**Guide for Teachers**

This is intended as an advanced guide for teachers of chess classes or afterschool clubs. It is in three sections: classroom/club instruction, going over games at tournaments, and resources. It’s based on my experience teaching middle school students rated 0 to 2000, and might need to be slowed down for younger students.

My introductory curriculum is [here](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6TWtFZUhNZEtFV0U). It covers a fast half year for middle school students, longer for younger grades. It covers piece movement, check and checkmate, notation, basic tactics and the four move checkmate.

**Classroom/Club Teaching**

1. **Teach in Units**. It’s so much easier and more fun to teach when you are building towards a teaching goal, and not deciding each morning what to teach next. I include a number of my lessons (as chessbase files), but you will probably want to build your own, tailored to the needs and the level of your students. I write mine by stealing my favorite positions from a few books; these are described in the resources section at the end.

Examples:

* 1. **Beginner Tactics Unit**: Use the Combo Mombo pages in the green book as lessons and give the Tactics 101 sheets as homework (find more homework sheets in the red and orange books). Some examples: [pin](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6dW9FM3ZSamdFMms), [discovered attack](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6eWJFMmZiVzhQbmc), [skewers](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6elgzck1EdnRwZjg), [fork](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6M1NGOTdET0o1Y0U), [decoy](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6M1lJTTJaNU5kcG8)
  2. **Beginner Unit on the Pieces**: Work through the chapters on the properties of each piece in Yuri Shulman’s Lessons of a Chess Coach. These are some of the units I have written: [pawn](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6dWVPMzVUa3NKOEU), [rook](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6cW9xWFVYMWdQSWM), [knight](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6VXRzNUZmdkVfUG8), [bishop](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6aERETGpoQkN2YkE), [king](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6eEF5TG12bGJfMkk), [queen](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6aTJfY2NxRHMyWUE). You will need chessbase to open them.
  3. **Beginner Endgame Unit**: Silman’s Endgame Book is organized by rating level, and the early chapters of that book would make a good basis for an endgame unit. Post his tips all over your walls.
  4. **Calculation**: It’s so important that kids learn to calculate well that I have a unit on solving mates in 1s, 2s, and 3s. It’s not that calculating tricky checkmates is a very useful skill in chess, it’s not -- it doesn’t actually win many games-- it’s just that the finality of checkmate and the defined number of moves make it a great medium for teaching basic calculation. We talk about forcing moves, how you have to look at every check and every capture ever move, how to brainstorm candidate moves, how to recognize patterns, how to look for your own mistakes. This unit gets a structure and momentum from building from mate in 1 to 2 to 3—kids start to feel very able. I use it to introduce homework, how answers should look, what to do if you can’t get it, lessons are either spent going over homework or doing “think, pair, share” lessons, and two fun extensions are an Invent a Problem assignment and a Triple Loyd team competition.
  5. **Plans**: Sometimes openings require students to be able to execute particular plans, like the minority attack,[[1]](#footnote-1) attacking a backwards pawn, playing with an isolated d pawn, etc. Make sure in plan units that students have at least 2 different chances to practice playing the plan.
  6. **Skills**: I do a short unit on improving your worst piece that includes group puzzle solving sessions, a homework, and a positional flash card assignment.

1. **Homework** -- Homework is very important. For it to be effective and manageable, you have to be as consistent as possible. I like to give monthly homework packets, with 1 or 2 pages due on the same day every week. This way, even if a child is absent when you make the assignment or forgets to write the homework down, they will know what they need to do and their parents will also.

Checking homework is tedious, but you must do it or the kids will stop doing the work. I usually check every homework for completion, walking around the room making sure something is written. This takes 2-4 minutes, and I ask students to use the time to look over the problems and refresh their own memories. I collect homework every 4th or 5th assignment and grade each problem for correctness. If you don’t do this, most kids will spend as little time and thought as possible.

Cheating is a big problem on chess homework, because it is so easy to do. If you think this is happening, 3 suggestions:

