

Scholastic Chess Club Meetings framework

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Sketches of Typical Chess Club Meetings

Here's a meeting outline that can work well for many school chess clubs:

- Snack
- Brief general instruction (15 minutes)
- Divide students into teams for the day
- Team quiz (10 minutes)
- Chess game (25 minutes)
- Announcements for prizes, assignments, next meeting
- Clean-up

Training-oriented meetings for elementary students might look more like this:

- Snack
- Collect and review homework (5 minutes)
- Full group instructional activity (15 minutes)
- Divide students into small groups / assign opponent
- Small group lessons / chess game (30 minute sessions)
- Assign new homework
- Clean-up

Equipment and materials useful for these meetings:

- Snack items (often supplied by parent volunteers, following school guidelines)
- Suitable tables (cafeteria, library, science lab, art room)
- Chess boards and pieces (quality sets are available in bulk from several vendors; one set for each student is ideal for instructional purposes)
- Chess score sheets for recording games
- Demonstration chess board or chess transparencies and an overhead projector
- Chess clocks or timers
- Three-ring binders for students
- Printed chess exercises for between-game and home practice
- Items for tournament-style play: pairing sheets, team flags, prizes
- Items for evaluating and recognizing student progress
- If possible, computers with chess software and Internet access

A Closer Look at the Elements of a Chess Club Meeting

How difficult it will be to gather the items listed above and prepare for a meeting will depend on how established a club is, the level of chess expertise possessed by the adult mentors, the size of the club, and other variables. Yet there are preparations that are almost universally helpful. Let's walk through the two hypothetical meeting agendas once more, this time with more detail.

Warm-Up Quizzes

Before handing out the chess sets, having a short verbal quiz at the beginning of a meeting is a good way to transition into chess activities. A quiz also provides an informal opportunity to introduce instructional concepts.

Visualization quizzes can be devised with a minimum of props. For example, the names of the 64 chess squares can be written on the backs of business cards (cheerfully donated by parents) and stored in a box. Any number of quiz questions can then be devised using these cards. For example, for a quiz related to knight moves, a student volunteer could draw two cards from the box. The two squares written on the backs of the cards would be announced. Then students would race to determine the minimum number of moves needed to move a knight from the first square to the second. If forks are being discussed, the task for the students might be to name EVERY square from which a queen could attack both of the drawn squares.

Scoring systems for quizzes can be handled in many ways:

- No points -- simply ask questions and congratulate each student who answers correctly first.
- Award points based on the amount of time elapsed before the correct answer is given. For example, suppose students are given a maximum of 30 seconds to answer each question. A student who provides the correct answer instantaneously would receive 30 points. Answers given after 10 seconds elapsed would be worth 20 points.
- Points based on difficulty of the problem -- "hard" problems might be worth twice as much as "easy" ones. On visualization quizzes, students who choose to solve problems with their eyes closed can be made eligible to receive double the points of students who are able to look at or manipulate a chess board.
- Bonus rounds -- certain questions may be arbitrarily given special value before they are asked. For example, the last three questions might be worth double or triple the points of earlier questions.

The emphasis of contests should, of course, clearly be on developing chess skills. Quizzes and similar games that include simple non-intrusive motivators can help larger groups maintain focus on chess skills -- especially students who tend to be distractible due to maturity or low interest in chess.

Organizing Games Between Club Members

Without a system for pushing club members to play against a variety of opponents, the natural tendency is for cliques to form where students repeatedly play within small circles of friends. Once such cliques are established, when a player does seek a game against a new opponent it's often for the wrong reason -- to score an easy win at the expense of a younger, weaker player. For player development and team morale, it's usually best for club directors to frequently take control of pairings for games at meetings.

Besides chess sets, handy items to have for club games are score sheets, pairing forms, and chess clocks.

A lot of chess coaches have a love-hate relationship with chess clocks when working with young students. Beginners inevitably play excessively fast and increase their blunders-per-game ratio when using a clock. Chess clocks and any form of blitz chess are best avoided

until students are consistently studying their options throughout their games. Once students have demonstrated that they habitually look for threats of captures and checks before touching a piece, chess clocks become an important training tool for promoting accurate calculations that are performed with efficient use of time. Clocks are also invaluable for bringing an orderly finish to games that must be brought to a close so the group can move to the next round or activity.

