

# KEYWORD

A game about describing a thing  
in terms of another thing

by Kevan Davis

3+ players, 30 to 60 minutes

**Keyword** is a game where a player has to communicate a word to the rest of their team, describing it in terms of a secret "keyword" which only that team knows. A second team eavesdrops on the conversation, trying to work out what they're talking about.

## SETUP

With four or more players, divide the players into two teams. (For three players, see the Variations section at the end.)

To play the game you need a deck of cards with a random word on each card. Raid one from another game you own, or try:

- The Random Noun Server web page (<https://kevan.org/randomnoun?x=3>), which fits on a phone screen and simulates drawing three at a time from a deck of cards.
- The print-and-play Keyword Word Grid at <https://kevan.org/games/keyword>, rolling dice or sticking a pin to choose a word. When you're drawing three cards for Targets, call horizontal or vertical before selecting, and also count the closest two words in that direction
- A dictionary to pick nouns from at random: the three "on the card" are the one you pick, plus the nearest two others on that page.

## GAMEPLAY

Pick a team to start. Teams then take turns with the following seven steps:-

### ① Pick a clue-giver

The team nominates one of its members to be the clue-giver for that turn.

### ② Determine the Keyword

The clue-giver draws a card and silently shows it to their entire team, so that they can all see the word on it.

The other team don't get to see this word.

The card is then discarded, face-down.

### ③ Draw a Target card

The clue-giver draws a hand of three cards.

They do not show these cards to their team.

### ④ Describe a Target word

The clue-giver chooses one of the three words in their hand and attempts to describe it in a way that will allow their team to guess it, while the rival team listening in won't. They do this by talking in terms of the Keyword, which the other team don't know. For example, the clue-giver could start by saying *"The Target is the same shape and colour as the Keyword, but smaller, and without the part you lift it up by."*

The team can ask questions and chat back and forth as much as they wish, either requesting clarification of the clues or asking general questions about the Target.

The clue-giver may also switch to a different word in their hand at any time, if they feel that the one they picked isn't working out. (If you switch to a different Target you can call it "the second Target", to keep the two distinct in your team's imagination.)

#### **Remember that the other team can hear all of this!**

The clue-giver and their team should avoid being too obvious in what they say, and should keep in mind their big advantage: that the other team don't know what the Keyword is.

When the clue-giver's team are confident that they know one of the Target words on the card, and don't want to risk asking any more questions, move to the next step.

### ⑤ The rival team guesses

The other team now gets to make **one guess** about any of the Target words, based on what they've heard. If the clue-giver attempted multiple Targets during the conversation, the rival team can choose which one to guess. If they're correct, the clue-giver confirms this and **the rival team win 2 points**.

A guess is considered to be correct if it's the exact word on the card, or a **close synonym** for it (if the word is "boulder" and a team guesses "a rock", that's fine).

### ⑥ The active team guesses

If the rival team didn't get it, the clue-giver's team now get one guess at any of the Target words that were being clued. If they're correct, or they give a close enough synonym, the clue-giver confirms it and **the team win 1 point**. Otherwise, nobody scores this round.

### ⑦ Swap teams

The other team now takes a turn. Continue playing until a team reaches 5 points: that team wins!

## RESTRICTIONS ON CLUES

The team who know the Keyword can't imply that the Keyword has a quality that it **lacks**. (If the Keyword was "apple", they couldn't make decoy questions or statements like "does the Keyword have the same number of legs as the Target?" or "imagine the Keyword without any metal parts".)

Questions and statements can't refer to how words **sound** or are **spelled**. (You can't say "the Target starts with the same letter as the Keyword" or "The Target rhymes with that thing that a Keyword often carries".) This doesn't apply to the Target, though (eg. "the Target's third letter is A", "is the Target word fewer than ten letters?"), as this information helps both teams.

Statements cannot refer to **personal information** known only by members of the team (such as "the Target is what I had for breakfast on my way here") or **niche-interest knowledge** which they are very confident the other team wouldn't have ("the Target is the murder weapon in the Oracle of the Dog").

## EXAMPLE CLUE

The randomly-chosen Keyword is **SPIDER**. The clue-giver draws three new cards, looks at them and decides to start by clueing **WASHING MACHINE** as the Target. The team cannot see this card.

*Clue-giver: You know how the Keyword makes the thing that it makes? This is also what the Target does to things.*

Team: Do you mean the verb, or the substance that the Keyword makes it from?

*The verb.*

Okay. What kind of thing does the Target do this to?

*Actually, you know the substance that the Keyword uses? There's another type of thing that can be made from that substance, and you could use the Target on that.*

Would the Target have to be used carefully, in that situation?

*Yes.*

Is there a Target in this house?

*Yes, there is.*

Okay! I think we've got it.

(In practice, this conversation might go on for some time: the team may realise they've been talking at cross purposes, or decide they want to narrow things down further before proceeding to the guesses.)

# VARIATIONS

## Difficulty settings

For an easier game, draw four or five target cards to the clue-giver to choose from, instead of three. For a harder game, draw only two or one.

## Three-player game

Instead of playing as two teams, give the deck to a random player – they are the clue-giver, and start by picking any other player to give clues to. The game plays with them as a two-person team, under the basic rules, the third player attempting to guess without knowing the Keyword.

- If the teammate guesses, both the teammate and the clue-giver get a point. For the next round, the teammate becomes the clue-giver and the third player becomes the teammate.
- If the third player guesses, they alone get two points. For the next round, the third player becomes the clue-giver and the teammate stays the same.

First player to 5 points wins (if two players reach 5 at the same time, continue playing to 6 points, etc).

## 4+ player game without teams

As for three players, except that there's also a Receiver token and a First Guesser token that move around the table. Start the game by giving the deck to one player, the Receiver token to another, and the First Guesser token to a third.

The player with the deck becomes the clue-giver, clueing to the player with the Receiver token. When their conversation is over, the First Guesser gets to make the first guess, followed by the other non-Receiver players in a clockwise order, then finally the Receiver.

When the round ends, pass the deck to the player who guessed, then pass the First Guesser token to the right (skipping the player who has the deck) and the Receiver token to the left (skipping the First Guesser and the player with the deck).

Instead of playing first to five wins, play first to three.

## Casual play

This is probably one of those games where you can ignore the scoring and just play it for fun, isn't it? Two or more players volunteer to be clue-giver and receivers, while the remainder are the eavesdroppers. Swap roles however you like after each round.

At a stretch, you can also play this two-player, non-competitively. Just imagine that your conversation is being overheard by a third party who will pounce on any giveaway statements.

## Playing online

Played in real-time on Slack or Discord or somewhere, the clue-giver just sends the Keyword to their teammates via a private message.

Played asynchronously over Slack, Discord, Twitter, a mailing list, or anything, you can use the casual or 4+ teamless methods described above: two players share a Keyword and have a somewhat real-time conversation where one clues the Target to the other. The remaining players then have as long as they wish to pore over the log of that conversation and deduce what the Target might be - either making undiscussed guesses in sequence or (if you're not playing to keep score) comparing notes and working as a team, getting one guess each before the Receiver makes their guess.

For an online source of words, use the Random Noun Server at <https://kevan.org/randomnoun>.