

Chapter 1

Understanding Chess Openings

In This Chapter

- ▶ Understanding what a chess opening is
 - ▶ Choosing openings that fit your playing style
 - ▶ Getting familiar with chess notation
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Chess is typically divided into three phases: the opening, the middle-game, and the endgame. Although the exact point of transition from one phase to another can sometimes be ambiguous, each phase of the game has properties that distinguish it from the others. The opening phase of the game is all about mobilizing your forces as quickly and as efficiently as possible.

In this chapter, I explain how you know when an opening has been established. I also ask you to sit back and think about your style of play, because how you play the game helps determine what type of openings you favor. Finally, I include a quick review of basic chess notation.

Identifying a Chess Opening

The first phase of a chess game is called the *opening*. Players concentrate on the rapid mobilization of their forces during this phase of the game.

In the following sections, I explain what makes an opening an opening, and I show you how one move turns into an opening.

Distinguishing “the” opening from “an” opening

In chess, *opening* can mean two different but related things, and it all depends on whether *the* or *an* comes before *opening*.

- ✓ The phrase *the opening* refers to the phase of the game when you get your pieces (by *pieces*, I'm referring to the rooks, bishops, knights, queen, and king — basically, everything but the pawns) off the back rank and reposition them where they can do the most good. (The other phases of the game are the *middlegame* and the *endgame*.)
- ✓ The phrase *an opening* refers to a specific sequence of moves. When a move or a specific sequence of moves, by pawns and/or pieces, is given a name, you have yourself a chess opening. These openings are what I cover throughout this book.



There are many, many chess openings. Some are named after players. Some are named after locations. But to be considered an opening, for the purposes of this book, a sequence of moves has to have a name. (I cover chess naming conventions, which are frequently a source of head-shaking, in Chapter 3.)

Chess players and scholars generally agree on what to call a particular opening, but sometimes it depends on where you are. For example, the *Ruy López*, which I cover in Chapter 7, is called the *Spanish Opening* in some parts of the world. Throughout this book, I refer to the generally accepted opening names as they're used in the United States.

Seeing how a move turns into an opening

Openings are defined and categorized by their pawn structure and piece placement. Although the pawns may not appear to have a lot of power when you're in the thick of a game, at the start of the game, they open lines for your pieces to take advantage of.

The most frequently played opening move is 1.e4 because it does the most to help you *develop* your pieces (or move the pieces off of their starting position). However, the move 1.e4 is not considered an opening (see Figure 1-1).

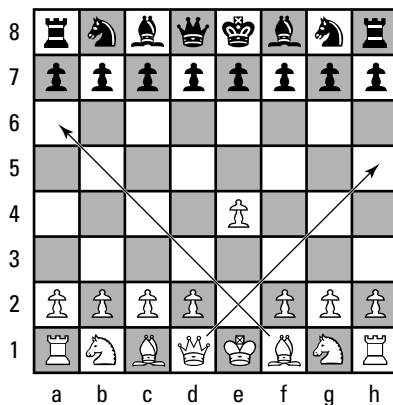


Figure 1-1:
An opening
move, but
not an
opening.

Ranks, files, and diagonals are collectively referred to as *lines*. The move 1.e4 opens a line for both the queen and the bishop. They're now free to move off of their starting positions.

If Black responds to the move 1.e4 with 1...e5, you have a position that can be classified as a *double king pawn*, which is a type of opening known as an *open game*. (I cover the variety of chess opening types in Chapter 3.) But these opening moves are not yet *an* opening, because they don't have a name.

If now, however, White continues with 2.Bc4, you have yourself a named opening! This position is called the *Bishop's Opening*, which I cover in Chapter 5 (see Figure 1-2).

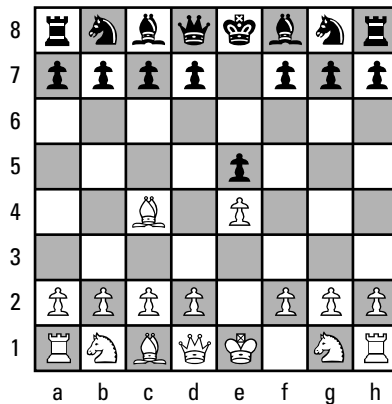


Figure 1-2:
The
Bishop's
Opening.

Watching an opening transform right before your eyes

According to Wikipedia, *The Oxford Companion to Chess* lists 1,327 named chess openings and variations. A *variation* is an alternate line of play within a particular opening.

It's also possible to arrive at a particular opening or variation by different move orders, or to start out in one opening and end up in another, which is called *transposing*. Many opening systems offer the possibility of transposing from one opening into another, and top-notch players use this possibility to keep their opponents guessing.



It's not so much the exact sequence of moves that matters, but the position you arrive at. As long as you understand the general ideas behind that position, you'll be able to navigate through the maze of possibilities at your disposal.

Finding an Opening That's Right for You

People have different styles of play when it comes to chess. Your style doesn't necessarily have anything to do with how you behave in real life. You may be shy and retiring in your everyday encounters but a real tiger when it comes to chess, or vice versa.

