

Chapter 1

Tackling Chess Basics

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering what chess is all about
 - ▶ Familiarizing yourself with the chessboard
 - ▶ Setting up your army
-

If you're interested in participating in an endlessly fascinating and stimulating mental activity — an activity that sports a rich history and may provide you with countless hours of amusement — you're in luck. You can play chess.

If you're new to chess, don't despair. No chess gene decides who can and can't play; take my word for it. Everyone can learn to play a passable game of chess, and after you come on-board (no pun intended!), it's just a matter of time until you find someone you can play well against.

In this chapter, I define the game of chess, discuss the basics of how you play, and describe the materials you need.

Chesstacular! Understanding the Basics of the Game

Chess, simply stated, is a board game for two — one player uses white pieces, and the other uses black. Each player gets 16 pieces to maneuver. Players take turns moving one piece at a time, with the ultimate objective of checkmating their opponent's king.

Because chess has so many great rules and because the pieces all exercise their individuality with different moves and abilities, the game has lots of interesting nuances that you'll want to keep in mind as you play. I cover each aspect of the game in this book, so if you're a novice, you'll find sufficient information to get acquainted with chess; if you already know how to play but want to hone your prowess, you'll find plenty of information to help you do just that. This section gives you the nutshell version of all this book has to offer.

The underlying concepts

Components of a chess game can be broken down into categories that are so fundamental that they're referred to as *elements*. The element of time, known as *development*, is one example. The element of force, known as *material*, is another. If one player deploys more force more quickly than the other player, it may be impossible for the latter player to defend against a subsequent invasion. The first step in a player's progress is learning how the pieces move, so I cover the bases in Chapter 2. Gaining an appreciation of the importance of the game's elements is usually the next step, so I describe all the chess elements in Chapter 3.

The elements are all a part of what drives a game to the desired end result: *checkmate*. If the king is attacked and can't escape the attack, the aggressor has secured checkmate, and the game is over. However, checkmate doesn't always come to fruition — sometimes a game ends in *stalemate*, which is one way to draw. You can also have a situation called *check*, which is an attack on the king. One thing to note, however, is that placing your opponent in check doesn't necessarily mean you'll win — check can actually happen several times in a game, and if your opponent can effectively escape from check, you may just be wasting your time. I discuss all of these events in Chapter 4.



You also have some special moves at your disposal that your opponent (if she's a novice) may not know about — namely, en passant, promotion, and castling. To give you an edge (and a resource to help quell any arguments that may arise after you make one of these tricky moves!), I provide the inside scoop on these special moves in Chapter 5.



To make it easier to talk about what's happening on the board, someone somewhere at some point in time came up with a naming system for the exact pieces and squares, and I use those conventions throughout this book. In Chapter 6, I dive into the subject of *notation*, which expands on these naming conventions and shows you how to write the moves of a game. You really don't need to know this stuff to enjoy playing chess, but it does help to have the basic terminology under your belt, and throughout this book, you can read the extra notation information I give to you as I explain moves.

The finer points of the game

Holding an advantage in one or more of the elements of chess doesn't guarantee victory. It does, however, increase the likelihood of success. When the inevitable clash of opposing armies takes place, the resulting tactical possibilities generally favor the one with elemental advantages. These clashes usually feature common tactics and combinations such as the ones that I present in Chapter 7. Tactics decide the outcome of most of the games played at a fairly competitive level, so a good understanding of the basic tactics and combinations pays off extremely well.

One of the ways an advantage can be transformed into victory is through sacrifice. A game of chess is a constant process of giving up something to get something else. Giving up some of your force makes sense, for example, if doing so allows you to checkmate the enemy king. Chapter 8 provides examples of when sacrifices are justified.

Another key to playing chess well is the ability to recognize patterns. When you spot a pattern with which you're familiar, the right moves suddenly suggest themselves. Chapter 9 deals with building pattern recognition in chess.

