

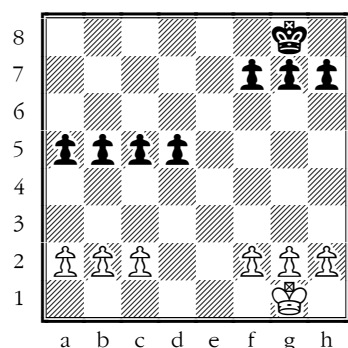
Learning to Play with the “Little Guys”

Part 1: Pawn Majorities and Minorities: The Basics of Pawn Play

Concepts:

- What is a pawn majority?
- What is a pawn minority?
- What are the advantages of a majority and/or a minority and how to use them!

Pawn Majorities, Example 1: What is a Pawn Majority and How Do I Get One?

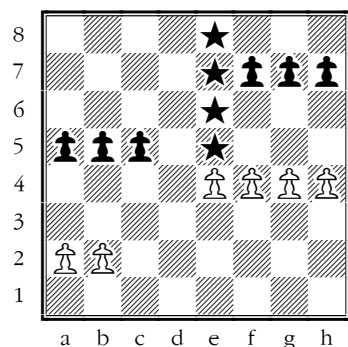


The word “majority” essentially means “more”.
Black has more pawns!

As you learned in Lesson 17, the “little guys” can be awfully important! We are now learning that the basics of pawn play and the **advantages** associated with pawns can be just as crucial as learning about positional weaknesses. Our first diagram is going to teach us how to recognize a “Pawn Majority” in any chess game we play!

The position to your left is simple: Black has a “Queenside pawn majority”. This means that on the Queenside of the board, black has **four** pawns against white's **three** pawns. If nothing else was happening in this position, black would have a winning advantage. Note that the Kingside pawns are completely equal with no majority for either side.

Pawn Majorities, Example 2: A “Potential, Pretending, Passer” is Looming...

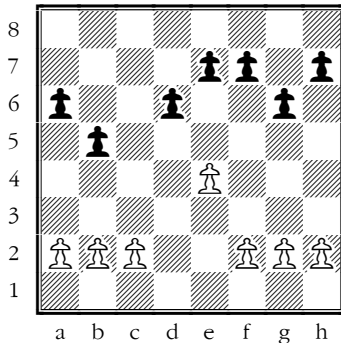


Both black's c-pawn and white's e-pawn are “Pretending” passers!

The true advantage of a pawn majority is the “un-challenged” pawn that cannot be directly blocked by the enemy. We call these pawns “Pretenders” because they are almost passed pawns. White's e-pawn and black's c-pawns need only the help of their brothers (the b-pawn for black and the f-pawn for white) to become passed pawns!

White's pawn's path is highlighted by stars to reveal that it is **unblocked**, and black's c-pawn is every bit as good. Every good majority – meaning a majority without doubled or broken pawns – has a “Pretender” *waiting* to become a real passer. An easy plan is to advance the pawns forward, **making trades where necessary**, and attempt to turn the Pretender's dreams into a reality.

A Pawn Minority, Example 1: What is a Pawn Minority and is It Always Bad?

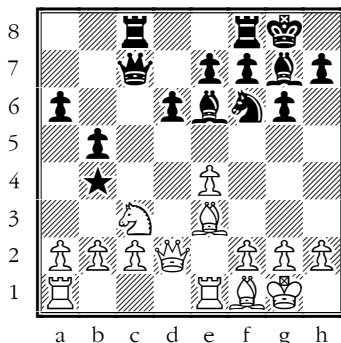


Without the pieces to use the open files and space, a minority is no good!

The word minority means “less”, so it is the opposite of majority. When it comes to **just** the pawns, a minority is never a good thing. For example, unless black's a and b pawns are using *super-strength medicine* – there is **no** way they could ever take down white's three a, b and c pawns. All trading will eventually leave white with an extra pawn.

Before we move onto looking at this structure with the pieces on the board, it is good to realize the one good thing about having a pawn “minority”: By definition, if you have one less pawn, that means you **always** have an open file to go with it. This structure for example, leaves black with a potentially open c-file for either one or both of his Rooks!

A Pawn Minority, Example 2: Minorities Are Good When the Pieces Are Involved!

