

# The Five Ways to Make a Piece Safe

**Quote of the Month:** *The most important idea on the chess board is safety.*

As listed in earlier Novice Nooks, there are five ways to make an unsafe piece safe:

- Move the piece to a safe square.
- Guard the attacked piece.
- Capture the attacking piece.
- Block the attack.
- Counterattack.

In any given situation one method may be best or more than one about equally effective. However, we can make some strong generalizations about each that should prove helpful *if analysis fails to reveal which is best in a given situation*. Listing *all* the moves that can make the piece safe is usually a good first step. Note that only three of the five ways applies to getting out of check.

## A) Move the piece to a safe square

Moving a piece to a safe square is the “default” way to make something safe and, in many cases, the best. Moving often presents the opportunity to relocate that piece to a better square.

A common example occurs after **1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bc4 Bc5 4.O-O Nf6 5.Ng5? O-O 6.Nc3 h6:**

**White to Play after 6...h6**



White's knight is not safe. Some players might think “I can't *retreat* to f3 because I came from there and that loses tempi. I can't go to h3 because *a knight on the rim is dim*. Therefore, I won't retreat, but will boldly attack with 7.Nxf7.”

The problem with this logic is that when faced with three choices of A, B, and C, deciding by process of elimination that C is best because you don't like A or B may fail because C can be worse! Here the sensible move 7. Nf3 is best – the loss of tempi was caused by 5.Ng5? not 7.Nf3. Making this best safe move is not a retreat in any way except direction! For an evaluation of a position similar to 7.Nxf7?, see [A Counting Primer](#).

Here is a more advanced example from a student's game:

#### Black to Play after 14.Rfd1

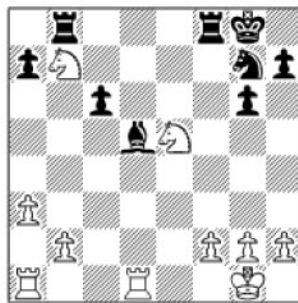


White has an indirect pin on the d-file and now threatens 15.Bxe5 dxe5 16.Nf6+ winning the queen for a rook and a knight, or possibly 16.Nb6. Black's easiest defense is to just move the attacked knight, say, 14...Ng6. Instead, he missed the idea and played **14...Re8?**. After **15.Bxe5**, he finally realized what he had missed, but instead compounded the mistake – as often happens – with the Counting error **15...Bxd5?**. After **16.Rxd5**, the d-pawn was pinned to the queen and since 16...dxe5 17.Rxd8 Raxd8 would leave him down a queen for a rook, Black resigned.

This example also shows the rewards for following the strong principle *develop your rooks to the same file where your opponent has his queen*. As a corollary, if your opponent develops his rook to your queen's file, make sure everything is safe – you might want to move your queen.

The following occurred during an online 2-12 game (two minutes with a twelve second increment). White has built up time and now has over five minutes remaining.

#### White to Play after 1...Rb8



White is ahead a pawn, but his b7 knight is skewered to the b2-pawn. The best way to make the knight safe is just to move it, e.g., 2.Nc5 Rxb2 3.Ncd3 (or 3.f3) with roughly equal chances. Instead, White sees a fork and “counterattacks” with **2.Nd7(?)**. White is not winning the exchange, but rather giving up two pieces for a rook, a loss of about a pawn and a half. However, when compared to the better 2.Nc5, which gives back the pawn, it is “only” a Counting error of approximately half a pawn. Black, who was short on time, fails to play the simple 2...Rxb7, when after 3.Nxf8 Kxf8, Black has two pieces for a rook and a pawn with good winning chances. Instead, he also blundered with **2...Rfd8??** and after **3.Nxd8 Rxd8** was behind the exchange and a pawn. However, despite his winning position and huge time advantage, White continued to play extremely rapidly and lost anyway; at the end of the game he had seven minutes left.