Due to the starting lineup and the piece movement limitations, only the knight can move at the start of the game, so you have to move some pawns in order to get your other pieces out. The positioning of the pawns often determines the optimal positioning of the pieces. Certain pawn positions, or *formations* as players often call them, have occurred in so many games that they have their own names. Chapter 10 presents some of the more common ones and shows how the pawns guide you on where to put the pieces.

Chapter 11 illustrates a number of common ways to deliver checkmate. These types of checkmates appear so often in chess games that players refer to them as *mating patterns*.

There usually comes a time in every player's development when she's at a loss as to what to do next. Sometimes a player will see a move by a stronger player and have no idea why that move was made. At this point, the principles of play, or strategies, are necessary to make further progress. Chapter 12 provides an introduction to chess strategy.



The militaristic character of chess is undeniable, but it also holds appeal for the confirmed peacenik. Although many of the strategies of war apply equally well to chess (divide and conquer, for example), many people gain ascetic pleasure from playing or watching a well-played game. Well-known patterns can appear with an unexpected twist and delight the observer. At an advanced level, you'll discover harmonies that lie just below the surface of the moves, and a move that breaks that harmony will feel as discordant as an off-key note in music. So take heart, consider the information this book provides, and allow yourself to get comfortable with the pieces, their powers, and all the exciting aspects of this strategic, creative game. Besides, unlike real warfare, the worst you'll suffer in your chess career is a bruised ego.

Three parts that make a whole

Players divide the chess game into three phases — opening, middlegame, and endgame — to better understand the different demands of each one, but you really need to understand the game as a whole and not just in terms of its separate parts. Otherwise, playing the game can be a bit like eating Chinese food with one chopstick.

Here's a quick breakdown of what each phase entails (see Chapters 13 through 15 for an in-depth look):

- ✓ **The opening:** The main objective of the opening moves is to effectively activate your forces. The term *development* refers to this type of activation.
- ✓ **The middlegame:** This phase is where the opposing armies most frequently clash. The terms *tactics* and *combinations* are frequently used to describe these clashes.
- ✓ **The endgame:** By this phase, the forces have been greatly reduced in number, but checkmate hasn't yet been delivered.

Different ways to get your game on

If you're the type of player who wants to be tested in competition, check out Chapter 16. Chess tournaments come in a variety of flavors, and that chapter gives you the scoop. You need to know how to act as well as how to play, so I also cover chess etiquette in that chapter.

In this day and age, you don't need to be physically located next to an opponent in order to play, and Chapter 17 gives the lowdown on computer chess and chess in cyberspace. Chess on the Internet has blossomed, but you need to be aware that nothing is permanent. Although the web is ever-changing, the addresses I provide have proven to be very stable, so they should take you where you want to go.

Chessboard Chatter: Bringing Home a Board and Chess Set

So you've decided all this chess stuff is up your alley. Well, first things first — you need a chessboard and *chess set* (the collection of chess pieces). If you don't own a board and chess set, you can turn to Appendix B for mail-order information. You'll find it extremely helpful to have a board and chess set on hand when reading chess books. Some people can do without one — but some people can memorize the works of John Milton, too. (And who wants to be like that?)

In the following sections, I explain different types of boards and chess sets that are available, and I break down the layout of the board.



Throughout this book I include numerous diagrams to help you understand the game, but they don't take the place of a real set and board; these diagrams serve primarily to make certain your board is set up correctly. I urge you to get out your chessboard and set when you're reading and set up the board as the diagrams show you. That way, you get a real-life view of the moves I describe.

Finding the right board and set

Your first challenge in finding a chessboard and set is to sort through the many available types. A tremendous range in sizes, colors, and quality exists.

