

Gift Exchange Games and Printable Rules

Agree on the budget and swap rules before the party, then choose one format that keeps gifts and participation optional.

Host guide / Letter / 4–24 adults; larger groups can use table-sized exchanges / 15–35 minutes; see each format

Read the guide privately first if this activity has hidden answers. Print single-sided at Actual size / 100%. Cut only sheets marked CARDS. Keep answer keys with the host.

What you need

- For gift-based formats: one wrapped, low-cost item per person who opts in, with a host-set spending limit or a bring-from-home rule.
- Number slips or name cards for turn order; the left-right story is printed on its game card, so no separate story sheet is needed.
- For no-gift formats: blank cards and pens; no purchase required.

How to run it

1. Before the event, tell people whether a gift is required, what the spending limit is, whether homemade or reused items are welcome, and what items are not allowed. Give people a no-gift option without asking them to explain.
2. Choose one format card and print or read the full rules before anyone brings an item. Do not mix swap variants after the exchange starts.
3. Set the turn order with number slips or a simple list. For the left-right story format, seat everyone in one circle with one wrapped item per opted-in person. Explain that every bracketed [LEFT] or [RIGHT] cue means everyone passes the item they are holding one seat in that direction at the same time. Explain swap limits for the other formats and what happens when a person passes.
4. Begin only when participants understand the rules. Let someone choose a no-gift card, observe, or leave the exchange without becoming the focus of the room.
5. End when all opted-in participants have had a turn. Do not require people to open items publicly or explain their value. Thank the group and collect reusable materials.

Set expectations before the party

Gift exchanges can create spending pressure if the rules are vague. State a maximum amount, or make the format explicitly bring-from-home, homemade, or gift-free. Tell people whether food, alcohol, scented items, or personal items are excluded. A participant should be able to opt out without explaining a financial or personal reason.

For work groups, avoid asking managers to match gifts with employees or use the exchange to make judgments about generosity. Keep the activity separate from performance review, recognition, and required team events.

Choose the swap rule in advance

The formats below differ in whether participants choose a wrapped item, swap once, or pass a paper card. Read the chosen rule before the first turn. If an item can be swapped, set a limit and make clear that a person may keep their current item. Do not add “stealing” or surprise rules mid-game.

Use number slips for a simple order, or let participants choose a seat order. If someone passes, move to the next person and keep the exchange moving. No one needs to say why.

Make opening and sharing optional

Some people enjoy opening a package in front of a group; others do not. Let participants unwrap privately or take the item home unopened. Avoid asking people to explain a gift's price, source, or personal meaning.

If the group chooses a no-gift format, keep it fully no-cost. The cards below include a recommendation exchange and an optional celebration-choice card, so there is no hidden expectation to buy or bring an object.

Printable host script

"This exchange is optional. The budget is [amount or no-cost], and only people who choose to join need to bring an item. Today's format is [name]. The swap rule is [rule]. You can pass, take a no-gift card, or observe without explaining. Opening gifts in front of the room is optional."

At the end: "The exchange is complete. Please take your item with you, and thank you for joining in any way that worked for you."

Use the eight rule cards

Pick a single format that fits your group and time. The six gift-based variants use wrapped items with different turn or swap rules. The final two are no-purchase options that use written recommendations or group activity cards.

Print the selected card and keep it visible during play. If the group wants a different rule, stop and agree before restarting rather than changing an active exchange.

CARDS / Gift Exchange Games and Printable Rules

<p>R_GIFT-001 / Gift-exchange format</p> <p>Numbered pick, no swaps</p>	<p>R_GIFT-002 / Gift-exchange format</p> <p>One optional swap</p>
<p>R_GIFT-003 / Gift-exchange format</p> <p>Two-choice turn</p>	<p>R_GIFT-004 / Gift-exchange format</p> <p>Category mystery exchange</p>
<p>R_GIFT-005 / Gift-exchange format</p> <p>Left-right paper pass</p>	<p>R_GIFT-006 / Gift-exchange format</p> <p>Gift-free recommendation exchange</p>

CARDS / Gift Exchange Games and Printable Rules

<p>R_GIFT-007 / Gift-exchange format</p> <p>Celebration-choice card draw</p>	<p>R_GIFT-008 / Gift-exchange format</p> <p>Bring-from-home table pick</p>
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Host answer key

Keep this section separate from player cards. Accept equivalent wording where the meaning matches.

