Understanding the Middlegame  
*How to Analyze Positions, by Richard Westbrook (2003).*

The opening is a race to develop your pieces and control the center. It usually lasts 10-15 moves. The middlegame begins when all, or most, of your pieces are developed. How do you figure out what to do next? Grinding out variations based on the first move(s) you see is a poor method of thinking. You must learn to think about each side’s strengths and weaknesses.

First, here’s some background. There are six well-known concepts which form the basis of middlegame theory.

(1) In chess, only the attacker can win. By definition, "check" is an attack; "checkmate," is an attack from which there is no escape.

(2) The right to attack belongs to the player who has the better position. Therefore, no attack can be successful from an inferior position without a mistake by the other side.

(3) The side with the advantage not only has the right to attack, but also has the obligation to attack or else risk losing the advantage.

(4) There are two types of attack: strategic and tactical. We usually think of attack being amongst the various pieces: close, hand-to-hand combat. But, an attack can be conducted at a distance and in the form of maneuvering for a better position.

(5) The attack must be aimed at the opponent’s weakest spot(s). While one weakness may be fatal if severe enough, two weaknesses are usually needed as objects of attack. It may be that the second weakness does not become clear until enough pressure is brought to bear on the main weakness.

(6) The inferior side must be prepared to defend, and to make concessions while at the same time trying to keep alive some possibility of a counter-attack.

When trying to figure out what to do next, it is important to keep the four elements of chess in mind:

(A) **Material or Force**  
(B) **Time**  
(C) **Space**, and  
(D) **Position**, which usually means pawn structure.

It is possible to have the advantage in any, or all, of the four main elements.

(A) **Material** is easy to assess superficially, but the finer points of positional analysis include being able to determine which pieces are effectively posted, which are not, and what that means. Also, how much extra is enough to win in any given situation?

(B) **Time** is a temporary advantage which is closely linked to mobility and space. An advantage in time must be exploited quickly; otherwise your opponent may catch up.

(C) **Space** is also a temporary advantage, but for a different reason than time. As more pieces are swapped, space becomes less important. In practice, this is harder to exploit than time. It may take many moves before the effects of superior space are evident.

(D) **Positional elements** usually relate to pawns, but also include issues related to pieces. A good, but by no means complete, list for novice players consists of –

**Pawns:**  
Isolated, Doubled, or Backward  
Holes (in front of backward pawns)  
Passed pawn  
Protected passed pawn  
Outside passed pawn  
Pawn majority (or minority)  
Outside pawn majority
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Pieces:
Superior development
Strong outpost square
Control of an open file
Control of a half-open file
Control of a diagonal
Rook(s) on 7th rank
Bishop pair on an open board
Poor piece placement
Poor king placement/field

To add to the confusion, some of these advantages are permanent, some are temporary. Furthermore, some overlap, are interdependent, and can be categorized in a number of different ways.

How can the student make sense of all this? Obviously, it is impossible to consider everything each and every turn.

First, identify all the elements you can about the position from each side's perspective. Give the positive elements one point; subtract one point for negative elements. Add up the plusses and minuses for each side. The difference in the totals gives you an indication of who has the advantage and how large it may be.

If there is no difference the position is even. Try to create a new plus for yourself or a new minus for your opponent.

The side with a difference of plus one has a very slight advantage, but the side with a difference of plus two has a good position. The player with a plus of one or two should try to use them to get the initiative and/or increase pressure.

The side with a difference of plus three has a distinct advantage, probably worth about a pawn! That does not mean that a pawn is available for immediate capture, but you may be able to force the win of a pawn, or more, in the near future. It may mean that you can sacrifice a pawn, or even the exchange, to launch an attack.

Once you have identified the elements you think are most important, and have made your assessment as to who has the advantage, you still have to make a plan. Make your plans according to the following five questions:

(I) King Safety
(II) Material Balance
(III) Pawn Structure
(IV) Mobility
(IV) Tactics

(I) King Safety really belongs under Tactics, but is of such great importance that it deserves to be the first question considered! Your king must be protected; your opponent's must be destroyed. If there are immediate threats, they must be met first!

(II) Material: It is well known that a rook is the minimum extra force required to mate against a lone king; it is less well known that a rook-plus-piece superiority in the king's vicinity are generally required for a direct mating attack to be successful. Of course, there are countless exceptions, but as a principle of attack, it is an extremely useful guideline.

The technique for winning with a material advantage is to increase it until it is enough to force checkmate. You will either win more pieces, or you will win more pawns (which might be promoted). Conversely, the only compensation for a material deficit is counter-attacking chances.

