

# 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 generate the random words you'll need one of the following:-

- The Random Noun Server web page (<http://kevan.org/randomnoun>), which fits on a phone screen and simulates a deck of cards.
- The cards from a game you already own that uses a deck of random words. If it's a game with one word per card, draw five of them during the Target Card step. If each card has more than five words, ignore those after the fifth.
- The print-and-play Keyword Word Grid at <https://kevan.org/games/keyword>. The clue-giver can either roll a ten-sided and a twenty-sided die every time they need a word, or blindly stick a pin in the printed sheet, doing all of this out of sight of the other players. When they're selecting a Target card, they also count the four words immediately above, below, left and right of the selected word as being "on the card". (If the word is on the edge or a corner, you can wrap around and count the word on the other side of the grid as well.)
- A dictionary to pick nouns from at random: the five "on the card" are the one you pick, plus the nearest four 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 calls a number from 1 to 5, then draws a word card.

lumberjack
kaleidoscope
crayon
milkbottle
cinema

The word on that card in that number's position is the Keyword for this round. The clue-giver silently shows their entire team the card, so that they all know the word. **The other team don't get to see it.** The card is then discarded, face-down.

### ③ Draw a Target card

The clue-giver draws a second card and looks at the five words on it, and keeps this card in their hand. **They do not show this card to their team.**

### ④ Describe a Target word

The clue-giver chooses one of the words on the Target card 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 on the card 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 a second card, considers its five words and decides to start by clueing **WASHING MACHINE** as the Target. The team cannot see this second card at all.

*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

## Hard mode

Have the clue-giver choose a word at random from the second card (in the same manner as the first). The clue-giver must clue that word, and cannot switch to another.

## 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>.