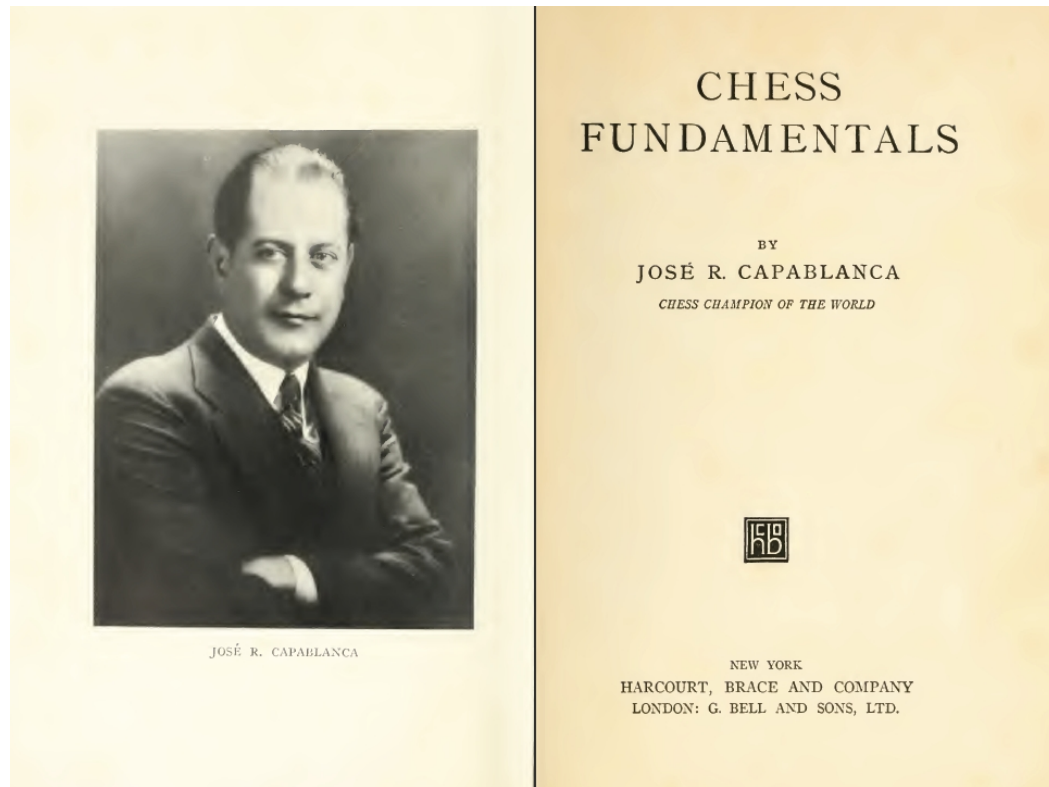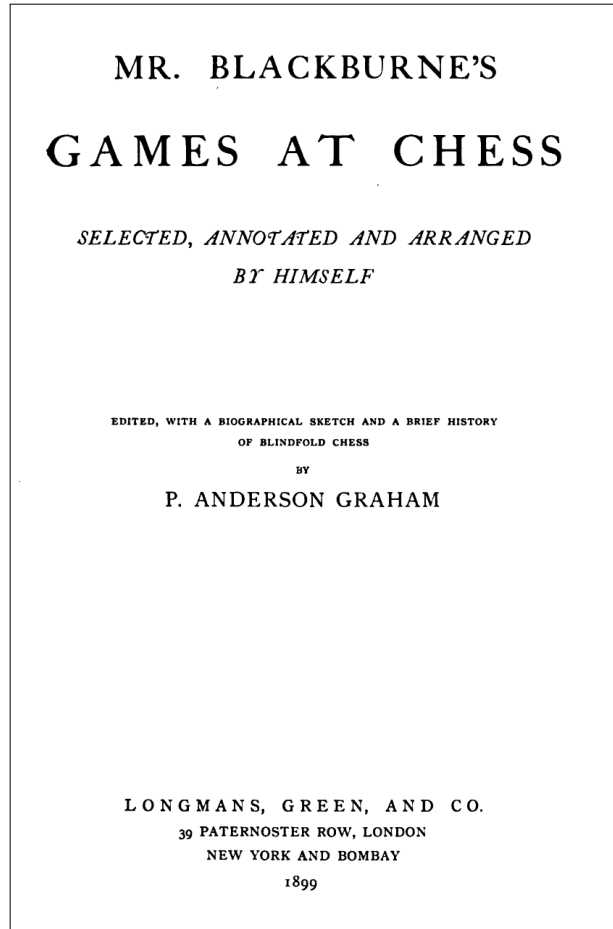# Descriptive Notation

Descriptive chess notation was the standard until the 1980s. While superseded by modern algebraic notation, descriptive does have several advantages over algebraic. For example, descriptive notation allows you to access older chess books which have become legendary in the chess world, such as Jose Capablanca's *Chess Fundamentals* or Bobby Fischer's *My 60 Memorable Games*. Both of these books were originally written in descriptive. Older books are sometimes ported to algebraic notation but reprints often contain errors, unnecessary added commentary, or are undesirable for other reasons.

JOSÉ R. CAPABLANCA

CHESS FUNDAMENTALS

BY
JOSÉ R. CAPABLANCA
CHESS CHAMPION OF THE WORLD

NEW YORK
HARCOURT, BRACE AND COMPANY
LONDON: G. BELL AND SONS, LTD.

