

Go initiation

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Introduction

To initiate at Go is a more difficult task than it seems at first glance. The simple presentation of the game and the explanation of the rules can be rather tedious if you do not know how to proceed. In the same way, the transmission of the basic strategies requires a serious preparation to be done naturally and in a pleasant way. This is why, in order to help any player who wishes to succeed in beginners initiation, this article presents synthetically some basic ideas recommended by the majority of Go pedagogues.





1. Be prepared

If an initiation is obviously about teaching the basics of Go, what we want to transmit is much more than simple rules: it is to hear the sound of stones, to discover the subtleties of the game and more generally to transmit our passion for Go.

To succeed, we must obviously pay attention to these values of welcome, mutual aid and development that are part of the Go culture and prepare the initiation both in terms of material (promotional leaflets, rules of the game ...) and the speech.

2. Listening and welcoming

In practice, these are simple and common sense things that will count first:

- Take the first step towards the curious
- Introduce yourself / make presentations
- Discuss a little to measure the interest in the game and the time available. Ask the public what they know about Go.

To introduce well, it is essential to listen to your audience to be able to adapt.

For example, if you are dealing with a beginner who has already played a bit it may not be worth reviewing the rules. In the same way you can detail the history of Go if your interlocutor is interested in Eastern culture, but not if he/she has a train to take ...

A point of attention: everything will obviously work much better in a pleasant atmosphere - avoid in particular the untimely intervention of external speakers and noise in general.

As an introduction

Several ways to present Go are possible:

- the rich **history of Go**: its invention more than 2000 years ago in China, its expansion to Korea and Japan and finally the modern era
- the **game theory**: its mathematical properties, artificial intelligence ...
- **Go culture**: millions of players in the world and an open door to Asia through proverbs, philosophical concepts (taoism, feng shui ...), mangas (Hikaru No Go) ...

3. Introduce the rules

Since Go has very logical rules, the most natural way to transmit them is to explain only the basic rules, as clearly and briefly as possible:

- **the course of the game**: to take stones in turn on the free intersections (no displacement)
- **the goal of the game**: get more points than the opponent with the captures and territories
- **capture rules**: identify a string of stones (no diagonal connections!), count the freedoms (no diagonal freedoms!), capture by removing the last freedom

As these rules are very logical, they can be transmitted in a very interactive way. For example: make everyone count how many liberties a group does have to make sure it's understood, place a group of stones with only 1 liberty left and ask how to capture.

Explanations should be mostly used to clarify what has been seen.



Obviously, questions need to be answered. But at this stage, it is not recommended to explain the particular cases (suicide, eye capture, Ko, Seki ...), the uses of the game (passing, counting points, Komi, handicap, rank ..) and the strategies, which will be much easier to approach through practice.

Technical tips

- *Explaining that "there is capture when the last freedom is removed from an opposing stone or string of stones" avoids any subsequent ambiguity.*
- *There is no need to define in detail the notion of territory. Just say that a territory is closed by "frontiers".*

4. Let's discover the game

For the very first games, it is better to play with beginners or at least keep an eye on their games just to help the correct application of the rules.

Whatever happens, keep cool even if rules are not followed or if there are particular cases (Ko or Seki for example).

Play the first games on a small board (size between **6x6** and 9x9). This allows beginners to play games faster, practice capture rules and have fun watching "what's going on".

In the end, do not hesitate to fill in "obstinately" inside the opponent territory until there are only "impossible to capture" stones left, to make clear the game is finished and what can't be captured are "territories".

Complicated situations

- *To avoid misunderstandings, it is preferable to see in order the "suicide" and thereafter the particular case "if there is capture it is not a suicide because the capture gives more liberties".*
- *If players are stuck on a Ko, explain that: "recreating a position identical to the previous move is forbidden". If a Seki appears, simply show that no one has any interest in playing there.*
- *Rather than talking about "kill", "suicide", "handicap"... which can cause trouble, use instead "capture", "self-capture", "gift"...*

5. Stone pedagogy

To play pedagogically, it is important to carefully observe each beginner's move to understand his/her intentions and evaluate his/her understanding of Go.

By interpreting this information, it becomes possible to help progress by playing instructive and comprehensible moves for your opponent's level.

