the
Chess Sets Guide

and bonus chess set buyer tips

Raphael Neff
Welcome! :-)

This informative, photo-rich guide is packed with tips and knowledge to help you understand and clarify your interest in chess sets while offering advice along the way.

You’ll learn things you didn’t know about chess sets as you tap into experience and knowledge condensed into this 25 page quick-read guide. Many answers come from top questions from people just like you.

Be sure to start with “Who's this guide for?”

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Who's this guide for?

This guide helps parents, players, teachers, and people with a variety of unique interests explore, reacquaint, and answer key questions about chess for home, education, or business.

You’ll discover new ideas and concepts. You’ll rapidly gaining new ideas, become familiar with key standards, and be informed, saving you time and money.

An overwhelming amount of knowledge is distilled into the essential facts you need to make good choices. It’s packed with tips to help you understand and clarify your interest in chess sets and offer you advice and assistance along the way.

When you buy a chess set, I want you to know you’re getting what you want and need. Unless you’re a collector, you do not have to spend thousands of dollars.

Weigh your options carefully. While you don’t have to invest a lot to get good value, and maybe exactly what you need, you need to do a little research. Not all manufacturers are equal. Similar looking products may be very inferior. That’s why you need a little guidance avoiding pitfalls that could burn a whole in your wallet.

You value your time as much as we do. You need to make good choices... avoid surprises with inferior products, or an unaccountable company you can't reach by phone.

It's my goal to guide you in finding the most delightful, interesting, and suitable products.

Just one way is recognizing obscure, worthy artists, bring their interesting works to the marketplace. Carolyn Cavanaugh’s dream of turning her work of art into a chess set reality became the House of Hauteville masterpiece.

Let’s help you find the ideal chess set. I hope you find answers and enjoy the insights you’ll find herein.

And finally, I want to earn your trust and delight with ChessHouse as one of your most valued resources. This company is small, but not new. It’s built on genuinely caring about clients like you as well as the staff.

If you’re not delighted I expect to hear from you.

Enjoy! :-)

-Raphael Neff
Guidance in your choice of a chess set

Standards to consider

Standards among chess sets have developed over the years. Official regulation standards of size and style are common to tournaments, clubs, scholastic chess, and frequently home-study and personal use.

This means, that if you know these standards you can own a chess set that will be accepted ANYWHERE and be a long lasting chess set for at home.

The standard in the United Status known as the “club” chess set is generally a King 3 ¾” tall, chessboard square size 2 ¼”, usually 20” square in all. Most often the pieces will be solid plastic, or with extra weight, and the chess board green and white.

A chess set like this is perfect for parents to kick off their kid’s chess experience with a basic, durable set. It's also ideal of course for the casual club player or serious tournament player.

In this all-purpose role, scholastic, club, and high level tournament players rely on the club set for official US Chess Federation rated tournaments and non regulated chess instruction.

The similar-looking wooden chess sets of this same Staunton style that also meet these size standards would also fall into this category, but rarely are they brought to chess events. In a championship however, the top 10 or so boards will often be wood.

It is perfectly acceptable to bring properly sized wooden chess pieces to a club or event. This is popularized with styled carrying cases that make them safely portable.

Fitting a chessboard to pieces

The King’s base diameter should be about 3/4 of the square size. Yes, it’s really that simple!

If you can’t find a close match, use a larger chessboard square by up to 25%. If you choose a smaller square size you’ll risk crowding the pieces.

The precise standard is the King’s base diameter 78% of the chessboard square. Start matching a chessboard with the King’s base diameter in mind and divide by .78.
For example. You have a chessboard with 2" Squares. The King's base should be about 1 1/2" (about 75% of 2"). Another example. You have chess pieces with a 1.75" King base. 1.75" divided by .78 = approximately 2 1/4". Applying the +1/8" rule, the 2 1/2" square chessboard will also be an acceptable choice.

**Algebraic notation and why it's important**

"Algebraic" is just a funny way of saying "letters and numbers" along the sides of some chessboards.

These coordinates help players record their games on scoresheets. Many chess rules in competitive chess rely on an accurately recorded chess game.

Chessboards for learning or competition usually have letter and numbering along each side with 1-8 horizontal ranks and A-H vertical files creating a coordinate system for recording a chess game on paper.