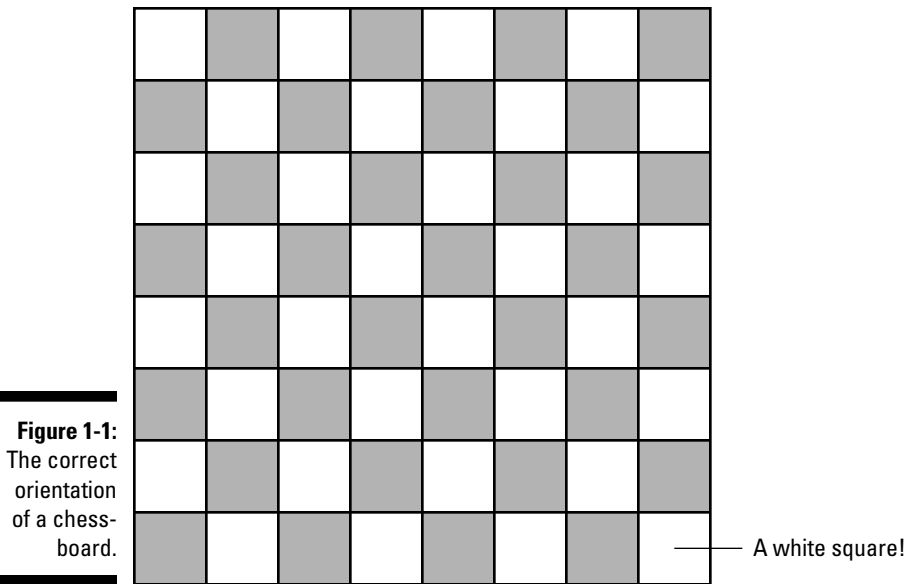
The name of the standard design, which is distinguished by the look of the pieces, is the Staunton. This design bears the name of the great English player Howard Staunton and was registered in 1849. Its popularity was so great that it was adopted as the one and only design allowed in official tournaments. If you play with strangers and bring anything other than a Staunton-designed set, people may assume that you're trying to psych them out by using equipment that they aren't familiar with. You probably don't want to start off on the wrong foot.

Wood sets and boards in the Staunton design are more popular at higher levels of competition, but a typical tournament set can be made of plastic pieces in classic white and black. The board is generally of a vinyl roll-up variety with white and green squares. "Why not black squares?" you may justifiably ask. "Headaches," I would answer. I've learned that staring at a high-contrast board is not advisable. Miniature traveling sets are the only exception. It doesn't matter what color they are, because the makers assume that you won't be staring at them too long (especially if you're driving!).

If price is no object, wood pieces and boards are the way to go. Wood boards provide the most soothing background possible, and the weight and feel of wood pieces are generally far more satisfying to the touch. In case you're really getting into chess and admire sets meant to be looked at rather than played with, collectible sets have a small cottage industry of their own, and these sets vary in design as well as in quality.

Getting up close and personal with your board

After you pick up your soon-to-be-beloved chessboard and set, you need to get familiar with them. The first thing to notice about the chessboard is that all the squares are the same size but alternate between two colors (a light color and a darker color). Colors are important in chess (bishops are confined to only one of them, knights go back and forth between them, and so on), which is why chess players insist that a white square needs to be in the lower right-hand corner at the start of the game. Start by whipping out the board and making sure it's facing the right direction in front of you — Figure 1-1 shows the correct orientation (if you set this book on your lap and look at the figure, you get a better idea).



A white square should be in the lower right-hand corner as you face the board. The most common mistake among beginners is to position the board incorrectly at the start of the game. (As a matter of fact, Hollywood makes this common mistake, too. Whenever you see a chessboard positioned in a movie, check to see whether the lower right-hand square is white. Chances are it won't be!)

