

WINNING CHESS ENDINGS

By

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CHESS ELEVATION

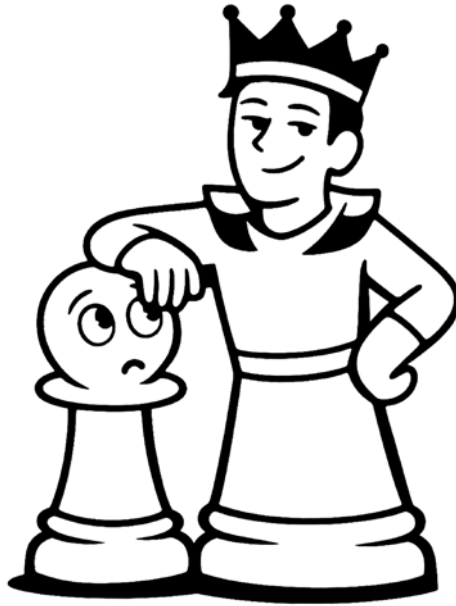
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CHAPTER 2

King and Pawn Endings



At all stages of a chess game, timing is vitally important, but timing undergoes curious changes in king and pawn endings. In the opening and middlegame, every move is treasured as a way to enhance our development, protect our king or a weakness, or initiate an attack. In chess, each move is a *tempo*. In king and pawn endings, the difference of a single tempo is often the deciding factor; having an extra move in a pawn race can mean victory or defeat. Interestingly enough, there are some king and pawn endings in which you want your opponent to be on the move, so you want to lose a tempo!

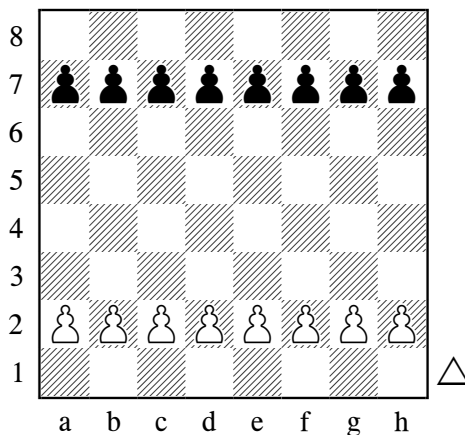
To drive home the importance of timing, there's a joke I tell about a bank robber who wouldn't tell prison authorities where he buried the loot, no matter how they tried to pry it out of him. In one of his aging mother's weekly calls, she said she was thinking about planting potatoes in her back garden. Her son, stressing his concern, said, "Mother, you definitely don't want to do that! The ground is extremely hard, and you have to dig deep to plant the potatoes. You would certainly strain your back and might hurt yourself badly. You must promise me you won't plant potatoes. Now is definitely not the time!" "But..." she started to protest, but her son insisted. "Really, mother, now is not the time." The next week when she called, her son asked, "Mother, how are you?" "Terrible," said his mother. "There are FBI agents and police everywhere, digging up the backyard! It's a mess and I'm in a panic! I don't know what to do!" Calmly, her son replied, "Now is the time to plant your potatoes."

Just as in life, in chess it is sometimes better to wait.

The tempo tester

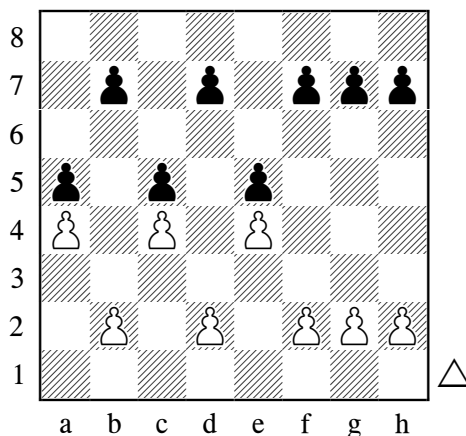
With the importance of tempos firmly in our minds, we can enjoy an exercise I've seen taught around the world. Both players are trying to promote their pawns, and the first to promote one of his pawns wins. There are only pawns on the board. The *tempo tester* game seems easy at first, but bear in mind that I constantly lost to my first teacher! Now I invariably beat my students in this game, whether I play Black or White. Let's see an example of a tempo tester game in which White plays poorly and loses without a fight.

