

Chapter 1:

Word Knowledge

"Words are dangerous weapons. And you need weapons to prevail in battle."

Across the US, parents use Scrabble as an educational tool to teach their children an appreciation for language in a fun and engaging way. In Thailand, this is taken to a whole new level. Many of their schools use Scrabble to teach kids English while improving their spatial and anagramming skills. As a result, Thailand is home to many strong Scrabble players.

Thai players think about learning words differently than their American counterparts. Some words are learned as English words: words that are necessary to succeed in the English-speaking world that are also valid in Scrabble. However, Thai Scrabble players also learn other words as "functional" words; words that are rarely used in English but are useful in Scrabble.

To become a good Scrabble player, you need to study "functional" words. Think of studying like any other skill, from dribbling a basketball to hitting bunker shots. It's something you *must* do if you want to be proficient at Scrabble.

Studying starts with the two letter words. The two letter words are essential to playing Scrabble at a proficient level and understanding the lessons in this book. There are only 101 two letter words, many of which you already know. By learning just 5 words a day, you can learn all of the two letter words in two weeks. (A list of many useful Scrabble words, including many two and three letter words, along with definitions can be found in the appendix.)

Chapter 2:

Finding Words

"You can't win a battle of wits until you find the right words."

After traveling through stormy weather, a boat's navigation system malfunctions. The captain calls in the crew and asks them how to find their way back to land. One crewmate tries to construct a compass on board, and tells the captain to stay the course. Another crew member tries to use the stars as navigation, and suggests turning the boat slightly east toward the sun. The boat turns. A third member uses the ocean currents and examines the seafloor and recommends a significant turn westward.

The boat is lost. The captain moves onward, picking a direction arbitrarily and hoping that he's right. The captain no longer wants advice. It's easier to focus on one path rather than accept input from the rest of the crew.

This is how many novices feel on the Scrabble board. They are overwhelmed by all the factors they have to consider: while they search scrupulously, they reach a breaking point and give up, making a play just to get to the next rack. After a few racks, they are so frustrated that they refuse to give any rack more than a cursory glance.

Learning how to find plays is like learning to play an instrument; it can only be developed through practice. By developing an understanding of the types of spots and words that yield high scores, finding good plays can become second nature to any Scrabble player.

Chapter 3:

Hotspots

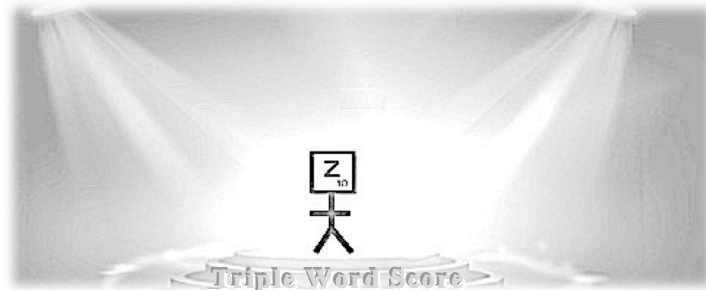
"Hotspots allow high point tiles to shine."

One aspect that attracts players to Scrabble is the board. It is a piece of art: colorful and exciting, yet symmetric and easy to understand.

Hotspots make Scrabble more dynamic. While they can be a savior for your high point tiles, hotspots can also be detrimental when your opponent has high point tiles and can easily score with them. While tiles such as the S and R are used for playing a bingo, tiles such as the H, W, X, and Y are used for hotspots.

Hotspots allow tiles like the Z or X can score 50 or more points. They enable otherwise poor high point tiles to punish your opponent, especially if you can use multiple hotspots on one turn or make a parallel play using a hotspot. Two of these plays are worth just as much as a bingo. The points can add up fast!

Since it is easy to score well using hotspots, you should avoid giving your opponent easy access to these spots. You may need to sacrifice points to block or avoid opening hotspots so your opponent cannot score well with their high point tiles.



Chapter 4:

Decision Making

"Good decisions are made one decision at a time."

All eyes are on you. Your breathing speeds up. Your muscles begin to tense. Your mind wanders. "What if I'm wrong? What if I'm missing something?" Making crucial decisions under pressure seems impossible.

Whether it's marriage, school, your job, etc., making life altering decisions is difficult because of the ramifications. Although Scrabble does not change someone's life, the same stress reactions occur. A meticulous, logical thought process is imperative for good Scrabble play.

In this chapter, you will learn three metrics to evaluate plays: the number of points your play scores, the hotspots available for your opponent, and the remaining tiles on your rack also known as your *leave*. (This concept will be discussed further in Chapter 5.)

How do you compare plays using these metrics? There are two stages of decision making: the *primary stage* and the *selection stage*. In the primary stage, you are comparing similar plays. The differences between plays are small and straightforward. In the selection stage, you must contrast plays with different strengths and weaknesses.