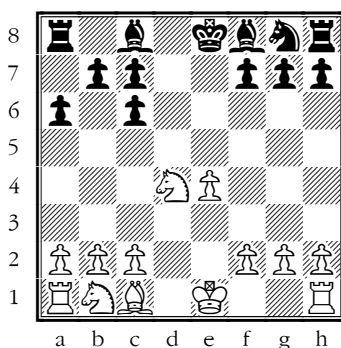


Minorities can't win on their own, but they can be good in the Middlegame!

Do you recognize this pawn structure? It is the same as Minority Example 1, except we have added pieces. Suddenly the tables have turned! Black has an open c-file for his Rook and Queen, and after the last move 1...b5!, black is threatening to *kick* the c3-Knight. This, in turn, means that black is attacking the e4-pawn with his f6-Knight, as well as the c2-pawn with the Queen and Rook.

We see here that black's open space on the Queenside has led to active piece play for the b-pawn, the c8-Rook, the Queen, the e6-Bishop, the f6-Knight and even the Bishop on g7 (if the Knight on f6 is ever to move). Black is slightly better in this position and happy to have a minority!

Practical “Majority” Example: The Ruy Lopez or Spanish Exchange Variation



1.e4 e5 2.Nf3 Nc6 3.Bb5 a6 4.Bxc6 dxc6 5.d4 exd4 6.Qxd4 Qxd4 and 7.Nxd4

Our final example shows a main line Opening variation (actually reviewed at the end Lesson 17 Part 1 as well) where white has **achieved a majority on the Kingside**. Please find the moves played to reach this position listed beneath the diagram. White has just played 7.Nxd4.

Though black has compensation as of right now because of his Bishop pair and easy development (Lesson 17, Part 1) – if white is able to *simplify* this position down to just the pawns, the **four vs three pawn majority** on the Kingside should be enough for a victory in white's favor. Notice that white's e4-pawn is the **“pretending passer”** in this pawn structure, while black's Queenside majority is useless.

Learning to Play with the “Little Guys”

Part 2: The Basics of Pawn Structure and Advanced Pawn Play

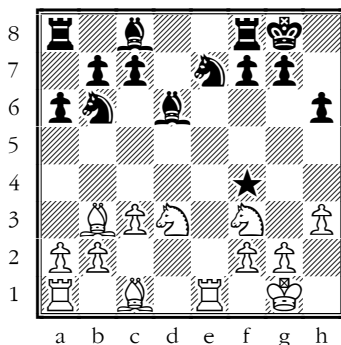
Concepts:

- What is a pawn **“structure”** or **“formation”**?
- Learning to “listen” to your pawns!
- Swimming with the River – Pawn Chains!

Weaknesses having to do with the pawns (whether they be the pawns themselves or the squares around them) once created, are usually **permanent**. The same can be said for pawn majorities and minorities. The pawn *structure* – sometimes referred to as the pawn *formation* – also tends to be relatively static. So what is a pawn “structure”?

Structure is a word used to refer to **everything** having to do with the pawns: The pawns themselves; the individual square weaknesses around them (like holes/outposts); as well as the open files and diagonals created by pawn moves. Squares, open files, and open diagonals determine the best moves and plans for the pieces, and **all three** of those things are **created because of a player's decisions and moves with the pawns!**

Basic Structure #1 – The Open Center: Pawns “Tell” the Pieces Where to Go!

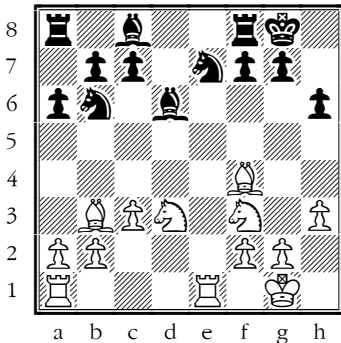


Without the pawns trading in the center, the pieces wouldn't be so happy! In this open center position white's pieces are very active – especially the Rook on the open file!

Think about it: Until you start moving your pawns, you have **no** open files, **no** open diagonals, and **no** weaknesses or strengths of any kind to speak of either. So what do we do with this new, **very scary knowledge**, that the “little guys” are much more important than we ever thought possible?

Learn about pawn structures! How to recognize them; find plans; and eventually, master every pawn formation! Surely there are too many to deal with here, so consider this lesson as more of an **introduction to knowledge** which masters have that most players don't: *Your pawns are talking to your pieces and telling them what to do with every move, your pieces just have to learn to listen!*

Basic Structure #1 Continued – The Open Center = Strong Pieces = Good Tactics!

