

# How to Organize a White Elephant Gift Exchange

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A white elephant gift exchange is a lighthearted way to have fun with your work colleagues, or at family gatherings. "White elephants"<sup>[1]</sup> are traditionally presents that are undesirable but one cannot turn down: extremely tacky, nearly useless, silly or weird. In white elephant gift exchanges the goal is really to have fun. Most is to give everyone a chance to rid themselves of these tacky gifts—and invariably gain a new one!

White elephant gift exchanges can be run different ways. Some set rules that the item *must* be previously owned, which means that you are re-gifting an unwanted item or trinket. Others purchase a new, (generally inexpensive), item just for the party. The goal is to choose wacky, funny or entertaining gifts. Some encourage a mix of wacky gifts, and sensible if generic ones--after all, one person's trash is another person's treasure!

There are a few variations and different names for this game. Not all require gifts to be regifted. This basic game is also called "Yankee Swap" in some regions, and are often played at workplaces and with families.<sup>[2]</sup>



**1 Set the gifting rules for your group.** Is this a re-gift party or are folks supposed to buy something new--or does it matter? How much is the spending limit? Is there some sort of challenge or theme? Make sure everyone understands the rules like whether they have to buy new things or not.

- Be careful of sticking to overly stringent rules. After all, not everyone has a regifiable present laying around. Not everyone is good at picking out gifts. The focus of this game is on fun *not* making it a picky rules-bound affair.
- Be aware that very elaborate rules or themes (such as it has to be edible, or red or green, or some such) may be fun for some but may be an annoyance and stress for another. In general, keep it simple.
- Gift spending limits avoid putting people in a position to pay an uncomfortable amount for a gift. What may be comfortable for the vice president will not be the same as the junior secretary.<sup>[3]</sup>
- Price limits keep gifts more or less on the same level of value. You don't want one person to get a brand new video game console and another person to get a used pen protector.

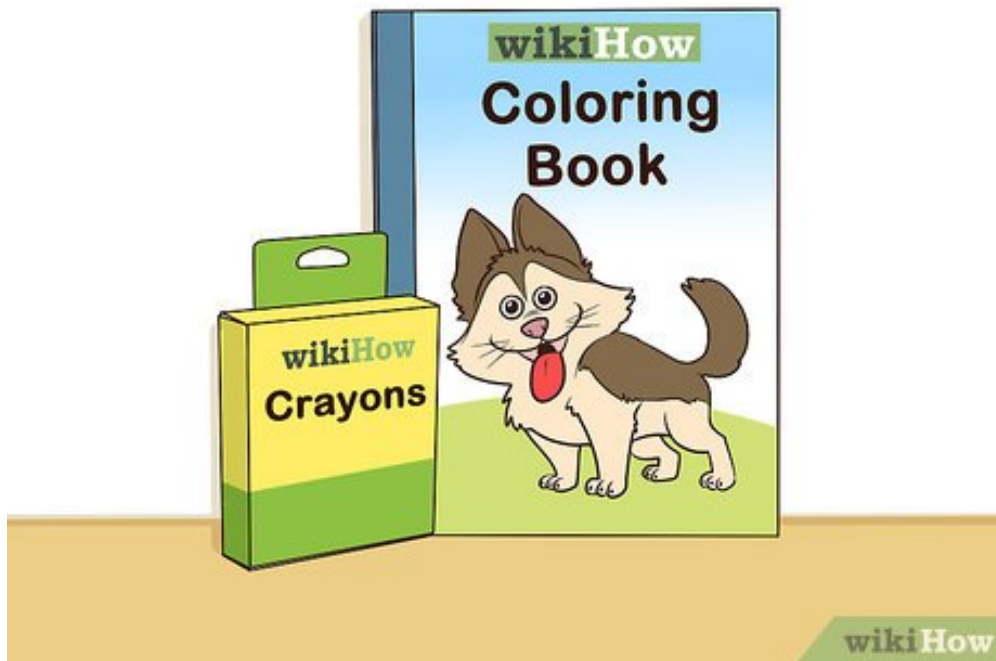


- 2 Find that perfect white elephant gift.** Get it gift wrapped or [wrap](#) the gift yourself, and bring it to the party stealthily. And feel free to have some fun with this.
- Feel free to do a really silly wrapping job. Use plain brown paper, or even just stick it in a plain mailing envelope.
  - Do something silly. Feel free to wrap it with a different theme than expected. For a New Year's gift exchange, wrap it in birthday, baby gift, or graduation themes.<sup>[4]</sup>
  - If you enjoy wrapping, feel free to do an excellent job. Go overboard, do every elaborate flourish.



