

Secret Santa Gift Exchange FAQ

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1. What is the secret santa gift exchange?

It's an annual gift exchange run by yours truly since 2012 with the power of friendship and pigeon post. Each autumn, people who want to participate sign up for the exchange, their names are thrown into a metaphorical hat (i.e. my brain and spreadsheets) and assigned to each other. Each participant then assembles a gift package for a person they've been assigned to, and receives one package from someone else.

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2. Who can participate?

You, obviously! :D It started off as something for my lj friends, but has expanded to include my friends outside lj, and my friend's friends. The core participants are people who've been joining for many rounds, but we usually get a couple of newcomers every year.

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3. Can my friends participate?

Yes, your friends are welcome to join, too! I will ask if they have a lj/dw account, because a) it's more fun for them to bask in the collective glee with things like santa squee posts and b) they can follow updates and PSAs on dw/lj, but that's not a hard rule. I can send them PSAs over email, but if they follow the group notifications on dw/lj, there is less chance I might miss someone by accident.

As long as they want to participate, and are willing to play by the rules, I'm more than happy to see more people on board \o/ Just refer them to me at *ikel89 at gmail dot com*.

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4. What are the timelines for the GE?

They are always announced in the sign-up post for the year: you need to check the latest sign-up post in this [tag](#). Ping me if you are not sure!

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5. Are there any reminders for next year? I don't want to miss it.

So far I don't have a tech-savvy solution to send reminders for you. Try putting into your calendar a recurring reminder for mid-October, it's a safe bet: the sign-ups will have either been announced or actually in progress.

Another thing you can do is to set up email notifications on lj/dw for anything I tag with "[gift exchange](#)" or "[sign-up](#)", those are annual and don't change. Only each year's round will have a unique tag, e.g. "[gift exchange 2018](#)"

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6. What are the principles behind matching people?

Originally I tried to match people according to

- compatibility of their questionnaires, for maximum fun and success of gift-hunting
- geographies, to accommodate preferences where possible and shake up the international pigeons
- uniqueness of recipients: I tried for the longest time to match people who haven't been matched in previous rounds
- my arcane and mysterious ways.

However, with each new round, things have shifted further away from these criteria. For example, the longer someone was participating, the more combinations they would have experienced. By now we've passed the critical point where I could still reasonably claim to be able to match you with a new sender and/or recipient every round, so please take it as a chance to impress them with how much cooler you are as a santa with years of friendship behind your belt :D

I had to move away from geographical preferences as well because it is hard to predict whether domestic match-ups are possible in every new round; same logic went into scrapping previously available option to ask for someone you know to be your assignment. Please try to go into this with an open heart <3

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7. Will I be sending my package to the same person who is sending a gift to me?

Nope. Assignments are arranged to make sure that in a given year, your recipient is never your sender. I'm sticking to this principle as a hard rule.

But it's entirely possible that someone you are sending a gift to this year was your santa in some previous rounds, or could become them in future rounds.

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8. Why did I get the same person as a few years ago?

Because a core group of participants are veteran santas, I have ran out of possible combinations to match people with new senders/recipients. I will continue trying to space out repeat matches as much as I can, but look at the bright side: by now, you sure know more about the person and can work absolute magic with your gift!

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9. How am I supposed to pick presents for someone I might not even know!

To make things easier and fun for everyone, during the sign-ups each participant fills in and sends me a questionnaire that their sender will receive and use as a guidance/inspiration to accommodate preferences and avoid allergies and pet hates while gift-hunting.

In case you feel that the questionnaire you received doesn't give you enough ideas, or you want a clarification/confirmation on something you have in mind and don't feel too sure about, let me know. I can act as a go-between so that you can ask your recipient for more details without giving away your secret identity.

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10. I'm wary of sharing my personal info & contact details. What happens to them?

(insert your European Data Protection Law joke of choice here)

You won't be sharing them through anywhere public, only over personal email. I'm the only person who will see them until assignments go out, and during assignments are shared with your santa sender only.

Any exceptions are made with your permission only: I will always reach out to you first before sharing your details with anyone else, no matter how well-wishing.

But everyone has been super nice and respectful so far, so I hope that alone doesn't stop you from participating!

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11. Is international shipping a must?

Assume yes. Everyone goes in with the blanket assumption that they are okay to ship internationally to anyone. Please consider the cost of international shipping to be part of your decision making when you sign up, for obvious reasons of geographical spread.

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12. I can't afford to ship internationally this year, but I really want to participate! Is there anything that you can do?

