



StrategyForge

Big Ideas on the Board

A SPARK & ANVIL STRATEGY BOOK

StrategyForge – Big Ideas That Work in Every Game

A Spark & Anvil companion book – free to download and share.

Ages 9-14. Game: cross-game strategy (chess · Go · checkers · backgammon · mancala · Connect 4).

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This volume teaches strategy through the app's cast – 7 big ideas, one per chapter.

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*Chess, Go, checkers, backgammon, mancala, Connect 4 – they look nothing alike. But the best players use the **same handful of ideas** in all of them. StrategyForge teaches strategy as a *transferable* skill, and this book tells those ideas through the cast – one big idea per chapter, each shown working in more than one game.*

Chapter 1 – Look Ahead

Foresee plays every game the same way: **think a few moves ahead** before touching a piece. Not ten moves – that is for computers. "Three moves ahead is usually enough," said Foresee. "Look further only when the position forces it."

The habit is identical everywhere. In chess: *if I move here, what is their best reply, and what do I do then?* In Connect 4: *if I drop here, do they get a winning threat?* In backgammon: *if I run, can they hit me?* Every game rewards the player who pictures the reply before making the move.

Say it out loud: *Before I move – their reply, then my answer. Usually three moves is enough.*

Your turn: The "Look Ahead" workbook pages show a tempting move in one of the games. Picture the reply first – is it still good?

Looking ahead feels slow at first, in every game. It is the one habit that improves your play the fastest, everywhere.

Chapter 2 – Read the Shape

Read never memorises move-lists. Read learns to **recognise shapes** – the patterns that repeat game after game. "Patterns repeat," said Read. "Once you know the shape, the shape tells you the move."

A back-rank weakness in chess, a ladder in Go, a two-for-one setup in checkers, a double-threat column in Connect 4 – each is a *pattern* a strong player spots instantly, because they have seen its shape before. You do not calculate every position from scratch; you recognise the familiar shape and recall what it wants.

Say it out loud: *Patterns repeat – read the shape, and the shape shows the move.*

Your turn: The "Read It" pages show a familiar pattern in each game. Name the shape – what does it want you to do?

Pattern recognition grows quietly with every game you play. Suddenly positions that once looked new look like old friends.

Chapter 3 – Two Questions at Once

Pincer plays the single most powerful move in *any* game: the one that **asks two questions at once**. "One move, two threats," said Pincer. "They can only answer one."

It has a hundred names – the fork in chess and checkers, the double threat in Connect 4 and Gomoku, the two-mills threat, the double-attack. It is the same idea underneath: force your opponent to save one thing and lose the other. Learn to hunt for the move that does two jobs, and you will find it in every game you play.

Say it out loud: *Make two threats at once – they can only answer one.*

Your turn: The "Two Questions" pages ask you to find the double-threat move in each game.

The fork is the most satisfying idea in strategy, and it lives in every game. Train your eye to hunt for it, and it appears everywhere.

Chapter 4 – Trade Wisely

Trade knows that swapping pieces is not simple arithmetic. "Equal value isn't equal worth," said Trade. "A piece doing important work is worth more than the same piece doing nothing."

In chess, trade off the opponent's active pieces and keep your own. In checkers, a well-timed exchange can win the race to a king. In Go, giving up small stones to gain a big wall is a *good* trade. And Lodge adds a cousin idea: **the outpost** – a piece planted on a square where it can never be chased away is worth two pieces that can. Strong players ask, on every exchange, *which side does this trade really help?*

Say it out loud: *Trade to help my position – equal value isn't equal worth.*

Your turn: The "Trade" pages show an exchange in each game. Does the trade help you or your opponent?

Learning to weigh a trade by worth, not just value, is a real leap. It applies to every game with pieces to swap.

Chapter 5 – Take Away Their Plan

Thwart plays defence like a chess grandmaster: **prophylaxis**. "Before you make your own plan," said Thwart, "ask what THEY want – then quietly take it away."

This is the deepest idea in the book. Instead of only pushing your own attack, you look at the board through the *opponent's* eyes: what are they hoping to do next? Then you play the move that makes it impossible. Goad turns the same idea into attack – **initiative**: "keep them answering you, and they never get a move of their own." And Bide reminds us that **patience** is a move too: "sometimes the best move is to wait, and let them commit first."

Say it out loud: *Ask what they want – then take it away.*

Your turn: The "Take It Away" pages show a position where the opponent has a plan. Find the quiet move that stops it before it starts.

Seeing the board through your opponent's eyes is a grandmaster habit. It feels like a whole new way of thinking – and it works in every game.

Chapter 6 – Break Through

Wedge waits for the moment a position is jammed shut – walls of pieces, no obvious way in. "When the door is stuck," said Wedge, "break the wall, not the pieces." That often means a **sacrifice**: giving up material on purpose to blast open a line, a file, or a point.

In chess it is a pawn or piece sacrifice to open the king's defences. In checkers it is offering a man to force a winning multi-jump. In Go it is a stone given up to break the opponent's shape. The breakthrough looks like a loss for one move – and turns into the winning blow the next.

Say it out loud: *When it's jammed, break the wall – a sacrifice can open the door.*

Your turn: The "Break Through" pages show a stuck position. Find the sacrifice that opens the winning line.

Giving something up to break through feels risky, and it is meant to. Learning when a sacrifice is really a winning move is the mark of a strong player in any game.

Chapter 7 – Learn from Every Game

Concede has the calmest, wisest habit of all: **learning from every game – the wins and the losses.** "Losing is a teacher; winning is too," said Concede. "I write down both."

This is the idea that ties the whole book together, because it is how *all* the others grow. After a game, ask: where did I stop looking ahead (Chapter 1)? What shape did I miss (Chapter 2)? Did I spot the fork (Chapter 3), trade well (Chapter 4), see their plan (Chapter 5), find the breakthrough (Chapter 6)? A player who reviews every game – without shame for a loss – improves faster than one who only plays and forgets.

Say it out loud: *Every game teaches me – I look back at the wins and the losses.*

Everything in this book meets here: look ahead, read the shape, ask two questions at once, trade wisely, take away their plan, break through – and then *learn from what happened*, so the next game is stronger.

Your turn: The "Learn From It" pages show a finished game. Find the one moment where a different move would have changed everything.

Looking back calmly at your own games – proud of the good moves, curious about the mistakes – is the deepest strategy skill of all. It is exactly what getting good, in any game, feels like.

Keep playing at spark-and-anvil.org – the trainer runs these ideas as live puzzles across all six games, with the cast beside you.

Keep playing

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