

# THE GIFT OF THE MAGI

*Giving  
&  
Receiving*



by Mary Ann Johnson, M.Ed.

## More About Receiving Than Giving

- Giving Compliments
- Evaluating Responses to Compliments
- The Importance of a Good Receiver
- “The Gift of the Magi”
- Social Skills Practice—White Elephant Gift Exchange

*Just Right for the Holidays!*

## Introduction to the Activities of This Unit:

Students preparing for upcoming winter holidays may find their thoughts gravitating to the gifts they hope to receive within a matter of weeks. This unit plan presents a set of lessons emanating from the classic Christmas story “The Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry. While most readers see the story as the beautiful example of the message that it is “better to give than to receive,” it may actually contain a more important focus, not just on the skill of thoughtful giving, but, also, on the equally important value of thoughtfully receiving a gift. The first assignment involves having students giving “gifts” of words to others leads to an analysis of the usual responses.

Students then look at the story of “The Gift of the Magi,” imagining how different it would be with ungrateful responses to the gifts they have given.

A further look shows the sociological implication that there may be a void of appropriate norms for gracious responses to receiving unexpected or very special gifts. Media examples based on unexpected gifts from unknown benefactors helps bring to light the difficulties of receiving and not being able to give anything equal in return. The cultural tendency of Americans is to try to give gifts of greater value to people who they perceive as more important, and otherwise to select gifts that correspond to the perceived value of their recipient (ideas suggested in the book, The Art of Loving by Erich Fromm. )

The unit ends with a white elephant “gift” exchange to practice the social skills of being a gracious recipient of a gift, regardless of its extrinsic value. In addition, there is the chance that once received, the white elephant gift will be wanted more by someone else and taken away in trade for a new unknown item after the student may actually have, ironically, formed a desire for it.

The total time involved in these activities can be across five days, with some time needed for students to provide enough white elephant gifts to use in the day of gift exchanges to practice the hilarious fun of thanking the donor for something originally designed to have had no significant extrinsic value. While the gift is not particularly thoughtful, the role of the receiver will be elevated to a level of giving a “grateful” gift back in return.

### What you will need for preparation:

- 1- Index cards for the assignment to give a “gift”
- 2- A copy for the class to examine “The Gift of the Magi” by O. Henry
- 3- Helpful, but not necessarily required for your review, The Art of Loving by Erich Fromm
- 4- Small brown paper bags to use for the White Elephant Gift Exchange
- 5- A set of numbers from the previous month on an old calendar to use for the numbers students will draw to determine the order for receiving gifts in the White Elephant Gift Exchange

### Day #1: Giving Compliments

Give students two index cards and assign them to record two genuine compliments they can give before tomorrow’s class. Have them bring back the wording and setting for the compliment, and also the response they received in return. Advise them that they are doing action research on human responses to genuine compliments, so they need to find a situation in which they can really deliver a sincere compliment. The point of the work is to find out what are the usual responses the class will be receiving from these “gifts” of words. You will make a list and categorize the types of responses they get.

### Day #2: Analyze Responses to Compliments

Hold a discussion in which students tell their experiences with the homework assignment. They can explain the context for their compliment, and explain what response they received. As the class presents their results, make a list of the types of responses they report to their compliments.

Typical responses include:

- 1- Denial (“No, it isn’t;” “not really”
- 2- Insult you or make fun of your compliment
- 3- Compliment you back in a fresh compliment
- 4- Just say, “You too.”
- 5- “It’s really cheap,” “I got it at a garage sale,” etc ---” (discount)
- 6- Ignore you; pretend not to hear the compliment
- 7- Genuine “thank you”

**Then read or assign the story of “The Gift of the Magi,”** giving students the chance to see how this newly married, loving young couple try to come up with an appropriate first Christmas gift for each other. (You can mention that the first three sentences of the story have a factual error which makes the launch of the story even more interesting. Ask them if they can spot the factual error, which revolves around change Della has saved by December 24th for the present for her husband James.) Speculate on how much the money would probably be worth today.

As the students discover the irony of the beautiful gifts Della and James have acquired for each other, speculate on how the story would have been different if James, who loved Della’s beautiful long hair, had gone ballistic when he first walked in the door, and saw her new “school boy” haircut. A man with a temper or a tendency to give verbal abuse would immediately have insulted his wife and probably thrown down his present, saying something like, “Well, now you’ve ruined it—you’ve ruined my Christmas! No point in giving you this present now!” Instead, have students look again at his reaction when he saw the new hair-do.

Likewise, contrast how Della handled the receipt of the gift and the discovery that James had traded his heirloom watch for the combs which now would have to wait for Della’s hair to grow out again. Both Della and James had the sublime grace to completely embrace the thoughtfulness of the gifts they had been given, and were able to imagine the future when they could use them later.

