

Spymasters know the secret identities of 25 agents.  
Their teammates know them only by their  
**CODENAMES.**



**YOU CAN  
LEARN TO PLAY  
FROM THE  
VIDEO!**

[www.cge.as/cn-htp](http://www.cge.as/cn-htp)



[www.codenamesgame.com](http://www.codenamesgame.com)

# SETUP

## SPLIT INTO 2 TEAMS.

Organize players into 2 teams of roughly the same size, with at least two players on each team.

## CHOOSE SPYMASTERS AND OPERATIVES.

Each team chooses 1 player to be their spymaster. The rest are operatives. The red and blue spymasters sit on the same side of the table, opposite their own operatives.

## LAY OUT 25 RANDOM WORDS.

Mix up the word cards, choose 25 at random, and lay them out in a 5 × 5 grid.

## SPYMASTERS DRAW A RANDOM KEY CARD.

Each game has one key that shows which words belong to which team. The spymasters choose the key randomly and slide it into the stand between them. Any side can be up.

## SPYMASTERS TAKE THE TILES.

Put the 8 red tiles in front of the red spymaster and the 8 blue tiles in front of the blue spymaster. The 7 bystanders and 1 assassin go in between.

## GIVE THE DOUBLE AGENT TO THE STARTING TEAM.

The four triangles on the edge of the key card show which team starts.

The starting team has 1 additional word to guess, so they get the double agent tile. **Flip it to their color** and add it to their tiles.

### RED OPERATIVES



25 word cards  
(from a deck of 200)



8 red agents

7 innocent bystanders



1 double agent  
with red/blue sides

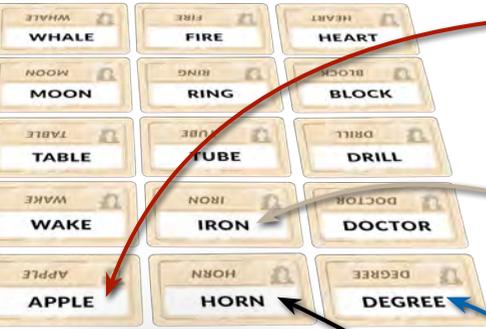


RED SPYMASTER



**TOP SECRET**

**BLUE OPERATIVES**



1 key card  
(from a deck of 40)

1 assassin

8 blue agents



**BLUE SPYMASTER**

**ONLY SPYMASTERS SEE THE KEY!**

The key card shows the secret identities of the 25 words.

APPLE is red.



IRON is an innocent bystander.



DEGREE is blue.

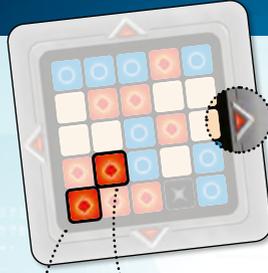


HORN is the assassin.



# HOW TO PLAY

Teams take turns, beginning with the team indicated by the triangles on the key card. Keep taking turns until one team wins.



In this example, red goes first.

## ON YOUR TURN

### THE SPYMASTER GIVES ONE CLUE.

If you are the spymaster, you start by trying to find a clue for 1 or more words in your team's color. More is better.

Your clue must be **1 word and 1 number**:

The **word** relates to the words you want to give a clue for.

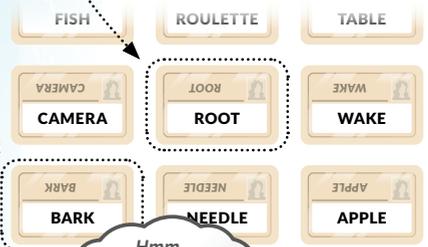
The **number** tells how many words your clue relates to.

For example, if ROOT and BARK are red words, the red spymaster might try to give a clue for both words by saying *tree: 2*.

*tree: 2*



Hmm ...  
ROOT and BARK ...



### THE OPERATIVES MAY MAKE MULTIPLE GUESSES.

The operatives should take a moment to discuss the clue. (Or, if you are the only operative, you may think out loud.) Then, one of the operatives must **make a guess by touching one of the cards**.

The spymaster covers the word with a tile matching the color shown on the key.

If you guess a word in your own color, you may **guess again**. (You get another guess, not another clue.)

In our example, the operatives guess ROOT, so they may guess again. They then guess APPLE instead of BARK. The key card says APPLE is also red. The spymaster must act as though it was the second word intended by the clue.