Descriptive Notation

One advantage to descriptive notation are that it is more natural to talk about the moves and especially the captures - "queen-takes-pawn" (QxP) is easier to understand than "queen-takes-at-h6". Another advantage is that chess maxims make sense for both players. For example, "a rook on the 7th is worth a pawn" doesn't make sense in algebraic for Black but does make sense for both players in descriptive. But as mentioned previously the chief advantage to learning descriptive for today's player is that it allows you to access a vast collection of chess literature written by the great players of the past.

MR. BLACKBURNE'S

GAMES AT CHESS

SELECTED, ANNOTATED AND ARRANGED BY HIMSELF

EDITED, WITH A BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH AND A BRIEF HISTORY
OF BLINDFOLD CHESS
BY
P. ANDERSON GRAHAM

LONGMANS, GREEN, AND CO.
39 PATERNOSTER ROW, LONDON
NEW YORK AND BOMBAY
1899

Game 4.
French Defence.
Played at the Berlin Tournament in 1881.

White. J. H. Blackburne.	Black. Herr Schwarz.
1 P – K 4	1 P – K 3
2 P – Q 4	2 P – Q 4
3 Kt – QB 3	3 Kt – KB 3
4 P × P	4 P × P
5 Kt – B 3	5 B – Q 3
6 B – Q 3	6 P – B 3
7 Castles	7 Castles
8 Kt – K 2	8 B – KKt 5
9 Kt – Kt 3	9 Q – B 2
10 B – K 3	10 QKt – Q 2
11 Q – Q 2	11 KR – K sq
12 QR – K sq	12 Kt – K 5
13 Q – B sq	13 QB × KKt
14 P × B	14 Kt × Kt (a)
15 RP × Kt	15 B × P
16 K – Kt 2 (b)	16 B – Q 3
17 R – R sq	17 Kt – B sq
18 R – R 3	18 P – KKt 3
19 QR – R sq	19 QR – Q sq
20 B – KKt 5	20 R – Q 2
21 P – QB 4 (c)	21 P × P
22 B × BP	22 P – KR 4
23 R – R 4	23 P – Kt 4
24 B – Kt 3	24 Kt – K 3
25 B – B 6	25 Kt – B 5 +

White to make his 26th move.
Black—Schwarz.

Descriptive Notation

As in algebraic notation, horizontal rows of squares are called *ranks* and vertical columns of squares are called *files*. Unlike algebraic, however, each file is named for the *piece that stands on the file* at the beginning of the game. The file where the kings stand is called the *king's file*, the file where the queens stand is called the *queen's file,* and so on. The ranks are numbered 1 through 8. In descriptive notation the numbering of ranks is from *each player's perspective*; White's 1st rank is Black's 8th rank, White's 2nd rank is Black's 7th rank, and so on. Black's K3 is White's K6, Black's QN2 is White's QN7 and so forth.

In 19th century texts, you may see the first rank squares referred to as the piece's square, for example, R-K sq. would be R-K1.

QR1	QN1	QB1	Q1	K1	KB1	KN1	KR1
QR8	QN8	QB8	Q8	K8	KB8	KN8	KR8
QR2	QN2	QB2	Q2	K2	KB2	KN2	KR2
QR7	QN7	QB7	Q7	K7	KB7	KN7	KR7
QR3	QN3	QB3	Q3	K3	KB3	KN3	KR3
QR6	QN6	QB6	Q6	K6	KB6	KN6	KR6
QR4	QN4	QB4	Q4	K4	KB4	KN4	KR4
QR5	QN5	QB5	Q5	K5	KB5	KN5	KR5
QR5	QN5	QB5	Q5	K5	KB5	KN5	KR5
QR4	QN4	QB4	Q4	K4	KB4	KN4	KR4
QR6	QN6	QB6	Q6	K6	KB6	KN6	KR6
QR3	QN3	QB3	Q3	K3	KB3	KN3	KR3
QR7	QN7	QB7	Q7	K7	KB7	KN7	KR7
QR2	QN2	QB2	Q2	K2	KB2	KN2	KR2
QR8	QN8	QB8	Q8	K8	KB8	KN8	KR8
QR1	QN1	QB1	Q1	K1	KB1	KN1	KR1

