

Tournament Prep Guide



Your practical guide to arriving prepared, playing confidently and learning from every game.



For players entering local, provincial or national chess events

WELCOME

Playing your first chess tournament can be exciting—and a little nerve-racking.

The good news is that most tournament stress comes from not knowing what to expect. Good preparation removes much of that uncertainty.

This guide will help you prepare for tournament day, understand what happens during a game, manage nerves, and learn from every round.

Your goal is not to win every game. Your goal is to make good decisions, learn from each round and enjoy the experience.

1. KNOW YOUR TOURNAMENT

Before you leave home, make sure you know exactly what to expect.

A few minutes of preparation can prevent a lot of confusion on tournament day.

Before the tournament, check:

- ☐ Venue address and travel time
- ☐ Registration/check-in time
- ☐ First-round start time
- ☐ Number of rounds
- ☐ Approximate finishing time
- ☐ Time control
- ☐ Age group, section or rating category
- ☐ Whether the tournament is rated

- ❑ What happens if you are late for a round

ARRIVE EARLY

For a new player, arriving **30–60 minutes before the scheduled start** is a sensible target.

This gives you time to:

- Register
- Find your board
- Find the playing area
- Use the bathroom
- Drink some water
- Get settled
- Ask any questions
- Calm your nerves

Being early is better than arriving rushed.

2. WHAT TO BRING

Pack your tournament bag the night before.

Tournament day is not the day to discover that something important is still sitting at home!

Tournament Essentials

- ❑ Tournament registration details or confirmation
- ❑ Identification, if required
- ❑ Emergency contact details for younger players

Chess Essentials

- ❑ Pen or pencil for your scoresheet
- ❑ Small notebook for post-game notes, where permitted
- ❑ Chess set, **only if the tournament asks players to bring one**

Personal Essentials

- ❑ Water bottle
- ❑ Light snacks

- ☐ Comfortable clothing
- ☐ Comfortable shoes
- ☐ Light jacket or jersey
- ☐ Any required personal items

PHONE RULE

Follow the tournament's electronic-device rules exactly.

In many over-the-board competitions, phones and other electronic devices are restricted in the playing area.

When in doubt, ask the arbiter before the round begins.

3. TOURNAMENT ETIQUETTE

Good tournament behaviour is part of being a strong chess player.

You represent yourself, your family, your school and your academy.

Before the Game

Find your board, sit quietly and wait for the round to begin.

If you are unsure where to go, ask an organiser or arbiter.

At the Start

Greet your opponent politely and follow the arbiter's instructions.

A simple:

"Good luck."

is a great way to start the game.

During the Game

- Do not talk to your opponent.
- Do not talk to other players.
- Avoid unnecessary noise or movement.
- Do not distract other players.

- Do not touch pieces when it is not your move.
- Stay focused on your own game.

If You Need Help

Raise your hand and ask the **arbiter**.

Do not ask:

- Parents
- Coaches
- Friends
- Spectators

for advice during the game.

After the Game

Follow the tournament's procedure for recording or confirming the result.

Then:

- Thank your opponent.
- Leave the playing area quietly.
- Reset your mind for the next round.

Remember:

The arbiter is there to help manage the competition.

If there is a clock problem, illegal move, dispute or uncertainty about a rule, stop and ask the arbiter rather than arguing with your opponent.

4. CHESS CLOCKS & TIME CONTROLS

A chess clock gives each player a limited amount of thinking time.

When it is your turn, **your clock runs**.

After you make your move, you press your side of the clock so that your opponent's time starts.

Understanding Time Controls

You may see time controls written like:

10 + 5

Each player starts with **10 minutes** and receives **5 additional seconds after every move**.

30 + 0

Each player has **30 minutes** with no additional time.

90 + 30

Each player starts with **90 minutes** and receives **30 additional seconds after every move**.

Increment

An increment is extra time added to your clock after you make a move.

Flag

The flag indicates that a player's allotted time has run out.