It’s a very simple idea. The bottom right square is A1 and the top right square is A8.

Beginners rely on this coordinate system printed on the chessboard to help them write down their moves, so it’s good for those starting out to use “algebraic chess boards”.

Nearly all standard vinyl roll-up chessboards will have this algebraic coordinates. But you’ll find it’s rare on wooden chessboards.

Beyond beginner level, players know the coordinate "name" of all 64 squares and don’t rely on or care whether the coordinates are depicted.

**Size**

Chess sets vary in size from less than 1/2" tall to over 2 feet tall!

A chess set’s size is the dimensions of the chessboard and the height of the King piece. Both together help you estimate the size. Here are typical sizes and what they’re for.

Pocket chess sets (3-6" chessboard) such as this Checkbook size, are usually very flat, designed to fit in your shirt pocket.
Travel chess sets (5-12” chessboard) can easily be carried, fit inside luggage, and played while traveling. The Drueke 8x8” shown is a popular one.

Folding chess sets (5-20” chessboard). Most pocket and travel sets fold to help you store pieces inside the board. This wooden CHW10 set is comfortable sized at 10.5 inches square.

Analysis chess sets (8-14” chessboard) are usually a miniature of the “club” chess set and help you study and review games when you don’t need a full size set. This 14” set fits on smaller surfaces.

Club chess sets (20-22” chessboard) Usually 20”, these are comfortably sized for hours of concentration. Such a club chess set is the most common and is available in several levels quality, all solid plastic.

Giant chess sets (12-25” King, 9 ft chessboard) for indoors or outdoors use, are fun for events, attractions, parks, backyards, etc.

You’ll learn more about these different sizes and what they are for as you continue through this guide.
Avoiding poor quality and expensive surprises

With the rise in material and labor costs, many manufacturers are seeking ways to cut cost at the consumer’s expense.

Therefore it is important to perform some fundamental extra tests and quality checking rather than relying on manufacturers alone to do this job.

This incurs extra cost but we believe the consumer should receive the best product at a fair price. A product that lasts 10 years, not 2-5 months.

A few examples of this trend in 2011

For well over 20 years, the classic, all-purpose "Quality Club Special" pieces have been reliably produced from an extremely durable plastic composition that withstands day-to-day use, bulk storage... even the most "violent" chess. Many of these chess sets have lasted for literally decades. My personal set is over 10 years old.

Today you can find the "same", similar looking set which may or may not last, often arrives broken, lacks a piece, or pieces that are tilted and don’t stand straight. Yes, the set looks almost the same as the true Club Special that costs a fraction more.

Notice the original set on the right compared to the inferior quality broken set on the left. When shopping for one of these chess sets online, it’s often hard to see the differences unless they are photographed together.

How valuable is your time? Would you pay a couple dollars less and have to replace it or get help shortly thereafter?

The good news, is that the original E104 Club Special Chess Pieces will continue to be produced and made available to chess players at a fair price into the near future.

One can always lose pieces of course :-). If you lost pieces to this set let us know and we’ll do our best to replace it - usually for free.

The basic chess set

All ages, but especially children need a solid, tactile feel to strengthen learning. Flimsy, lightweight pieces don’t create as much muscle memory while learning.
Everyone should consider owning an inexpensive, unbreakable, solid plastic, basic "club chess set". They are all-purpose, rugged, and ideal for all ages.

Avoid the cheap Target/Walmart pieces. You can get 5 times the value for the same price with a solid, durable chess set that's truly multi-purpose. And you won't have to pull it out with an embarrassed look either - it's a true chess set.

It is the most recognized, ideal for all styles of chess, and is the building-block of chess learning and competition. The solid plastic pieces will last for years.

These sets aren't sold at big chain stores or most local game stores. You have to find them online.

If you ever lose a piece from the basic club chess sets, you can just ask ChessHouse to mail you a free piece replacement.

It's easy to accessorize. While you only need the club chess set, its 20" size and 3 3/4" pieces make it standard for easy storage in travel chess bags.

I keep one of these chess sets in an inexpensive fitted chess bag in my Jeep. Inside that travel bag I also have a black Touch Chronos, my favorite chess clock.