Symbols for the pieces

K = King
Q = Queen
R = Rook
B = Bishop
N = Knight
P = Pawn

Unlike algebraic, in descriptive the lowly pawn gets a symbol (P). Note that in older texts (Prior to the 1940s) knight is sometimes written as "Kt" instead of N.
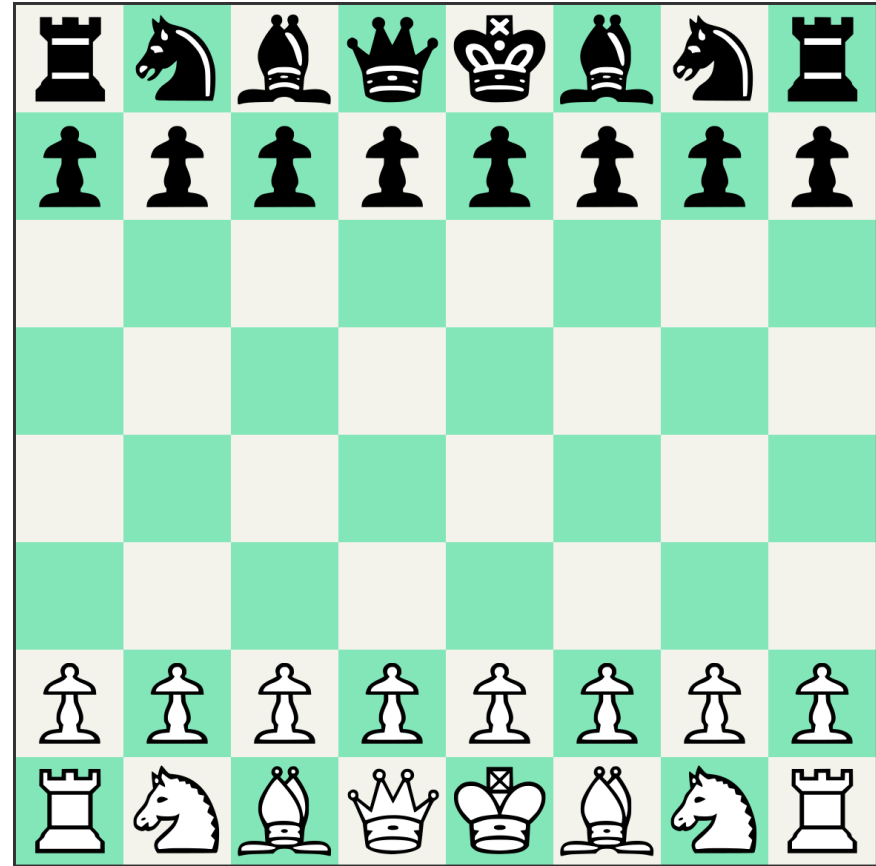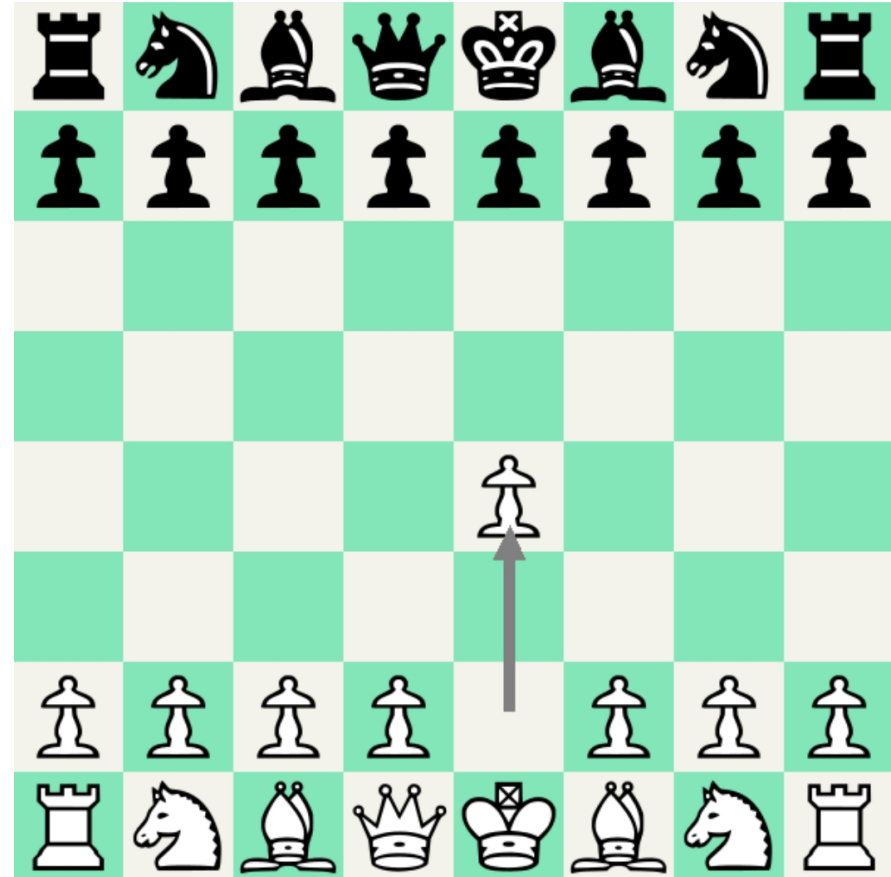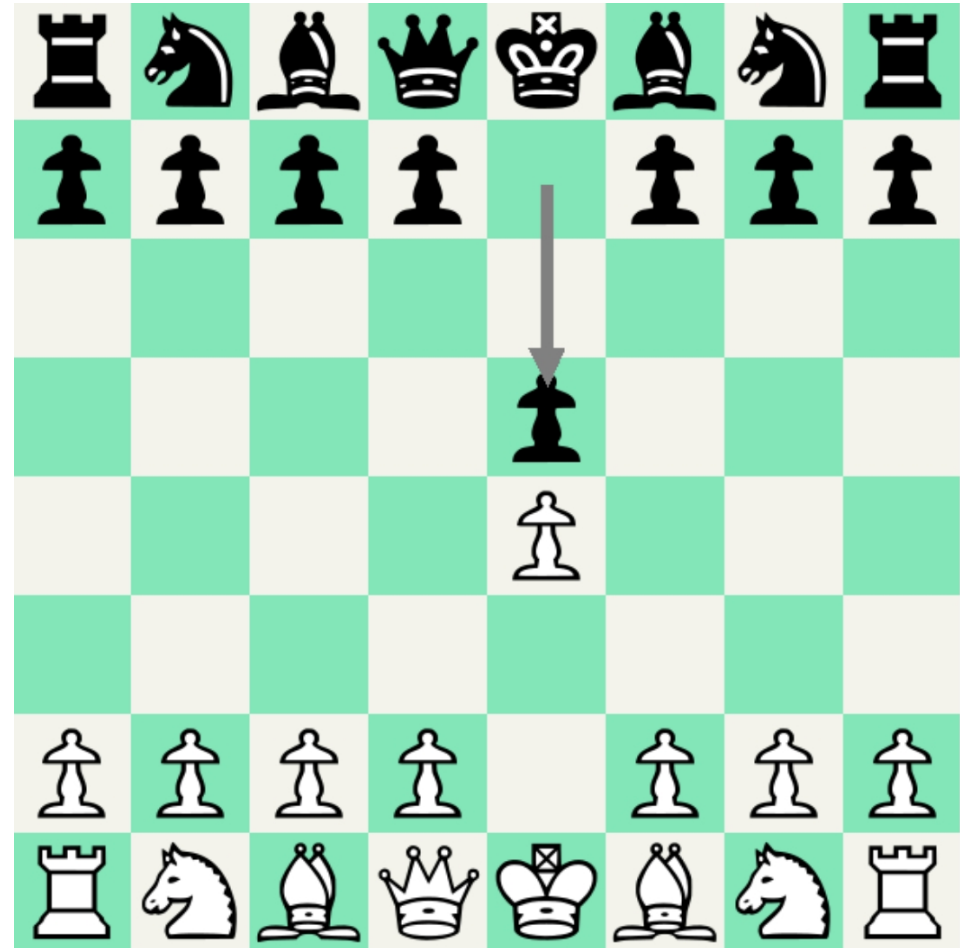
An Example Game

