

Avoiding blunders

Reducing Chess Blunders

Every chessplayer makes blunders, even GMs. We are humans – humans make mistakes. It's annoying, but we just have to accept it and move on. Blunders can never be eliminated completely, but there are ways of reducing them. A reduction in blunders of around 50% could add as many as 10 ECF points to your grade at the end of the season.

Nearly all authorities recommend the same sorts of methods for reducing the number of blunders you make, although there are some variations in the details.

When the experienced IM Bob Wade (twice British Champion) was our national coach, he used to recommend a "Five Steps" method; before making your move, ask yourself:

1. What's he/she trying to do?
2. How does it affect my plan?
3. What to do?
4. Have I better?
5. Am I missing something? (= final blunder check)

Here's my interpretation of these five steps:

- 1) First, after writing your opponent's last move down, examine its positive and negative effects. Remember that every move strengthens some squares, weakens others, opens some files/diagonals, closes others. Then try to figure out the opponent's intentions
- 2) Check to see whether the opponent's last move affects what you were intending to do.
- 3) Examine the position for a short time and first consider the move that your intuition (which is the sum of all your experience and study of chess) suggests. Be cautiously confident in your own judgement – very often your first idea will be correct, but if you discover a serious flaw, you should "reverse out" of that "tunnel" and then adopt Kotov's "candidate moves" search-routine and mentally queue them up for consideration, one by one (I'm referring to GM Alexander Kotov's famous book "*Think like a Grandmaster*").

Don't think for too long – remember GM Larsen's famous quip: "long think = wrong think". After choosing your move, put yourself in your opponent's shoes and try to decide what his/her best response is going to be to your intended move. And what will be your response to that? This alone (checking out the possible "two-movers" in the position) can eliminate some blunders, by reminding you that chess is "two-way traffic".

- 4) Unless you are running very short of time, scan the board at least briefly to check that you are not overlooking an even better move.
- 5) You've chosen your move. Now use one of these two methods of checking for blunders:

1st Method

It often happens that immediately you move your piece you realise that it is a blunder. Somehow you have to bring that moment of clarity forward in time! Some players try to do this by moving their hand towards the board and picturing themselves making the move on

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the board. (But you should avoid hovering your hand over the board for more than a second or two.)

2nd Method

A more “respectable” method of blunder-checking (recommended since the 1930s by Russian sports psychologists) is (after you’ve chosen your move but before you’ve made it on the board) to look away from the board and deliberately focus for a few seconds on something else.

You need to devise your own routine for doing this: stare at the ceiling, or at the control desk, or the door, or your pen, or even the position on the adjacent board. The idea is that this “disconnects” your brain from the board and seems to have the affect of clearing your “working memory”. Then, after a few seconds, look back at the board with fresh eyes, as if you have never seen the position before, and check you are not missing something (hanging a piece, allowing mate in one etc.). *

Some sources suggest that ideally you should quickly make the following “reality checks” in your mind's eye:

- a) check out the possible forcing moves, for both sides;
- b) check that “forced” moves are really forced - watch out for *zwischenzugs*;
- c) check the squares/files/diagonals that your intended move will weaken.

All checked? Then make your move crisply and confidently on the board - this is not a recipe for becoming a ditherer!

** The Russian psychologist (and chess master) Benjamin Blumenfeld recommended writing your intended move down before playing it and then doing a blunder chec. Many players at all levels adopted this practice, especially following its endorsement in the famous book “Chess for Tigers” by IM Simon Webb. Unfortunately this is no longer permitted under the FIDE rules.*

Further tips

Some other pieces of advice in this and related fields that I have collected in researching this topic:

- Try to get into the habit of using the opponent's time for thinking about the position verbally (in your head, of course, not out loud!), for assessing the position, noting the imbalances, and working out the plans for both sides that seem to suit the position best. In contrast, use your own time for calculating variations.
- “If it is possible to decide on your move on purely positional considerations then you should do so; it is quicker and more reliable. There are, of course, many positions in which concrete analysis is essential, but even in these cases you should not analyse specific variations more than necessary.” GM John Nunn in his useful book “Secrets of Practical Chess”.

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- Stay calm, and (unless in extreme time pressure) NEVER reply instantly to your opponent's last move, even if it was one you expected – always stick to your routine and look at the new position with fresh eyes.
- If your opponent plays a completely unexpected move, make yourself slow down and don't reply until you have recovered from the surprise. (Many blunders arise when moving while in a state of shock).
- Avoid distractions during the game – no chatting, no checking the football scores, no jumping up from the board after every move.
- If you do get distracted, make yourself aware of this and force yourself to re-focus and concentrate again before selecting a move. If you've been out of the room, spend a few moments to readjust after sitting down again at the board.
- Don't dither over positions where a few minutes thought soon convinces you that there is no single "best move"; just choose a sensible, logical move that seems to answer the demands of the position, blunder-check it and then play it, without wasting time striving for perfection. *In chess you don't need to play perfectly - just better than your opponent!*
- Try to avoid time pressure – when you are short of time the quality of your decision-making will inevitably deteriorate and, no matter how good your position is, you are quite likely to make at least one potentially serious blunder.
- If you are in time pressure, you can reduce the chance of a blunder by simplifying the position, e.g. exchanging the queens, even if objectively that's not the best move.
- In a game with a quick-play finish (no increment), as in the Manchester evening league, a "winning position" will not necessarily earn you a point. You need to make a conscious mental switch into "rapidplay mode" or, when down to your last five minutes, "blitz mode". This means speeding up, relying more on intuition and much-abbreviated calculations and moving fast enough to avoid the biggest blunder of all: allowing yourself to be "flagged".
- Exercise your "chess muscles" regularly by solving tactics puzzles and endgame studies, rather than by endlessly playing blitz games.
- Before a game, "warm up" by doing 10-12 tactics puzzles – easy ones, since you don't want to waste a lot of energy. (You might try solving them "from the other side" – this is good training in looking for the opponent's threats.)
- Try this: during a game, every time your opponent makes a move that you hadn't considered, record it on the scoresheet in the usual manner, but add a full stop. When you analyse your game afterwards, consider why you overlooked those moves. If you find that your score sheet contains more than 3-5 full stops, you really need to start devoting more attention to your opponent's plans and threats! Chess is "two-way traffic"!