

# How to Play Thirty-Five

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## About Thirty-Five

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Thirty-Five is one of the most versatile frame games in Thiagi's collection ([thiagi.com](http://thiagi.com)). The principle behind the game is that people learn best when they create the content. The game takes only 20 to 30 minutes to play and you can use it at any time in your workshop. It's most commonly used as an icebreaker or a closer. One of the major principles behind it is that participants know a lot and bring their own ideas.

## The Generic Game Plan

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This table shows the basic structure of Thirty-Five. It identifies the steps in the flow of the game and briefly describes what the facilitator and the participants do during each step.

Step	Facilitator Action	Participant Action
1 – Write Responses	Ask an open-ended question. Instruct participants to write a response to the question.	Write a short, specific response on an index card.
2 – Exchange Responses	Begin and end the exchange process.	Walk around the room, exchanging cards with each other without reading the responses.
3 – Compare and Score	Give instructions.	Find a partner. Compare the responses on two cards. Distribute seven points between the two cards to reflect the relative values of the responses.
4 – Repeat the Process	Repeat the previous two steps four more times.	Exchange cards. Find a new partner. Compare the responses on the two cards and distribute seven points. Write the new point values below the previous ones. Repeat this process four times.
5 – Identify the Top-Scoring Responses	Ask participants to find the total score. Count down from 35 to identify the top scoring responses.	Stand up and read the response when the countdown reaches your total. Listen to other top-scoring responses.

## Recommendations for Each Step

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Here are some recommendations for performing each step. Modify these to fit your needs.

### Preparations

#### *Things You Will Need*

- A good, open-ended “seed” question
- A room large enough that participants can move around fairly easily
- A stopwatch
- A whistle (or some other attention-getting device)
- Index cards (one per participant)
- Pens (one per participant)

#### *Requirements for the “Seed” Question*

The success of this game depends a great deal on seeding it with a suitable question, so, you’ll need to prepare a good question ahead of time. Here are a few important requirements for the question:

- It must be open-ended to permit a wide variety of acceptable responses rather than a single correct response.
- It must elicit a short answer.
- It must be relevant to the goals of the group (organization, work team, etc.)

#### *Example Questions*

Here are three general types of open-ended questions that work well in Thirty-Five:

Questions that require a **practical suggestion** (or guideline, or principle, or technique, or strategy, or prescription, or recommendation)

- What guideline would you suggest for encouraging the inclusion of all team members?
- How could we do a better job of managing emergencies? Describe *only one* strategy or suggestion.

Questions that require the **identification of a root cause** or **key factor**.

- What do you think is the major reason why some team members feel left out?
- What do you think is the primary driver behind the lack of complete and accurate sales reports?

Questions that require the **identification of an effect** or **probable result**.

- What would happen if we gave all members equal time to speak during team discussions?
- What is a likely outcome of having more level-three-style evaluations in place?

#### *An Even Number of Participants*

Having an even number of participants is ideal in this exercise. If you don’t have an even number, recruit an assistant to be an extra participant, or you yourself (the facilitator) may participate.

## Step 1 – Write Responses

Present the question and ask students to respond to it briefly by writing an answer—a single answer—on an index card. Encourage them to be brief, clear and legible.

Here's an example of what you can say:

- *“I want you to consider this question: [insert your prepared question]. Think about it for just a moment and then write a short, clear and legible response. Just one answer, one response. [If appropriate, provide an example response.] You'll have ninety seconds to complete it. Any questions? [Check for questions, respond to them]. Okay. Go.”*

After ninety seconds, blow your whistle and tell students to wrap up their responses.

## Step 2 – Exchange Responses

Ask students to turn their cards over (answer-side down), get out of their seats, and exchange cards by walking around the room and swapping cards with other students.

Consider saying something to this effect:

- *“Thank you. I want you now to take a good look at your response. Read it again. Bask in its brilliance. Gloat about its greatness. And then... emotionally detach yourself from the idea. You're about to send it out into the real world. We're going to let the best idea rise to the top... and you don't want to be too attached to yours. Prepare yourself for this. Despite your answer's greatness, I don't want you to suffer any lowering of self-esteem if your response doesn't receive a high score. Okay? Here's what I want you to do. Turn your card over (answer-side down)—go ahead, let it go, turn it over, release it to the universe—and stand up. Grab your card and something to write with. On my cue you'll begin walking around the room. Hold your cards with the written side down, and exchange cards with each other. Do not read the responses on the cards at this time. Any questions? [Check for questions, respond to them]. Okay. Ready? Go.”*

After 15-20 seconds (roughly four or five swaps), blow your whistle and stop the exchange process by asking students to quickly pair up with a partner.

