

# The White Elephant Gift Game

by Dave Howell

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## OVERVIEW

Guests bring one (or more) gifts for the exchange. These are set out where people can see them. Everybody votes on which package is the prettiest.

Next, people start selecting gifts from the pile or stealing them from other people. Every time a gift is stolen, it gets a point, and whichever gift has the most points wins a prize for being the most popular. Note that this phase is done *before* the gifts are opened.

Once selection is complete, people start opening the gifts to find out who got stuck with what. After they're all opened, everybody gets to vote for "whitest elephant," the gift they're most thankful that they're not taking home.

## Definition of "White Elephant"

A "white elephant" is a gift that is perfectly useful but completely undesirable. The term comes from a story of an important personage who received a rare albino elephant as a gift. The cost of feeding and caring for the elephant bankrupted the recipient.

## RULES

### Gift Requirements

For the White Elephant Gift Game, a gift must meet the following conditions:

- It cannot be purchased for this purpose.
- It must be functional and in good condition.
- (Optional) It cannot be from last year's White Elephant party.

Rule #1 means you have to scrounge around your home to find the gift. Maybe you bought it, but didn't end up using it. Somebody gave it to you, and you hate it. You inherited it. You bought it by accident. As long as you don't go shopping to try to *find* something to give, you're clear on Rule #1.

Rule #2 means you can't give a padlock that's missing the key, or a lamp that doesn't light up, or a doll that's missing a leg, or a sweater with runs and holes. If the lamp works and is made from a two-liter cola bottle, great! If it's an anatomically disturbing "goth" doll with a safety pin in its nose? Super! If it's a like-new sweater featuring square-dancing pigs, you're good to go.

Rule #3 is good for small groups; but not needed for larger ones. Basically, there shouldn't be much chance of getting stuck with the gift you brought last year. (They can bring it back in two years, though!)

### Quantity

Normally, each person brings one White Elephant. However, a couple can bring one; they will compete as a single player. Alternatively, people can bring up to three, if they understand they'll be leaving with the same number of gifts that they brought.

If practical, gifts should arrive more or less anonymously. Each gift gets assigned a letter ("A," "B," "C," et cetera) for keeping track of Prettiest and Most Popular. If this seems like too much

work, people can just put their names on the gift(s) they brought, but it's usually more fun if you don't know for sure who brought what.

### **Prizes**

The party host should have three "prize gifts" to be awarded for Prettiest Gift and Most Popular Gift. The third one goes to whoever has to take home the Whitest Elephant. These needn't be elaborate. A half-dozen cookies, a scented candle, or getting to sit in the best spot for watching TV later in the evening, for example.

### **Wrapping**

The first prize gift is awarded to the person who brought the most beautifully wrapped package. When wrapping, keep in mind it's totally legal for someone to gently shake or squeeze a package (once they've chosen it, that is; see "Selection" below), so your presentation can't be untouchably delicate. Also, you cannot incorporate fungible items in the wrapping. This means you can't try to win "Most Popular" through bribing people by wrapping your gift in dollar bills, or by taping a gift card on the side, or making a bow from unexpired "free pizza" coupons. (Fungible: something that can (easily) be exchanged for something else of equal value.)

### **Voting for Prettiest**

This can be done by secret ballot (everybody writes down the letter/name of the giver of the gift they think looks the best) or you could go around the room and just have people announce their vote. Secret ballot is more work, but also reduces the chance for feelings getting hurt. It tends to depend on how serious people are about "winning" in your group.

### **Selection**

During selecting, somebody should write down each gift's letter (or name, or whatever) when it's chosen from the pile, and put a check next to it every time it's stolen. At the end of the selection phase, this list should show the order the gifts were selected, and how many times each one was stolen.

When selecting a gift from the pile, as soon as somebody touches a gift, they've chosen it. You can't shake it or squeeze it before you decide. However, once you've got it, *then* shaking (gently!), squeezing (also gently!), sniffing, holding it up to the light, or otherwise trying to guess what's inside is perfectly legal. If somebody steals it, you might have a better sense of whether you want it back, or if you dodged a bullet.

You can't choose your own gift(s). Whatever you brought has to go home with somebody else.

#### *Option A: Sequential*

Determine in what order people will get to choose gifts. Drawing numbers out of a hat is good, but it can also be by age, by height, or alphabetically by middle name. Whatever seems fun. You can also randomly select the first person, and then each person picks somebody to go next.

When somebody's number comes up, they can either steal an (unopened) gift from somebody else, or pick a gift from the pile. Once a gift is picked from the pile, that round is over. It's the next person's turn.

If, instead, they steal a gift, then the person stolen from can immediately steal somebody else's gift or pull from the pile. However, each gift can only be stolen once per round.

### *Option B: Random*

This scheme is more chaotic. You can either draw a name from a hat, or have people roll a die. If you pull a name from a hat, the name goes right back into the hat. If you choose rolling a die, if somebody rolls a 1, they get to pick/steal a gift. Keep rolling or drawing until all the gifts are claimed. Unlike Option A, someone who's gift is stolen does *not* get to get a replacement. They just have to wait until it's their turn to grab a gift again. The result is that some people will almost certainly get more chances to select a gift than others. Like Option A, this process ends when the gift pile is empty.