The story borrows its title and ends with **a reference to the Three Wise Men of the story of the birth of Christ.** They were called the Magi (also part of the word “magic” for referring to extraordinary wisdom.) They brought gold, frankincense and myrrh to a baby named Jesus. Students may wonder what was so wise about these particular gifts in reference to a baby. This is an explanation: The gold was a present to welcome the Holy Baby as a future royal “Prince” on earth; the frankincense was a symbol of the incense burned in a temple to indicate the presence of God, in this case, his presence there as the Son of God; and the myrrh was reference to a salve or ointment used after washing the feet of a visitor to one’s home, welcoming this Baby to his new home on earth.

### **Day #3:**

**Return to the analysis** the students did to their responses to compliments they gave earlier, and have a discussion of the cultural awkwardness of giving and receiving things in our culture. Ask about how they see people responding to stories in books and on TV when someone rich provides a big gift, often anonymously, to someone very needy. How does that person respond? Why? What would be the best way to deal with such a gift, especially if the gift were anonymous? Why would a gift giver do an anonymous gift? Is that fair?

You can also prompt a discussion of the ideas expressed by Erich Fromm in The Art of Loving in which he said that many people calculate the value of a gift they give in proportion to the value they perceive of their friendship or relationship with the receiver. The exchange is simply a self-serving definition of a conditional regard. Likewise, when someone unexpectedly shows up with a gift, especially if it is of real value, and the receiver hasn't thought of giving anything to the giver, there is often a quick effort to assure the giver that there is already a gift ready, perhaps but not yet wrapped that will be forthcoming. We seem to need to keep relationships equal in rank to keep ourselves from being perceived as poorer, more needy, or even socially thoughtless. And the giver may feel it now unnecessary to give anything further, since it seems as if the receiver did not have an equal regard. Christmas card lists go the same way. If you get a card, you give one back. Otherwise, no need to give. Have students discuss the meaning of this type of giving transaction. Might it be necessary? Might it be okay?

Ask students their opinions about re-gifting? Would that be okay? Is it okay to get rid of a gift that isn't wanted or needed after expressing appreciation? Why or why not?

How does a giver feel when the gift is not enthusiastically received? How does a person know what is the best reaction to a gift? Is it really better to give than to receive? What takes more thought? Are they both a special act?

### **Next: Introduce the practice simulation, a White Elephant Gift Exchange!**

To practice the skill of giving an appreciative response to a gift, regardless of the content of the gift, **ask students to bring in White Elephant objects to use in an upcoming gift exchange.** Tell them that the objects need to fit into a small brown paper bag, or if they are bigger, they need to arrive in a large paper bag that can be stapled shut after you see what it is. (You could mark each bag with "Boy," "Girl" or "Either," to make the exchange less surprising, but you wouldn't have to, if the idea will be to reaction with pleasure, whether the gift inside the bag will be a good fit, or not. I would mention that toilet items are not okay, and neither are items that are too personal.) Explain that most white elephants are something dated or useless or no longer treasured by their owners, but surprisingly, may be something desired by someone else. Small silly items like toys in cereal boxes or the old Cracker Jack boxes are sometimes used.

Students may want to know **how the name "White Elephant" was derived.** You can explain that a king of Thailand once gave a white elephant to a person he didn't appreciate, because it would burden the receiver with the obligation to feed an elephant for life, and the recipient couldn't easily trade or sell the white elephant, since it was so rare and would be frowned upon as "regifting" something given by a king.

### Days # 3-5: (Allow two days for student gift items to arrive.)

Decide on the norms the class will use to react to the “gifts” in the paper bags. Have them suggest a few lines of appropriate responses when they open the contents of the bag with a white elephant “gift.” Explain the procedure: All the stapled brown bags will be located on a table in the room. You will have students each draw a number from a container when the game is ready to begin. (I cut up the numbers on a former calendar month to provide the first 31 numbers.)

The numbers determine who gets to select a bag first. The person drawing #1 gets to select the first brown bag and open it. When the contents are pulled out, that person gets to make the first response in an enthusiastic tone. Then the person drawing #2 gets to decide to get a new bag to open or take a new bag, give it to Student #1, and take away the contents of the first bag. If Student #2 takes away the “present” of the first Student, Student #1 must make a gracious remark to relinquish that “gift,” whether or not it is actually desired.

When the last student has received a “gift,” Student #1 gets to take whatever present s/he wants and exchange it for whatever was in another student’s possession.

There are a lot of laughs and a few struggles to see someone have to give up something they really did want to keep when another student decides to take it and replace it with a new brown bag in exchange. It gets to be a little repetitious to hear students respond with their gracious thank-you’s and affirming comments, but the idea of the practice is to become used to hearing positive response like the best response students heard when they gave their compliments.

This entire set of activities can take place over 4-5 days, with about 2 days to collect white elephant items as students bring them in. Not everyone will be able to bring one in, and some students will bring in extras. You can run the exchange when you have enough white elephant gifts that you have put into brown bags and have stapled them shut so that every student will be able to have a turn opening a gift.

All the social skills practice and thoughtful consideration of the role of giving AND receiving wrap up the real insights from O.Henry’s story “The Gift of the Magi.”