WHITE	BLACK
1. **P-K4**	. . .

An Example Game

WHITE BLACK

1. P-K4 P-K4

An Example Game

WHITE	BLACK
1. P-K4	P-K4
2. <u>B-B4</u>	. . .

Note that although there are two B4 squares, only one bishop can move to a B4 square. It's not necessary to write KB-QB4 or B-QB4 because White's QB is unable to move and KB4 cannot be reached by a white bishop.
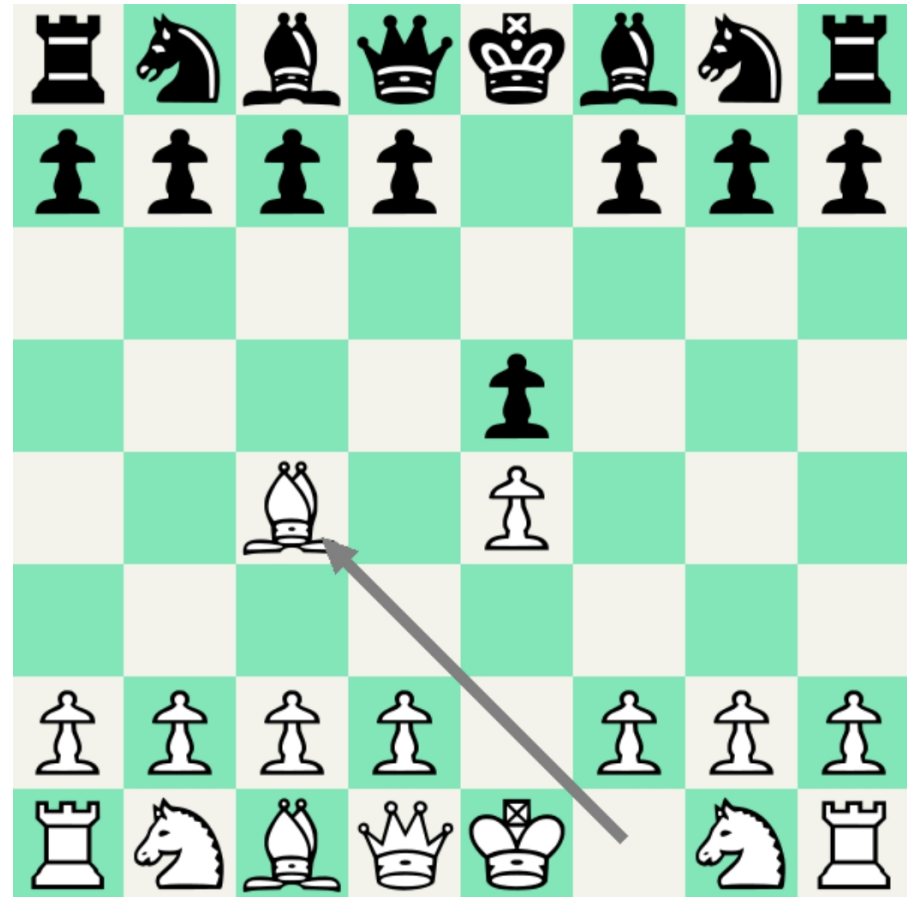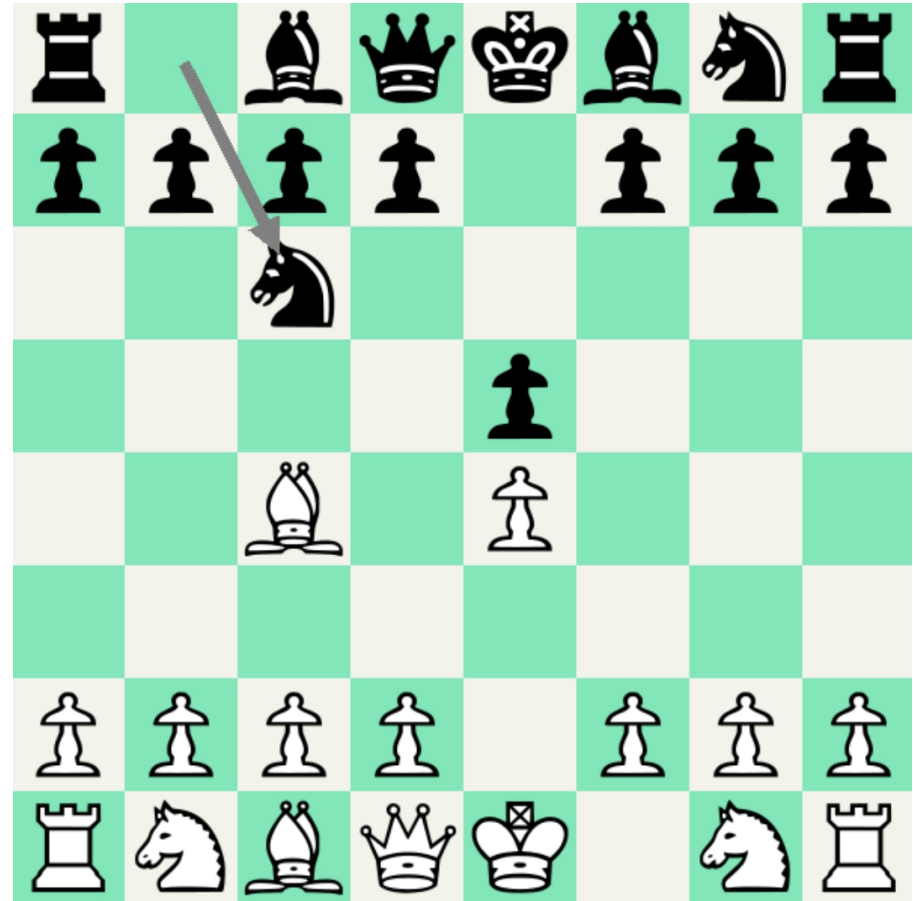
An Example Game

