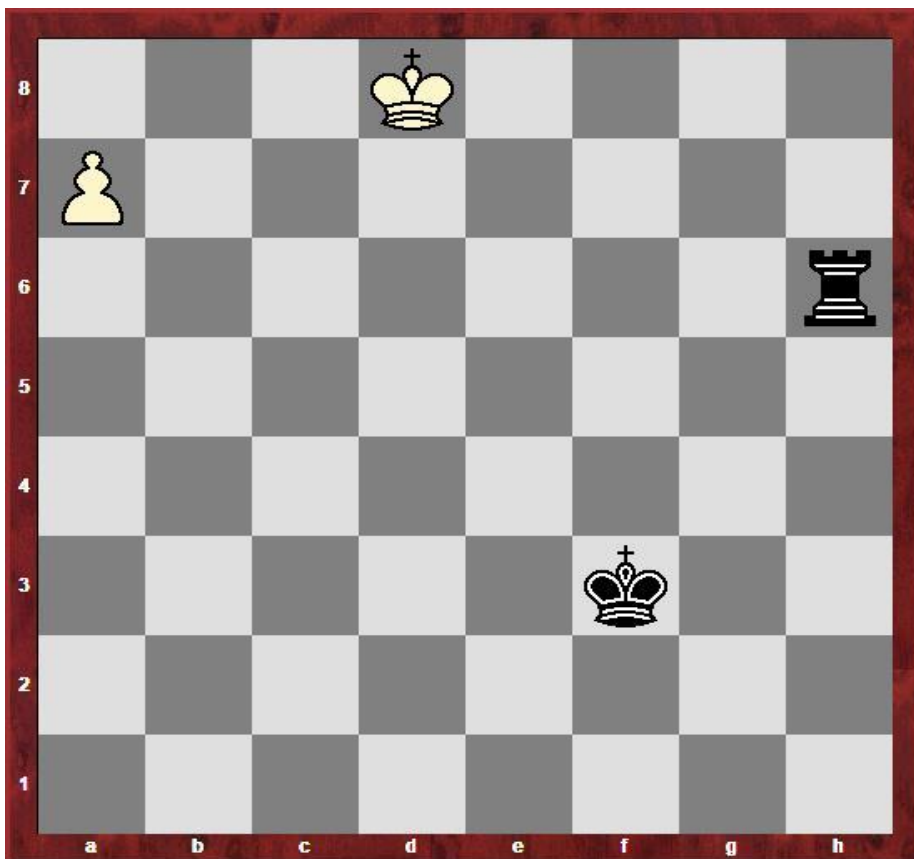
to a queen. If that happens, black has to force the exchange of his rook for the White queen to get a draw. If the king is on b8 when the pawn moves to a8, the rook will have to check the king by moving to h8. If the king moves to b7 or a7, black is forced to capture the queen on a8 and white recaptures the rook with a drawn outcome.

If the black rook moves to a8 after the white king moves to c7, the white king can then move to b7 defending the pawn and attacking the black rook at the same time. The black rook is forced to either take the pawn on a7 after which the rook is taken by the king or move away from the king across the back rank. White can then move the pawn to a8 getting a queen and forcing the black rook to take the queen immediately. The rook is then captured by the king on b7 and again the game is drawn as only the two kings remain.

Now suppose that it is white's move in the initial diagram. If he moves the pawn to a8 and gets a queen, black's correct response is to check the king by moving to h8 and capturing the queen on a8 on the next move with a winning position.

Now look at the diagram below where the black king is on f3 and it is white to move!

What happens now if the pawn moves to a8 and becomes a queen?



As the new white queen and the black king are on the same diagonal, it means that the black king is in check when the white pawn queens on a8, so black has to move the king instead of being able to check the white king by moving the rook to h8. Once the black king moves out of check, the white queen is free to check the king repeatedly with a view to forcing the king onto a square where it will be possible to put the king in check and in doing so, also attack the rook at the same time - **that is creating a fork**. Once white captures the rook, it is a straightforward win with queen and king against a king.

So the main lesson from the above is that once you select the correct plan (in the first position, with white to move the plan is to capture the pawn), you need to choose the moves that allow you to achieve your plan as quickly as possible.

You can see from the later examples that if you don't pick the quickest way to achieve your plan, you could end up drawing or even losing a winning position.

The same ideas apply in assessing other positions as follows:

- (1) Check the material on both sides. See who has the most pawns and pieces;
- (2) Check the safety of the king;
- (3) Look at the position of the pawns and pieces as follows when the position is more complicated than the above example when there are very few pieces on the board:
 - a. **Pawns.**
 - i. Check for passed pawns;
 - ii. Check for pawns that are well advanced down the board
 - iii. Check for doubled and isolated pawns (these are pawns that cannot be defended by other pawns, so they are generally weaknesses);

Remember if you have a passed pawn you should push and support it (**PAST**). If your opponent has a passed pawn, then you should be "**bad**", that is you should block and defend to stop the pawn advancing safely down the board.

If your opponent has pawns that cannot be defended by other pawns, you should aim to attack them with your pieces.

b. Pieces

- i. Where are the pieces located ? Are they developed (that is already moved off the back rank)?
- ii. Are bishops on long diagonals?
- iii. Are knights in advanced positions?
- iv. Are the rooks on open files (files not blocked by pawns)?
- v. Are a number of pieces aiming at the same area of the board;

- vi. Where is the queen and is she aiming at the same area of the board as some of your other pieces?

In deciding what to do if it is your move and if the answer to the above questions about pieces is “no” then see if it is possible to put your pieces on better squares.

So move them off the back rank, get rooks to open files, try to put the bishops and knights onto squares where they have more influence on the game and put your queen on squares where she supports other pieces. (for example on the same rank and file as a rook, on the same diagonal as a bishop or aiming at the same square as a knight).

Remember also to be on the lookout for checks and captures and to avoid moving the same piece repeatedly.

It is generally better to move or aim your pieces towards a particular area of the Board, usually either the centre of the Board or towards the position of the opposing king.

If you are ahead on material, it is a good idea to exchange pieces of equal value so your opponent has less pieces to play with and this increases the impact of your advantage.

If you are behind on material, it is generally better to avoid exchanging material.

When deciding whether or not to swop or exchange pieces, try to work out if your piece is in a better or worse position on the Board compared to the piece being offered for a swop by your opponent.

Look at what your piece is achieving on the Board (for example is it defending one of your pieces or pawns? Is it attacking a piece or pawn belonging to your opponent? Is it aimed at your opponent’s king?).

You can also ask the same questions in relation to your opponent’s pieces to determine if you should swop pieces or else move to avoid a swop.

In summary, try to develop the habit of “scanning the Board” and taking all of the above into account before making your move.

So move more slowly and think before you act!

This will help your understanding of the game and allow you to improve your chess playing ability!