In case you have **financial** constraints that make international shipping too burdensome for you this year but you strongly want to participate anyway, please be upfront with me right away (an email to *ikel89 at gmail dot com* if you don't feel like sharing it in the comments on dw/lj). I will accept your questionnaires, but they will go into a separate queue -- i simply CANNOT promise there will be enough people from your country (or nearest geography that allows for cheaper shipping costs) doing the same. What I CAN promise to you in turn is that when i have the full set of questionnaires, I will reach out to you to say if a domestic/regional match is possible or not, so you can choose whether to opt out or play depending on your circumstance, and let me know within 1-2 days so i can match and send out assignments accordingly.

For any other reasons i'm not going to consider shipping preferences.

UPDATE for all exchanges since 2021: alternatively, consider signing up for letters exchange -- sign-ups will make it clear if i'm running one in parallel with a gift exchange in any given year.

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13. I am not sure how to ship internationally.

The best person to advise you on that is your local post office and/or their website, as package types and rates vary from country to country. They can tell you box sizes, rates, tracking options, guide you through customs forms and tell you where to look up items that can't be shipped.

We have a [masterpost](#) of collective wisdom for a few recurring geographies, make sure to check it out before shipping, and please do contribute if you have experience to share. This post is open to all -- you don't have to have an lj account to see it.

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14. I've had this experience with international shipping that I'm happy/not happy about. Is that useful information?

By all means, tell your story! International shipping [masterpost](#) grows with collective wisdom, so the more you know and share, the easier it will be for someone else :) Just drop a comment there or write directly to me, I keep this post updated.

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15. I sent you my questionnaire a year ago, can't you just re-use it again?

I could, but do you really want to give outdated information to your recipient? Even if you are sure most of the items will stay the same, please give your old questionnaire a reread, see if there are any questions added/removed since then, and mail it to me again with full confidence you are not still asking for a pair of fuzzy green socks that you just got as a birthday gift half a year ago.

Also, in case your questionnaire will end up being assigned to someone who has previously sent you a gift, they might appreciate some new information on it to have new directions to think in :)

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16. Why is the questionnaire so long? Is it a must?

The questionnaire is a must: it will tell your sender important things like your allergies/preferences/pet hates etc, to rule out things you won't be able to enjoy while they are looking for gifts you would love. It's okay if on some questions you don't have much to say -- for those, just make a short note that it's not something you are interested in at all or in the moment -- and elaborate as much as you want on others. You can go the extra mile on top of your questionnaire: attach pictures of things you like, or include links to help your sender understand what you are talking about, or even put together a hipster instagram moodboard if you feel it expresses you best :)

The questionnaire itself is also available at the bottom of this file.

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17. Do I have to find everything that's on the list?

Of course not. The questionnaire is a guidance meant to help your sender, not a decree from the Queen of England. Think of Yuletide spirit as your rule of thumb: avoid any DNW (do-not-wants and allergies and such), and use all other details as inspiration sources.

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18. How many items should the package contain?

Up to you: I set the minimum of 4 items per package, but it's more on average. You can go check out santa package squee masterposts from last years like [this](#) one to get an idea: that's where people drop links to their own posts with thank-yous to their senders.

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19. Is there a monetary threshold?

Not really. I'd previously said to aim for something in 25-35 USD as a baseline, but that's neither observed nor enforced.

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20. Does the package have to be sent with a tracking number?

Previously I used to stress the importance of asking for a tracking number when sending your package, but turns out, that's not foolproof either (US being a notable exception). For detailed guidance, please go to [pigeon post reference](#), but the rule of thumb is that if possible, and if supported by regular state post, ask for a tracking number. When it works right, the tracking number helps keep tabs on the shipping, and can help identify and locate the package if anything happens to it on the way. If your postal services make it possible to ship your package with a tracking number, please keep it at hand until you have heard from your recipient.

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21. What happens after I send the package?

First, you let me know that you mailed off your parcel -- I keep tabs on that to see if everything has been sent/delivered and keep people informed about delays.

Second, ENJOY THE ANTICIPATION :D

As soon as the first person in the round receives their gift, I open up a santa squee masterpost -- a post you can track to see when someone else has received their package and posted their own squee post. Those are usually linked in the comments. This step is not mandatory but encouraged for everyone's delight :)

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22. What happens after I receive the package?

You let your santa know by emailing them to say thank you, or dropping a comment in the santa squee post. Give me a word too if you contact the sender directly, I will stop worrying if your package and you were reunited and cross it off my tracking spreadsheet :)

You can also write a post in your own space with squees & thanks to the sender and then link it to the squee masterpost for this year -- a step that's highly encouraged but not mandatory. The only thing you absolutely have to do is find time to thank your sender directly.