Illustrative Example 11



1.e4 e5 2.c4 c5 3.a4 a5

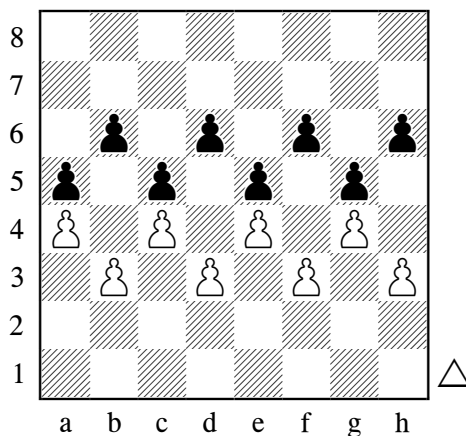
White is running out of ways to create an imbalance.



4.g4

White makes another mistake, and it is decisive.

4...g5 5.h3 h6 6.f3 f6 7.d3 d6 8.b3 b6



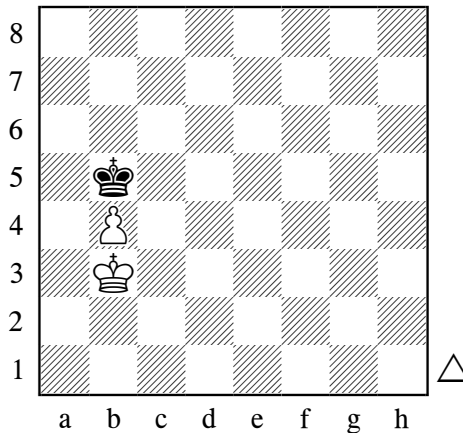
It's White's move, and he's dead lost because of it. He would love to pass, but that's not an option. Now imagine that on his first move, White had played 1.e3, and answered 1...e5 with 2.e4, hoping to ape his opponent, just as before. In that case, it would be Black's move in the final position and he would be lost.

Play the tempo tester game a few times with a friend. It will improve your calculation skills and teach you the vital importance of controlling the tempo. In king and pawn endings, the fight for a tempo might mean the difference between a win and a draw. In this section, you will learn to spot any position with king and pawn vs king that indicates whether the game will be a win or draw.

Kings in direct opposition

It's time to nail down some basics of king and pawn vs king endings. The first basic principle is: *if the defender's king is directly in front of the pawn, the ending is drawn.* This is true of all pawns from a to h.

Illustrative Example 12



Black's king has the perfect defensive position, and the game is drawn. However, there are a number of tricks you must know.

1. ♔c3 ♕b6

The defending king steps backward on the same file as the pawn.

2. ♔c4 ♕c6

This immediately puts the kings in direct *opposition*. Opposition is a crucial aspect to the king and pawn endgame. The kings face off, and because neither can advance, one has to give way, and that player 'loses' the opposition. After Black's last move, White has to yield, and Black wins the opposition. Every other move for Black loses!

3. ♔d4

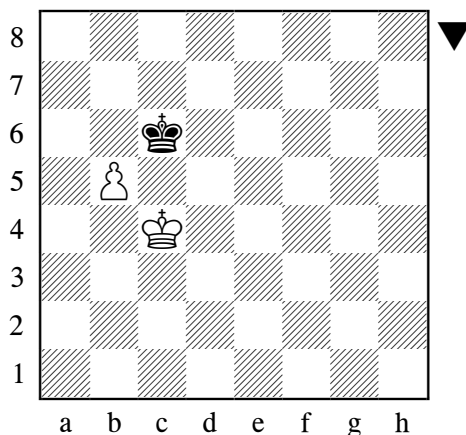
White tries to trick his opponent into a mistake.

3... ♕b5

Black is quick to step up directly in front of the pawn. The players now repeat the moves just played.

4. ♔c3 ♕b6 5. ♔c4 ♕c6 6. b5†

Unable to make progress any other way, White advances his pawn.



6...♔b6

The king always steps into the path of the pawn.