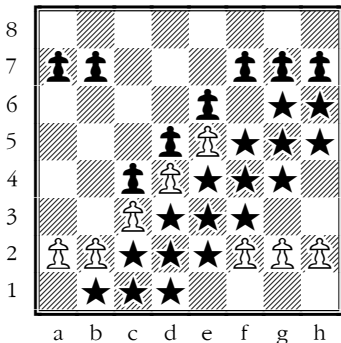


In Kramnik-Krasenkov,
Wijk aan Zee 2003
Kramnik played 16.Bf4!

With his last move, World Champion Vladimir Kramnik was “listening” to what his open center and e-file were telling him: **Be aggressive with the pieces!** Black was then left with a tough position. White is more active, threatening to capture on d6 and the e7-Knight is next. Krasenkov played 16...Ng6 and after 17.Bxd6 cxd6 18.Re4-d4!, Kramnik piled up on the isolated d6-pawn and went on to win the ending.

This simple example is designed to make one critical point: When the central pawns have been traded, nice open squares, open files, and open diagonals are *begging* for pieces to use them. So be aggressive in the center when it opens up, put your pieces on strong squares, and attack!

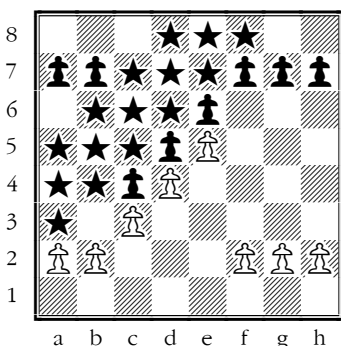
Structure #2 – Pawn Chains: Learning to “Swim with the River”!



Pawn chains can arise from many different types of Opening Variations!

Pawn **chains** create positions where a very specific type of plan is best for each player. Particularly, both white and black will generally need to focus solely on one side of the board, attacking and creating threats “behind the wall of pawns”. White's chain runs from b2 to e5 in this example.

We often refer to this as “swimming with the river”! This means that when the “**flow**” of a position is heading in one specific direction – in this case white's b2-e5 chain is pointing towards the Kingside – trying to attack on the other side of the board would be like “swimming upstream”, with white's pieces being constantly blocked by his/her own pawns. The b1-h7, c1-h6 and d1-h5 diagonals are open space for white to fill with pieces and to create threats!

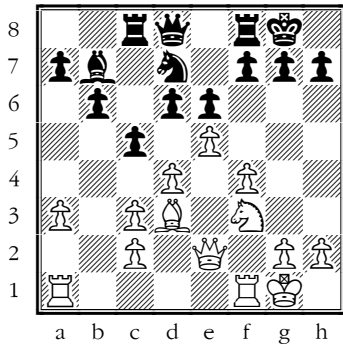


The d8-a5, e8-a4 and f8-a3 diagonals are black's to control and use!

Taking a look at the same pawn chain from black's perspective, we see a similar plan but on the other side of the board. Black's pieces will naturally find open space on the Queenside in this type of structure. Often a player might also continue to gain space (see structure #3 for more on space) on the side of the board that the chain is headed.

For example, black might consider advancing the a and b pawns together, and along with the pieces, attempt to create an attack on the Queenside. We have stripped both diagrams of the pieces in order to highlight what the pawn chains, in their pure form, are telling the pieces to do: Swim with the river and attack in the direction of your pawn chain!

Structure #2 – Pawn Chains: Just Keep Swimming... A Practical Game Example!



*White's **pawn chain** is responsible for black's problems: The f6-Knight would have guarded h7!*

Here we see a game from the library of IM Daniel Rensch – one of the authors of this curriculum (username “ACEChess” on ChessKid.com). His opponent underestimated the power of the c3-e5 pawn chain. After advancing 17.e5!, white has removed the Knight from f6, which it should be noted is a common idea behind achieving an advanced pawn on e5. Why is it a good idea?

Without a Knight on f6, the Kingside is much more vulnerable to tactics – especially the **h7-pawn**. Here white finishes the game with 18.Bxh7+!, a common sacrifice that leads to a deadly mating net. After: 18...Kxh7 19.Ng5+ Kg8 20.Qh5 (mate coming on h7) Re8 21.Qxf7+ Kh8 22.Qh5+ Kg8 23.Qh7+ Kf8 24.Qh8+ Ke7 and 25.Qxg7 checkmate!