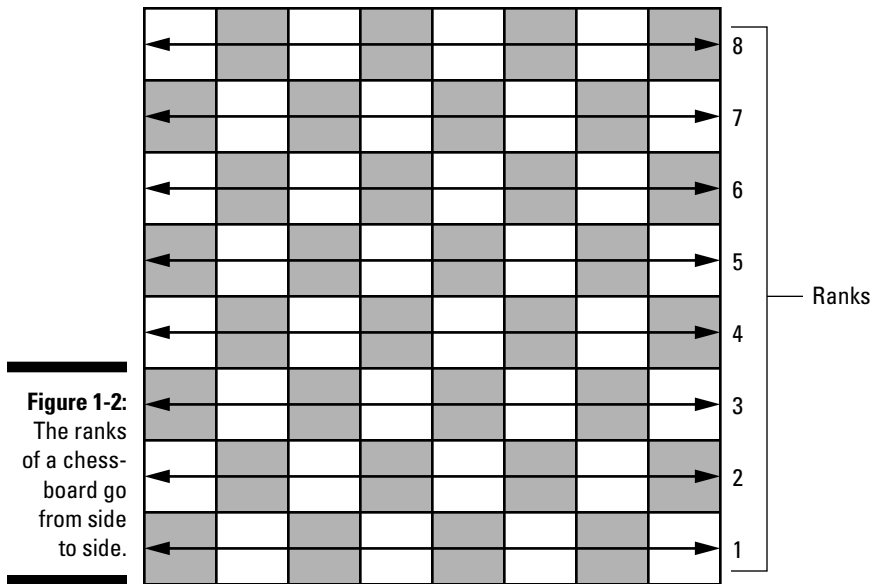
Consider a few fun facts while you're scoping out your chessboard:

- ✓ It's made up of 64 squares evenly divided between 32 light squares and 32 dark squares.
- ✓ It's symmetrical and square — in the geometric sense.
- ✓ The square comprises eight *ranks* and eight *files* (and a bunch of diagonals), which you'd normally call rows and columns (and diagonals!), but chess people shun such conventional language. (Using clear, easy-to-understand terms would be too easy, right?)

In the following sections, I go into more detail on the ranks, files, diagonals, and squares.

Recognizing the ranks

Ranks are rows that go from side to side across the chessboard and are referred to by numbers. Each chessboard has eight ranks, which are numbered from the *bottom* of the board (where the white pieces start) on up; see Figure 1-2.



Figuring out the files

Files are columns that go up and down the chessboard, and each board has eight of them. Because numbers indicate ranks, letters indicate files, which are labeled from left to right. Figure 1-3 shows the files.

