

The Complete Beginner's Guide to Sudoku

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Welcome

You picked up a Sudoku puzzle. Maybe you saw one in a newspaper, a friend mentioned it, or you downloaded an app. Either way — welcome. You're about to discover one of the most satisfying logic puzzles ever invented.

This guide will take you from "I don't know where to start" to confidently solving easy puzzles on your own. No math required. No prior experience needed. Just logic, patience, and a pencil (or a screen).

Chapter 1: What Is Sudoku?

Sudoku is a number-placement puzzle. You work with a 9×9 grid divided into nine 3×3 boxes. Some cells already have numbers — these are your clues. Your goal is to fill every empty cell with a number from 1 to 9.

The Three Rules

Every valid Sudoku solution follows three rules:

1. **Each row** contains the numbers 1–9 exactly once.
2. **Each column** contains the numbers 1–9 exactly once.
3. **Each 3×3 box** contains the numbers 1–9 exactly once.

That's the entire game. Three rules, one grid, one solution.

What Sudoku Is Not

- **It's not math.** You never add, subtract, or calculate. The digits are just symbols.
 - **It's not guessing.** A good puzzle can always be solved through pure logic.
 - **It's not random.** Every properly made Sudoku has exactly one valid solution.
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Chapter 2: Understanding the Grid

Let's break down the anatomy of a Sudoku puzzle.

Cells

The grid has 81 cells arranged in 9 rows and 9 columns. Each cell holds exactly one number when the puzzle is complete.

Rows

Nine horizontal lines. Each row runs left to right across the full grid. Every number from 1 to 9 appears once per row.

Columns

Nine vertical lines. Each column runs top to bottom. Same rule: 1–9, no repeats.

Boxes

Nine 3×3 squares, usually marked by thicker borders. Also called “blocks” or “regions.” Each box follows the same 1–9 constraint.

Givens

The numbers already filled in when you start. They’re your anchor points. An easy puzzle might have 35–40 givens. A hard puzzle might have 24–28.

Units

A “unit” is any row, column, or box. Each cell belongs to exactly three units: one row, one column, and one box. When you check a cell, you always check all three.

Chapter 3: Your First Puzzle — Where to Start

Looking at a fresh Sudoku can feel overwhelming. Here’s how to approach it without panic.

Step 1: Look for the Most Filled Units

Scan the grid for any row, column, or box that already has many numbers. If a row has 7 of 9 numbers, you only need to figure out 2. That’s far easier than a row with 3 givens.

Step 2: Count What’s Missing

For a nearly complete unit, list the missing numbers. Then check each empty cell: which of those missing numbers could go there? Often, constraints from crossing rows, columns, or boxes leave only one option.

Step 3: Work Outward

Once you place a number, it creates new constraints. The row, column, and box that cell belongs to all become more constrained. This often makes nearby cells solvable.

Step 4: Don't Force It

If you can't find a certain placement, move on. Work a different area of the grid. Come back later — new placements elsewhere might unlock what you were stuck on.

Chapter 4: Pencil Marks — Your Best Tool

Pencil marks (also called “candidates” or “notes”) are small numbers you write in empty cells to track which values are still possible.

How to Pencil Mark

1. Pick an empty cell.
2. Check its row, column, and box.
3. Note which numbers from 1–9 are NOT already present in any of those three units.
4. Write those remaining numbers small in the cell.

Why They Matter

Pencil marks turn invisible information into something visible. Instead of holding possibilities in your head, you see them on the grid. This makes patterns obvious and prevents mistakes.

When to Start

You don't need to pencil-mark the entire grid at once. Start with a focused area — a single box, or the cells around a nearly complete unit. Expand as needed.

Tip: In the Sudoku a Day app, tap “Notes” mode to pencil-mark digitally. Clean, easy, and you can erase without smudging.

Chapter 5: Four Strategies for Easy Puzzles

These four techniques are all you need to solve any easy Sudoku. In fact, they'll carry you well into medium puzzles too.

Strategy 1: Scanning (Cross-Hatching)

This is the most fundamental technique. Here's how:

1. Pick a number (let's say 7).
2. Find all the 7s already on the grid.
3. For each 3x3 box that's missing a 7, look at which rows and columns running through it already have a 7.
4. The intersecting constraints often leave only one possible cell for the missing 7.

Example: If Box 1 needs a 7, and its top two rows already have 7s elsewhere, the 7 must go in the bottom row of that box. If only one cell in that bottom row is empty — that's where it goes.

Repeat for every number, every box. This single technique solves most easy puzzles.

Strategy 2: Naked Singles

After pencil-marking, check if any cell has just one candidate left. If so, that number must go in that cell. Done.

Why it works: You've eliminated every other possibility through the three rules. Only one number fits.

Habit: After placing a number, immediately re-check neighboring cells. Your new placement may reduce their candidates to one.

Strategy 3: Hidden Singles

A hidden single is slightly trickier. It happens when a number can only go in one cell within a unit — even though that cell has multiple candidates.