I recommend that you spend the extra couple dollars for the club chess set with the US made vinyl chess board (E010a). This cloth backed vinyl is slightly thicker and resists curling better.

The reason curling is a factor is that vinyl chessboards are almost always “rolled up” for storage. Obviously you need a good quality vinyl to ensure that after a few months in storage it will uncurl and lay flat.

Travel chess

Playing chess during travel means your game can be interrupted at any time. Most of us like to finish our chess games. That's why a set with strong magnets and a case that can close for storage while saving your chess position will let you continue playing where you left off.

You can pack travel sets in a shirt pocket, purse, briefcase, or alongside your laptop.

Three dimensional pieces are easier to grasp and move than flat 2D pieces, but flat pieces usually come in the most compact sizes.
Here is an example of an 8" x 8" chess set with small 3D pieces and strong magnets, the Drueke Travel Chess Set. You can save and continue later, in a plastic case that’s tough enough to stand on.

One downside is that the playing surface is slightly prone to scratching over time, and the rare magnet might have to be re-glued to the piece. But overall it’s an excellent set.

One of the SMALLEST and yet practical chess sets is the “Checkbook” size magnetic set. The pieces are flat, pictured, magnetic pieces. Overall it’s a clever design that basically looks and feels like a checkbook.

I was looking for a nicely designed travel chess set and found the perfect one, at an very affordable price through ChessHouse.com. Not only was the price lower than everyone else, it was also shipped to me right away, and I received it within two days of my order. I also received a follow up email to check to make sure I was satisfied.
- Ellie

Electronic Chess

See the guide to electronic chess for more information.

Blind players

Since blind players rely on feel, the ideal chess set for blind players has pieces with small pegs on the bottom that allow the player to feel the position of the pieces without disrupting them. The peg keeps the pieces in place until it’s ready to move.

A good size is 10", for example this chess set shown folds in half, and all the pieces are peg style so they will not shift or move when touched. See Folding Pegged Style Set
Giant Outdoor Yard Chess

At two feet tall, there’s nothing quite like giant chess to entertain your guests at the party. There are so many creative uses. It’s completely up to your imagination.

You could even design and lay checkered tiles in your backyard or paint squares on your patio. Or keep it completely portable with a 9 foot nylon quick-fold chess mat.

At 25” tall, it’s perfect for most uses, and is still portable. Getting the two large sports equipment size bags can make it easier to store.

Unique Chess Sets

Fascinating, aesthetic, ingenious. Made by Naef in Switzerland.

This game of chess with clean lines is typical of timeless Bauhaus style.

Josef Hartwig’s chessmen, designed in 1923, have characteristically reduced forms which, in contrast to commonly used figures, are symbols based purely on the function and form of the manoeuvre of each piece.

Cubes, cylinders and balls lead you move by move to checkmate.

Wooden Chess Sets

The variety of wooden chess sets available can become overwhelming. This section is purposely brief with just a few recommendations. You are invited to explore. There are several great reasons to own wood chess sets.

• Traditionally more desirable
• Richer playing experience
• Create “your” style with great variety of woods and unique designs
Play or display

Rosewood (dark reddish brown) and Boxwood (very light wood) sets are perfect for both display and use because they not only look fabulous, but are affordable. ($75-$200)

Drueke (droo-kee) is an American based manufacturer of wooden games. Their affordable wood chess sets are a pleasure to play or display in the home.

The pieces are imported from India, but the boards and boxes are made in the USA. Shown here is a combination wood chess board, pieces, and storage box item 82705

Any board 15” or larger up to 23” will be comfortable to play any time. The pieces for these will range from 2 1/2” tall to 4 1/4” tall.

Polish artisans at their finest, this large, ornate and stylish 21 inch Ambassador Chess Set is cherished by anyone that loves chess.

Special piece styling with opposing king and queen colors, plus fine carving make the set very special.

The folding chess board lays out very nicely, and like the pieces has intricate carving somewhat akin to “western” style with artistic rope engraving.

It has “algebraic” coordinates, a rarity among wooden chess sets. It is not magnetic.

It is large and a pleasant chess set to play or use as a unique decorative chess set.

Most detail is done by hand, including both the painting and etching.