TIME-MANAGEMENT TIPS FOR BEGINNERS

- Don't spend five minutes on a move you could decide in 20 seconds.
- Don't play instantly just because you feel nervous.
- When the position becomes complicated, slow down and calculate.
- Keep an eye on your clock—but don't stare at it constantly.
- Use your opponent's thinking time to consider your next move.

Think when it is your turn. Think while your opponent is thinking. But never panic because of the clock.

5. HOW TO RECORD YOUR MOVES

In standard tournament chess, players generally record their moves using **algebraic notation**.

Learning notation before your first tournament will make the experience much easier.

Basic Chess Notation

Piece	Symbol	Example
King	K	Kf2
Queen	Q	Qh5
Rook	R	Re1
Bishop	B	Bc4
Knight	N	Nf3
Pawn	—	e4

Useful Symbols

x = capture

Example: **Nxf3**

+ = check

Example: **Qh5+**

= checkmate

Example: **Qh7#**

O-O = kingside castling

O-O-O = queenside castling

IMPORTANT

Do not write future moves in advance.

If you are unsure about chess notation, practise recording games with your coach before the tournament.

Different tournament formats can have different scoring requirements, so always follow the instructions given by the tournament organisers and arbiter.

6. MANAGING TOURNAMENT NERVES

Feeling nervous before a tournament is completely normal.

Your heart may beat faster.

Your hands may feel different.

You may feel excited or worried.

That's okay.

The goal isn't to eliminate nerves.

The goal is to **learn how to play well while you are nervous.**

THE 60-SECOND RESET

Before your game:

1. Breathe

Take a slow breath in through your nose.

2. Relax

Relax your shoulders and unclench your jaw.

3. Breathe out

Slowly and completely.

4. Focus

Look at the board and remind yourself:

"I only need to make one good decision at a time."

REPLACE OUTCOME THINKING

Instead of:

"I must win this game."

Think:

"I will focus on making good decisions."

Instead of:

"My opponent is much stronger."

Think:

"I will make them solve problems."

Instead of:

"I can't afford to blunder."

Think:

"I will check my move before I play it."

Instead of:

"What if I lose?"

Think:

"What can I learn from this game?"

7. YOUR PRE-GAME WARM-UP

10–15 minutes before the game

You don't need an intense training session immediately before a tournament game.

The purpose of your warm-up is simply to switch your brain into **chess mode** without exhausting yourself.

A Simple Warm-Up

2 Minutes — Settle

- Sit quietly.
- Drink some water.
- Take a few slow breaths.

3 Minutes — Easy Tactics

Solve 2–3 easy tactical positions.

Focus on:

Accuracy, not speed.

3 Minutes — Review

Review one familiar:

- Opening principle
- Tactical idea
- Endgame concept

2 Minutes — Visualise

Remind yourself of your thinking routine:

Checks → Captures → Threats

2–5 Minutes — Settle at Your Board

Find your board.

Check your seat.

Get comfortable.

Take a breath.

Get ready.

DON'T OVER-PREPARE

Avoid trying to learn a brand-new opening or complicated variation five minutes before your game.

Review what you already know.

Confidence comes from familiarity, not last-minute information overload.

8. DURING THE GAME

A tournament game can feel very different from a casual game.

The clock is running.

The result matters.

There may be lots of other players around you.

This is why having a **thinking routine** is so valuable.

YOUR 5-STEP THINKING ROUTINE

1. CHECK

Ask:

Is my King safe?

What is my opponent threatening?

2. LOOK

Ask:

What checks do I have?

What captures do I have?

What threats can I create?

3. CALCULATE

If you have a candidate move, ask:

"What is my opponent's strongest response?"

Don't only think about your own move.

Think about what happens next.

4. COMPARE

If you have several possible moves, compare them.

Ask:

"Which move gives me the best position?"

Don't automatically choose the most exciting move.

5. BLUNDER CHECK

Before you actually move the piece, ask:

"What could I be missing?"

This final check can save you from countless mistakes.