## A WRONG GUESS ENDS YOUR TURN.

Three things can go wrong:

If you guess an innocent bystander, **your turn ends**.



If you guess the other team's word, **your turn ends, and you have helped the other team!**



If you guess the assassin, you immediately **lose the game!**



## IF YOU KEEP GUESSING RIGHT, YOU CAN GUESS UNTIL ...

### **YOU CHOOSE TO END YOUR TURN.**

If your turn does not end with a wrong guess, you can end it voluntarily. For example, if you are given the clue *cold*: 3, you want to find 3 words related to *cold* and then end your turn.

Or, if you find only 2 good words for *cold* and guessing a third seems too risky, you can end your turn after 2. Or even 1. You are required to make at least 1 guess.

### **YOU USE THE "PLUS ONE" RULE.**

As long as the operatives keep guessing words of their own color, they are allowed to **guess one more card** than the number specified by the clue. For example, the clue *cold*: 3 lets the operatives make up to 4 guesses.

OR

You do not need this extra guess on your first turn. Later, however, you may need to use the "plus one" rule to guess a word you missed from a previous turn's clue.

## **WHEN YOUR TURN ENDS, IT IS THE OTHER TEAM'S TURN.**



## **WINNING**

Keep taking turns until one team wins.

→ **When your team has no words left to guess, your team wins.** Often, you will win by guessing your last word. But you can also win if the other team guesses your last word on their turn.

→ **You also win if the other team guesses the assassin.**

# **YOU NOW KNOW THE RULES. GO PLAY!**

# VALID CLUES

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Spymasters must give clues that are in the spirit of the game. If you aren't sure your clue is valid, **consult with the opposing spymaster.** (Quietly, so the operatives can't hear.)

## **SPIRIT OF THE GAME**

Some clues are invalid because they violate the spirit of the game.

**Your clue must be about the meaning of the words.** You can't use your clue to talk about the letters of a word or its position on the table. You can't tie BED, BUG, and BOW together with a clue like *b: 3*, nor with *three: 3*, however ...

**Letters and numbers are valid clues as long as they refer to meanings.** You can use *x: 1* as a clue for RAY, and you can use *eight: 2*, as a clue for BALL and OCTOPUS.

**You must play in English.** A foreign word is allowed only if the players in your group would use it in an English sentence. So you can't use *Apfel* as a clue for APPLE and BERLIN, but you can use *strudel*.

**You can't say any form of a word visible on the table.** Until BREAK is covered, you can't say *break*, *broken*, *breakage*, or *breakdown*.

**You can't say any part of a compound word on the table.** Until HORSESHOE is covered, you can't say *horse*, *shoe*, *unhorsed*, or *snowshoe*.

**You can't use melodies or accents as a clue.** If you could always give a clue for FRANCE by saying any word in a French accent, then FRANCE would be too easy.

## **DON'T BE TOO STRICT**

England and island were originally compound words, but in this century, *island* is a valid clue for ENGLAND. Even *land* is a valid clue for ENGLAND. And anybody who says you can't say *sparrow* because ROW is on the table is just trying to cause trouble.

**If the opposing spymaster allows it, it is a valid clue.**

## **SOUNDALIKES**

**In traditional Codenames, soundalike clues are allowed only if they are about the meanings of words.** So *snail* is valid for MAIL because that is a common phrase, but *snail* is not valid for SCALE unless your group has a friend whose job is weighing snails. Similarly, *night* is not valid for ARMOR, and *knight* is not valid for MOON.

**But in the Codenames app, all soundalikes are allowed.** And your group can agree to play this way, allowing *night* for the word KNIGHT and other knightly things.

**You can spell your clue,** and you must spell your clue if someone asks.

**If two words are spelled the same, treat them as the same word.** *L-e-a-d* is valid for CAPTAIN and GOLD.

## **BENDING THE "ONE WORD" RULE**

Your group can agree to allow common abbreviations (*CIA*, *NASA*, *PhD*) as one-word clues.

One-word names are always valid clues. Your group can agree to allow all names (*George Washington*, *New York*) and even titles (*The Old Man and the Sea*).

One-word compounds like *greenhouse* are valid clues. Clues like *mother-in-law* or *alarm clock* are invalid unless allowed by the opposing spymaster.