1. Make it a routine for kids to write “I did not give or receive any help on this assignment” and sign their names on the bottom of each homework. Requiring this makes it clear to kids how important honesty is to you.
2. Send a letter home at the beginning of each year asking parents to initial the bottom of each page after it is done, or after the parent has witnessed the child working for at least 30 minutes. This does not eliminate over-the-phone cheating, but most homework copying is done in the cafeteria before school. Take a letter grade off for students who forget to get the initials.
3. Once in a while, collect the completed homework, distribute a blank copy of the worksheet, and ask students to complete it as a test in class. Do not believe students who say they did it all by themselves several days ago but have forgotten how.
4. **Run a semester-long classroom round robin tournament**. It’s boring to play the same people over and over, but kids will do that if you don’t pair them. I make a round robin crosstable for each class, and write weekly pairings on the whiteboard. After the lesson, kids play their opponent for the week, and then circle their name if they won. I update the crosstable at the end of class, and have a small awards ceremony at the end of (n-1) rounds. This allows you to be flexible with pairings when some children are absent/ have resource room and lets you track their progress (you’d be surprised at how the best class participants are not always the best players). For students, this gives both variety and structure, and gives them motivation to try their hardest each week.
5. **Vary your lesson structure**. I have 3-4 different types of lessons. This keeps things fresh both for them and for me.
   1. Lesson/check homework (20 min or 5 min x grade level) + play 1 game of the class tournament game (25 min). It’s amazing how much easier and more efficient it is to teach chess (beyond the very basics) on a smartboard with Chessbase.
   2. Mini lesson (5 min), play a position (20 min), talk about how a GM played it (15 min)– endgames especially. *A* [*sample lesson*](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6NzNFUVZwVEZXWnc) *on how to play endgames up a pawn (first knight, then same color bishop).*
   3. Think, pair, share on a tactics sheet: spend a class period entirely on tactics. This is a good thing to do early in the year as they are learning to do harder sheets for homework. Students have a page of 6 harder tactics. They have 15 minutes to work independently (think); then 15 minutes to work with a partner (pair), comparing answers and working on anything they couldn’t get; then you meet as a big group and “share” any answers that are still unclear. I try to go quickly through the last part—most kids will know the answers by now and the time is better spent on their extended thinking.
   4. Go over an opening line (15 min); have students play through the handout to move 9 or 10 and then play blitz repeatedly, alternating sides (30 min).
   5. Puzzle solving competition (advanced) (1 period) or chess jeopardy (beginner)(1-2 periods)
6. **Create activity stations** where kids can do alternate individual activities if they are super advanced, or the odd person out, or their game ends early and they don’t want to play another, etc. Planning this before the school year starts and explaining it to the kids that it’s relevant to (maybe the whole class; maybe just the advanced players) in the beginning of the year will save you 3-5 minutes every period that you will otherwise spend dealing with the annoying kid that no one wants to play with who demands that you entertain him for the rest of the class.

Station possibilities:

* 1. The Coakley books are full of high- fun puzzle worksheets.
  2. The green and blue books have 3 excellent essays about chess and thinking, Using Your Brain, Common Mistakes, and The Logic Of Chess, that are readable at the smart 4th grade level. Make photocopies and keep them in a folder—they are great for the kid who feels too sick to play. I ask kids to underline (or copy in a notebook) the three sentences they thought were the most surprising and interesting. (model this: give them an example of one you liked and why.) I also ask them to underline any words they aren’t 100% sure of knowing, and to find and underline/recopy one idea they disagreed with.
  3. A computer with a tactics program (CT Art is good) or access to a tactics website (chesstempo.com, emrald.net – with emrald, there’s no www).
  4. Get a chesslecture account and a pair of headphones and have the super-advanced kid listen to a chesslecture while you teach his class mate in 1s. (chesskid.com is also good)

1. **Decorate your room**. You may not be able to force every child to listen to every second of every class, but you can control what they look at. Use bright colors and *fade proof paper*. You won’t have much meaningful student work to put up at first, maybe ever (scoresheets? tactics problems?) but here are some of my favorite alternatives:
   1. Pictures of the kids playing chess. Kids love pictures of themselves; they will stare at themselves every day for a long time. You are getting a free chance to visually reinforce the child’s self-image as a chessplayer. They are also relatively easy to make and potentially cover a lot of wall space. It also makes you look like a caring, child-centered teacher to other adults, like parents and the principal.
   2. Lesson visual aids. It’s good for children to see the rules of castling every time they look around.
   3. Give an occasional written assignment and hang the best ones (after getting the kid’s permission). My favorite assignments have been
      1. bughouse articles, (*part* [*one*](http://main.uschess.org/content/view/11243/632/)*,* [*two*](http://main.uschess.org/content/view/11258/632/) *and* [*three*](http://main.uschess.org/content/view/11301/636/))
      2. describing a game like a story,
      3. nationals reflections,
      4. thank you letters to our student teacher and to sponsors, and
      5. freewrites on whether you think in pictures or words (from “Using Your Brain.”)
   4. Have a [bulletin board](http://lizzyknowsall.blogspot.com/2011/11/how-my-bulletin-board-is-looking-so-far.html) of chess rules. I got most of the rules from the Coakley book.
   5. Chess quotes (easily googleable)
   6. Positional flash cards. This is a fun project to do with kids who play in tournaments. On the front is a position from a tournament game where they did not see an important or thematic positional idea. On the back is the answer.
   7. The caricatures of the world champion that the old Serbian guy at the World Open sells. Kids like them, and they are nice to refer to when a world champion comes up.
2. **Schedule time in the computer lab.** On Fridays last year, I was off the entire morning, but then on 4 periods in a row and afterschool. So I took my 7th and 8th grade class that met daily to the computer lab, and they did CT Art problems for 45 minutes. It’s good to impose some structure: I would have them all start with a 15 question “test” on the level they were currently working on (we started the year at rating 0-1100=level 10; rating 11-1700 level 20, over 1700 level 30). I make a big deal of recording the grades, but don’t actually use them. Most of the time, I would circulate the room, helping kids with computer issues or giving them hints, but you can also use the time to conference/ check in with kids about missing homework, other issues. Chess Tactics for Beginners is a very good, much easier program.