IF YOU MAKE A MISTAKE

Every player makes mistakes.

Even strong players blunder.

If you make a mistake:

Stop. Breathe. Reset. Continue.

Don't spend the next five moves thinking:

"I can't believe I did that!"

Instead ask:

"What does the position require now?"

One mistake does **not** automatically mean you have lost the game.

9. IMMEDIATELY AFTER THE GAME

Win or lose, the moments immediately after your game are important.

Don't rush straight to the next distraction.

Do this first:

- ☐ Record or confirm the result.
- ☐ Thank your opponent.
- ☐ Leave the playing area calmly.
- ☐ Drink some water.
- ☐ Have a small snack if needed.
- ☐ Take 2–3 minutes to remember what happened.
- ☐ Prepare mentally for the next round.

QUICK GAME NOTES

After your game, ask yourself:

What was my best decision?

Where did the game change?

What did I miss?

What will I work on next?

10. POST-GAME ANALYSIS

The best tournament players are not the players who never make mistakes.

They are the players who **learn quickly from their mistakes**.

Try analysing your game in three stages.

PASS 1 — YOUR MEMORY

First, analyse the game **without a chess engine**.

Replay the game and think about:

- Where did I feel uncertain?
- Where did I feel confident?
- Where did I spend a lot of time?
- Where did the game change?
- What moves am I proud of?

PASS 2 — YOUR DECISIONS

Look at the critical moments.

Ask:

What was I thinking here?

What moves did I consider?

What did I miss?

What would I do differently now?

The goal isn't simply to find a bad move.

The goal is to understand **why you made the decision**.

PASS 3 — THE ENGINE

Only after analysing the game yourself should you use a chess engine.

The engine can help you identify:

- Tactical mistakes
- Missed opportunities
- Stronger moves
- Strategic problems

But don't simply memorise the computer's move.

Ask:

"Why is this move better?"

Understanding the idea is more valuable than memorising the answer.

THE ONE-GAME RULE

Don't try to fix ten weaknesses at once.

Choose **one lesson from each game** and make that the focus of your next training session.

For example:

"I need to check my opponent's threats before attacking."

Or:

"I spend too much time in simple positions."

Or:

"I need to improve my endgame technique."

Or:

"I need to develop my pieces more quickly."

Or:

"I need to stay calmer when I have less time."



TOURNAMENT DAY CHECKLIST

BEFORE LEAVING HOME

- ☐ I know the venue and start time.
- ☐ I know my section/category.
- ☐ I have my tournament information.
- ☐ I have water.
- ☐ I have snacks.
- ☐ I have a pen/pencil.
- ☐ I am dressed comfortably.
- ☐ I know what time I need to leave.

AT THE VENUE

- ☐ I have completed registration/check-in.
- ☐ I know where my board is.
- ☐ I know where the playing area is.
- ☐ I know where the toilets are.
- ☐ I have asked about any rules I am unsure about.
- ☐ My phone/electronics are stored according to tournament rules.

BEFORE EACH GAME

- ☐ I have used the bathroom if needed.
- ☐ I have had some water.

- ☐ I have taken a few slow breaths.
- ☐ I am focused on the process, not the result.
- ☐ I know my thinking routine.
- ☐ I am ready to make one good decision at a time.

AFTER EACH GAME

- ☐ I have recorded/confirmed the result.
- ☐ I thanked my opponent.
- ☐ I wrote down one lesson.
- ☐ I have mentally reset.
- ☐ I am ready for the next round.

THE MZANSI TOURNAMENT MINDSET

Prepare well. Play bravely. Think carefully. Respect your opponent. Learn from every game.

A tournament is not just a competition.

It is a classroom with a chessboard.

Every round gives you another opportunity to practise:

-  **Decision-making**
-  **Concentration**
-  **Strategic thinking**
-  **Resilience**
-  **Sportsmanship**
-  **Continuous improvement**

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.

Mzansi Chess Academy

Developing stronger players. Building stronger thinkers.

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