	WHITE	BLACK
1.	P-K4	P-K4
2.	B-B4	<u>N-QB3</u>

This could also be written QN-B3 however we usually clarify the square rather than the piece when two like pieces can move to their "same" squares (B3). Here, it's not necessary to write QN-QB3 because only one N can move to QB3.
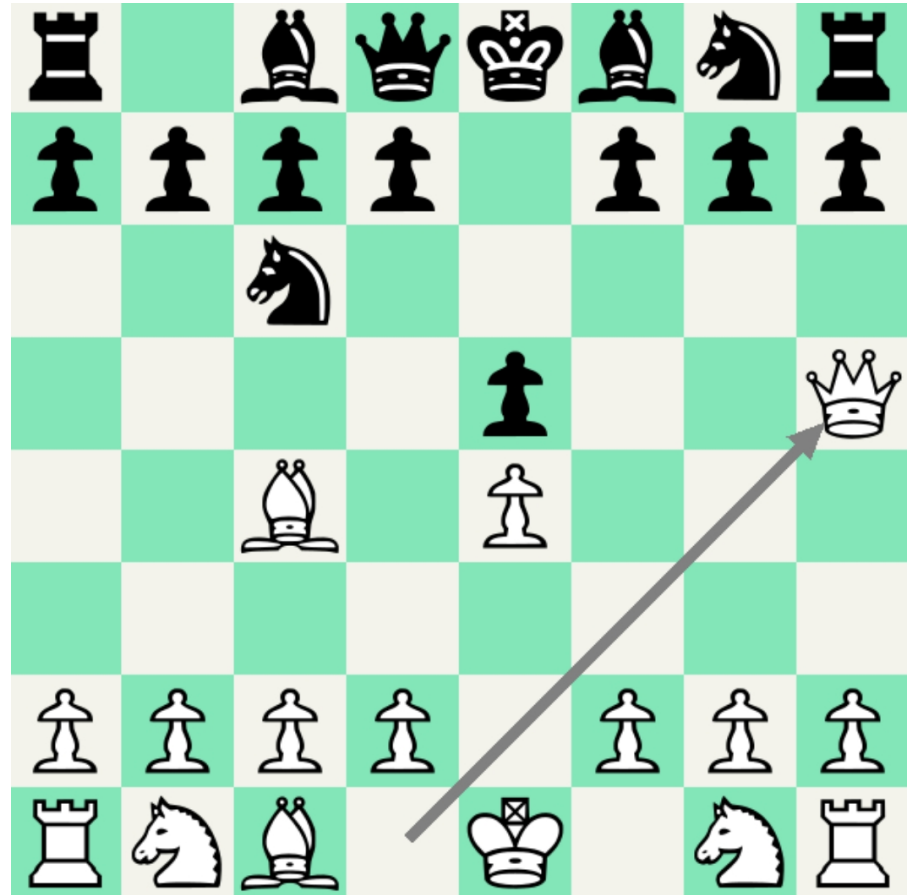
An Example Game

	WHITE	BLACK
1.	P-K4	P-K4
2.	B-B4	N-QB3
3.	Q-R5	. . .