Naming individual squares

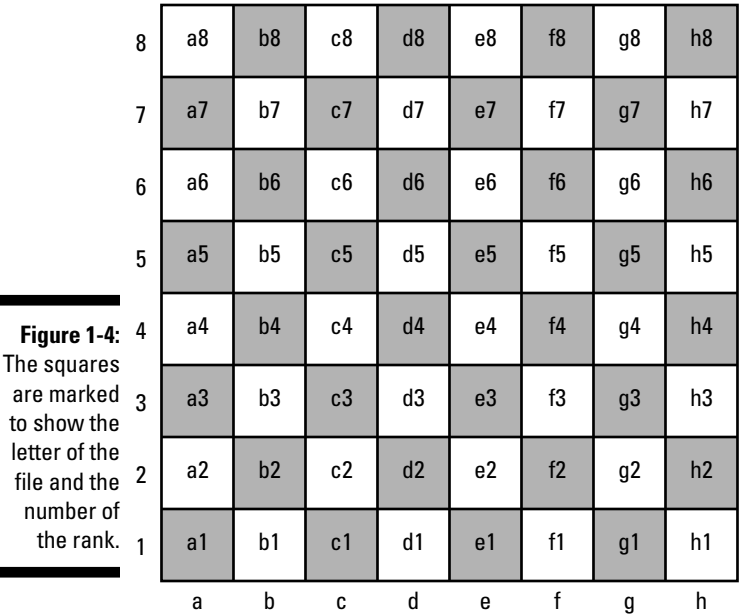
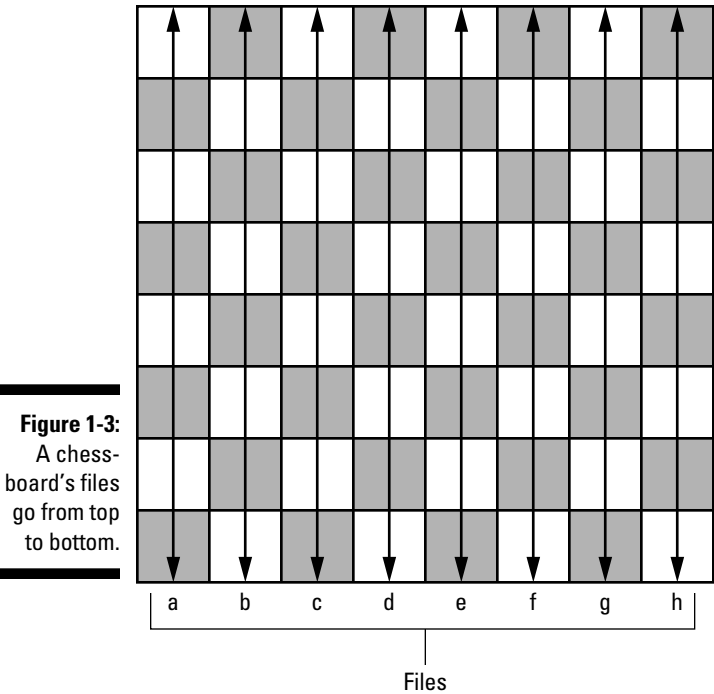
The naming convention for ranks and files allows you to give a unique identifier to every square by using what chess people call the *file-first method*. For example, the lower right-hand square (which is white, of course) is called h1. This name is shorthand for h-file, first rank. Figure 1-4 gives the name for every square.

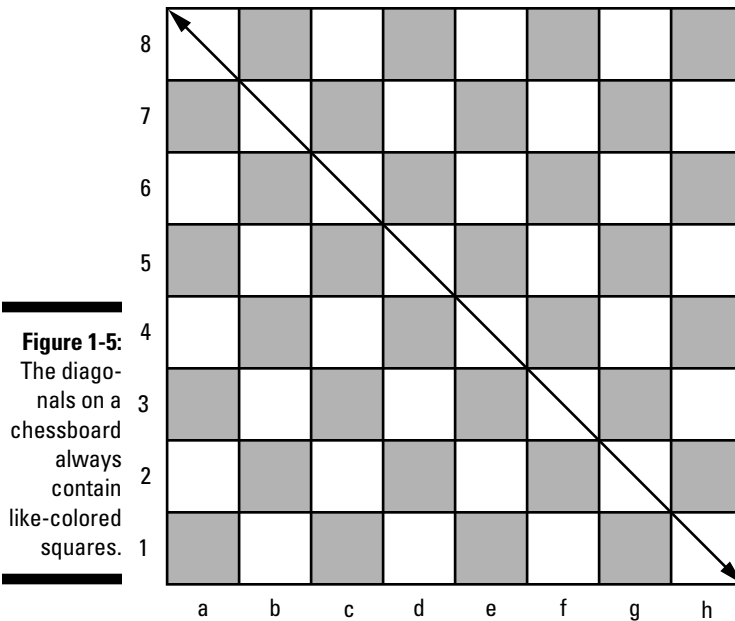


When figuring out the names of individual squares, it may be helpful to think of the games *Bingo* and *Battleship*, where every square has a letter and a number (and the names may be easier to figure out if you're sitting on the "white" side — or bottom — of the chessboard). Of course, in *Battleship* you get to see only your pieces and have to guess where your enemy's are. In chess, however, you know where your opponent's pieces are — you just have to guess where he's going to move them!

Digging those diagonals

As you probably expect, diagonals have names, too. Unlike ranks and files, diagonals are defined by their starting and ending squares. The starting square is conventionally given as the one with the lower rank. For example, Figure 1-5 shows the h1-a8 diagonal. Diagonals are always composed of like-colored squares. You can have light-squared diagonals and dark-squared diagonals — but never two-toned ones.