7.♔b4 ♔b7 8.♔a5 ♔a7

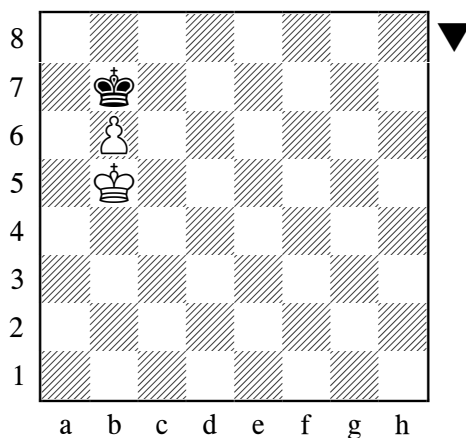
Black's king gains the opposition and saves the game.

9.b6†

White again advances his pawn.

9...♔b7 10.♔b5

This is a critical moment, which is repeated time and time again. Black has only one move to save the game.



10...♔b8

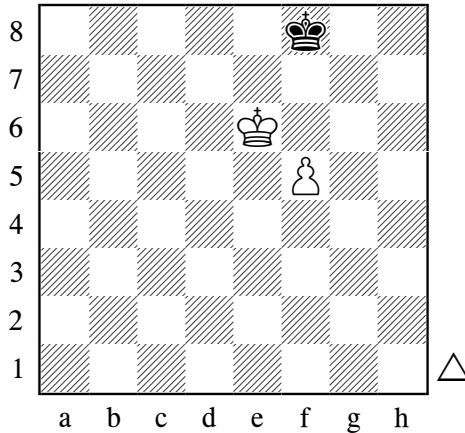
Why would other king moves have failed? 10...♔c8 would have lost to 11.♔c6 ♔b8 12.b7 ♔a7 13.♔c7, when the b-pawn becomes a queen. This sample tells us that for the pawn to promote, the superior side will need the support of its king, which must cover the queening square to force the pawn's promotion.

11.♔c6 ♕c8 12.b7† ♕b8 13.♔b6

Stalemate.

½–½

Illustrative Example 13



Imagine that you are White. A long, hard-fought game has come down to this position. Will you win or draw? Only one move wins.

1.♔f6

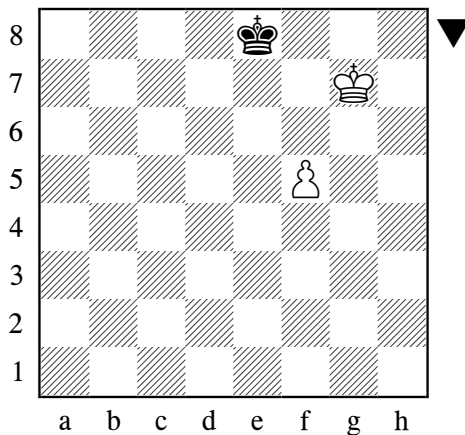
The mundane advance of the pawn with 1.f6? leads to a draw: 1...♕e8 2.f7† ♕f8 3.♔f6 Stalemate.

After 1.♔f6!, Black is forced to move his king out of the way, and he loses.

1...♕e8

Rats! Neither would 1...♕g8 2.♔e7! have saved Black.

2.♔g7

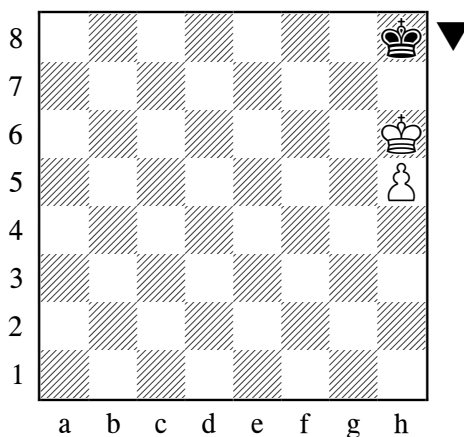


White wins. He has covered the f8-square, and with Black's king out of the way, the f-pawn can saunter up the board for a new queen.

1-0

Both the a- and h-pawn present a different problem.

