

How to operate a chess clock

If you've never played chess with a clock, you're about to enter an exciting phase of your chess experience!

You always thought there was only one way to win a game? Guess what! Here's another! You can win simply if your opponent doesn't move quick enough! That's right... now you don't have to sit there for endless minutes while he ponders and ponders... you just claim the win!

Not only are you going to win by announcing checkmate, you're going to announce "flag". Wonder what that's all about? In just a few minutes you're going to understand how to play smart chess with a chess clock as I explain how it works, how to use it in a chess tournament, plus some basic tips for effective time management when you're actually playing chess!

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how the chess clock works

For some reason, many chess clock manufacturers don't include instructions with their clocks - maybe they just figure the chess game clock is too simple to operate. Truth is, they are simple... once you know how.

Chess clocks are distinctly unique with two timers built into one unit - one for each player. The two clocks are never running simultaneously, but rather keep track of yours and your opponent's total used time. This keeps a chess game moving at the desired pace since both players will have a predetermined number of minutes to complete their game.

If you wish to play for one hour, each player would be given 30 minutes on each side of the clock. This way, with alternating moves, you're guaranteed not to exceed the one hour time limit. In case you wondered, chess clocks are the heart of organized chess competitions. You can see how a tightly run chess tournament with hundreds of chess players can literally run like clockwork, round after round, ending on time.

Ok. This crazy chess clock is sitting in front of you. How do you work it? The chess clock is so simple, yet for some reason people first stare at it dumb-founded - as if their car suddenly had two steering wheels instead of one!

Notice the two buttons on top the clock. These start and stop the timers in an alternating fashion. Before the game starts the time will be stopped and the buttons in the neutral position. **Make your first move, press the button on your side** of the clock **and your opponent's time starts to run**. At the same time, your clock is paused.

Now, when your opponent makes his move, he will **press the button on his side** which stops his timer and starts yours simultaneously. **EVERY** time you move, you will press the button. It might seem tedious at first, but after a few games you will feel like you've always played with a chess clock... it's part of every chess move and you'll become skilled at it.

setting the chess clock

Both digital and analog clocks are readily available today. Though digital are preferable for their versatility and nearly limitless features, many people still prefer analog.

Digital clocks typically count down. Time has expired when it reaches 0:00. Digital clocks have various setting methods and modes so we'll deal with the more standard setting procedure for the traditional analog clock instead.

First, most analog clocks need to be wound using the two winders on the back face. Use care not to over wind. A light snug will do. This should give it a good 12 hours of operating time. You might also own the rare battery powered analog clock which will obviously not require winding.

Analog clocks feature a real clock face and therefore count up. The signal for a player's expired time is a small red **FLAG**. As the minute hand reaches the 12 o'clock position this small red flag will rise. When it reaches precisely 12, the flag falls. In a competition, the player whose "flag has fallen" loses the game.

On the back of the clock, locate the *time setting* knobs. There will be one in the center for each display. Turn this knob as you look at the face of the clock. You will notice the hour and minute hands can be set. To set the clock for a one hour game (30 minutes per side), watch the face of the clock as you set, first one side to 5:30, and then the other side to 5:30. Make sure the clocks are not running. The time of 5:30 is chosen so that when the 30 minutes on each side have expired it would read 6 o'clock. This is the desired ending time position.

Let's say you're playing with a friend. You have only 30 minutes to play a game. Set both timers to read 5:45. This way, you'll both have 15 minutes before the time expires at 6:00 and one of the flags has fallen.

Let me warn you, you're probably going to get nervous and feel rushed when you have less than 5 minutes left! If that makes you fidgety, imagine playing in a blitz competition where every game is 5 minutes per player - for the **WHOLE** game! Let me tell you, a tournament competition with a hotel ballroom full of chess clocks and supposedly quiet chess players is quite the aural experience.

using a chess clock in tournament play

Chess tournaments would be impossible without chess clocks. They keep the whole place ticking and tournament organizers happy. While you might never play in a chess tournament it's helpful to understand how it works and apply some rules for your own use.

Tournament Time Standards

A tournament may be organized as a Standard, Action Chess, Blitz Chess, Speed Chess, Game 30. This is very important since people want to know how fast a game they will be expected to play before entering the competition.

Slow chess tournaments including US Championships will allow 1 hour to 2 1/2+ hours per player. These games can last as long as 7 or more hours! Many tournaments that pick up the pace will allot 1 hour per player, 30 minutes (Action Chess), 15 minutes (Quick Chess), 5 minutes (Speed or Blitz Chess).

With your friend, if you want a fast paced game, choose 5 minutes a player. For a leisurely pace, 15 minutes, or slow... 30 minutes or an hour.

Other rules

Here's something you might not have thought about... On which side of the board do you place the clock? Most people favor it to their right. Since both players can't choose, the player with the BLACK pieces always gets first choice - supposedly since white has the first move.

If you bring a chess clock AND your opponent does, the digital clock is automatically preferred... from there you can decide which to use.

What happens if you Checkmate your opponent and your FLAG falls (time expires) while you've made the move? In this rare case, the game is a draw! Be careful though... if your opponent calls your flag BEFORE you've made the move, you've lost the game, even though your next move could be checkmate.

Never call the flag on someone else's game. This makes both players mad and you'll look like an idiot. Only beginners will do that - and they never do it more than once.

clock tips for smart chess players

The chess clock is such an interesting dynamic to the game that even the best players either have trouble with it or strategize to use it to their advantage. Here are a few tips to help you maximize your chess clock experience!

Both you and your opponent have the same amount of time to start with. Will you make quick moves in the opening so as to accumulate extra time for when the going gets tough? Will you spend extra time in the opening to try to gain an advantage on the board early on and hope that you can play the advantage quickly to a win later on? Notice how balancing and monitoring your time closely is crucial.

Run out of time? Never call your own flag! ... that is, if you're close to the end of the game anyway. If you can manage to stalemate, checkmate, or capture all of your opponent's pieces before your flag is noticed, you achieve a draw!

Learn a series of opening moves. This will allow you to play the moves quickly. While your opponent has to think about them, you know they are proven good moves. You'll gain time this way.

Try to stay ahead of your opponents time. In theory... good. In practice... hard.

Here's one of the most important tricks. When you're opponent is running out of time, he will be thinking hard on YOUR time. Let him do this! But here's where you can use this to YOUR ADVANTAGE. Assuming you have the time advantage, plan a series of moves. Make the move, expect an immediate response and quickly make your planned response. These three moves will allow you to grab more of those key remaining minutes. Always revert to spending your time again though... you should NEVER be caught blitzing out an endgame when you have plenty of time. Just use this strategy. It works.

your turn!

Those are the basics! I'm sure you'll find that playing with a chess clock is not only more fun, but it's challenging and exciting especially on those last few minutes!

Have fun with your new chess clock skills! It takes a little practice, but you'll have it down in no time.

To buy chess clocks, chess sets, and supplies, see The Chess House at www.chesshouse.com

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