# EXPERT RULES

## UNLIMITED CLUE

Instead of a number, you can say your clue is unlimited. For example, *tiny: unlimited*. This allows your operatives to make as many guesses as they want, as long as they keep guessing right.

Operatives do not know how many words were intended by the unlimited clue, but sometimes they can figure it out. If you have 3 words left, a clue for 2 or 3 is enough to guess them all. So, in this case, *tiny: unlimited* probably means “guess 1 word for *tiny* and 2 words from previous clues.”

*tiny: ∞*

## ZERO CLUE

A clue like *feathers: 0* also allows unlimited guesses. (Ignore the “plus one” rule.)

The clue means “Don’t guess the word (or words) related to *feathers*.” So if PENGUIN is the only bird on the table, don’t guess PENGUIN.

Next ask “Why not?” Well, if there are words like SNOW, ICE, and ANTARCTICA, maybe your spymaster wanted to say *cold: 3*, but PENGUIN was in the way. So guess SNOW, ICE, and ANTARCTICA.

*feathers: 0*

## PENALTY FOR INVALID CLUE

If a spymaster accidentally gives an invalid clue, their team’s turn ends immediately, with no guesses, and the opposing spymaster may cover one of their own team’s words before giving the next clue.

However, if the opposing team feels the invalid clue did not harm the game, their spymaster can decide to allow it, in which case it is valid. Also, if an invalid clue is given but no one notices until later, that clue was valid.

## VARIANTS

Some groups prefer to use a timer to encourage a quicker pace of play. We have included several timers and randomized key cards in a free “**Codenames gadget**” available for your phone. (Not the same as the Codenames app, which lets you play asynchronous Codenames games with spymasters from around the world.) For more ways to play, visit [codenamesgame.com](http://codenamesgame.com).



## CODENAMES

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**Special thanks to:** our families, colleagues, and friends for their unwavering support and love for our work; our digital team for creating the awesome Codenames mobile app; Lukáš Novotný for the sleek web implementation; and most importantly, the millions of players around the world who have been enjoying Codenames – on the table, online, and in the app – throughout the past decade.

**Thanks to you, our work has meaning!**



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# REMINDERS AND TIPS

Learn more at  
[www.codenamesgame.com](http://www.codenamesgame.com)

- **Be patient.** The spymaster's job is hard. Finding the first clue of the game may take a couple minutes. After that, things usually start to flow.
- **You are allowed to give a clue for only 1 word**, but clues for more words are more fun.
- **Don't give any extra information with your clue.** Don't say, "This is a bit of a stretch." You are playing Codenames. It is always a bit of a stretch.
- **Operatives should discuss a bit, then guess.** If you are a lone operative, you may think out loud. And if you are a group, it is good to be sure everyone gets to play. But do not let debate and indecision stall the game.
- **Spymasters must keep a straight face.** When the operatives discuss your clue, do not react to their misguided ideas. Do not reach for any tile until they have touched one of the words. If they guess right by accident, act like that was what you intended all along.
- **Operatives must not look for spymaster reactions.** We recommend focusing on the cards and avoiding eye contact with your spymaster.
- **The operatives can guess words from a previous turn's clue**, even with their first guess of the turn. They are also allowed to guess randomly, but they probably shouldn't.
- **The spymaster must not tell operatives if they are missing words from a previous clue.** You can't even mention previous clues, unless you are asked to repeat them.
- **The operatives can end their turn early**, without guessing all the words specified by the clue. However, they are required to make at least one guess.
- **At the end of the game, just flip the 25 cards over.** You're all set up to play again!



**CODENAMES DUET**  
2+ players, cooperative  
400 more words  
(can mix with Codenames)



**CODENAMES PICTURES**  
4-8 players  
play with pictures instead of words



**VLAADA**

Creator of Codenames

“ Ah, there's some space left on this page – so let me use it to recommend the **Codenames app**. I've personally spent the past few years working on the app with our team, filling it with tons of content, cool twists, new ways to play (I am especially proud of the system of daily challenges), and interesting features – you'd be surprised just how many! :)

*I'm writing this because I genuinely think you might enjoy the app. **So go ahead, treat yourself, and give it a try. 99***

You can read Vlaada's design story at [cge.as/cn-story](http://cge.as/cn-story)

4.9 ★★★★★

