GIFT IDEAS — GUIDE

How to run a white elephant exchange

The agreed rules, the three stealing variants and a running order that keeps a white elephant gift exchange moving.

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A white elephant exchange works when everyone knows the rules before the first gift opens. Every argument on the night is a rule nobody agreed in advance. Decide the format, the spend limit and the stealing rule, put them in the invitation, and the game runs itself.

Before the party

Decide and announce three things:

- **The spend limit.** One number, stated as a cap or a target — "$25, wrapping included" reads better than a vague range.
- **The ground rules.** New or used, homemade allowed, gift cards allowed or not, and whether the theme is "genuinely wanted" or "deliberately silly". Guests plan to whatever you write down.
- **The stealing rule.** Pick one of the three variants below and name it in the invitation.

The base game

1. Everyone brings one wrapped gift and draws a number.
2. Player one opens any gift from the pile.
3. Each player after that either opens a wrapped gift or steals an already-opened one.
4. A player whose gift is stolen immediately opens or steals again — but cannot steal back the gift just taken from them in the same turn.
5. The game ends after the last gift opens.

The three stealing variants

- **Gift cap.** A gift may be stolen a set number of times — three is common — and is then frozen with its current holder. This is the most common house rule and keeps the game short.
- **Round cap.** A set number of steals per turn — two is common. When the limit is hit, the player must open a new gift. Simpler to track, slightly slower.
- **Swap finish.** After the last gift opens, player one may swap with anyone. It rewards the first draw and divides opinion — use it only if the invitation said so.

Running order for the host

1. Collect gifts at the door and keep them anonymous.
2. Draw numbers — folded slips work fine.
3. Restate the format, limit and stealing rule in two sentences.

4. Run the game, tracking frozen gifts out loud so everyone hears the count.
5. Open the last gift, apply the finish rule if you chose one, done.

Budget about ninety seconds a turn. A fifteen-player game takes half an hour.

The common snags

- **A guest forgot a gift.** Keep one wrapped backup at the limit. Hand it over quietly.
- **A dispute over a steal.** The written rule rules. Read it aloud and move on.
- **Someone overspent.** You cannot police receipts. If it matters, tighten the invitation wording next year — "the limit is the limit".
- **The game drags.** Too many steals per gift. Next year lower the cap, or switch to the round cap.

Frequently asked questions

How many times can a gift be stolen in white elephant?

Only as many times as the group agreed. A common house rule is three steals, after which the gift is frozen with its current holder. Write the limit into the invitation.

Can the first player swap at the end?

Only if the group agreed on the swap-finish variant before the game. Because it rewards the first draw, it is the most disputed rule — state it in the invitation if you use it.