A smaller design similar to the Ambassador is the 16 inch Junior Chess Set
Next time you buy a chess set, stop and ponder the incredible amount of craftsmanship required.
Manufacturing process

Many wood chess sets are painstakingly hand made to exacting standards. For example, the Ambassador set by Polish artisans, pictured above, requires hours of labor from the initial cutting of Maple trees all the way to the gluing, etching, and painting of the finished product.
Wood types

- **Boxwood** - an inexpensive, yet colorful lightwood. Many light color chess pieces are made of boxwood for its hardness and sandy-yellow contrasting color.

- **Shishamwood** - This light wood (not pictured) is very typical for less expensive chess sets since the wood is abundantly available in India, one of the world’s major producers of chess sets. The wood is very suitable for chess pieces since it comes in a variety of shades suitable for both the light and dark pieces.

- **Ebony** - a very dark, dense, and expensive black wood, sometimes with a dark brown tinge. Ebony chess sets are sought after by collectors and they’re readily available from companies like ChessHouse. But they do demand a premium.

- **Ebonized** - Since ebony is so desirable as a classic deep black finish, Ebonized chess sets were developed which are made out of different woods and therefore less expensive. However they are lacquered, painted, or varnished to appear like Ebony.
Ideas for Parents

School and learning

Chess is fun and sharpens young minds. Parents can encourage their children to study chess, thereby experiencing the active, transforming benefits chess has on the mind.

Effective learning involves stimulating both intellectual and motor skills at the same time. That's why a child with a real chessboard following along move-by-move, with training presented on DVD encourages deeper learning. Learning is reinforced as it is physically played while listening and viewing the instructional material.

Several chess learning kits are available that combing quality chess sets with the best instructional material.

I wanted to write you and thank you for the chess kit we received from you. My seven year old and I have literally been playing non-stop since. It is amazing to see a seven year old grasp chess so quickly and to see the development as he learns the pieces and their allowed moves. You can see his mind working as strategy beings to formulate, which is fun to see. Soon he will be beating dear ol’ dad! With so much of our world today, including DVD’s, video games and the internet pulling our families into isolation, we believe in the power of family games. Our family has made it a priority to spend time playing games together and have even set up our Tuesday evenings as a no-technology family night. Chess is becoming part of that tradition and the resulting quality time with my son and family is irreplaceable.

Travis H., CPA
Washington

Ideal kid's chess set

The club chess set is ideal for class, practicing with fellow students, and competing at the club and scholastic tournament.

Children quickly become familiar with this set, so it's a good idea to introduce them to the set they will use if they ever play in a scholastic chess tournament.

Even if you never plan to send your kids to chess class, this style chess set is still what you should consider for at home.
It’s basically indestructible. If you ever lose or break a piece, just ask and we’ll replace it for free.

We recommend at least getting a carrying case for your chess set. The bag will keep all 32 pieces zipped up for storage and the rolled up board with the set together.
Ideas for Players

Tournament chess sets

The club chess set is the most common and suitable set for tournaments as well.

Most tournaments will have the chess sets already set up and ready to play. After you complete your match, you just set up the game for the next round.

But you should always bring your chess set anyway so you can practice or review between matches. Clubs usually have chess sets provided, but not always. So be sure to bring your set.

ALWAYS use a traditional style chess set, usually known as Staunton - no themed pieces, red or black pieces, or anything non-standard, unusual, etc. Players expect the standard set and you’ll stand out as a newbie if you come with something weird or unusual.

You MAY, however, bring a nice set of traditional, correctly sized (3 ¾” or 4”) wood chessmen and offer to play with wood instead! No one has a right to make fun of you, and many times your opponent will jump at the opportunity to play on your nice wooden chess pieces.

Just keep in mind, that in real competition, a chess game may get fast and furious near the end if players times are running low :) so your set must be able to take the heat of battle!

Upgrading your set

Many chess players like to upgrade the club chess set to a heavier or more stylish variety.

Several interesting possibilities exist. Here are a few and the reasons to consider each one. These chess sets fit the same chessboard as the club chess set.

• Collector - High-end plastic pieces with distinct styling. Heavily weighted with collector drawstring bag. Recent quality not good. For most people not worth the $50. Two extra queens.