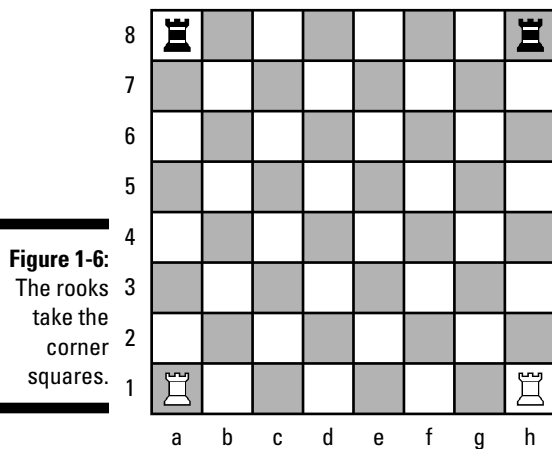
Piecemeal: Putting the Pieces on the Board

To depict the chessboard in a way that everyone around the world can understand, chess players have developed a set of symbols to represent the chessmen. Each may be represented by a one-letter abbreviation or by an icon. (See Table 1-1 for a list of all the pieces and their symbols.)

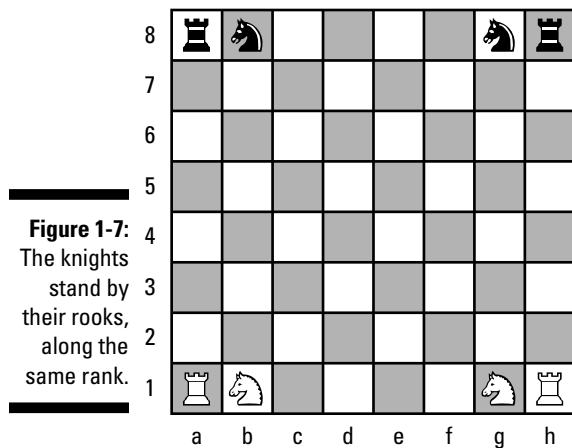
Table 1-1 Chess Pieces and Their Symbols		
Piece	Symbol	
King		
Queen		
Knight		
Bishop		
Rook		
Pawn		

I use the piece symbols here to show you how to set up the board, and I use them throughout this book to demonstrate various moves and positions. You may find it helpful to set up your own board piece by piece.

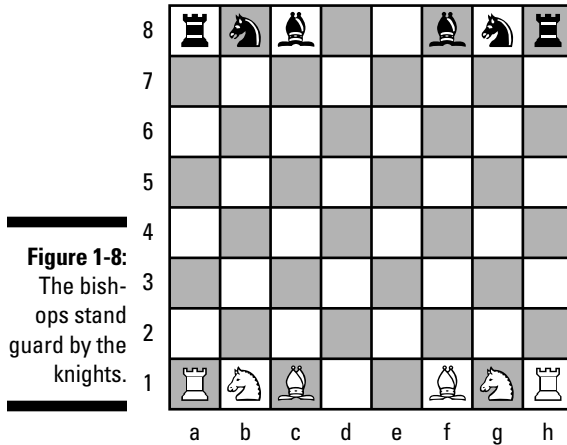
Start with the corners. The rooks go on the corner squares, as shown in Figure 1-6.



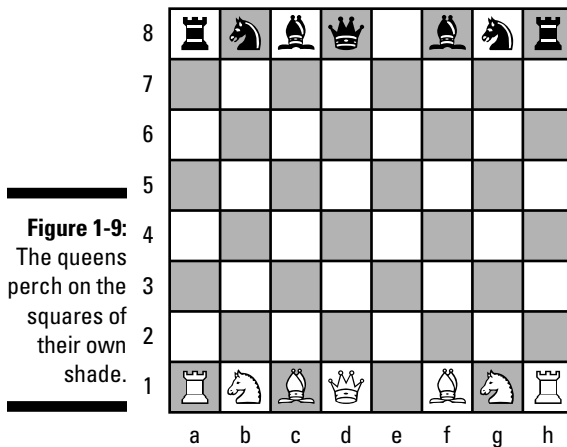
Next come the knights. Place them next to the rooks (see Figure 1-7).