Here, it's not necessary to write Q-KR5 because only one R5 square is available to the queen. If however the queen stood on K5 (where the black pawn is in the center), it would be necessary to write Q-KR5 because the queen would also be able to move to QR5.

An Example Game

	WHITE	BLACK
1.	P-K4	P-K4
2.	B-B4	N-QB3
3.	Q-R5	<u>N-B3</u>

Note that we don't have to write KN-KB3 because only one knight can move to one B3 square. The other B3 square (QB3) is occupied by Black's other knight.

An Example Game

	WHITE	BLACK
1.	P-K4	P-K4
2.	B-B4	N-QB3
3.	Q-R5	N-B3
4.	**QxP mate.**	

Note that it isn't necessary to write QxKBP or QxBP because while the queen could take the BP, KP, or the RP, only one of these captures results in checkmate - the BP. In descriptive we don't use # for checkmate, we simply write "mate."

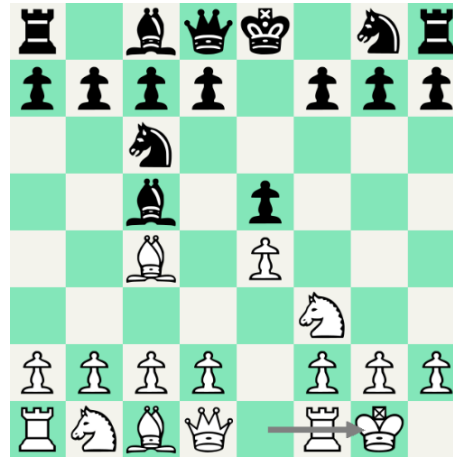Important point: the names of squares are <u>omitted</u> when writing captures - QxP, not QxB7.
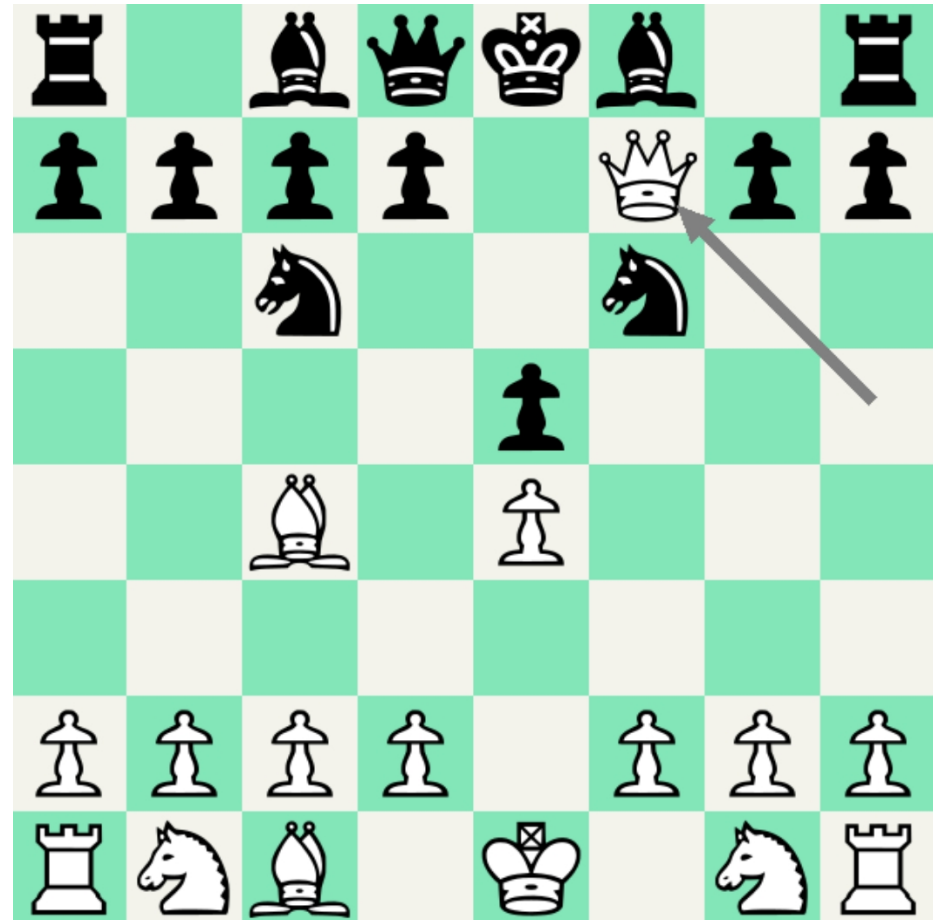
How to write castling

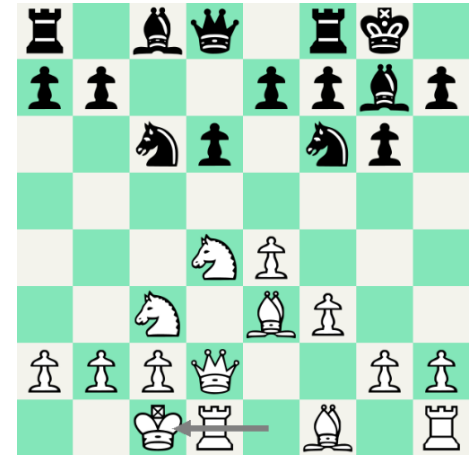**In descriptive notation, castling is written in the same way as algebraic.**

Here is how we write castling:

O-O   = castles kingside
O-O-O = castles queenside

Note: in older books, you will sometimes find this written out as "Castles".