note: you MUST install and test whatever program you are using for tactics before you take the class there, and you must verify with someone that the kids will know how to log into the computers and what you should do if one can’t!

1. **Schedule a blitz tournament once in a while**. Blitz tournaments are great after standardized tests, when the class has lost its sense that chess is fun, or when you are totally unprepared. Kids take the games MUCH more seriously if it’s an official blitz tournament than if you just tell them to play blitz and sit at your desk. See [this handout](https://docs.google.com/open?id=0B4cRSlVgLWb6czhVRjM3X3Qwblk) on how to do the pairings quickly and easily.

Make blitz tournaments more instructive by having students:

* Practice an opening you are teaching. Ask students to make the first 8 moves of an opening you are teaching them (write the moves on the board, so they read them and make them; don’t say them unless they really need help) and then play blitz from there.
* Play a position from a grandmaster game you are going to show them.
* Play a plan you recently learned (minority attack)
* Play a position from “Chess Workouts” (blue book, p 22)
* Play an endgame you are teaching them (example Neil McDonald Converting an Advantage)

Remember that blitz tournaments should not take the place of instruction. Your time with these students is precious and short.

**Going over Games**

Analyzing students’ games at tournaments is my absolute favorite part of the job. It’s a chance for you to work individually with a student at a moment when they are maximally receptive. It can be a very meaningful experience: the child just tried their absolute hardest on a difficult intellectual problem; they feel either crushed or exhilarated, but they don’t completely understand why. You can explain it to them, show them how to make sense of it, and how to think about and control an intellectual challenge. You may be the first person ever to take your students’ intellectual work seriously, and that’s an amazing gift to give a child.

There are three main goals in going over games: building your relationship with the student, helping the student improve, and informing your curriculum.

**Building a relationship with the student**. This means you have to be kind and treat even bad games with dignity, but you also have to be useful. It’s too easy to blindly praise kids, but they’ll see right through it. If you don’t tell them something useful that they didn’t know before, they won’t see the value in showing you their games. At the end of this last year, I had my students write thank you letters to Matan, our incredible student teacher, and Anita wrote “Thank you for going over my games and really looking at them—not just making them moves on the board and saying “good, good.”” Kids will get bored of praise, but they won’t get bored of the sense that you are really interested in seeing their game, and they won’t get bored of getting better.

It’s worth thinking ahead of time about what you want to say to the kid who is crying because he lost, and the kid who is happy because she won. These are mine:

“It’s ok that you are upset about losing. That means you care. It means you tried your hardest and you are upset that you messed up. Magnus Carlsen cries when he loses too. What you have to do though, is take this negative energy you feel now and turn it into something positive. You have to make sure you learn something from this so you don’t lose again in the same way. If you lost in the Sicilian, go prepare a great line for the next time you face this opening or opponent. If you lost a queen ending, study queen endings and become expert in them, so next time you will face the same situation with knowledge and confidence.”

I next ask “Why do you think you lost?” I like to ask this before going over the game, both to see what the kid thinks the reason is, which is often wrong, and also because the child needs to talk about it

Then you look at their game and hopefully give them something specific to channel their energy towards. If they lost a minor piece endgame, photocopy a relevant part of Silman’s endgame book and help the child study it. If they moved too fast, make it really clear how they can change that behavior. If they didn’t know the opening, make them study it.