(III) Pawn structure is critical to the middlegame. Think of pawns as the skeleton of the position. The pawn formation will determine (generally) who, if anyone, controls the center and has an advantage in space.
Pawn structure also defines strong and weak squares, and suggests strategic and tactical possibilities, i.e., where your pieces can be most effectively posted and the "flow" of the battle. The items above can guide your thinking about how to use the pawn structure.

(IV) **Mobility** of the pieces is greatly influenced by the existence of pawns. You can not have superior mobility without having an advantage in space! Whereas King Safety, Material, and Pawn Structure are usually permanent in nature, an advantage in mobility is temporary! If you do not use it, you will lose it! A lead in development will evaporate if you do not actively strive to maintain it. So, make a threat if you can!

The process of increasing your advantage in Mobility/Space consists of (1) restraining and weakening your opponent, (2) breaking through, and (3) "cashing in" -- which can be a mating attack or capture of decisive material.

(V) **Tactical assessment** is examination of direct and indirect threats available to each side. Of course, these threats are aimed at weaknesses cited above and are based on such elements as double attacks, pins, weak pawns, unprotected pieces, and a host of other themes, the thorough study of which is absolutely essential to making progress in chess.

Next, let’s apply the ideas discussed above.

The position comes from is very instructive. It is White’s move (after 10...b6). White is already better after skirmishes in the opening. Let’s ask our five questions:

1. Both kings are safe for the time being.
2. Material is even.
3. White has the better pawn structure. He has a solid pawn chain d4-e3-f2; Black has a backward pawn on a half-open file.
4. White has a lead in development of 4:3, and he has an advantage in space due to a pawn on 4th v. pawn on 3rd. His bishop pair is very mobile and aggressively placed
5. There are no immediate tactical threats.

Now, let’s assess the plusses and minuses:

We can give White “plusses” for
- Better development;
- Bishop pair;
- Strong outpost square (e5).
White has no minuses.
Total for White: +3.

Black has no plusses!
We can give Black “minuses” for
- Backward pawn on a half-open file; and
- A poorly placed piece (Ne7).
Total for Black: -2.

Thus, White is “up five” and therefore has a very strong position even though there is no immediate attack. The plan is to maintain his lead in development by moving his queen, a-rook, or even his knight, and should target Black’s weak c-pawn.

11.Qc2!  

Also strong is 11.Ne5! occupying the outpost square, but I did not want to encourage ...Ng6 just yet. The immediate 11.Rac1 is good, too.

11... Bb7
12.Ne5  Qd6
13.Rfd1  ...

White puts a rook on the same file as Black’s queen which creates some tactical threats.

13...  Ng6
14.Rac1  ...

White increases the indirect pressure on Black’s c-pawn.

14...  Nh4
15.Bf1!  Qd5

Black’s threat is easy to counter, but it must be seen! Take time to look for threats – checks, captures, double attacks, etc.

16.f3  Nh5?!  

Better is 16...Rac8, but Black’s situation is critical in any case. Moving the knight away from the center weakens e4, so -

17.e4!  Qd8
18.Bb4!  ...

White has cleared the c-file for his heavy pieces and now must win material.

18...  Re8

This move is practically forced, because 18...c5? loses material to 19.dxc5 which uncovers an attack on the queen. Note that f7 is now weak.

19.Qxc7  Qg5?!

This is desperate attempt to counter-attack. Better is 19...Qxc7 even though that allows White to get a rook to the seventh. In general, an attack can be reduced in strength by trading the most important piece – usually the queen. Black is offering his bishop to slow the attack against his king and to build an attack against White’s.

20.Qxf7+!!  ...

It is very common for novice players to give check just because it is possible to do so. You must have a good reason for giving check! For example, you force the king to a worse square; you also fork an unprotected piece; you gain time to bring another piece into the attack, etc.

Here, the check is much stronger than simply taking the bishop! (The bishop isn’t going to run away!)

20...  Kh8

Black’s position is obviously bad. He is two pawns down, his king is in danger, and his pieces are all poorly placed. How should White continue?

21.Qxe8+!  Rxe8
22.Nf7+  Kg8
23.Nxg5  h6
24.Nh3?!  ...

White makes a move typical of novice and intermediate players – he moves the threatened piece out of danger. However, it is not always necessary to move such a piece if you can give check, or attack a piece of equal or greater value than yours which is being attacked. White overlooked two very strong replies:

(A) 24.Nxe6!  Rxe6 25.Bc4  Kf7 26.Bxe6+  Kxe6; and

(B) 24.Bb5!

24...  Kh7
25.Rc7  Bc8
26.Rdc1  1–0.