When selecting is over, some people will almost certainly have too many gifts, and others won't have enough. People with extra gifts then get to decide which gifts they want to give away, and to whom they will be given, until everybody has the same number of gifts that they brought to the party. Don't forget: you can't give somebody a gift that they brought.

Note that this is a golden opportunity for people with too few gifts to wheedle and grovel to get their hands on gifts they (think they) want, and lets people who were lucky enough to get extras to keep the ones they prefer and unload the ones that they think contain something dreadful.

### **Awarding “Most Popular”**

Check the tally, and give the award to the gift that changed hands the most. If there's a tie, give it to whichever tied gift was chosen the latest from the pile.

### **Opening**

Now it's time to find out what everybody's actually been fighting over all this time. You can draw names again, or just go around the room in a circle. Was the gift people tried so hard to not get stuck with really as bad as they thought?

### **Voting for Whitest**

Finally, one last quick round of voting where everybody gets to vote for which gift they are the most glad they don't have to take home. Or maybe they do get to take it home.

## STRATEGIES

Hopefully, people are going to try to score one of the three prize gifts. For Prettiest, just do a bang-up stunning job of wrapping it! However, sparklers, candles, or other open flames or otherwise potentially dangerous accessories should be avoided. The party host has the final word on whether or not a gift's wrapping needs to be modified, or disqualified.

There are a couple of strategies for landing Most Popular. One is to wrap your gift in a way that suggests what it might be, or at least fools people into thinking that it might be something that's actually good. Maybe it's tiny, so, whatever it is, at least it will be easy to bury in a closet. Or maybe it looks suspiciously like somebody wrapped up an iPad. Be creative! However, be aware that somehow incorporating actual money in the wrapping (taping a bunch of one dollar bills together to create wrapping paper, for example, or sticking a gift card onto the side) is technically a violation of Rule #1.

Another approach is bribery. Make some battery-powered Christmas lights part of the wrapping, and maybe people will steal your package for the wrapping, regardless of what's inside.

Finally, although the Whitest Elephant prize goes to the person who has to take the naked torso salt and pepper shakers home (or whatever), there's definitely kudos to whoever managed

to unload the dreadful things. Sure, you could wrap a bottle of champagne that somebody gave you because you don't drink champagne, but giving a jar of pickled herring that your Norwegian cousin left behind after their visit is so much more fun! Just don't forget, you can't go around during the summer hitting garage sales looking for the Worst Gift Ever. That's a violation of Rule #1. If you bought it yourself, it has to be because you had intended to use it at the time.

## OPTION CHECKLIST

Regifting from last year's White Elephant Party? A) Allowed B) Not Allowed C) Irrelevant  
Gifts per person/couple? A) One, or B) One to Three  
Gifts should be A) Anonymous, or B) Identify the gift-giver  
Selection process: A) Sequential, or B) Random

## EXPLANATION AND COMMENTARY

Why have three pages of rules for a white elephant gift exchange? People do white elephant gift exchanges all the time with just the usual boring old "bring a gift, go around the room, each gift can only be stolen three times" gift rules. Most white elephant exchanges are barely different from ordinary gift exchanges. People bring fairly reasonable, "nice" things, and, basically, it's a way to re-arrange stuff. Or, the exchange does involve gifts that people don't want, but there's some dollar limit, which amounts to incentivizing people to buy things to throw in landfills.

The White Elephant Gift Exchange Game is a *game*. People get to show off and compete with their gift-wrapping skills, their ability to mystify and mislead others with their packaging choices, and their luck: the bad luck that put some crazy, ugly, embarrassing whatchamacallit in their home, and their good luck in getting to foist it off on somebody else. Participants get to see iridescent ribbons, or a motorized revolving bow. Packages will be tiny, or huge, or oddly shaped, or make strange noises.

In short, these rules are designed to make the entire process a lot more *fun*. Instead of stealing the set of four kinds of jam that somebody unwrapped, you're stealing the pyramid-shaped gift, because you're dying to find out what it could be! Or maybe you want the envelope, because how bad can it be if it fits in an envelope? You don't just wrap an unopened bottle of wine from your last dinner party, you poke around in your attic to see if there's something really crazy or weird in a box that you'd forgotten about; something that will make people cringe when they see it.

Coming up with the three prizes for Pretty, Popular, and White might seem like a bother, but they really don't have to be much. Having a prize gets people's attention, and makes them think about how they can compete. The real prize is the bragging rights, other people's comments, and the admiration and/or laughter that you receive. It's such a blast to watch people fighting over a donut-shaped package, clearly convinced that it must be something valuable or nifty, and then find out it was actually just a couple of silicone ice trays shaped like inappropriate body parts, smooshed into a box folded together in a way that left a hole down the middle.