

Secret Santa rules and etiquette

The rules to agree before a Secret Santa draw, how to handle exclusions and dropouts, and the etiquette that keeps it fun.

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Secret Santa is simple: everyone draws one name in secret and buys one gift for that person. What makes it work is agreeing the rules before the draw — and keeping the secret after it.

Rules to agree before the draw

- **The spend limit.** One number, and whether it is a cap or a target. Say if wrapping and postage count toward it.
- **Who is in.** The list is fixed at the draw. Late joiners break the pairing — invite them next year or let them organize a side swap.
- **The reveal.** Most groups open gifts together and either guess the giver or have givers reveal themselves at the end. Pick one.
- **The ground rules.** Homemade allowed, gift cards allowed, consumables welcome — or not. One line in the invitation settles it.
- **Dropouts.** Agree in advance that a person who pulls out after the draw still sends their gift.

Drawing the names

For a group in one room, folded names in a hat works. Redraw only your own name; if the last person draws themselves, restart the hat.

For remote or busy groups, a draw tool does it privately: each person gets their name by email or link, and the organizer never sees the full pairing — secrecy is part of the game. Several free tools do this; the [apps page](#) lists a few.

Most groups also exclude some pairings: partners, housemates, last year's recipient. Collect exclusions privately — a message to each person asking who they must not draw — and apply them in the draw. A good tool enforces exclusions automatically.

Etiquette that keeps it fun

- **Buy for the name you drew, not the person you wish you drew.** A thought-out gift for a colleague you barely know is the whole point.
- **Stay inside the limit.** Going far over it embarrasses everyone who stayed inside it.
- **Keep the secret.** No hints, no asking around, no telling one person. The reveal is the payoff.
- **Wrap it and tag the recipient's name only.** Your name appears at the reveal, not on the tag.
- **If you cannot attend, the gift still goes.** Arrange delivery before the event.
- **When your recipient tells you what they want, take the hint.** A wish list is an assist, not a spoiler.

For the organizer

Send the draw results privately, restate the limit and date, remind once a week before, and have one wrapped backup gift for the person who inevitably forgets. The [white elephant guide](#) covers the steal-based variant if your group wants a game instead of a straight exchange.

Frequently asked questions

What happens if someone drops out after the names are drawn?

They still owe their recipient a gift — post it or hand it over another way. If that is impossible, the organizer arranges a substitute so nobody is left without a gift.

Should couples or housemates be allowed to draw each other?

Most groups exclude them, plus last year's pairing. Collect exclusions privately before the draw; an online draw tool can enforce them automatically.