01. Opt-in group: any size. Materials: one wrapped item per participating person and number slips. Each person draws a number. In order, a participant chooses one remaining wrapped item, opens it privately or publicly by choice, and keeps it. No item is swapped. If someone passes, skip their number and continue.

02. Opt-in group: 4–20. Materials: one wrapped item per participant and number slips. First person chooses an item. Each later person chooses a new item or asks one earlier participant whether they want to swap; the other person may decline. Limit each item to one completed swap. Keep the item if a swap is declined.

03. Opt-in group: 4–16. Materials: one wrapped item per participant and number slips. In order, each person may either choose a wrapped item or swap once with a willing person who already has one. No item can change hands more than twice. A participant may keep their current item or pass out of the exchange.

04. Opt-in group: 4–20. Materials: wrapped items within one announced category, such as desk accessories or books already owned. Set a no-cost or low maximum rule first. In number order, participants select one unopened item from the table. After all turns, each can choose to open privately or publicly. No swaps.

05. Opt-in group: 4–20. Materials: one wrapped item per participant. Seat everyone in one circle, with one item in each person’s hands. Read the original story below slowly. At each bracketed [LEFT] or [RIGHT] cue, every participant passes the item they are holding one seat in that direction at the same time. Continue until the story ends; each person keeps the item in hand. No one needs to unwrap it. Every participant starts and finishes with one item.

Read-aloud story: “The community hall was ready for a winter gathering. The host set a lantern at the [LEFT] end of the welcome table and a basket at the [RIGHT] end. A paper map showed a path turning [LEFT] after the book display and [RIGHT] beside the garden gate. One volunteer carried a ribbon [RIGHT] to the blank greeting cards, then walked [LEFT] to bring a marker. Outside, the painted route pointed [LEFT] toward the fountain and [RIGHT] toward a row of winter trees. Before the doors opened, the host placed a chair to the [RIGHT] of the welcome sign and a small bowl to the [LEFT] of the card basket. A final lantern stood to the [RIGHT] of the entrance. Everyone looked [LEFT] toward the welcome table, then turned [RIGHT] to greet the next guest. When the gathering ended, the host walked [LEFT] to switch off the lights.”

Read only the bracketed direction cues as pass signals. All passes happen together; do not stop to count or unwrap. The person holding an item when the story ends keeps it.

06. Group: any size. Materials: one blank card and pen per person who opts in. Each participant writes a public, non-personal recommendation such as a book, public podcast, or free local exhibit. Fold and place cards in a bowl; each participant may draw one or pass. No names or purchases required.

07. Group: 4–20. Materials: one set of cards with no-cost group choices: paper puzzle, quiet break, shared playlist titles, or short drawing activity. Participants draw a card and may trade it with a willing person once, or keep it. The group can choose one option to do together or keep choices private.

No one owes the group a service or must lead the selected activity.

08. Opt-in group: 4–12. Materials: one clean, reusable, low-cost item per participant who freely opts in; state that no new purchase is expected. Place wrapped items on a table. Each person draws a number and chooses one remaining item; no swaps. A person without an item can choose a no-gift recommendation card instead.

Name excluded item types in advance and do not require anyone to disclose why they did not bring a gift.

Hosting questions

Does everyone need to bring a gift?

No. State the budget and opt-in rules in advance, and include a no-gift alternative. A participant can pass without explanation.

Should the host allow swaps?

Only if the group chooses a format with swaps. Set a limit before the exchange begins and make every swap voluntary.

Do participants have to open gifts publicly?

No. Let people unwrap privately or take an item home unopened.

Is there a recommended gift amount?

There is no universal amount. The host should state a maximum or choose a no-cost format that fits the group.

Original AI-assisted resource with AI editorial review. Independent human playtesting and physical printing have not been completed. Answer, listen, or pass.