In this position, White castles kingside. We write this as **O-O**.

In this position, White castles queenside. We write this as **O-O-O**.

We can see that Black has already castled kingside (O-O).

When more than one piece can move to a particular square.

Sometimes, more than one piece can move to a particular square. In the position at right, both White knights can move to K2. The move with the arrow is written:

KN-<u>K</u>2

We use the name of the knight itself - the <u>king's</u> knight - to distinguish it from the other knight - the queen's knight. If it were not possible to tell which knight is which, we could write N/1-K2 (knight on the *first* rank to K2) or N/N-K2 (knight on the *knight's file* to K2).
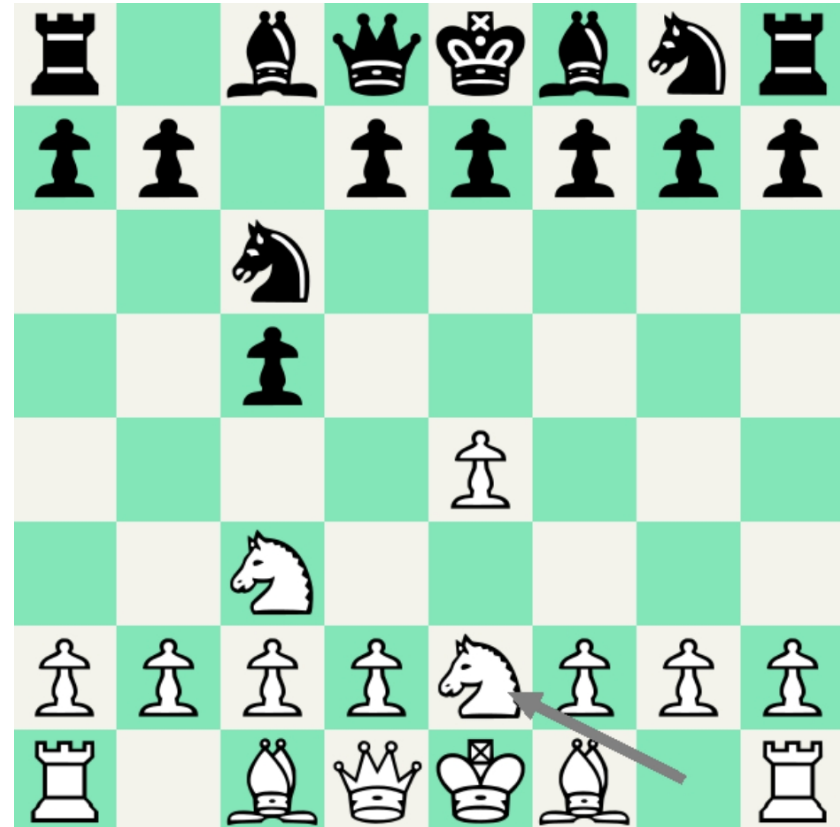
Pawn promotion

To write a Pawn promotion, simply write the move as you normally would followed by the symbol of the piece you're promoting the Pawn to in parentheses. For example:

P-R8(Q)

This means Pawn moves to R8 and promotes to a Queen. In the position at right, White has just captured Black's rook with RxR. Pawn-takes-rook-and-promotes-to-queen would be written: **PxR(Q)**.

Don't forget the **x** for captures!
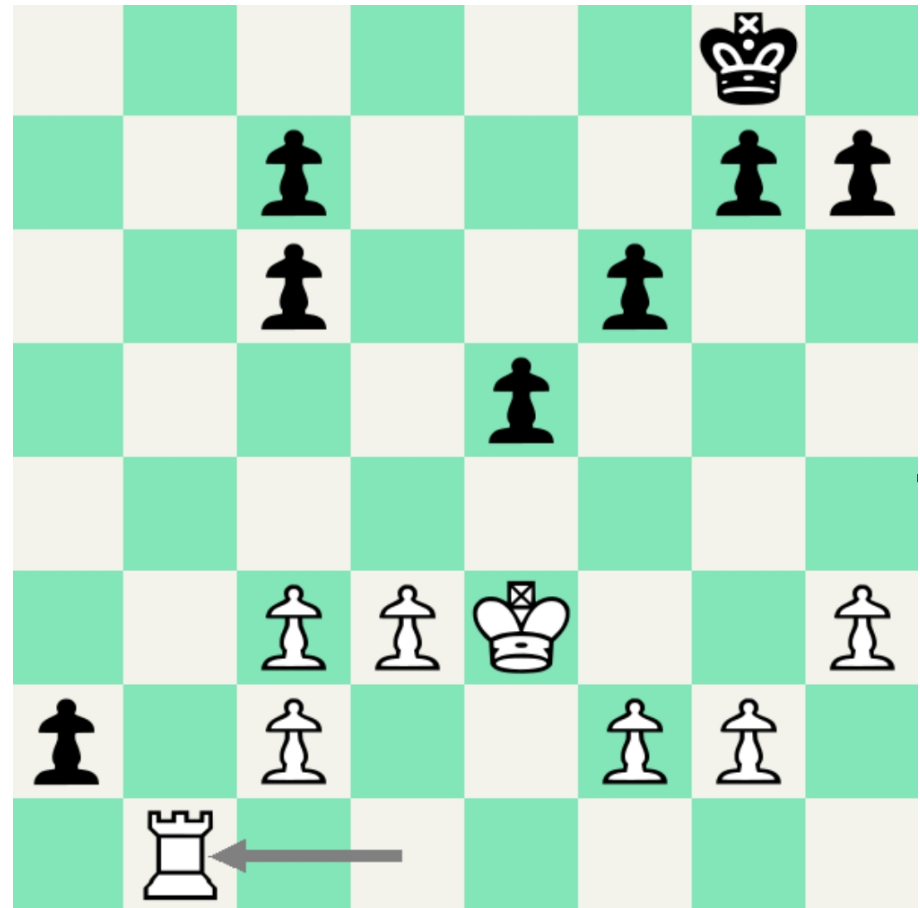
Other notes and symbols