White's hasty play brings up the important question: “When given the choice (such as before a fun Internet game), why choose a time limit if you don't want to use all the given time?” *To choose to play a slower time limit than you feel like playing is like giving your opponent a handicap.*

Except under special circumstances, you are never trying your best if you don't attempt to use your given time – see [The Room Full of Grandmasters](#).

## B) Guard the attacked piece

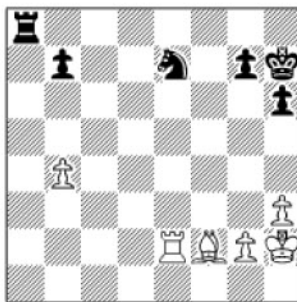
Guarding is the idea most closely associated with “making a piece safe,” but, ironically, it is often one of the worst! When I ask a student what they should do with an unsafe piece, they often respond:

“I need to *guard* (or protect) my piece” rather than the correct “I need to find a way to make the piece safe.” This mislabeling of the problem often results in an incorrect solution as well – how you ask yourself a question often has a strong affect on your answer. For example, in the previous section White did not wish to “retreat” his knight to f3. *In general, using the correct terminology – and asking the correct questions – can often help lead to better answers!*

Guarding has the following disadvantages:

- It ties down the guarding pieces.
- It may allow the attacker to pile on more attacking pieces.
- It may allow the removal of the guard tactic (see [The Underrated Removal of the Guard](#)).

### Black to Play after 1.Re2



In this equal position the knight is attacked and Black should simply move it. Instead, guarding it with 1...Re8? is not safe because it creates a pin; after 2.Bc5, the knight is lost. Counterattacking with 1...Rf8? loses the exchange after 2.Bc5 (much better than winning the b-pawn with the simple 2.Rxe7 Rxf2 3.Rxb7 – *When you see a good move look for a better one!*) 2...Ng6 3.Bxf8 Nxf8. If in the diagram the bishop were on c4 instead of f2, then the counterattack 1...Rc8 would lose a pawn to 2.Rxe7, while the guarding 1...Re8 loses to the removal of the guard Bb5. Once again the common theme: guarding bad, moving good.

Of course, sometimes guarding – or any other way to make something safe – is clearly correct because it is the only logical method, or at least the options are limited. After the common 1.e4 e5 2.Nf3

### Black to Play after 2.Nf3



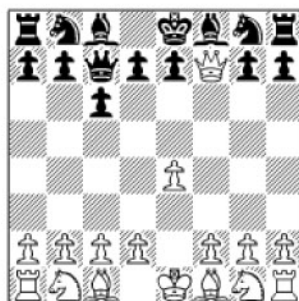
...the most common move is the guarding **2...Nc6** although counterattack by **2...Nf6** – Petroff's Defense – is very popular among strong players, and pawn counterattacks with **2...f5** – Latvian Gambit – or **2...d5** – Elephant/Englund Gambit – have their devotees.

Echoing Nimzowitsch, GM Andrew Soltis mentions in his helpful new book [\*The Wisest Things Ever Said About Chess\*](#), "The stronger the piece, the worse protector it is." Strong pieces have better things to do! Therefore, pawns are usually the best guarders and kings are good protectors until the endgame, when they must activate.

### C) Capture the attacking piece

Just as weaker players may think "My piece is unsafe – I have to guard it," rather than "My piece is unsafe – I have to list all the ways to make it safe and choose the best one," those same players, when checked, may think "I have to move my king," instead of "I have to find the best way out of check." I have seen the following situation more than once in young childrens' games:

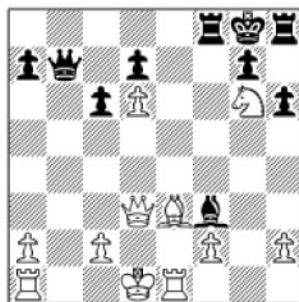
**Black to Play after 1.Qxf7+**



This kind of mindset leads the beginner to play the "safest" king move: **1...Kd8??**, instead of the simple capture **1...Kxf7**.

