



# Teaching Games: How to Get to the Good Part

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So—you have a group that you want to teach a game to, and you have a game that you want to teach. Of course, before you get to the cool part—the playing of the game—you have to get through the part that nobody gets excited about: the rules. Here are a few tips to make explaining rules quick and painless.

- Know your game.

There are times when you're with a group of friends, and a shiny new game is sitting in front of you waiting to be explored. If it's your game, or you're the traditional "rules interpreter," your friends will look to you for an explanation of how to play. Your challenge is to spell things out clearly and quickly. Even with simple rules, this is no mean challenge.

Fortunately, your audience doesn't normally demand expert analysis or even an in-depth explanation. They just want to start playing with the right rules. They want to know how you win, how a turn works, and how you might interact with other players. These are points you must know before you start your explanation. People's attention begins to lapse or disappear whenever they fail to obtain a general understanding or vision of the game quickly.

Mastery of the game or rules is not the point. The issue is maintaining control of the situation long enough for everyone to be comfortable about starting the game. Your authority only lasts as long as people aren't bored or confused. This control, and some or all your authority, disappears when you're in the middle of your rules explanation and you suddenly stop to look up a rule, or, even worse, you read rules verbatim from the rulebook. Then, your audience will find themselves wondering just how long this explanation will go on, and how many memory jogs (and how much more time) you'll need before you stop talking.

There will be rules that you either forget, or choose not to include, during the initial rules presentation. Setting aside the talent of pretending the former is the latter, it's okay to revise or add rules after the game starts if necessary. What you want to do is let your audience know that you're getting through the rules as cleanly and efficiently as possible; and to do that, you have to have some familiarity with the game and its rules. Efficient rules presentation helps you maintain control.

- Set up the game before you start.

Props improve presentations, and no prop is better than the game itself. By setting up the game beforehand, you move the process along in several ways. You want people to start playing as soon as your explanation is over, and you want to be able to use the game pieces to illustrate your explanation. If there are examples within the game parts that you will specifically want to use during your explanation (such as specific cards from a deck, or a type of turn using the game pieces), make sure to set them aside. Keep your demonstration tools accessible.

Of course, attractive components can be a distraction for younger children or fidgety adults. A pile of beads, a handful of dice, figurines, or other irresistible eye candy invite unbridled play, so watch out. If the game you choose features bits that your audience is going to be distracted by, stage those pieces close to you or in a location that is less accessible to your audience.

- Give them the goal before, and give them the goal after.

Some games embody straightforward goals: "The person with the most points wins." There are other games where the victory conditions are considerably more complicated, and will not make sense until the rules are explained. Whatever the case, people want to know how to win. They want to know why they're doing things. In the absence of knowing the victory condition(s), your audience will be constantly wondering which parts of the rules will let them win. So, even if the goals of the game are not going to make much sense before you begin to explain the game, you should give the audience keywords to look out for during your explanation. Stating the goal up front heightens interest in your explanation; not doing so invites distraction.

Focus on the general, bottom line goal. Often, simply brushing off complicated victory conditions in your first statement will defuse some of the tension that complexity will inspire. I can say, for example, “the winner will have the most victory points, which is calculated as your cash times three, minus your debt points times your default chips. For now, just remember that cash is good, and debt is bad.” The first sentence is factual; the second gives them permission to not understand most of what they just heard. Once your rules explanation is completed, the repeat of the goal will sound familiar, and the details will then make sense.

- Give them less to remember.

“Three” is a convenient number of things to talk about and remember. Three things have a rhythm in explanation: do A, B or C, do this, that or the other thing. There are game rules that lend themselves well to being grouped together in sets of three or less, but there are times when you can tweak your explanation to conform to this rule. Take, for example, a game that offers three types of turns, and within each of those turns there are three steps to fulfill. You could explain the first type of turn, detailing each step, then move to the second type of turn. The better way to approach it is to think about each step of the game, grouping the “decision step” together as a player would, and then moving to each step individually. When you can group rules together this way, you help a player remember the options at that point of the game (“I can do A, B or C”), then move on to the steps of the turn (“do 1, 2 then 3”).

This is a flexible concept. Don’t force things when the rules are written otherwise. Sometimes, though, you can group types of rules together to approximate the effect. If you have six options, but three of those options are offensive and three are defensive, put them in sub-groups of three. It’s a fluid way of breaking the concept into more digestible parts. Helping your audience reduce the number of things to remember at any given time will help unintentionally repeating yourself later.

- Repeat, and repeat.

Now, intentionally repeating yourself is a positive. Rules are not easy to learn cold, and an appropriate amount of repetition will help fix important concepts in their mind. If the game has three options on a turn, we might say, “So, you can do A, B, or C. With turn A, you’re on offense, and you do step 1, step 2, and step 3. So, that’s turn A, an offensive turn. Turn B is defensive, and you do steps 4 and 5. So that’s an offense turn, and a defensive turn, which brings us to turn C.” By repeating your bullet points, you keep the conversation fresh. Repetition also ties the points together as a unified whole.

Repeating oneself should always be about quickly recapping, not repeating blocks of rules. Good repetition usually entails creative rephrasing. Eyes will glaze over quickly if you try and give them the same rule over and over again. Strive to identify those rule points that need to be in the forefront of their mind, and repeat things in the natural progression that the rules suggest.

- Use the game terms—or don’t.

There are a lot of games with money, and a lot of different names for that money: dollars, ducats, dinars, Euros, thalers, gold. You usually talk about money a lot, so the game’s name for money is something that players need to get comfortable with fast. This goes for most common game terms. As you prepare to teach, make sure you single out words and phrases that may be uncommon, or terms that will be used frequently.

In addition, don’t be afraid of using your own terms for something that doesn’t have a game term associated with it. A rulebook may describe something like “turn over two cards from the draw deck. These cards are available for you to keep or trade as you choose.” You might shorten that to, “Turn over two cards. These are your trading fodder.” Something like this gives you a descriptive and colorful verbal hook that will act as shorthand as people continue to familiarize themselves with the game.

- Pay attention to the non-verbals: yours and theirs.

One of the most important things to remember is that communication flows both ways. Don’t treat a rules summary as dictation. It’s better as directed conversation. Just as you communicate with the audience, they should communicate to you. You need to know when they grasp things or find themselves flailing about. Your side of the equation should project fun, eagerness and confidence through your face, your gestures and your eye contact with players. That individual contact will give you the chance to see if your audience is still engaged and attentive, or if someone’s having trouble with a concept. Don’t be afraid to stop and if necessary restate something, but do so in

a way that is for the benefit of everyone. Try not to make anyone specific look slow. Doing so will not only spoil the fun, it will make others reluctant to offer their thoughts and questions.

Finally, don't be afraid to go out onto the Internet and look for tools to help you teach a game, whether they are from a game company or a fan site like BoardGameGeek (<http://www.boardgamegeek.com>). In addition to a wealth of information about a game, there are often rules summaries and player aids that can be used as part of your teaching, or can simply help you organize your thoughts as you develop your explanation.

Like any skill, practice makes perfect. Hopefully, after effectively communicating the rules, you'll earn the reward of a successfully run game—which tends to lead to the desire to play, learn and teach more often!



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