It can add to the excitement of club games to divide players into teams that are approximately equal in playing strength. Players should be grouped differently for each meeting, and along different criteria (e.g., occasionally it might be "4th Grade vs. The World"). Team flags can be a nice option. As games are played during a meeting, both individual and team points are collected using the standard 1, 0.5, 0 point system for wins, draws, and losses. After the games have finished for a meeting, all players on the team with the most points can be given a Championship Team card. This system can complement one for recognizing individual achievements. New players usually have little hope of doing well in individual rankings but, by also offering team points, everyone can have a chance to win a team card.

Small Group Instruction

Teaching chess in the schools provides a sure-fire way to acquire appreciation, empathy, and respect for educators. In many ways, the situation is ideal -- eager, motivated students with interested, supportive parents. Even with these advantages, the instructional portion of chess clubs is often an exercise in triage, figuring out how to spread limited resources as effectively as possible. Adults in charge of meetings must decide whether to give their attention to novices just learning the game, advanced students who are finding fewer challenges at the club level, or the middle group of players.

The pool of potential chess teachers for school clubs is nearly always miniscule. One common response to this problem is to recruit older students who have strong chess and interpersonal skills act as tutors for less advanced students. Other ways that clubs compensate for the lack of adult teachers are using instructional video tapes, computer programs, and books or worksheets.

Whatever instructional style is used, elementary-grade students most successfully apply chess theory to their games when lessons are focused on a single clear idea and are followed immediately by an opportunity to apply that concept over the board. The central idea of a lesson can be introduced by an instructor or video; practiced under structured conditions (on the board, computer, or worksheets); then targeted for attention during actual games.

Suppose one instructor is available at a club meeting for 18 students. The instructor would like to provide small group lessons at three levels of difficulty. One way to approach this situation would be to first divide the group into two teams of 9 players. The two teams would be reasonably matched according to playing strength. Then each team would be divided into thirds by playing strength. The two teams would play three rounds of games against each other. During the first round, the most advanced third of students from each team would receive a lesson instead of playing a game. During the second round, the intermediate third would receive their lesson. And the weakest third of players from each team would have a group lesson while the stronger players complete the day's mini-tournament. (After finishing their lesson, the advanced students might play one longer round of games rather than two shorter rounds.)

Between-Round and Home Practice

In the majority of scholastic chess clubs, we adults facilitate progress rather than directly cause it. Once students develop a fascination for the game, they tend to push their own progress -- often our biggest challenge is to avoid dampening their enthusiasm or growth. Providing material and opportunities for student progress, rather than presenting detailed lessons, is the primary task of most amateur coaches. When students are not receiving direct instruction or playing chess, for example between games at meetings, is the ideal time to create these opportunities.

Ideas that have been introduced in formal lessons can be greatly expanded and extended through worksheets that students use while waiting for their next game at club meetings, at home, or anytime they're not expected to be doing something else.

One of the trickiest times to manage a scholastic chess meeting is the point where there are several students who are between games, and are waiting for other games to finish. If a game finishes significantly sooner than the rest of the field is expected to, usually the players involved can switch colors and play again. Some instruction or handicapping may be necessary to prevent a series of lopsided outcomes.

Another alternative is to have the players start a new battle from an endgame position. There are many benefits to having students practice from both winning and losing endgame positions. Beginners need to practice forcing a lone king into mate using a king and queen. They also need to learn the importance of trying to keep their king in the middle and to fight for a stalemate if on the losing side. The specific position can be as straightforward or as subtle as appropriate for the players involved. Chess Meets Hangman is a useful tool for adding structure to this type of exercise.

Some scholastic chess programs offer a series of skill classifications that students may advance through -- similar to advancing through belt colors in the martial arts. One peripheral advantage of such a system is that it provides another source of chess-oriented activity for students to concentrate on while waiting for games. Criteria for advancing from one level to the next can be summarized by simple checklists, or by a more thorough set of requirements. Upon completion of a level, players might receive a certificate, or a card, or some other tangible symbol that will mark the milestone for both players and parents. The main point here is that a skill checklist provides a great resource when helping to direct student energy between games.

To make substantial improvement, students need to work on their chess skills outside of club meetings. Ideally, players should regularly turn in score sheets of outside games. Some students will have difficulty finding a suitable human or computer opponent and will do better with exercise sheets. Having students complete analysis forms about games played during meetings can be an excellent homework exercise.