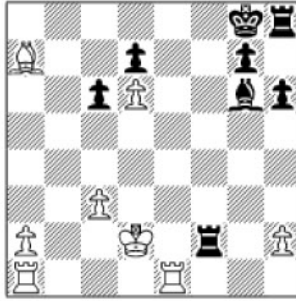
This type of error may seem farfetched, but I notice that adults make a similar mistake all the time. They choose a clearly inferior defense because they don't list all the ways to make the piece safe and choose either the first move they see or one that looks good, but the safety is superficial. The following is from a Team 4545 game involving players rated over 1500 ICC standard. Both players had over thirty minutes remaining, but the following moves were blitzed:

**White to Play after 1...Bf3+**



White is ahead a piece and has the rooks forked. However, he played the hasty **2.Kd2??**. **2.Kc1!** is the safe square and even **2.Re2** wins easily. **2...Qb4+** What else did White expect? If White were playing slowly, he might see that his advantage has all but disappeared. **3.e3** White could try **3.Qc3!? Qxd6+**, this double attack on the knight is key. **4.Kc1** (**4.Qd3** guards the knight, yet **4...Qb4+** would repeat) **4...Qxg6**, but his big advantage is gone. **3...Qb2+ 4.Qc2 Qxc2+ 5.Kxc2 Be4+** The other key double attack. **6.Kd2 Bxg6 7.Bxa7 Rxf2+??**:

### White to Play after 7...Rxf2+



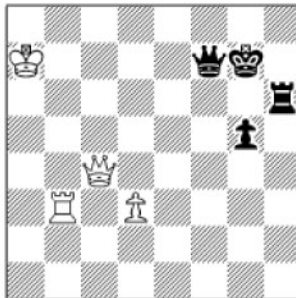
8.Re2?? Despite having more than thirty minutes remaining, White made this move in *two seconds*. He probably thought this interposition was the best way to save the h-pawn. Later the game was drawn. Once again the best way to save the piece (in this case the king *and* the h-pawn) was to capture the rook with 8.Bxf2. Psychologists say that the hardest chess moves to see are retreats and long distance moves on diagonals, and 8. Bxf2 is both.

### D) Block the attack

Blocking, also known as *interposition*, can only occur against a distant attack by a queen, rook, or bishop. Blocking has pros and cons. The pro is that if the blocking piece moves in the same direction as the attacking piece, it may be counterattacking that piece. The bad is that if the blocking piece is not counterattacking, then blocking usually creates a pin.

Here are some simple examples:

### White to Play after 1...Qf7+



White can move the king to the eighth rank, but then 2...Rh8+ might become troublesome. And 2.Qxf7+ leads to a roughly equal ending. But best of all is to interpose with **2.Rb7**, pinning the queen and winning it for the rook.

### Black to Play after 1.e4 d5 2.Bb5+(?)

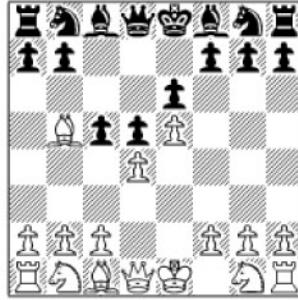


Instead of saving the e-pawn with 2.exd5, White has “counterattacked”



with the silly 2.Bb5+. Some beginners consider meeting similar checks as great opportunities to develop a knight with 2...Nc6(?), but that just wastes time after 3.exd5 Qxd5 4.Nc3. Much better is 2...c6 attacking the bishop and giving Black the initiative.

**Black to Play after 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.e5 c5 4.Bb5+(?)**



A move commonly found in the games of weaker players. Black has no choice but to block as 4...Ke7 is rather senseless. Black has no problems after 4...Nc6, even though the knight is pinned. If White continues with the poor 5.Bxc6? bxc6, the doubled pawns are very strong, as, after a later ...cxd4 cxd4, Black can break again with ...c5! when the White center crumbles and Black gains the bishop-pair. But even more logical is 4...Bd7 blocking the check without the pin and attacking the white bishop. If 5.Bxd7+ Qxd7, and Black has rid himself of his bad bishop, his only problem piece in the Advanced French.