In summary, there are many different types of pawn structures in chess. They all have original names associated with them and should be learned and mastered one at a time. The purpose of this lesson is to introduce the basic concept of approaching a position from the **“pawn's perspective”** first, then think about where your pieces should go second. Of course, the ultimate goal is to see your entire army as one and coordinate them, pawns included, together in unison.

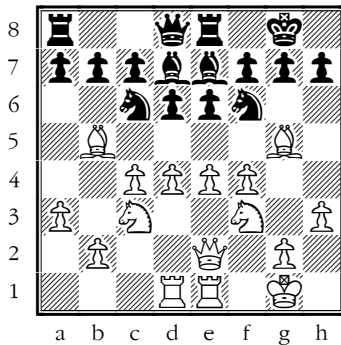
Learning to Play with the “Little Guys”

Part 3: Advanced Pawn Play, Space and Building Strength

Concepts:

- What is *space* in chess?
- Learning to build strength in your position!

Building Strength, Example 1: What is “Space” in Chess?

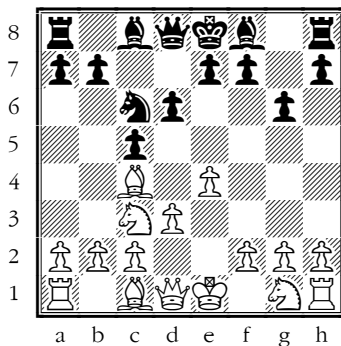


More space means better pieces. Here white controls the whole board!

Our final topic of discussion regarding the pawns is something that is not necessarily a structure or formation, but rather **a general plan to *always* have in any game.** When play is roughly equal, with both sides fighting for better pieces (as better pieces lead to better tactics!) the most effective way to make your position stronger is to “build strength,” which means to gain **space**.

In chess, the term “space” refers to all the squares your army controls or occupies behind **your most advanced pawn(s)**. In our current diagram, white has more space than black because his pawns are further advanced and constricting black from improving the minor pieces.

Building Strength, Example 2: Learning to Gain Space and Use It!

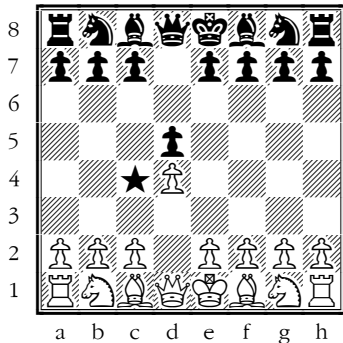


In the Closed Sicilian Opening, White plans to attack on the Kingside!

Gaining space is always a good idea, and though not every position can be as good or offer as much space as the previous diagram, you should **always** strive for more space and better squares for your pieces. What should white play here? Develop the Knight to f3 or play pawn to f4 first?

5.f4! By developing the Knight to f3 **behind** the pawn, white's chances of a successful Kingside attack are much greater. Using the principles of both *pawn chains* (notice that white's c2-d3-e4 chain is better with white's f-pawn advanced) and *gaining space*, white can now involve the f1-Rook in a Kingside attack after getting castled. All of white's pieces will find space on the Kingside after the f4!

Building Strength, Example 3: Think About Your Space Before Developing!



After 1.d4 d5 – white's needs to think about a plan before just developing the pieces. The plan to attack on the Queenside after 2.c4 is a good one!

Our Closed Sicilian example showed that if white thinks about the pawns and how the pieces can attack together, before developing the Knight to f3, then white can grab the early chance to gain space (5.f4!) – thus setting up a much better chance of attack on the Kingside. **Space offers your pieces avenues and options of attack!**

Going back even further in the Opening stage, the Queen's Gambit is a perfect example of needing to gain space before developing. Many amateur and beginner chess players might play 2.Nc3 here. The problem with this move is that white applies no pressure to the center against the Queen pawn, because the d5-pawn is easily protected. White needs to play 2.c4! First, followed by bringing the Knight out behind the c-pawn. In this case white will naturally put more pressure on the center (d5) and be able to develop pieces towards the Queenside more easily.