As you begin to read more chess material you'll come across other notes and symbols used in descriptive chess notation. Here is a list of the most common:

ch. = check
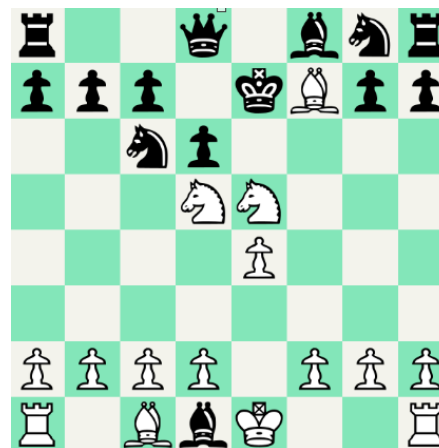mate = checkmate
? = Bad move
! = Good move
?? = Blunder
!! = Outstanding move
!? = Interesting move
?! = Doubtful move

Can you play through these moves? If you reach the position below, you've done it correctly!

1. P-K4 P-K4 2. N-KB3 P-Q3 3. B-B4 B-N5 4. N-B3 N-QB3 5. NxP BxQ 6. BxP ch. K-K2 7. N-Q5 mate.

This famous position is known as Legal's Mate.

Notice Black's bishop next to White's king. White sacrificed his Queen to achieve this checkmate!

What should Black have played instead of 5...BxQ?
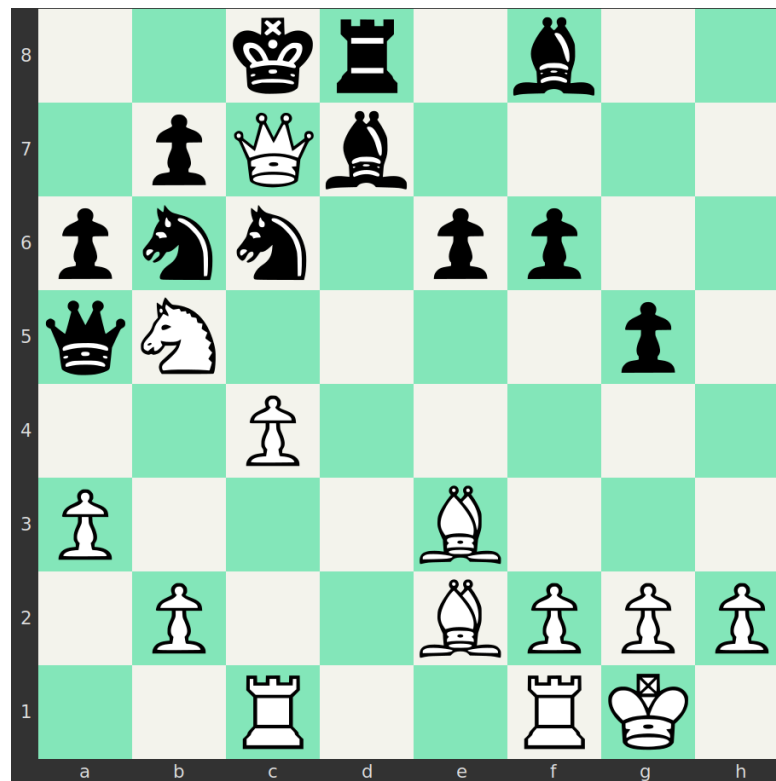
Play through a longer game

Can you play through the following moves from one of my games?

1. P-K4 N-KB3 2. P-K5 N-Q4 3. P-QB4 N-N3 4. P-Q4 P-Q3 5. N-KB3 PxP 6. NxP P-K3 7. Q-B3 P-KB3 8. Q-R5 ch. P-N3 9. NxP ch. PxN 10. QxR QxP 11. N-B3 Q-K4 ch. 12. B-K3 N-B3 13. B-K2 N-N5 14. O-O B-Q2 15. QR-B1 O-O-O 16. Q-R4 P-N4 17. Q-N3 Q-R4 18. P-QR3 N-B3 19. N-N5 P-R3? 20. QxP mate.

If you reach the position at right, good job! If not, go back and check to see where you made a mistake. This notation must be practiced to become proficient.

The checkmate can be hard to spot! Why can't Black's king capture White's queen?

Friend

Coach K.