If it’s midway through an important tournament, I sometimes add an optional extra:

“One of the big tests of a chessplayer’s character is your ability to pick yourself up after a loss. It’s one of the hardest things in the world to decide not to feel a strong emotion that you feel, but right now your challenge is to let go of how upset you are about this game. After the tournament, you can come back to it and be upset, you can beat yourself up if you want to, but for right now, you have to try to put it past you. Let it go. Forget it happened. Go outside, run around, get something to eat, hang out with your friends. You have another game in 2 hours, and the most important thing is that you are feeling good, focused, and ready for it.”

When kids win, I try to praise specific behaviors. It’s not so important that the child did the behaviors a lot or well, just that they will agree with you (i.e. you can’t be *completely* offbase) and they will connect the behavior to winning. For example, you might say, “I really like how much thought you put into calculating taking on d5, and I like how you used what we learned in class to plan the exchange of your bad bishop. I can tell you were really working hard at the board.” Even if the game was pretty bad, the child will associate winning with having been thoughtful, and they will think of themselves, at their very best, as a thoughtful, careful player who applies what you teach him in class. If you can, point out how a student has changed a behavior you asked them to change, or done something specific you asked. “I like how you remembered to do a blunder –check for every move[[2]](#footnote-2), and it really paid off this game!”

When students win, it’s also a good time to ask them to judge their performance in other ways. Did they feel they were focused at the board? Did they feel they were creative, or deep, or they had a great plan? Are they proud of this game? It’s a very useful life-skill to have a set of internal criterion to judge your own performance.

**Helping the student improve** – going over games is the absolute best way to improve. There are four teaching methods I use when doing this:

1. modeling thinking methods (talking out loud);
2. giving them concrete information about openings, pawn structures, typical plans;
3. doing guided practice of calculation, assessment (whatever questions you ask them during the analysis); (e.g. ask them to calculate a pawn ending, ask everyone watching to find an idea for white, lots of what ifs)
4. diagnosing their weaknesses/recommending a treatment.

It’s really important to model thinking methods and questions. I try to do a lot of talking out loud as I go over games, asking myself questions, trying on ideas (“Can I take on f6 and then take twice on d5? Oh no, you’ll recapture with the bishop.”). I also make sure to stop and assess the position frequently, both to model how important it is, and because kids usually aren’t great at this. (try stopping at a random position and asking a kid what the material is next time you go over a game. They will, shockingly, have *no idea*.) At the end of a line of analysis, I show them how you should go back and try to disprove yourself, try to find improvements for the opponent or potential problems for yourself.

Point out all the moments that strike you as important, but at the end of the game, choose 2-3 main points and write them in the scorebook at the bottom of the page. This will allow you to look back and notice patterns more easily. Try to be very concrete about what happened, and then generalize it to a specific weakness. (“I think you are great at tactics for yourself, but you spend less time looking for your opponent’s ideas. You found the great idea 18. Bxf3!, but missed both 25…Qxa5 and 30…Bd4. Make sure before you move anywhere that you have tried to predict your opponent’s next move.”)

* “Don’t trade automatically. When your opponent offers a trade, see if you can find a better move.”
* “Bring out all your pieces (including your rooks) before making pawn breaks.”
* “Always make a prediction of where your opponent will go before you move.”
* “learn the French”
* “slow down”

Try very hard to notice and point out a child’s characteristic weaknesses.

Sometimes parents can help with this, either reminding their child of what you said before their games (“play more slowly”) or reinforcing your message in non-chess ways, like asking their child to predict how a story is going to end (for a student who doesn’t think ahead), or to guess why their sister is upset (for a student who doesn’t think about their opponent’s motivations/intentions).

If you do anecdotal assessments in your school, game analysis notes are very useful. In some years, especially at the beginning of the year as I am getting to know the kids, I keep my own notebook where each kid has a page. This allows me to remember what particular students are working on and to see at a glance what the overall problems are.

It’s possible, and not necessarily a bad idea if you are not much stronger than your student, to use a computer engine to analyze games, but doing this has very real drawbacks. You lose the chance to model how to ask yourself the right questions and use them to get the answers. If you do use a computer, make sure you and your student understand why the engine likes certain moves more than others. Ask a lot of questions and try to get the computer to answer them. Recognize when the computer’s lines are not meaningful because no one, especially no child, would ever play like that. Make sure you don’t give the impression that answers in chess are easy, quick, or absolute.

**Informing Your Curriculum**

You will find yourself repeating some things over and over again. I grew so frustrated at one class, I made them stand at the beginning of every class, put their right hand on their head (more meaningful than their heart) and say the Pledge of Chess :

**The Pledge of Chess**  
I will write my move down before I play it!

I will consider every check and every capture on every move![[3]](#footnote-3)  
I will not trade pieces just because I can (I will have a good reason!)!  
I will make a special effort to consider pawn moves that change the pawn structure (like pawn breaks!)!  
In d4-d5 structures, I will not put the knight in front of my c pawn!  
I will not play Ng5 if ...h6 just makes me go back!  
I will never trade a bishop for a knight without a good reason!   
I will not stop developing until my rooks are active!