The most important part of this chapter is understanding *how* decisions are made. Making the right plays is not as important as understanding how to compare and contrast plays. This chapter's mission is to build a framework allowing you to find the best play on each turn. As this book progresses, more metrics will be added, another stage will be introduced, and you will learn how to incorporate more concepts into your decision-making process.

Chapter 5:

Leaves

"In Scrabble, you don't win by a single ferocious attack, but by a constant barrage of points. And sometimes that constant barrage requires holding a little something back."

Amongst games between top players, observant players will note that the same words show up frequently. Indeed, although experts are capable of playing obscure bingos such as OMOPHAGY, most bingos contain many of the letters in the word RELATIONS. Proficient Scrabble players keep good bingo and scoring tiles on their rack, enabling them to score consistently.

With poor tiles, even masters have a very difficult time finding a bingo or a high scoring play. No amount of skill can help you with a rack such as AAEEITU or DIRRTTT. Masters are no better than novice players at dealing with these racks: however, they avoid these situations by keeping a good *leave*. They keep good tiles on their rack while maximizing score so that their leave (the remaining tiles after their previous play) will result in a high scoring play next turn.

There are two components of a good leave. One component is *tile strength*. Keeping an S on your rack will improve your leave since it will help you score more points next turn than a tile such as the V. The other component is *balance*. Strong leaves do not contain duplicated letters, and possess an equal number of consonants and vowels.

In Scrabble, there are two ways to score well. One way is to play a bingo and receive a 50 point bonus for your play. The other way is to utilize your board vision and combine hotspots with high-point tiles to make a scoring play. Leaves that tend to form a bingo are called *bingo leaves*, while leaves that lead to high-scoring plays are called *scoring leaves*.

This chapter will provide you with a fundamental understanding of what makes a good leave. While there are important differences between scoring leaves and bingo leaves, it is important to learn various metrics to evaluate different leaves. Good leaves contain a balanced *vowel-consonant ratio*, possess good *synergy*, and are *diverse*.

Chapter 6:

The | | | | | | |----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------| | T ₁ | I ₁ | L ₁ | E ₁ | S ₁ | |----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|

"Every tile is special in its own unique way."

Any good chess book begins with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of each piece. Yet if you ask another Scrabble player: "What are the strengths and weaknesses of the T?" most players will think you are from another planet. However, learning the nuances of each tile is important.

Not all tiles are created equal. Tiles such as the blank and S are valuable since they score well regardless of the board. Meanwhile, tiles such as the V and Q are poor tiles since they tend to be inflexible and impede your ability to play a bingo.

This chapter should be used as a reference guide. By reading and rereading this chapter, over time you will acquire an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of each tile. This information will help you assess leaves in a precise and informative way.

To help you understand the capabilities of each tile, I have created several metrics that assess their strengths and weaknesses:

Type: Each tile is categorized into one of three different types based on each tile's usefulness. These types are:

- **Scoring Vowel/Consonant:** These are tiles primarily used for scoring 30+ point plays. These tiles usually score a lot of points by using hotspots or forming high-scoring 5 and 6 letter words. These tiles are also used for parallel plays.
- **Bingo Vowel/Consonant:** These tiles are used for bingos. Bingo vowels or consonants are tiles that exist in many 7 or 8 letter words.
- **Clunkers:** These are bad tiles you should get rid of as quickly as possible. Clunkers are used to make low scoring plays to balance your rack. Clunkers are poor tiles since they are too inflexible to be useful as scoring tiles, and are rarely found in seven or eight letter words.

Chapter 7:

Fishing

"An amateur fisherman tries to "catch the big one". A professional fisherman makes his money by catching lots of fish."

One reason why people love sports and games is the “almost” moments. For every great shot, there have been countless near misses: baseballs hit the warning track, buzzer beaters fall short, and Hail Marys fall unanswered.

In Scrabble, many of those “almost” plays can turn into great plays. By playing off a few tiles, you can turn the rack you have into the rack you want by fishing. Fishing is the act of playing or exchanging tiles in hopes of drawing a high scoring play or bingo on the next turn. In most cases, fishing requires a basic knowledge of a significant number of frequently occurring bingos. (A short list of some frequent bingos is available in the appendix.)

The strength of fishing plays is dependent upon three things: the valuation of other candidate plays, the likelihood that you will draw a bingo, and the ability of those bingos to play on the board next turn. Fishing is pointless if there are no spots to play a bingo or drawing a bingo is unlikely.

Opening rack: AEEERST

This is a good example of a rack that you should fish with. Exchanging the E allows you to bingo with many tiles in the bag. By going through each letter, you can see that the odds of drawing a bingo with AEERST are quite high:

A: AERATES

C: CERATES, CREATES, ECARTES

F: FEASTER

H: AETHERS, REHEATS, HEATERS

K: RETAKES

M: RETEAMS, REMATES, STEAMER

O: ROSEATE

R: RETEARS, SERRATE, TEARERS,

T: ESTREAT, RESTATE, RETASTE

W: SWEATER

B: BEATERS, BERATES, REBATES

D: DEAREST, DERATES, SEDATER, etc.

