Sun Tzu's The Art of War is one of the most widely studied works in human history, but mastering its principles from just reading it is like mastering geometry by simply reading Euclid. It teaches a philosophy that could be described as "winning without conflict." Its philosophy has several aspects:

- Understanding strategic positions
- Collecting competitive information and recognizing opportunities
- Automatically selecting moves that minimize losses and avoid dangerous situations
- Instantly recognizing the specifics of situations and the responses they require
- Getting the most out of each move and securing advantages

The work is organized into thirteen chapters. Written in an almost mathematical style, the book starts with the most general concepts and works toward most specific and detailed ideas. Though the ancient Chinese in which the work is written is a conceptual language, in which each character has a broad range of meaning, Sun Tzu treats language scientifically, defining most of his key terms through the course of the work. However, much of the work demands a great deal of understanding of the ancient Chinese science, especially the six philosophical schools’ that were important during his era (the Yin/yang, the Taoist, the Monists, the Fatalist, the Legalist, and the Confucian). Much of the work also adapts many of its ideas and relationships to the Five Element Theory, where Sun Tzu replaces the Classical Chinese Elements with his own five elements: philosophy (mission), heaven (climate), earth (ground), command (leadership), and methods (procedures). Many of the relationships among these concepts were organized according to the various graphical forms of graphing these five elements.
Summary of Chapters

In thirteen chapters, Sun Tzu defines a sophisticated science in a deliberative manner. The book itself is written in a highly condensed form, where each stanza plays a key role in the development of its ideas. Each chapter builds on concepts laid out in earlier chapters.

**Chapter 1, "Planning,"** explores the five key elements that define competitive position (mission, climate, ground, leadership, and procedures) and how to evaluate your competitive strengths against those of your competition. This discussion ends with the idea that information in a competitive environment is limited and that perceptions are often very different from reality. This difference between objective and subjective information is one of the principle leverage points for the working of his strategic system.

**Chapter 2, "Going to War,"** defines the economic nature of competition. It explains how success requires making winning pay, which in turn requires limiting the cost of competition and conflict. This chapter is critical to understanding why Sun Tzu teaches "winning without conflict." By definition, conflict is expensive. Beating opponents and winning battles may satisfy the ego, but Sun Tzu considers that goal a foolish one.

**Chapter 3, "Planning the Attack"** defines the nature of strength. It is important to understand that by "attack," Sun Tzu means specifically the idea of moving into a new territory, not necessarily battle or conflict. Conceptually, you must expand or advance your existing position in order to survive. While defense is less expensive than advance over the short term, change undermines existing positions, so if they are not advanced, they must fail.

**Chapter 4, "Positioning,"** explains how you must use competitive positions. Your abilities to defend yourself and to advance are both based on your current position. To get where you want to go, you must start from where you are. You do not create the openings or opportunities that you need to advance because the environment is too large and complex to control. Instead, you must learn how to recognize opportunities created by changes in the environment.

**Chapter 5, "Force,"** explores the energy that drives all human endeavors: imagination. One of the reasons competitive environments are chaotic is that creativity makes prediction impossible. The human imagination is infinite. Its infinite capacity makes the possibilities of human wealth and progress infinite as well. However, this creativity must be tied solidly to reality. Creativity doesn't work alone. It must be paired with proven methods, that is, existing knowledge, to be effective. Together, they create what Sun Tzu called force or momentum.

**Chapter 6, "Weakness and Strength,"** examines the "circulatory system" of competitive environments, the underlying mechanism of change. As water flows downstream, there is a natural balance of the forces in nature. Voids are filled. Excesses are emptied. Sun Tzu uses this process to explain the deeper nature of opportunity. The multitude of characteristics in the environment can be reduced to emptiness and fullness. Most importantly, human needs are all forms of emptiness, and human produce is all forms of fullness. Using opportunities is largely positioning yourself in the environment to tap into the flow between them.

**Chapter 7, "Armed Conflict,"** explains the dangers of direct conflict. Fighting people over resources is tempting if you don't understand the true nature of opportunity and creativity. However, although conflict is best avoided, it cannot always be avoided. In those situations, you must understand how you can tip the balance in your favor in any confrontation.
Chapter 8, "Adapting to the Situation," focuses on the need to adapt to the conditions that you encounter. This chapter serves as the introduction to the next three long chapters. These chapters give a number of specific responses to specific situations. This chapter presents the idea that every situation is unique but that it combines familiar elements. While we must be creative and flexible, we must also work within the rules of "standard responses" and not react out of ignorance.

Chapter 9, "Armed March," describes the different situations in which you find yourselves as you move into new competitive arenas. It is the first of the three most detailed chapters. It explains both what those situations mean and how you should respond to them. Much of it focuses on evaluating the intentions of others.

Chapter 10, "Field Position," examines the three general areas of resistance (distance, dangers, and barriers) and the six types of field positions that arise from them. This is again a long, detailed chapter filled with specific responses that must be learned. Each of the six field positions that it discusses offers certain advantages and disadvantages, both in terms of defending and advancing future positions.

Chapter 11, "Nine Terrains," describes nine common situations (or stages) in a competitive campaign and the recognition and response required in each. This is the last and the longest of the detailed chapters. These nine situations can be generally grouped into early, middle, and late-stage conditions, and they range from scattering to deadly. In each of these situations, there is one and only one appropriate response.

Chapter 12, "Attacking with Fire," discusses environmental attacks and responses. As the most deadly form of destruction in Sun Tzu's era, fire attacks are the framework for discussing both using and surviving moves aimed at the destruction of an opponent. The chapter does this systematically, examining the five targets for attack, the five types of environmental attacks, and the appropriate responses to such attacks. However, it ends with a warning about the emotional use of weapons. While competition can go this direction, it shouldn't.

Chapter 13, "Using Spies," focuses on the most important topic of all: information gathering. It specifically discusses the value and methods of developing good information sources, specifically the five types of sources you need and the way you must manage them. In this final chapter, Sun Tzu makes it clear that all wars are, at their heart, information wars.
Note: The original text was written in a circle. The last chapter on gathering information feeds directly back into the first chapter on analyzing information...