Example: In a box, the number 3 appears as a candidate in only one cell (even though that cell also has 5 and 8 as candidates). Since 3 must go somewhere in the box, and this is its only option, it goes here.

How to spot them: Check each unit, one number at a time. Count how many cells have that number as a candidate. If the answer is one, place it.

Strategy 4: Process of Elimination

Sometimes you can work backwards. If eight of nine numbers are placed in a unit, the remaining number goes in the remaining cell. Simple, but easy to overlook when you're scanning fast.

Tip: After each placement, quickly check if any unit now has 8 of 9 filled. Free placements.

Chapter 6: A Step-by-Step Solve

Let's walk through solving part of a puzzle using the strategies above.

Starting Position

Imagine a row that reads: 1, , 3, , 5, 6, _, 8, 9

Step 1: The missing numbers are 2, 4, and 7.

Step 2: Check the column and box for each empty cell.

- Cell 2 (row position 2): Its column already has a 2 and a 7. Only 4 is possible. → **Place 4.**
- Cell 4 (row position 4): Its box already has a 4. Its column has a 7. Only 2 is possible. → **Place 2.**
- Cell 7 (row position 7): Only 7 remains. → **Place 7.**

Row complete: 1, 4, 3, 2, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9.

That's the rhythm. Identify what's missing, check constraints, place what's certain, repeat.

Chapter 7: Five Mistakes Every Beginner Makes

1. Guessing

If you're not sure, don't place it. Write pencil marks instead. Guessing creates a chain of errors that's hard to undo.

2. Forgetting the Boxes

New players often check rows and columns but neglect the 3×3 boxes. Always check all three constraints.

3. Trying to Solve Everything at Once

Work one area at a time. Find the easiest placements first. Small wins unlock bigger ones.

4. Skipping Pencil Marks

Your working memory has limits. Write candidates down. It's not a crutch — it's how experienced solvers work.

5. Giving Up Too Early

Easy puzzles are designed to be solved with the four strategies in Chapter 5. If you're stuck, re-scan the grid. You've probably missed a naked or hidden single somewhere.

Chapter 8: Building Your Solving Routine

A consistent routine makes solving faster and more enjoyable.

Suggested Routine

1. **Quick scan.** Glance at the grid. Which units are most filled?

2. **Cross-hatch.** Go through numbers 1–9, checking each box for easy placements.
3. **Pencil mark** areas that aren't obvious.
4. **Hunt for singles.** Check your pencil marks for naked and hidden singles.
5. **Place and update.** Each time you place a number, update pencil marks in its row, column, and box.
6. **Repeat** until complete.

Timing Yourself

Speed isn't the goal at first — accuracy is. But once you're comfortable, timing adds a fun challenge. Many beginners solve easy puzzles in 8–15 minutes with practice.

The Sudoku a Day app tracks your solve time and shows your progress over days and weeks — without pressure.

Chapter 9: Difficulty Levels Explained

Most Sudoku apps and publications use a difficulty scale. Here's what it typically means:

Level	Givens	Strategies Needed
Easy	35–45	Scanning, Singles
Medium	30–35	+ Naked Pairs, Pointing Pairs
Hard	26–30	+ X-Wing, Triples, Hidden subsets
Expert	22–27	+ Coloring, Swordfish, XY-Wing

Start with Easy. It's not embarrassing — it's smart. Master the fundamentals before adding complexity. You'll build speed and confidence that makes harder puzzles enjoyable rather than frustrating.

Chapter 10: What Comes Next

Once easy puzzles feel routine, you're ready to grow:

1. **Move to medium puzzles.** They introduce Naked Pairs and Pointing Pairs — logical extensions of what you already know.
2. **Learn one new strategy at a time.** Don't try to absorb everything at once. Add one technique, practice until it clicks, then add another.
3. **Use the strategy guide.** sudokuaday.com/sudoku-strategies covers every technique from easy through master level, with explanations and examples.
4. **Build a streak.** Solving one puzzle a day is the best way to improve. The daily habit keeps techniques fresh and builds pattern recognition naturally.

Quick Reference: Key Terms

Term	Meaning
Given	A pre-filled number in the puzzle
Candidate	A possible number for an empty cell
Pencil mark	A small note tracking candidates
Naked single	A cell with only one candidate
Hidden single	A candidate appearing in only one cell within a unit
Unit	Any row, column, or 3x3 box
Cross-hatching	Scanning technique using row/column intersections
Elimination	Removing candidates that violate the rules

Resources

- **Learn the rules:** [sudokuaday.com/rules](https://www.sudokuaday.com/rules)
 - **How to play (step by step):** [sudokuaday.com/how-to-play](https://www.sudokuaday.com/how-to-play)
 - **All strategies by difficulty:** [sudokuaday.com/sudoku-strategies](https://www.sudokuaday.com/sudoku-strategies)
 - **Free printable puzzles:** [sudokuaday.com/printable-sudoku-puzzles](https://www.sudokuaday.com/printable-sudoku-puzzles)
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