G: ERGATES, RESTAGE

I: AERIEST, SERIATE

L: ELATERS, REALEST, RELATES, etc.

N: EARNEST, EASTERN, NEAREST

P: REPEATS, RETAPES

S: RESEATS, TEASERS, TESSERA, etc.

U: AUSTERE

X: RETAXES

Chapter 8:

Setups

"Every tile is like a child. If you care about your child, sometimes you need to set up your child for success."

While some people react to everything life throws at them, successful people make things happen. They establish a social group, a desirable job, or a lifestyle they want to live. Successful Scrabble players develop this same attitude. They force their opponent to react to them, and plan ahead to put themselves in advantageous situations.

Chapter 5 briefly discussed how leave values are dependent on the board. It discussed keeping bingo leaves on wide open boards and scoring leaves on boards with open hotspots. However, you don't have to be a slave to the board: you can alter the board to conform to your remaining tiles. This type of play is called a *setup*.

Setups allow you a chance to use your high scoring tiles for big points, and can allow you to use your bingo tiles to play a bingo. They allow you to create a board conducive to your remaining tiles. When there are no good Scrabble plays, masters have the ability to create scoring plays for themselves next turn.

Good setups possess several key characteristics: they are easily accessible for your tiles while being difficult to block for your opponent, they set up a high scoring play next turn, and they don't sacrifice too many points immediately. Plays that are easily blocked or sacrifice too many points typically are weak setup plays.

Chapter 9:

Entropy and Blocking

"Being atop the mountain just means you're going to get attacked from every possible direction."

Comeback. Nothing feels more exhilarating than grasping victory from the jaws of defeat. Yet nothing is more devastating than watching as a seemingly surefire victory slips through your fingers. Comebacks stay with both players: they can be the subject of a story that lasts forever, or they can haunt you into wondering what might have been.

Comebacks don't just happen: they are events that must be prepared for. Trailing players must take calculated risks in hopes of overtaking the deficit, while leading players minimize that risk, taking steps to ensure their victory. Players with leads want to minimize risk, while trailing players want to maximize risk.

In terms of Scrabble, this translates simply: the leading player wants to eliminate high scoring bonus options since they are likely to produce large scoring swings. They want to *block* their opponent, defending their lead and inhibiting them from playing bonuses or other high scoring plays. Meanwhile, the trailing player wants high scoring bonus options available so the score can change quickly. They want to create bonus lines while blocking scoring spots enabling them to overtake their opponent with a lucky draw.

The propensity for the game score to change is measured in terms of *entropy*. A high entropy indicates a high propensity for the score to change, with high-scoring bonus lines but few scoring options. A board with few bonus lines and consistent scoring is described as having low entropy.

Trailing players should increase entropy by inciting bonuses and encouraging high-scoring plays. They need the unpredictable nature of Scrabble to take over. Meanwhile, leading players want to retain their lead using consistent scoring. They want to use open hotspots and score 35 points every turn, blocking bonus lines while keeping balanced leaves to score well on future turns. While the trailing player takes big risks (such as fishing) to hit home runs, the leading player is content hitting singles.

As a result, Scrabble boards turn into a game of cat and mouse, depending on who has the lead. When one person is trying to open the board, the other player is trying to close the board, blocking their opponent's potential options. The type of board desired varies drastically based on game score.

This chapter focuses on this cat and mouse game, showing you how to block your opponent's high scoring options and protect your lead while making adjustments based on the game score. The person who properly controls the board will come out on top.

Chapter 10:

Endgame

"With fewer options and less time remaining, it is more important than ever to be precise."

During most of the game, players are often speculating. *"What does my opponent have? What will they do? What am I going to draw?"* The ability to predict the answers to these questions will determine your Scrabble success.

During the endgame, there is no speculation. You can see your opponent's options, and there are no tiles left to draw. It's just a matter of seeing your options, seeing your opponent's options, and executing.

To play an endgame, you need to track tiles. This process will provide you with valuable information about your opponent's options, which plays to block, which tiles are problematic for your opponent, and whether or not they can block you next turn. A sample scoresheet is available at <http://www.breakingthegame.net/scoresheet>.

Playing the endgame well requires keeping the following themes in mind:

1. *Block your opponent.* If your opponent has a bingo, an *out play*, or a high scoring play, you should block these devastating plays.
2. *Go out in two.* During the endgame you should often think of your rack in two pieces: as two different scoring plays on your next two turns. Your first play should ideally score well and leave you two different spots to play your remaining tiles.
3. *Search for setups and traps.* The endgame allows for more creative play, as you know your opponent's exact tiles and can use that information to your advantage. Looking to set up high point tiles (especially when your opponent has a poor rack) or trapping awkward letters such as the J, V, or Z on your opponent tiles are both common, useful tactics during the endgame.