I first became serious about chess when Bobby Fischer challenged Boris Spassky for the World Championship in 1972. I had suffered a skiing injury and spent some of my enforced downtime with a chess book that featured a lot of Nimzo-Indian Defenses (see Chapter 16) and French Defenses (see Chapter 10). They became the openings that I chose to play in tournaments.

I noticed, however, that the majority of players in those tournaments played Sicilian Defenses (see Chapter 9) and King's Indian Defenses (see Chapter 17). It became clear to me that this was because Fischer played those openings. Fischer was a trendsetter.

But what about you? Do you want to play something that's in fashion now, or do you want to go your own way? Out of all the available openings that exist in chess, which ones are right for you?

There is no right or wrong chess style. Two great players became World Champions in the 1960s, and their styles could not have been more different. Mikhail Tal (1936–1992) became World Champion in 1960 and was one of the fiercest attacking players of all time. On the other side of the ledger was Tigran Petrosian (1929–1984), who became World Champion in 1963. He was a staunch defender who was extremely difficult to beat.

Ask yourself what appeals to you the most about chess. Do you always want to be the aggressor and go on the attack at all costs? Check out the openings in Chapter 4. They may be right up your alley.

The different openings can be grouped together by type, as I explain in more detail in Chapter 3. In general terms, openings that feature open lines and easy piece development are grouped together in Part II of this book. Openings with closed lines and more limited piece mobility are grouped together in Part IV.

You may already know what type of player you are, and the organization of this book will steer you toward the type of opening that suits you best. If you don't know what type of chess player you are, browse through openings from each type and see which one appeals to you the most.

Chess fashion sense

A chess opening can become popular simply because a famous player uses it. Another opening can become unpopular if a move is discovered that seems to give the advantage to one player over the other. Openings can be rehabilitated, too — sometimes, even newer moves are discovered that change the evaluation yet again.

Chess openings have been exposed to enormous scrutiny, but there still are no final answers as to which variations are best. I always felt that the “latest and greatest” wasn’t for me. I wanted to play something I understood, and it was fine by me if it wasn’t popular with other players. Play what you like, and don’t worry about chess fashion.

After you figure out the type of opening you like, take a closer look at some of the specific openings in that section. You’ll find games where White’s strategy succeeds and games where Black’s strategy comes out on top. If you feel an intuitive attraction to any particular opening, pay attention to that feeling!

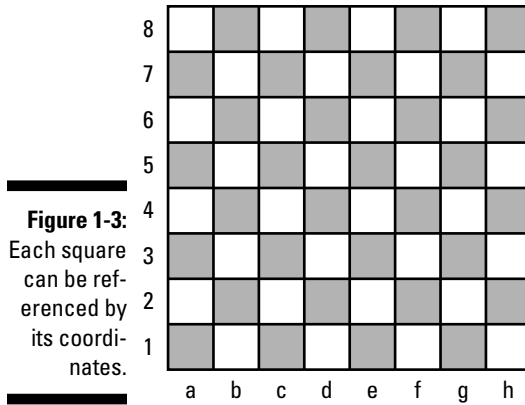
If an opening seems too complicated, or if it just doesn’t feel right to you, keep looking. Matching the right opening to your style of play makes you a better player, and it guarantees you more playing pleasure in the long run.

Reviewing Chess Shorthand

Throughout this book, I use game scores from notable games to explain how an opening influenced the outcome of a match. These game scores use standard chess notation. Unless you’re a chess novice, you’re probably familiar with chess shorthand, but I include the main points in the following sections just in case you need a quick refresher.

Describing the board and pieces

Chess players use an alpha-numerical system to record chess moves. Each *file* (column) is given a letter from *a* to *h*. Each *rank* (row) is given a number from *1* to *8* (see Figure 1-3). So the lower left-hand square is *a1*, the upper right-hand square is *h8*, and so on.



The pieces are described as follows (note that capital letters are used to distinguish these abbreviations from the letters that describe the files):

<i>Abbreviation</i>	<i>Piece</i>
K	King
Q	Queen
R	Rook
B	Bishop
N	Knight

If the only designation is a square, such as 1.e4, that implies a pawn move. If on White's second move the bishop moves in front of the king, it would be written as 2.Be2. If you're not comfortable with chess notation, find someone who is, and ask the person to explain it to you. It's much easier than it looks!

Describing the action

Chess is an action-packed game. Those who've played enough often comment on whether a move is good, bad, or fatal when writing about a game. The following chess symbols are the shorthand for conveying these ideas:

<i>Symbol</i>	<i>Definition</i>
?	A bad move
??	An extremely bad move
?!	A dubious move
!?	An interesting move containing some risk

!	A very good move
!!	A brilliant move
0-0	Kingside castling
0-0-0	Queenside castling
x	A capture has taken place
+	Check
++	Double check
#	Checkmate
1-0	White wins the game
0-1	Black wins the game
1/2-1/2	The game is drawn

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