NOTE: A common theme of gaining space – displayed in both Examples two and three – is that developing a Knight **behind a pawn** can increase the pressure on the squares you are attacking. Whenever a Knight is directly behind a pawn, the squares the pawn can possibly capture are also attacked by the Knight. This means that, when possible, it can be a good idea to **advance a pawn first** and **develop the Knight behind the pawn**. The extra space gained by advancing the pawn first is also useful to the rest of your army.



Learning to Play with the “Little Guys”

Instructor's Guide

Pawns are tricky! Even for most of the coaches reading this Lesson, there is a good chance that none have ever truly approached a chess game from the “little guys” perspective first. This Lesson may take more than one classroom setting (with the assumed time being 1 to 1.5 hours) to work through. Take your time, coaches, and enjoy the lesson!

Many positions in chess offer one side a pawn majority and the other, naturally, a minority. The simple version of the story is that a majority is more of a long term advantage that can be executed more aggressively as the pieces are traded. With less tactics and complications, especially in the endgame, it is easier to advance the pawns up the board safely. A minority on the other hand, because it offers the open files and space that a majority does not, can be a dangerous middlegame tool. Why? It is generally **easier** to advance **fewer** pawns up the board, especially with the help of the pieces.

The first step in the right direction in regards to learning structures and formations is to learn that though there are many different types of pawn structures, and many different versions of each, they can essentially be broken down into two major categories: **Open Center** positions and **Closed Center** positions. Hopefully, the examples in Part 2 provided some general guidance as how to approach each type of position (open and closed) as well as some practical advice on structures in general.

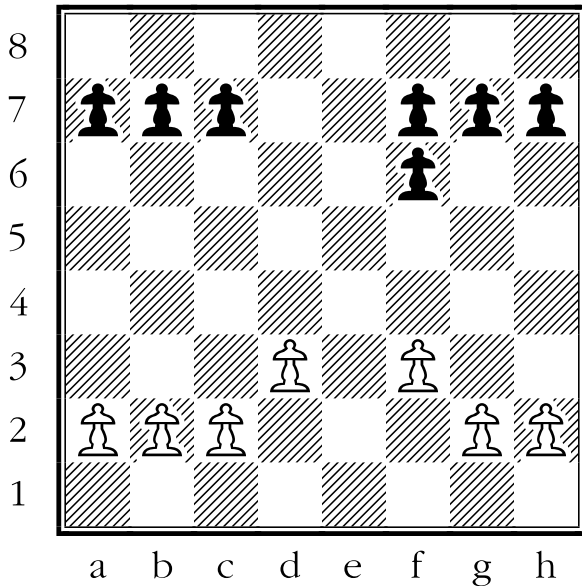
Space is a tricky matter to understand at the beginning levels, but we recommend referencing the point made in the summary of Part 3 – i.e., that when a Knight stands directly behind a pawn, their attacking powers double! Where as a Knight standing in front of a pawn, stands alone. This basic concept is “space 101”: When the pieces **work from behind the pawns**, they constrict and attack more squares than they do by blocking the pawns.

Practical Notes and Advice – Lesson 18:

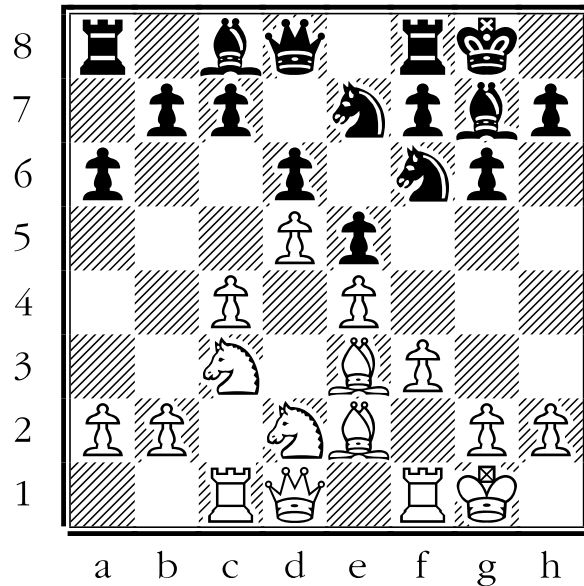
- **Do not assign the worksheets until the lesson, in its entirety, has been reviewed.**
- **Try to instill in your students that, though the pawns may seem boring, using them well is vital knowledge. Why? Because pawn moves can never be taken back! Learning to play with the pawns is critical!**
- **Review Lesson 17 (positional weaknesses) with your students if necessary.**

Lesson 18: Playing with the Pawns!