And many of the situations that you see kids misplay over and over at tournaments can become fantastic lessons: present the general rule, and give 6 examples of positions where Ng5 is possible, and students have to decide if it’s worth playing, or 6 positions where a black bishop on g4 pins a white knight on f3 to the queen and you have to decide whether to answer h3 with …Bh5, …Bxf3, or something else.

Kids will pay much more attention to their friends’ games than to master games, and showing student games creates peer pressure not to make similar mistakes. Showing instructive opening mistakes, or a well-played opening can be a very instructive and very team-building lesson.

**Resources**

**Jeff Coakley**

**Winning Chess Strategy for Kids** (henceforth referred to as “the green book”)

This is the best book for teaching chess ever written. You should own a personal copy. It has 28 excellent lessons (Kiril’s Klass) on topics including “Rooks on the 7th,” “Trading Queens,” “Strong Pawns” and “Weak Pawns.”) It has 23 tactics lessons, 8 easy tactics homework sheets. I also love the 25 “Chess lingo” pages that define chess vocabulary. Many of these explanations, like the initiative and zugzwang, can be taught as complete lessons.

**Winning Chess Exercises for Kids** (the blue book)

This is a great workbook and homework resource: 100 pages of 10 problem worksheets that progress from advanced beginner level to 2200 strength. The first three problems are checkmates; the next three are tactics; in problem 7, white is losing and has to find a way to save herself; problem 8 is a general best move; problem 9 is an endgame; #10 is a word problem. The exceptionally detailed index allows you to make lessons on any topic (rook and bishop checkmates are broken down into 5 categories (triangular, Pillsbury, Morphy, Greco, and other) with 3-12 examples of each. You can also find problems on “Deflect to Open a Line/ with a forcing check/ to deflect a pawn to open a file (15 problems) or a rank (7 problems) or “B v. N endings” etc.

Even if you know the answers, it’s worth reading the answer key carefully, as it often gives related positions that can be made into their own lesson (c.f 18:8, 30:8).

**Winning Chess Puzzles for Kids 1** (the red book)

This book contains a host of checkmate worksheets (40 mate in 1; 20 mate in 2), tactical lessons and worksheets, and other types of instructive problems. *Who’s the Goof* asks kids to look for illegalities; *Mazes* train students to check carefully for hanging pieces; *Triple Lloyds* ask you to approach checkmate problems in terms of space and square control. There are also instructive hands-on activities (“move pieces”) which ask students to solve problems of efficiency of movement, like the Bishop Cross (explain).

**Winning Chess Puzzles for Kids 2** (the orange book)

This is similar to vol 1, but has more advanced tactics. It also has a new type of puzzle, the “double whammy,” in which white gets two moves in a row to checkmate black (the first move cannot be check). This is great because it directly teaches kids to threaten tricky things.

I love the Basic Tactics lesson at the beginning of both volumes.

**Scholar’s Mate**

A fantastic free kids’ chess magazine put out by the Canadian nonprofit Chess ‘n Math. You can download them [here](http://www.chess-math.org/scholarsmate/).

**Littlewood, Paul. Chess Tactics**.

The first half of the chapters and homework make great intermediate tactics lessons. I usually skip the complex problems in the middle of chapters.

**Cheng, Ray. Practical Chess Exercises.**

A great book for teaching practical thinking to 1200-1800. I use this book a lot for group tactics solving sessions.

**Simpole, Julian. Junior Chess Training: Improve Your Chess**

A badly formatted book with a few great problem sections that show a specific theme in multiple contexts. My favorites are “Trapping the Queen,” which has maybe 15 simple problems to trap a queen on b2, or “Winning A Piece with a Queen Check, with 10 problems all involving Qa5+ (xNe5),

**Chandler, Murray. Winning Chess Tactics for Juniors** (and) **How To Beat Your Dad At Chess**

Companion books on tactics and checkmate patterns that lend themselves well to lessons and mini-lessons.

**Websites I like:**

[www.chesstempo.com](http://www.chesstempo.com)

chess.emrald.net  
www.chesskid.com

www.chessclub.com (ICC)

www.chesslecture.com

1. Michael Stean’s Simple Chess has a good chapter on minority attacks. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I ask kids to circle the move number each time they do a blunder-check. It’s good to have a visual marker of it. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Forcing Chess Moves [↑](#footnote-ref-3)