



9 Burning Chess Questions and Answers

By Andre E. Harding

About the Author

Born and raised in New York City, Andre Harding was taught the rules of chess by his father at eight years old. He began studying books and playing tournaments in middle school, and in high school made the U.S. Chess Federation's Top 100 List for his age.

During college, Andre served as Assistant Manager of the Marshall Chess Club in Greenwich Village. He also began teaching chess to children in after school programs and directing chess tournaments.

After graduating Queens College in 2005, Andre became a full-time chess professional.

In the years since, he has taught chess to thousands of students across more than 30 public, private, and charter schools. He has also coached teams in dozens of regional and national competitions and has given countless private lessons in students' homes.

Andre achieved the Expert rank in 2008 and won the U.S. Expert Class Championship in 2009. The International Chess Federation (FIDE) awarded him the National Instructor title in 2011, and he became a National Arbiter in 2019.

About Chess Essentials

Chess Essentials LLC was created to further chess education and tournament play.

Chess-Essentials.com is a blog dedicated to chess improvement, reviews and opinions. Private and group lessons are available, with more learning opportunities forthcoming.

About the Questions

There is no standard chess curriculum for a budding chess player, unlike in music, science, mathematics, or many other subjects.

As a result, people who seek chess information get conflicting answers to even the simplest of questions. If you surveyed a variety of experienced chess coaches about what to study, everyone would give different answers.

Here you will find answers to common questions about chess, backed by experience and sound reasoning. Hopefully they provide food for thought.

If you have other questions, submit them at <http://chess-essentials.com/contact/>. Be on the lookout for a future post providing the answer!

Question 1: Should beginners start by studying endgames?

José Capablanca recommended it. As World Chess Champion from 1921-27 and one of the most gifted players in history, many follow his advice.

Unfortunately, starting with endgames is not the best idea for most people.

Endgame study will not help the beginner as he or she loses their pieces and gets checkmated within 10 moves.

Avoiding needless frustration is an important part of the beginner's journey. Many chess hopefuls quit long before their games reach the endgames they are told to study.

Ignore endgames until you consistently bring out your knights and bishops, castle your king, and stop giving away your stuff. Then you can learn the three basic mates, in this order:

- King and Two Rooks vs. King
- King and Queen vs. King
- King and Rook vs. King

Question 2: Is studying openings a waste of time?

Absolutely not! Even beginners should learn some basics about openings. The real question is, *what* should a player study?

All players should have an idea what to do when their opponent tries to checkmate them in four moves. They should also learn what to do with their pieces and pawns during the first 8-10 moves.

Once a player can avoid disaster in the first 10 moves or so, he or she should play through some master games and copy some opening ideas she likes.

The key to learning openings is to not study more than you are ready for.

- A player rated 500 can begin learning a basic opening for white, and a basic defense for black.
- A player rated 1000 should have a basic idea of what to do after executing the basic moves in their opening.
- A player rated 1500 should be familiar with the main plans of the opening lines they play, which they can learn from books or other materials.
- A player rated 2000 can spend a large chunk of their study time on openings.

Question 3: Is chess really 99% tactics?

Richard Teichmann's famous quote "Chess is 99% tactics" is somewhat misleading.

It is true that all the strategic feeling and endgame skills in the world mean nothing if a player gives their pieces away or succumbs to mating attacks all the time.

Still, the ability to spot tactics is not everything! Consider these questions:

- Does the tactic work?
- Even if the tactical idea is sound, is it my best option?
- In what sequence should the moves be played?

Chess is really 99% *calculation*. That is why the top chess computer engines have ratings topping the 3400 mark, when the best human players have only reached the 2800s. Computers can calculate much deeper and more accurately than humans can.

Question 4: How does one identify chess talent?

My experience as a coach tells me that talented players regularly find interesting ideas, think quickly, and can efficiently learn from their own mistakes.

Not all talented players have high ratings, and not all highly rated players are talented.

Chess success is more about persistence and motivation than anything else. Some players are simply determined to earn high ratings and titles, or to win tournaments.

Chess comes too easily for some people, who turn to more challenging activities.

Question 5: Can anyone achieve a 2000 rating?

Yes. However, for most people the effort required is just not worth it.

If a player has not gotten close to 2000 before adulthood, it's unlikely they ever will. This is because as a person gets older their focus shifts to school, work, and family.

Also, each rung on the rating ladder is harder to reach than the previous one. The jump from 1400 to 1500 is much easier than that from 1800 to 1900, for example.

I reached a 2000 rating at the relatively late age of 25 years old. How did I manage it? I was a full-time chess teacher and spent hours on the game every day.

Question 6: Can older players reach new heights?

Age is not the main issue when talking about chess improvement. Does a player have the motivation and time to dedicate to chess improvement?

Declining memory and mental acuity are often cited as reasons older players fade. I have news for you: memory and quick-thinking are not as important in chess as many people believe.

Good chess comes from thinking clearly and accurately. Additionally:

- If a player does not think fast, play tournaments with longer time controls.
- If a player lacks stamina, play in events with fewer games per day. Take byes (games off) if necessary.
- If a player lacks a great memory, play sound openings with logical plans that change little over time. Leave the flashy stuff for others.
- Be professional. Study before tournaments, and don't play too much.

Question 7: Why are there separate tournaments for female players?

Most chess players are male; this becomes more pronounced after elementary school.

In order to encourage more females to start and continue playing chess, organizers have created girls-only or female-only tournaments. I have had many students who enjoy these events, and I support just about anything that helps grow the game.

Some females do not agree with female-only tournaments. No problem: they can play in tournaments open to males and females, which is still the vast majority of events.

The biannual Chess Olympiad team tournament is a prominent example of this. The Olympiad has two sections: "Open" and "Women." Women can play in either section if selected by their national team, and some women do play in the Open section.

A similar question relates to international titles. All players can earn the Grandmaster (GM), International Master (IM), FIDE Master (FM), and Candidate Master (CM) titles. In addition, female players can earn the Woman Grandmaster (WGM), Woman International Master (WIM), Woman FIDE Master (WFM), and Woman Candidate Master (WCM) titles, each 200 points lower than the corresponding "open" title.

Some females do not want W ranks. Since titles are not automatically granted, these players can simply not submit applications for titles they are uninterested in.

Question 8: Should I read books, hire a coach, or use a computer?

If you are coachable and have the money, hiring a good coach is the most efficient option for chess improvement. Assuming the coach is competent, in order to achieve best results you need to follow their guidance and not deviate from it.

Studying good books carefully will also lead to improvement. The biggest challenge is selecting the right books to study at each stage of your chess development. If you asked 10 experienced players which book you should study, you would get at least five different answers. Maybe 10 different answers!

The computer should be used sparingly, if at all. It cannot explain a thought process to you the way a good book or a coach can. It's fine to use the engine to check your games for blunders (serious mistakes), but that's as far as I would go.

Question 9: Is playing blitz chess a good idea?

Players who ask this question usually want to improve their rating and tournament results, and know they play more blitz than they should.

If you play chess just for fun, do what you want!

Otherwise, I recommend playing 15-minute games. Even longer if you can manage it.

The minimum amount of thinking time you will have for a tournament game is 30 minutes. There is simply no comparison to games where you have less than five minutes for a game full of decisions.

To become a stronger player, you need time to use what you are learning, to exercise your thinking muscles. That is where improvement comes from. When you do not give yourself time, you will fall back on the old habits and thinking patterns that keep you stuck.

If you want to improve, cut down on the blitz. Sorry!