

Beginner Chess Guide

Your First Steps to Becoming a Better Chess Player



Welcome to Chess – Chess is a game of strategy, patience and decision-making. You don't need to know everything before you start. The goal is to build good habits one step at a time.

Whether you're a child learning your first moves or a parent learning alongside your child, this guide will help you build a strong foundation.

The most important beginner lesson:

Don't just ask, "What move can I make?" Ask, "What will happen after I make it?"

1. The Chessboard

Before learning strategy, you need to understand the battlefield.

A chessboard has:

- **64 squares**
- 8 ranks (numbered 1–8)
- 8 files (lettered a–h)
- Light and dark squares

Setting up the board

Remember:

"White on right."

The bottom-right corner from White's perspective must be a **light-coloured square**.

The pieces

Each player starts with:

- 1 King
- 1 Queen
- 2 Rooks
- 2 Bishops
- 2 Knights
- 8 Pawns

2. How the Pieces Move

The King

The King moves **one square in any direction**.

The King is the most important piece. If your King is checkmated, the game is over.

Important: Your King may never move onto a square where it can be captured.

The Queen

The Queen is the most powerful piece.

She can move:

- Horizontally
- Vertically
- Diagonally

As far as she wants, provided no piece blocks her path.

The Rook

Rooks move horizontally or vertically.

They are particularly powerful on **open files and ranks**.

The Bishop

Bishops move diagonally.

A bishop that starts on a light square will always remain on light squares. The same is true for a dark-square bishop.

The Knight

The Knight moves in an **L-shape**:

Two squares in one direction + one square to the side.

Knights are special because they can **jump over other pieces**.

The Pawn

Pawns move forward but capture diagonally.

On its first move, a pawn may move **one or two squares forward**.

Pawns also have special rules including:

- Promotion
- En passant

3. Check, Checkmate & Stalemate

What is Check?

Your King is in **check** when an opponent's piece is attacking it.

When you are in check, you **must respond**.

You can:

1. Move the King
2. Capture the attacking piece
3. Block the attack (when possible)

What is Checkmate?

Checkmate means the King is in check and there is no legal way to escape.

Checkmate wins the game.

What is Stalemate?

Stalemate happens when:

- The player is **not in check**
- But has **no legal moves**

The game is a draw.

4. Basic Checkmates Every Beginner Should Know

You don't need to memorise dozens of checkmate patterns.

Start with these.

King + Queen vs King

The Queen can force the enemy King toward the edge of the board, while your King helps control escape squares.

Key lesson:

Don't try to checkmate using the Queen alone. Your King must help.

King + Rook vs King

The same basic principle applies.

Use your Rook to restrict the enemy King, then bring your King closer to support the final checkmate.

Two-Rook Checkmate

Two rooks can work together to gradually restrict the opposing King.

This is sometimes called the "**ladder mate.**"

5. Opening Principles

Beginners often try to memorise opening moves.

That's not the best way to learn.

Instead, learn these **five opening principles**.

1. Control the centre

Try to influence the central squares:

e4, d4, e5 and d5

2. Develop your pieces

Bring your:

- Knights
- Bishops

into the game early.

Don't move the same piece repeatedly without a good reason.

3. Castle early

Castling usually helps you:

- Protect your King
- Connect your Rooks
- Get your King away from the centre

4. Don't bring your Queen out too early

Your Queen is powerful—but that also makes her an easy target.

Develop your smaller pieces first.

5. Don't move pawns unnecessarily

Every pawn move changes the position.

Ask yourself: "**Why am I moving this pawn?**"

6. Beginner Tactics

Chess isn't only about long-term strategy.

You also need to learn how to spot **tactical opportunities**.

Start with these four:

Fork

One piece attacks **two or more enemy pieces at the same time**.

Knights are especially good at creating forks.

Pin

A piece cannot move because moving it would expose a more valuable piece behind it—often the King.

Skewer

A valuable piece is attacked and forced to move, exposing a less valuable piece behind it.