![Collector Chess Pieces](image1.png)

• Executive Staunton - mid-grade quality, large, heavy, and robust. Heavy weighted, massive set for low cost - fun for blitz chess. Two extra queens. View

![Executive Staunton Chess Pieces](image2.png)

• Ultimate - distinctly suitable for Blitz chess, or “speed” chess. Low center of gravity, heavy weights, and great, smooth feel is easy to grasp and slide. Match it with a wood board for the ultimate experience. Extra queens cost a lot. View

![Ultimate Chess Pieces](image3.png)

• Paladin - Rugged, nicely weighted and balanced for tournament play. Styled after a popular chess set from the 70’s. Not quite as durable as some. Also comes with two extra queens. View

![Paladin Chess Pieces](image4.png)
• Heavy Tournament Chess Pieces - the club chess pieces with extra weight. Lowest cost upgrade, easy way to increase the weight and feel of your chessmen. Two extra queens. View

* plastic “mold lines” are normal, yet generally less noticeable or more costly sets
* “Staunton” refers to the common chess piece style, as all above.
Ideas for Home

Theme, decor, and unique chess sets

Theme chess sets are fun and interesting, and can make exciting birthday gifts, anniversary gifts, and Christmas presents.

Most theme sets are made of polystone. Polystone is a compound made up largely of polyurethane resin mixed with powdered stone additives that give it added weight and the porcelain or "stone-like" feel that resulted in the materials name itself. Polystone is durable and highly effective at maintaining a sharp paint finish. Unlike porcelain which is fired in an oven, Polystone is a cold-cast material in which no heat is used in the manufacturing process, resulting in much greater variations of paint finish. Therefore polystone lends to a cleaner, more detailed set of chess pieces.

Beautiful and highly detailed Studio Anne Carlton chess sets originate in the United Kingdom. SAC created a wonderful array of theme chess sets from the Isle of Lewis, to Lord of the Rings, Winnie the Pooh, Civil War, famous battles, and of course Sherlock Homes among many others.

Encouraging a child's special interest, or enhancing a history lesson is easy with so many unique, weird, original or fun chess set themes.

Answers to top questions

Do I need extra queens?

No, yet they are a convenience and desirable to most players. If you play a pawn to the 8th rank, you can promote it to any piece, usually a Queen. If you still have your first Queen on the chessboard, you can add a second one! A popular alternative is to place a rook inverted.

What does Staunton mean?

Howard Staunton (1810 – 22 June 1874) was an English chess master who is generally regarded as having been the world’s strongest player from 1843 to 1851, largely as a result of his 1843 victory over Saint-Amant. He promoted a chess set of clearly distinguishable pieces of standardised shape that is still the style which must be used for competitions. He was the principal organiser of the first international chess tournament in 1851, which made England the world's leading chess centre and caused Anderssen to be recognised as the world’s strongest player.¹

Is my chess set rare or valuable?

If the set is obsolete or one-of-a-kind, it may be. One way to research this is searching active and completed auctions on Ebay. If you find the set or a similar set you'll know the going price. Otherwise, the only way to know the value would be to sell it or auction it off.

What makes a chess set valuable?

Some of the most expensive sets are Jaques at several thousand dollars each. Both rarity and design detail are factors that influence value. Generally, a chess set’s workmanship can be seen in the knights (horses) on the chess set. Look close at the mane, eyes, and head. Some knights are "bridled" This refers to a carved bridle - a rare, exquisite detail that lends to extra detail and desirability. Of course, the wood’s rarity and richness also influences the value of the set.

¹ Wikipedia: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Howard_Staunton
BONUS - 18 Tips to Choosing the Ideal Chess Set

*** TIP #1 ***
If you plan to study the game of chess, use a board with Algebraic Coordinates to help you record moves or play recorded chess moves on the chessboard. That's the A-H on the front and 1-8 on the side. Good chess players visualize and instantly know which square is e7, f3, e8, etc, but especially when you’re starting out, you should have a board with "coordinates" or "algebraic notation".

*** TIP #2 ***
If you love fast chess (Blitz chess), the Ultimate Chess Set has a very low center of gravity, resulting in very stable pieces. It has a great feel and is weighted properly. Thick, easy-sliding felts are ideal for vinyl and especially wood chessboards.

*** TIP #3 ***
If in doubt, go GREEN! 97% of chess players accept green/white as the standard chessboard color. Why is this? It's much easier to concentrate for hours looking at green, then red or blue!

