5 Check and Checkmate

When the king is directly attacked by an enemy man (piece or pawn), he is in CHECK.
The king is not allowed to remain under attack. He must escape. If it is not possible then the king is "dead" – it is checkmate.

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Here the black rook attacks the white king – Check.

It is probably a good thing to encourage the kids to yell CHECK (not too loudly), as it helps them get used to seeing that the king is in check. At first, they will often miss the fact.

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In this diagram it MUST be Black’s move. Do you see why?

The black king is in check, being attacked by the white rook.

A king is not allowed to remain in check, so Black has 7 possible moves – 6 with the king (to the 2nd and 4th ranks) and one with his rook, taking the white rook.

Black has made his move, getting out of check, by taking the white rook that was on d3.

Now the white king is in check and has no choice but to move. He can move up or down but not to the side – because the rook attacks the squares on the third rank (and the king is not allowed to move to a square that is under attack).

At the moment the black rook does not directly attack the a3 square (that attack is blocked by the king on b3).

But remember, the king is not permitted to remain in check.
If the white king tries to move to a3, we can see that it is still attacked by the black rook and we cannot have that position with Black to move.

It usually helps to think of pieces “x-raying” the king.

For this game the alternate move rule is suspended. Only Black gets to make moves. White has to remain motionless.

Black also has to stop and remain motionless if he makes a move that gives check.

How many moves will be needed for Black to capture both white rooks? (answer)

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With White to move, his rook, if he chooses to move it (he could move the king instead), has a choice of 14 squares: 7 across the 1st rank and 7 along the h-file.

3 of those moves would attack something. On d1 or h6, it would attack the black rook, and on h8, it would attack (check) the black king.
A king that is in check and cannot escape the check by:

1. Take
2. Block
3. Move

is in CHECKMATE.

White to move. How many moves does he have that put the black king in check?

There are 3 – the rook on a7 could move to e7 or to a8 and the rook on h1 could go to h8.

One of those (rook to e7) would allow Black to take it. Putting the rook on a8 is nothing special, just check, but moving the other rook to h8 is special.

This is not just check, this is CHECKMATE.

The Rh8 attacks the black king, the squares between them, and x-rays the d8 square, so the black king cannot move sideways.

Nor can he move down the board to the 7th rank, because all those squares are attacked by the Ra7.

If a king is in check and is unable to get out of check it is checkmate, end of game, victory for the checkmating side and defeat for the checkmated.

If this was the actual starting position, then White (who always moves first) should win every time.

He would take one of the rooks, putting the black king in check. The black king would have to move and White would then take the other rook. Then it is quite a simple task to force checkmate (see Basic Checkmates).

We need to be careful with terminology and our description of checkmate. We must avoid saying that checkmate arises when “the king is in check and cannot move.” Grandmaster Paul Motwani’s first ever tournament game went 1 e2-e4 d7-d6 2 Bf1-b5+, the sweet little girl, playing White, saying “Check, and you can’t move your king – Checkmate!”
- 5th diagram:

3 moves

1...Rh6-h7
2...Rh7xg7
3...Rg7xg6+

- 6th diagram:

3 moves

1...Rg3xg6
2...Rg6-g3
3...Rg3xb3+

Note that Black can't take the b3 rook first because it is not legal - it would expose the black king to check (from the Rg6) and that is not permitted.