

# The stocking stuffer budget guide

*How to set a per-stocking cap, what kinds of things fill a stocking well, and the two traps that make stockings cost more than gifts.*

Updated October 31, 2026

---

Stockings quietly outspend the gifts under the tree. The items are cheap enough to add "just one more" until the total is not. A cap per stocking, set before the first shop, is the whole fix.

## Set the cap first

Decide what a stocking is allowed to cost per person, as part of the gift budget — not on top of it. A round number per person keeps the mental math easy. If the household gift budget is set, take the stocking line out of it before you start shopping, not after the receipts come in.

## What fills a stocking well

A stocking reads as generous when it is full, not when it is expensive. The reliable categories:

- **Consumables.** Things that get used up: chocolate, coffee, snacks, bath and body bits, the brand they already buy. Low risk, always welcome.
- **The practical upgrade.** A better version of a daily small thing: socks, a nail brush, lip balm, a decent pen, a phone cable that is not fraying.
- **Something to do.** A puzzle book, a card game, a small craft kit, seeds for the gardener.
- **One anchor.** A single slightly larger item at the top — a book, a mug, a small tool — that carries the stocking so the little things do not have to.
- **Something personal.** One item that proves you noticed: their flavour, their team, their hobby.

A standard stocking needs fewer items than people think — a handful of small things plus the anchor fills it. Tissue paper in the toe saves money and looks intentional.

## The two traps

- **The checkout aisle.** Miniatures at the register are priced for impulse, not value. Buy stocking items in the weeks before, when you can compare prices — or from the same list as the main gifts.
- **The top-up reflex.** If the stocking looks thin, add paper, fruit or a chocolate orange — the traditional fillers — instead of another paid item. A full stocking at cap beats a stuffed one over it.

## For kids' stockings

Set the cap the same way, then count items, not price: children judge a stocking by how many things there are to unwrap. Individually wrapped small items stretch a small budget further than one expensive toy — and the wrapping slows the morning down.

## Frequently asked questions

### **How much should a stocking cost?**

Whatever your plan says. Set a fixed cap per stocking before you shop — many households pick a round number per person — then fill to that cap, not past it.

### **How many items go in a stocking?**

Enough to fill it, which is fewer than people think. A handful of small items plus one anchor gift fills a standard stocking. Bulky items pad it cheaply.