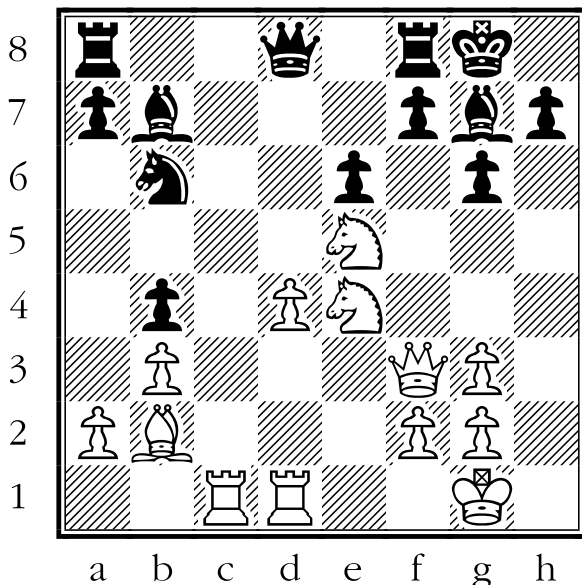
Beneath each diagram is a question about the given pawn structure or position.
Circle the correct answer to each question.



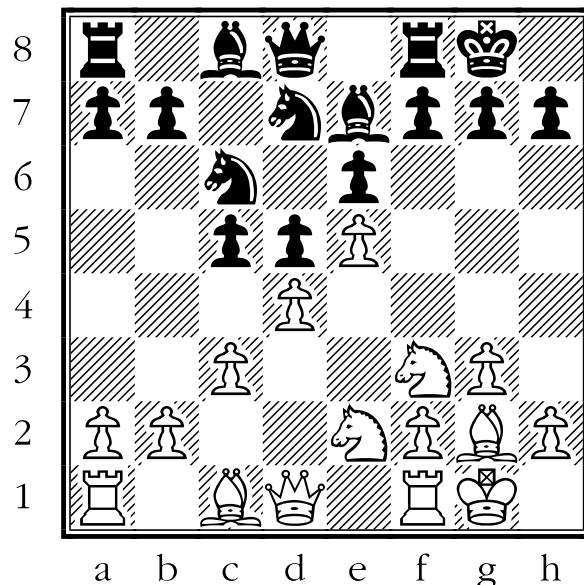
Who has the better pawn majority?
White? OR Black?



What "side" should white attack towards?
Kingside? OR Queenside?



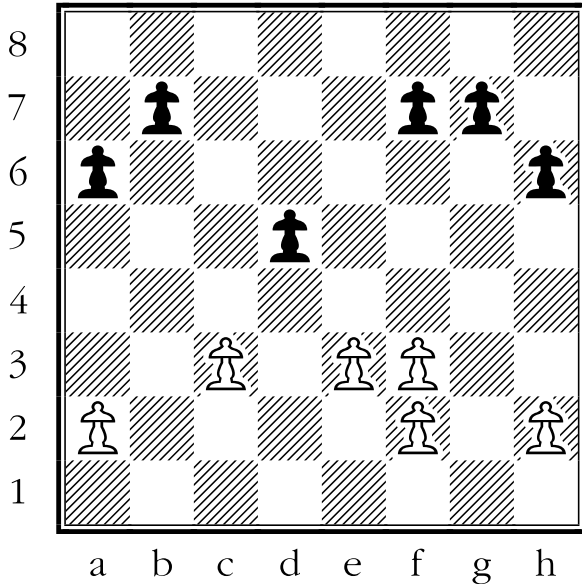
Who has more pawn weaknesses?
White? Equal? Black?



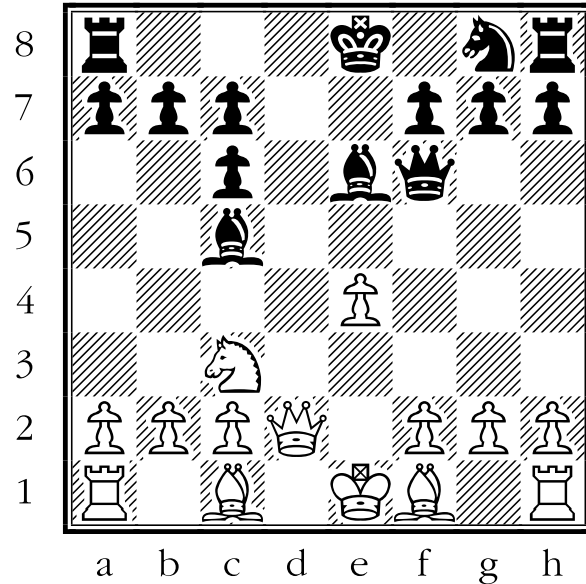
What "side" should black attack towards?
Kingside? OR Queenside?