Illustrative Example 14



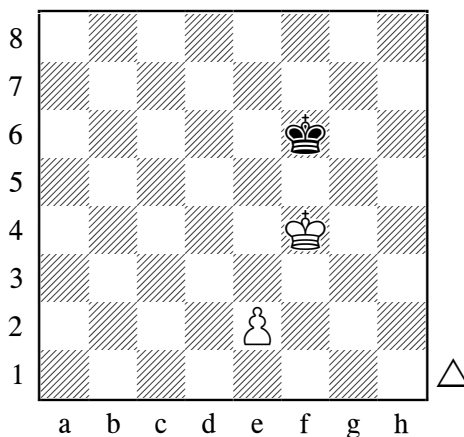
Regardless of who is on move, this position is drawn. White is unable to cover the h8-promotion square.

1...♔g8 2.♔g6 ♕h8 3.h6 ♔g8 4.h7† ♕h8

The game is drawn due to stalemate.

½-½

Illustrative Example 15



The two kings are in opposition. To win the game, White will have to *step in front of his pawn, gain the opposition, and then secure the promotion square*. This method of escorting the pawn up the board is key to winning many king and pawn endings, even though getting in front of the passer seems to be contrary to the plan of promotion. Imagine the king acting as a football blocker, clearing a path for the pawn.

1.♔e4

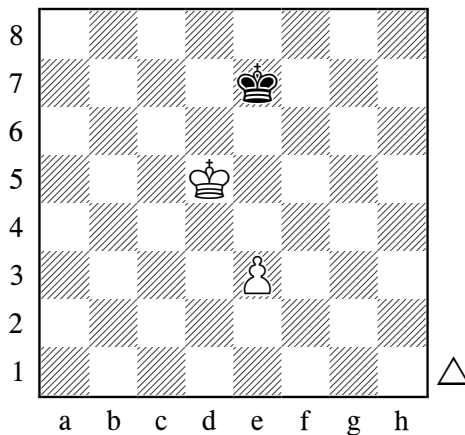
The winning move.

Rushing the pawn up the board with 1.e4? ♔e6! would be a mistake. When Black waits for the pawn to advance further with 2.e5 ♔e7! 3.♔f5 ♔f7, the game ends in a draw.

1...♔e6 2.e3

This is White's point. Black's king must give way, losing the opposition and allowing White's king to escort the pawn to its coronation. If White didn't have this little tempo waster with the pawn, he wouldn't win the opposition.

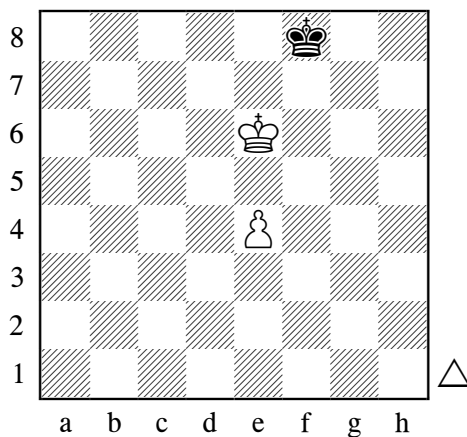
2...♔f6 3.♔d5 ♔e7



4.♔e5

White again gains the opposition and forces Black's king to move aside.

4...♔d7 5.♔f6 ♔d8 6.e4 ♔e8 7.♔e6 ♔f8



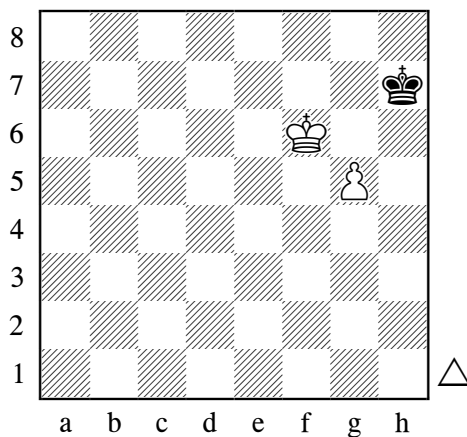
8. ♔d7

White wins control of the e8-square, and the pawn successfully marches up the board.

1-0

With that, we have the basics of king and pawn endings. However, if that was all there was to it, learning these endings would be a snap. Now let's try our hand at something more difficult.

Illustrative Example 16



The scenario shown here seems like it would be a piece of cake to play out.

1. ♔f7

White controls the queening square.

The weaker choice, 1.g6†? ♔h8! 2.g7† ♔g8, would have tossed away the win.