*** TIP #4 ***
When choosing a chessboard for your chess pieces, the general rule is to make sure base diameter the King (or largest piece) is no more than 75% of the chessboard’s single square size. Start with the King base diameter and multiply by 1.3 or more.

*** TIP #5 ***
Some chess sets have extra queens. It’s helpful but not required. It does add to the desirability of a set. It helps during pawn “promote” without having to borrow a queen from another set or improvise a piece.

*** TIP #6 ***
Steer clear of lightweight “dollar store” chess sets. They are usually hollow plastic with a flimsy board, ready to be whisked away by a breeze or Fluffy's tail.

*** TIP #7 ***
Any chess set marked as "weighted" will feel better when you play. Don’t worry too much about exactly how heavy they are as long as they are "weighted". Single, Double, and Triple-weight descriptions may change from store to store as there is no firm standard to these terms.

*** TIP #8 ***
Theme chess sets are fun, and decorative and generally don’t “play” as well as traditional style sets. How do you know if a Pomeranian puppy or Siamese cat is the bishop or pawn? The owner of a theme set can play an occasional game, but most often they are intended for display. There are hundreds of interesting themes.
*** TIP #9 ***
There’s no need to overspend on a wood chess set! Like the finest wines, the truly expensive sets are for the elite collectors, and sometimes come in limited edition.

*** TIP #10 ***
Most fine wood chess sets range in price from $100-$400. For most of us, a suitable wood chess set can be purchased for $150 or less. At this price range you’ll feel better about actually using it.

*** TIP #11 ***
If you’re thinking about teaching chess to an entire classroom, you need a “demonstration” chessboard. They are oversize chess sets designed to be easily seen at a distance while mounted vertically on the wall.

*** TIP #12 ***
Most black wood chess sets are Ebonized wood, a staining or painting process that gives the appearance of Real Bony. Real Ebony is a black wood, sometimes very dark brown, nearly black and it’s relatively expensive. While many sets are actually ebonized to appear like Ebony, chess players make a personal choice between the real or ebonized appearance, largely based on cost or prestige.

*** TIP #13 ***
Consider Shishamwood (light-medium brown), or Rosewood (medium to dark brown) woods for a chess set you can feel good about both using and displaying. Many players are starting to bring their Rosewood and Boxwood (dark/light) sets to club or competitions.

*** Tip #14 ***
In the event you wish to use a wood chess set in club or competition play, you’ll need to make sure it’s approximately 3 ¾” tall +/- ¼” and that it’s of a traditional Staunton appearance (most plastic club chess sets are a good representation of traditional Staunton style).

*** TIP #15 ***
Club chess sets are all purpose. If you need something that will work for every occasion, choose a club chess set. If you need to fit it on a smaller surface (classroom desk), pair the club chess set with a 17” vinyl board instead of the standard 20”.

*** TIP #16 ***
Analysis chess sets are miniaturized club style chess sets suitable for analyzing games while travelling or in limited space.

*** TIP #17 ***
Don’t be confused by the terminology “chess set”. This phrase is often used interchangeably to mean “both the chess pieces and board” or just an “entire set of chessmen without a board”.

*** TIP #18 ***
The company you buy from should take special care with hands on pre-inspections of chess sets, tables, and furniture to ensure each product you buy will arrive complete and
unbroken. This single critical step saves ChessHouse clients more time and frustration than any other company dealing in chess merchandise, since chess sets and tables are imported from many places around the world and frequently require attention. Just as important, when an occasional problem does get through the company should take care of it rapidly.
Conclusion

If you've made it this far I hope choosing the right chess set for you will become more of a hassle free experience for you now that you have taken the time to educate yourself further! You could also save yourself a small fortune buying the right one the first time.

The internet is an intense resource for all of us on a daily basis and the number of products available online is growing. Since we specialize in chess, we test and offer only the best merchandise we find.

If you choose to order from ChessHouse.com I want your experience to be pleasant and hassle free! Any time when ordering your chess sets you need help or assistance there's a team of friendly and helpful staff available.

I hope you enjoyed this guide as well. If you did, forward it to a friend. PLEASE Let me know how you found this guide helpful or if I didn’t answer all your questions.

Raphael Neff
ChessHouse

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