**3** Some great "White Elephant Gift" Ideas. If you're having trouble coming up with a gift that is both off-the-wall and appropriate, consider these gift ideas:

- 
- Hideous or tacky jewelry
- Perfume or lotion with an unpleasant scent.
- Cheap, ugly statues or other decorative knick-knacks.
- An obnoxious T-shirt, sweater, tie, socks, or bow-tie.
- Workout videos, particularly those with obnoxious aerobic instructors
- Bargain bin DVDs of Grade-B movies...the worse the better.
- A framed picture of your boss, (perhaps autographed) but only if the boss has a good sense of humor.
- CD of awful or weird music



**4 Find Other Low-Cost Fun Gift Exchange Gifts.** Although "White Elephant" or "Yankee Swap" gifts often aim to be wacky and goofy, there is nothing wrong with a gift that is sensible. It is OK to go with something that you are pretty sure will not get tossed in the bin. Sometimes trying to find the perfect crazy gift is just adding too much stress to holiday shopping. Some perhaps more boring but welcome exchange gifts:

- Lottery tickets
- Water bottle, mug, or coffee travel cup
- Small gift certificate to local eatery
- Winter hat, scarf, or gloves
- Good quality tea or coffee gift set
- Kitchen items, such as measuring cups, spoons, oven mitts



- 5 Be secretive about your gift.** The idea is for people to *not* know who the gift is coming from. Once you get to work, place the gift into a **gift box** along with all the other gifts.



- 6 Write out consecutive numbers on small pieces of paper.** Make numbers for however many people are participating in the gift exchange. For example, if there are 15 people participating, write out the numbers 1 through 15 on small pieces of paper, fold them once or twice, and throw them into a small bowl or bag.<sup>[5]</sup>



**7 Have everyone draw a number.** The number will signify the order in which they choose a gift.



**8 Begin with the person who draws #1.** The first person chooses any wrapped gift in the gift box and opens it. Their turn ends. The first player will be given the option to exchange gifts with another player at the very end.





- 9** Have the next person choose whether they want to steal a previously-opened gift or choose an unopened gift from the gift box. [6]
- A person who has his/her gift stolen from them gets to either steal a gift from someone else or choose a replacement gift from the gift box.
  - You cannot immediately steal back the gift that was stolen from you. You must wait at least one round before stealing back a gift that was once in your possession.
  - A gift cannot be stolen more than once a turn.



- 10** **Repeat in order of number.** The person with the next-highest number either chooses a gift from the gift box or steals a gift from someone else. People who have gifts stolen can choose a gift out of the gift box or steal items that have not yet been stolen that round.





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**1 Agree on and implement as many variations to the game as desired.** There are lots of variation to the white elephant gift exchange. Look through a couple and decide which ones you want to implement *before* the game begins.

- Mark gifts as **gender-appropriate**, where possible. Label a gift male-appropriate, female-appropriate, or unisex.
- **Cards containing instructions** can be wrapped up to look like presents and placed into the gift box. The instructions contain rules such as "Recipient of this card chooses two presents, opens them both, and places one back into the gift box," or "Recipient of this card chooses a gift and cannot have their gift stolen." If you choose to work with these cards, be mindful of **two** things:
  - People who make cards with instructions have to bring both a card and a gift. There won't be enough gifts to go around if people who write cards fail to bring gifts.
  - Cards with instructions are tougher to implement if you choose to open the gifts at the very end. Obviously, it's impossible to "open two gifts and choose one" if you don't open the presents until the end.
- The first player may be given the **option to exchange gifts** with another player at the very end. Because the first player doesn't have the option of stealing, they might be given it at the very end. This option works best when presents remain unopened until the very end; otherwise, the first player has a distinct advantage.