Concretely, playing pedagogically consists mostly in playing reasonable moves that can serve as an example for the beginner.

It's also playing simple moves that clarify the situation. For example: answer locally to show that a chain of stones can be captured, rather than playing elsewhere which would make the reading of the game more difficult.

More generally, to play pedagogically is to orientate the game to avoid too difficult sequences or to obtain positions pedagogically interesting for the beginner (for example a group that can be cut / killed ...).

Initiation is not humiliation

Punishing big mistakes is necessary. But to humiliate the beginners by making them lose all their games would disgust them of the game ...

To balance the odds: place enough handicap stones, play suboptimal moves or help find the right moves.

6. Help discover answers to questions

A fundamental principle of pedagogy is **not to give the answer to a question that the practice of the game will bring better**. Just **do not intervene** to **let the stones speak**.

Thus the beginner will have fun discovering the subtleties of the game by practice and the consequences of his/her moves, good or bad.

It's the beginner who must play and have fun, not the initiator !

In practice, limit yourself to a few oral interventions for:

- help to find answers to questions
- suggest when there are better moves, return to one or two key moments after the game
- take back unreasonable play (for example: a stone played directly in Atari)
- illustrate what has just been practiced by a simple comment, a compliment or by using a proverb to help memorize the idea

All this is already a lot and doing more would be doing too much!

Excess of explanations

Many enthusiastic amateurs initiate with the idea that it is necessary to explain as much as possible as quickly as possible. The result is always catastrophic: the beginner finds him/herself overwhelmed by complex concepts (make eyes, fight Ko, Shisho, good forms, Josekis ...). In most cases, the beginner will not understand these ideas that would require a long practice to be properly assimilated. But if by some mischance the beginner understands, then this would spoil the fun of finding these ideas by playing !

Let's content ourselves to contemplate the subtleties that have just been played and learning will naturally come as more games are played.

Do not explain, but let beginners play and discover !

7. Show the way forward

Respecting the hierarchy of knowledge is essential. To apply this, each player **progression rate should be carefully evaluated** and no step should be skipped. This must be kept in mind as much in our playing style as in our comments.

Some of the first basic strategies that can be introduced are:

- **be careful with liberties !** to evaluate, to capture or to save stones
- connect stones or cut the opponent's stones.

As more games are played, gradually help discover new strategic ideas.

Above all, do not force the pace! If for example the notion of "2 eyes" has not been addressed during the initiation, it is not a problem and this can be seen another time.

It's by giving time to progress at his/her own rhythm that the beginner will be able to build a sound foundation for Go practice.

One concept at a time

Explain that in Go "the goal is to make 2 eyes" before even talking about capture is an example of a very common pedagogical error.

It must first be seen that it is possible to capture "1 eye" and then only it is possible to discover that "make 2 eyes" prevents being killed. This must be practiced in this order to be understandable !

8. Follow-up after the initiation

After the game, humbly thank the opponent.

Discuss the first impressions to find out what your insider found interesting or fun, or on the contrary did not enjoy.

If your beginner does not seem very interested, you would have anyway helped to spread awareness about the Go culture and at least acquired useful experience for the next initiations.

If your beginner is motivated to continue, these are just the first steps and you can then guide for the next ones.

For those interested

- Give some documentation: a business card of the Fed, a promotional flyer, a copy of the rules of the game ...
- Advise about the possibilities of play: in club (give the schedules) or on Internet.
- Advocate to continue playing on a 9x9 (to avoid especially the drowning on a 19x19).
- Invite to join a club, because in Go direct contact with other players of all levels is essential to have fun and progress in the game.

Summary

- **Prepare the initiation.** Prepare the presentation and material.
- **Listen and adapt** to your audience.
- **Approach the basic rules**, let discover the special cases by playing.
- **Play on small board** (size 6x6 to 9x9).
- **Play pedagogic**: show a good example and simplify, let win from time to time.
- **Let the stones speak.** **Do not explain but show the game** through practice.
- **Show the way forward.** Respect the hierarchy of knowledge and player progression rate.
- **Discuss first impressions**, advise about the possibilities of play (club, Internet ...).