Let's consider an opening position where blocking is bad, but weaker players often do it anyway. Such a position occurs quite often in the French Defense, say after 1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Nd2 Nf6 4.e5 Nfd7 5.f4 c5 6.c3 Nc6 7.Ndf3 Qb6 8.g3 cxd4 9.cxd4 Bb4+

**White to Play after 9...Bb4+**



In this and similar French positions weaker players often play the “forced” 9.Bd2, which loses the d-pawn because it blocks the queen’s ability to guard d4. Instead of interposing and losing a pawn, it is much better to play the book 9.Kf2, forfeiting castling rights and retaining material equality. Many weaker players weigh the right to castle so heavily that they will voluntarily and unnecessarily fall behind in material to retain that right. But in general *if you fall behind in material you are just losing, so retaining equal material, even at the cost of the right to castle, is usually the correct decision.*

### **E) Counterattack**

Counterattack takes many forms, but most of them are “I won’t make the unsafe piece safe – instead I will attack one of my opponent’s pieces so that he can’t – or won’t – capture my piece.” This is a very powerful weapon, but, unfortunately, it introduces complications and many weaker players are often victimized by their own cleverness.

The most common failure of counterattack is that if your opponent uses

his piece A to attack your B and you reply by using your C to attack his D, then often he can answer saving D by attacking your E. Then A is still attacking B and now D is attacking E and both your B and E cannot be saved.

After **1.e4 e6 2.d4 d5 3.Bd3 Nf6 4.e5**, Black might think “Yes, I can just move my knight, but I see a chance to develop a piece with check first” and play **4...Bb4+??**

**White to Play after 4...Bb4+??**



After **5.c3**, two black pieces are attacked and one of them must fall.

Disaster is common when a counterattack is made without careful analysis. For example, consider the play after 7.d4 in diagram at the bottom of page two in [The Two Types of Counting Problems](#), where one of my intermediate students fell for a similar misplayed counterattack.

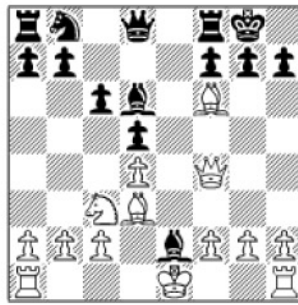
In the following position from an Internet game, Black is in some danger and must make the correct decision:

**Black to Play after 1.Bxf6**



Black's best move is simply to capture the piece attacking his queen with **1...Qxf6**. Although weak pawns are usually weakest in the endgame, this position follows another guideline, which is *if you have to weaken your king position, much better to do it with queens off the board*. So after **1...Qxf6 2.Qxf6 gxf6 3.Kxe2** or **3.Bxe2**, White has somewhat the better position, but there is a lot of game left to be played. However, Black did not like that possibility and instead found a much worse counterattack with **1...Bd6??**

**White to Play and win after 1...Bd6??**



White correctly found **2.Qh4!** threatening both mate on h7 and the white queen and Black resigned.

Finally, a completely different type of counterattack:

**White to Play after 1...Qe5+**



White saves his loose bishop on g5 with **2.Qe2**, pinning the black queen to the king.

A good general principle is *counterattack is very dangerous! Use it very carefully, when it is the only defense* (such as in the previous diagram, where it is the only way to save material), *you are losing, or if you are a pretty good player. Further, when you are way ahead avoid counterattack if at all possible because it introduces complications, which usually greatly favor the losing side.*

The following is an oversimplification, but summarizes *The Five Ways to Make a Piece Safe*:

- Move the piece – simple and clear
- Guard the piece – passive and binding
- Capture the attacking piece – desirable and aggressive
- Block the attack – pinning or counterattacking
- Counterattack – dangerous and complicated

*While principles or assumptions may be helpful, analysis is usually required to determine which of the above methods may be the best way to make something safe — take your time and try to find the best move.*