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23. Useful links

[gift exchange](#) tag on my lj. It's a general tag for all PSAs for all years; if you want this year's stuff only, you need "gift exchange [year]" tag, like this: "[gift exchange 2019](#)"

[international pigeon post masterpost](#)

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Your suggestions on expanding the FAQ are welcome! Drop them here or dw/lj and I'll build them in.

QUESTIONNAIRE OF DOOM

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Please **COPY PASTE THE QUESTIONNAIRE IN A SEPARATE FILE**, fill it in, and mail it to me at ikel89 @ gmail dot com with 'GIFT EXCHANGE [CURRENT YEAR]' in the subject line.

Give as much detail as you want for areas relevant to your interests, add links or pictures if your heart so desires. If some question asks for your preferences in an area you don't have any interest in, just say so directly and spend your efforts on what you care about.

In the meantime, it may be the year of our lord 2k2bla, but no one cancelled the honorable tradition of supplying the questionnaire with highly intelligent and not at all autobiographic sample answers.

--- The Basics---

1. LJ/DW USERNAME & YOUR NAME

2. E-MAIL [+ whatever other contact you want to add (tumblr, IM, etc)]

3. MAILING ADDRESS AND FULL NAME

3.5. PHONE NO to include on the address - it eases the process for some countries quite a lot!
[optional but encouraged]

4. GENDER

5. AGE

--- Your Preferences---

6. HOBBIES (e.g. "I like the awkward gay energy of Anna Kendrick movies, acquiring more books than I can read, and well-fitting hiking socks." or "I have a growing international collection of contraband succulents that I cultivate in vodka shot glasses and undersized artisan Bulgarian clayware." Please include anything you like - sports/arts&crafts/collecting things/gardening/cooking/pets etc.)

7. SMALL PLEASURES (e.g. "I will always apply the most artful fucking giftwrap in the house to make book covers for BAEN sci novels -- out of sight, out of mind." or "I have recently discovered the joys of

stress baking to Postmodern Jukebox and a growing appreciation for Nigella Lawson". In short, whatever you know can easily cheer you up.)

8. FOOD & BEVERAGES (e.g. "For all their colonialist baggage, the hipster loose leaf tea market niche here still leaves much to be desired, so please step in that if you are so inclined." Please note your allergies and other put-offs or refer to the To Avoid section, e.g. "Pu Erh still smells like dried compost." or "As misguided as this country is about what constitutes a chocolate bar, I have still not lifted my Heartless Embargo on sweets.")

9. ACCESSORIES (e.g. "I never feel quite as fashionable as when I manage to wear weather-appropriate clothes for the day, which does not happen as often as I'd like. Please send help or an extra pair of gloves." or "I don't understand how it took me thirty years to own my first denim jacket, and now good luck trying to convince me it doesn't go with absolutely everything, yes, including a midi work skirt." Do you wear belts/scarves/jewellery/hair ties/etc? Please specify preferred style, and size if it's relevant)

10. BATH/BEAUTY PRODUCTS (e.g. "Send me some nice moisturizing hypoallergenic soap to wash the blood of my enemies off my soft, innocent hands." Please note your allergies and other put-offs or refer to the To Avoid section, e.g. "P.S. It's 2k19 and licorice still sucks.")

11. STATIONERY (e.g. "I'm devastated thinking about the day I will run out of my all-purpose Rose of Versailles stickers and Japanese lettersets." If you're not interested, you can always say something like "The closest I get to stationery is cataloguing apps on my phone -- please link me to a cool organizer app so I can continue pruning my digital desktop.")

12. FANDOMS & GENRES (go all out - movies, music, books, authors, manga, webcomics. e.g. "Please send me some books about Victorian greenhouses and fragile poisonous plants -- it will greatly speed up my research for a queer romance about secret agents and botany nerds.")

---Things to Avoid---

13. ALLERGIES (Please be sure to note things to avoid so that your sender can pick stuff you can enjoy. e.g. "Mince pies are a culinary fraud that have no meat and altogether too many raisins under their crust.")

14. PET HATES (Anything that isn't strictly speaking an allergy, but you hate it with a fire of a thousand suns. e.g. "I harbour a not insignificant amount of disdain for the British bread and Wolverine singing.")

---Carte Blanche---

15. ANYTHING ELSE YOU THINK WORTH MENTIONING, ANY REFERENCE PICTURES YOU WANT TO ATTACH

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