Lesson 18: Playing with the Pawns!

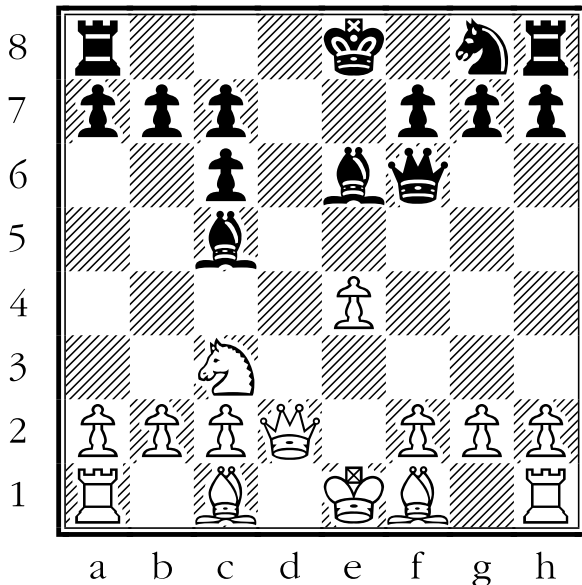
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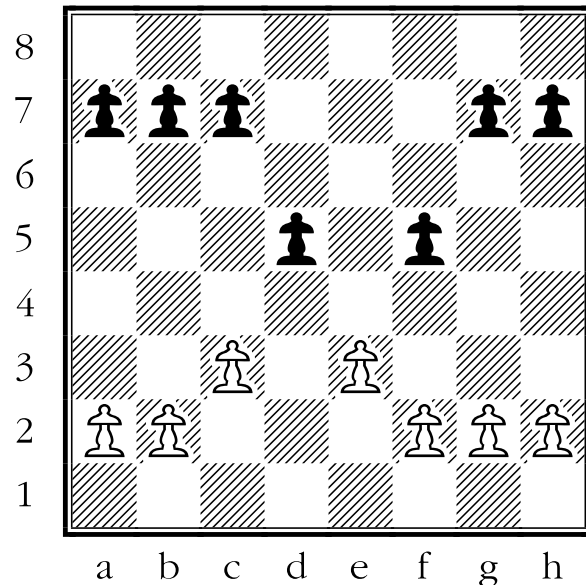
Who has more "pawn islands"?
White? Equal? Black?



Same position: Whose pawns are better?
White's? Equal? Black's?



What "side" should black attack towards?
Kingside? Center? Queenside?



Who has the better pawn majority?
White? Equal? Black?



Playing with the Pawns!

Answer Key

Worksheet Page 1:

Diagram #1 – White. White's Queenside pawn majority is a better four-vs-three than black's, because black's f-pawns are doubled and therefore ineffective.

Diagram #2 – White. White's a2-pawn is backward, the d4-pawn is isolated and the g-pawns are doubled. Black has no pawn weaknesses.

Diagram #3 – Queenside. White's pawn structure, led by the advanced d5-pawn, is facing towards the Queenside. A plan such as 1.b4 followed by c5 and Nc4 makes sense for white.

Diagram #4 – Queenside. Black's pawn chain (f7-e6-d5) provides space on the Queenside. Black should use his c5-pawn and moves like 1...Qb6 to put pressure on the center. Notice that black uses the Queenside space to develop the pieces for central pressure.

Worksheet Page 2:

Diagram #1 – White. White has four pawn islands.

Diagram #2 – Center. Black's Queen and Bishops, as well as the Rook coming to d8, apply pressure to both sides of the board, but the center is the most natural place to attack when the pawns have been traded to create open files and diagonals.

Diagram #3 – White. White has a four-vs-three Kingside pawn majority.

Diagram #4 – Equal. Though the structure may not be symmetrical, neither side has a majority either because the pawns prevent progress by capture.