Then put the bishops on the board next to the knights (see Figure 1-8).

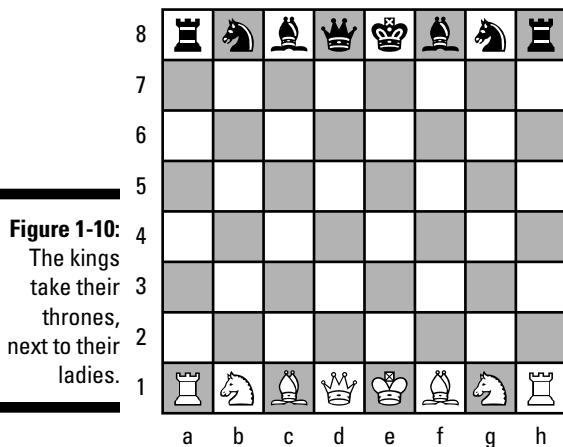


After the bishops come the queens. Your board should now look like the one in Figure 1-9.

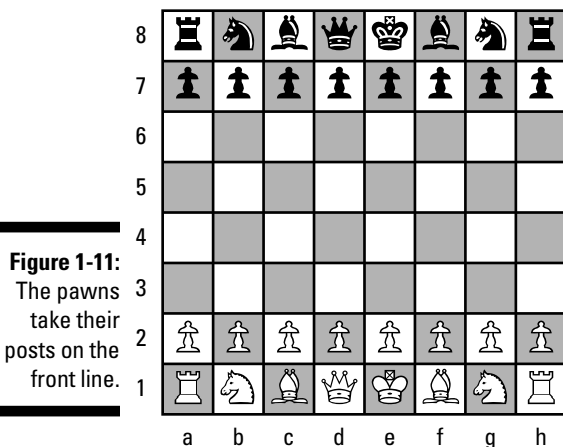


The queens always start on a square of the same shade — the white queen starts on a light square, and the black queen starts on a dark square.

Next, place the kings next to the queens, which is only fitting (see Figure 1-10).



Finally, add the pawns straight across the rank in front of the other pieces, as shown in Figure 1-11.



If you set up your chessboard by using the preceding directions and it looks like the finished one in Figure 1-11, pat yourself on the back! You're ready for a game.

A trip back in time: The origins of chess

The true origins of chess are shrouded in the mists of prehistory, which is good because it allows people to say just about anything they want about how the game started without fear of contradiction. From the evidence that does exist, the best guess is that chess, or a game very much like it, originated in Northern India sometime around A.D. 600 and eventually migrated to Europe through China and Persia (modern-day Iran). The ancient Indian game was based on Indian armies and was undoubtedly a pastime for their rulers.

No doubt, this game, called *chaturanga*, was much like present-day chess. It was played on an 8-x-8-square board and used six different kinds of pieces. The Indian Army was led by the *rajah* (king) and his chief advisor, the *mantri*, sometimes referred to as the *vizier*. The army was represented by foot soldiers, cavalry,

chariots, and elephants, and the game had corresponding pieces for all these leaders and warriors.

By the time the game got to Europe, it had changed considerably and continued to change until about the end of the 15th century. The changes basically made the game more familiar to the Europeans who were then playing it. The *rajah* became the king, the *mantri* the queen, the foot soldiers the pawns, the cavalry the knights, the chariots the rooks, and the elephants the bishops. Since that time, the game has been essentially stable. Nowadays, chess is played all over the world by the same rules established in Europe in the 15th century, under the control of the Fédération Internationale des Échecs (FIDE), which is French for the International Chess Federation.