**2 Experiment with stealing.** There are many different variations on stealing in a white elephant gift exchange. Play around with a couple different variants.

- An item that is stolen three times **becomes frozen**. After an item changes hands three times, it can no longer be stolen, and stays with the third person who stole it. Be sure to keep track of how many times an item is stolen on a notepad to avoid confusion.
- Alternately, a limit can be placed on the number of times a person is stolen from (instead of the number of times an item is stolen). If you set the limit at three, for example, an item can be stolen however many times, so long as it's stolen from someone who hasn't reached his or her limit of three.
- Place a limit on the number of steals per turn. If, for example, you limit the stealing to three gifts per turn, after the third gift is stolen, the player whose gift was just stolen *must* choose a gift from the gift box.



## Community Q&A

### Question

Should I put who the gift is from on a white elephant gift?



Community Answer

No, it's more fun if you don't know who the gift is from until the game ends.

Helpful 25 Not Helpful 5

#### Question

**How many times do you go around? One time, then the last person/first person gets a 2nd turn?**



**Epic Tien**  
Community Answer

It depends on how the host sets up the rules, but if the rules say that the person unwraps the gifts when they get them, then the first person is the only one that does not know what the other gifts are. To make it balanced, the first person gets a second turn at the end, and the game is over.

Helpful 6 Not Helpful 0

#### Question

**Is 40 people too many people to have a white elephant?**



Community Answer

No.

Helpful 12 Not Helpful 2

#### Question

**Can I get my own gift back?**



Community Answer

It depends on the rules you set up ahead of time. Many groups decide to make this against the rules, but it is totally up to you.

Helpful 24 Not Helpful 12

#### Question

**Are the gifts unwrapped so everybody knows what they are switching for?**



Community Answer

No, the reason for a white elephant exchange is that they don't know what they're switching for, so their present can either be bad or good.

Helpful 24 Not Helpful 19

#### Question

**We do this every year, but we seem to have an issue with the first player being able to steal a gift that is considered frozen. Can the first player steal a gift that is frozen?**



**Heather Kenyon-Haff**  
Top Answerer

If this is a consistent problem, just institute a rule that this cannot be done. And add, perhaps, the first person can make an exchange at the end.

Helpful 4 Not Helpful 1

#### Question

**How do I handle having a huge variation in ages of participants?**



Community Answer

Mark what kind of gift it is on the outside of the package, i.e., "kid's gift," "adult gift," "male gift," etc.

Helpful 1 Not Helpful 0

#### Question

**What if I'm jealous of someone else's gift?**



**Heather Kenyon-Haff**  
Top Answerer

You can always talk to the person after the game and make a trade. Or try to figure out where the original person got the gift so you can buy one. Not everyone gets an awesome gift in this game, and that's a reality.

Helpful 3 Not Helpful 0

#### Question

**Do I need dice to play White Elephant?**



Community Answer

No, there are no dice involved. Just follow the instructions in the article.

Helpful 2 Not Helpful 1

#### Question

**Why is it called a "white elephant" gift exchange?**



**Epic Tien**  
Community Answer

It is based on the legend of the King of Siam giving rare albino elephants to courtiers that displeased him. It was an honor to have an albino elephant, but it was very costly to take care of one; the king hoped that the courtiers would go bankrupt.

Helpful 2 Not Helpful 1

[See more answers](#)



#### Tips

- If you are hosting a white elephant party, you may want to choose a particular theme such as "home décor you no longer use" or "unusual tools." If your group is used to white elephant parties, this will make a fun new challenge.

## References

1. ↑ <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=white%20elephant%20gift>
2. ↑ <http://www.secretsanta.com/yankee-swap-rules/>
3. ↑ <https://www.whiteelephantrules.com/price-range/>
4. ↑ <https://www.businessinsider.com/best-funny-white-elephant-gifts-2018-10>
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