Discovered Attack

Moving one piece reveals an attack from another piece behind it.

7. The Most Important Beginner Skill: Don't Blunder!

A **blunder** is a serious mistake that loses material, position or sometimes the game.

Before every move, develop a simple checking routine.

The CCT Method

Before you move, ask:

1. Checks

Do I have a check?

2. Captures

Can I capture something valuable?

3. Threats

What am I threatening?

Then ask:

"What can my opponent do after my move?"

This final question can save you from countless beginner mistakes.

8. Think Before You Move

Good chess players don't necessarily think for minutes before every move.

They think **systematically**.

Try this simple process:

STOP → LOOK → THINK → MOVE

STOP

Don't move automatically.

LOOK

What has changed in the position?

THINK

What are my opponent's threats? What are my candidate moves?

MOVE

Choose your move and check it one last time.

Your final question:

"If I make this move, what is my opponent's strongest response?"

9. How to Analyse Your Own Games

One of the fastest ways to improve is to learn from your own games.

Don't immediately look at the computer's evaluation.

First, analyse the game yourself.

Step 1: Find the turning point

Ask:

Where did the game start going wrong?

Step 2: Find your mistakes

Look for:

- Pieces you left hanging
- Missed tactics
- Poor opening decisions
- Unnecessary pawn moves
- Missed opportunities

Step 3: Ask "Why?"

Don't simply write:

"I made a bad move."

Write:

"I moved my Knight because I wanted to attack the Queen, but I didn't notice that my Bishop was undefended."

Understanding why you made the mistake is more valuable than simply knowing that the move was bad.

Step 4: Use an engine

Only after your own analysis should you use a chess engine to see what you missed.

The computer can tell you what was wrong. Your job is to understand why.

10. A Beginner's Checklist

Before every move:

- ☐ Is my King safe?
- ☐ What is my opponent threatening?
- ☐ Are any of my pieces hanging?
- ☐ Do I have any checks?
- ☐ Do I have any good captures?
- ☐ Do I have any tactical opportunities?
- ☐ What happens after I make my move?

11. Your First Chess Goals

Don't worry about winning every game.

Focus on building good habits.

Your first goals:

Level 1 — Board Awareness

Know how every piece moves.

Level 2 — Safety

Stop giving away pieces.

Level 3 — Tactics

Learn to spot forks, pins and skewers.

Level 4 — Strategy

Understand development, centre control and King safety.

Level 5 — Analysis

Learn from your own games.

Improvement in chess doesn't happen because you play more games. It happens because you learn from the games you play.

12. Chess at Home: A Guide for Parents

You don't need to be a chess expert to support your child's chess journey.

The most valuable thing you can do is **be curious**.

Instead of asking:

✗ "Did you win?"

Try asking:

✓ "What was your favourite move?"

✓ "What did you learn?"

✓ "Was there a moment when the game changed?"

✓ "What would you do differently next time?"

Remember:

The goal isn't just to raise better chess players. It's to help children become better thinkers, decision-makers and problem-solvers.

13. Keep Playing!

Chess rewards patience.

You will lose games.

You will miss tactics.

You will blunder pieces.

You will sometimes wonder, *"How did I do that?"*

That's all part of learning.

Every game gives you another opportunity to think, improve and make a better decision.

Think. Learn. Improve. Repeat.

About Mzansi Chess Academy

Mzansi Chess Academy is dedicated to developing chess players of all levels while using chess to build valuable life skills.

Through structured coaching, practical training and competitive opportunities, we help young players develop:

-  Strategic thinking
-  Problem-solving
-  Concentration
-  Resilience
-  Confidence
-  Decision-making

Shaping champions on and off the board.

Next Step

Ready to start your chess journey?

Explore our chess programmes, coaching options and resources at **Mzansi Chess Academy**.

Contact us

Email: matthew@mzansichess.co.za

Website: mzansichess.co.za

Socials: @mzansichess