- *“Okay. Please stop and find a partner. Just find someone near you and pair up.”*

## Step 3 – Compare and Score

Have participants score the responses. Tell them to read the cards, compare them, and then distribute seven points between the two responses to reflect their relative usefulness. Give examples of seven-point distributions: four and three; five and two; etc. Tell participants to avoid using fractions or negative numbers. When ready, ask participants to write the points they award on the back of each card.

Here's what you can say:

- *“Great. Does everyone have a partner? Fantastic. So, the next step... I want you and your partner to read your two cards, compare them, and then distribute seven points between them based on the relative usefulness of the answer. So, for example, let's say Sam and I are partners. We read our cards and decide that Sam's card has a truly great answer and mine is totally impractical; we might give her card seven points, and mine zero. Or, let's say we decide that both of these ideas are pretty good, but mine is a little better. We might give my card four points, and her's three. Once you've rated the ideas, I want you to write your score, for the card you're holding, on the*

*back of the card. Don't forget to write it down. And, no, no fractions, or decimals, or negative points. Okay? Does that make sense? Any questions? [Check for questions, respond to them.] Okay. Go ahead. Compare your cards and distribute seven points."*

Give students 30-60 seconds (enough time to discuss and rate, but not too much; you want to keep the exercise moving along) and then blow your whistle.

## Step 4 – Repeat the Scoring Process

You'll now repeat this process of exchanging and rating ideas four more times, for a total of five rounds.

Wait to make sure that everyone has written the points they awarded on the backs of their cards. Then ask participants to repeat the process of moving around and exchanging cards. Blow the whistle after 15-20 seconds, and ask participants to find a new partner, compare the two responses on their cards, and distribute seven points. Instruct them to write the new score on the back of the card, below the previous number.

- [Beginning of round two.] *"Alright. Nice work. So we're going to do this again. Turn your cards over, answer-side down, and start walking around and exchanging cards again. Ready? Go."*

After about 15 seconds, blow your whistle.

- *"Okay. Stop. Find a partner. And distribute seven points between the two cards. Whatever points you award, write those below the previous number."*

After 30-45 seconds, blow your whistle.

- *"Great. Has everyone written their scores down? Good."* [End of round two.]
- *"We're going to repeat this three more times. Turn your cards over and begin exchanging again..."*

### Best Practices during the Scoring Process

- Encourage participants to maintain high levels of objectivity even if they end up with their own card and by disregarding earlier score points on the backs of the cards.
- At the end of each round remind students to write down their scores. Sometimes people get caught up in the fun, or the haggling, or the fast-paced nature of the game, and they forget to write down scores.
- If you (the facilitator) lose track of the number of rounds you've completed, simply ask a participant or two how many scores they've written down on their cards.

After five rounds, conclude the evaluation process by asking participants to return to their seats with the card they currently have. Ask them to add the five scores and write the total on the card.

## Step 5 – Identify the Top-Scoring Responses

Announce that you're going to conduct a countdown. When a participant hears the total on the card, he or she should stand up and read the response from the card.

Starting at 35, begin counting down to identify the card with the highest score. After the participant reads the response from the card, lead a round of applause (and, if appropriate, identify the person who contributed the idea). Repeat the countdown process until you have identified the top five to ten responses.

Conclude the session by thanking the participants for generating and evaluating useful responses. If appropriate, ask them to select a few responses for immediate implementation.

### Follow-up

One of the most valuable ideas for follow-up on this is to type up the sorted list of responses from all participants and distribute a copy of the complete set to each participant and/or the manager/leader of the group.

## Variations and Adjustments

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Here are some ways to vary the game.

If	Then
There's too little time,	Instead of asking participants to respond to the open-ended question, give each person an index card with a prepared response. Also, reduce the number of compare-and-score rounds to four (instead of five).
You find you're getting low-quality responses,	Use prepared responses. Supply participants with sample responses. Ask participants to read a book or a handout before responding to the question. Use the game as a follow up to a lecture.
There are too many participants,	This should not be a major problem since the activity is repeatedly conducted with two people at a time. You may want to use a group of non-playing Game Wardens for crowd control and to help you to efficiently implement the game procedure.
There are too few participants,	Here's an approach for handling small groups (with as few as two participants). Have a packet of prepared responses on cards. Take each participant's response, mix it up with four other prepared cards and give the set of five cards to another participant. Now ask each participant to compare each card in her set to every other card and distribute 7 points as in the original game.

### More Question Examples

- How would you respond to a coworker who tells you an insensitive ethnic joke?
- Here's one version of the Golden Rule: "Treat others as you would like to be treated". How would you rewrite this rule to incorporate current ideas about diversity?
- During the first day in a different time zone, what is one major problem that you are likely to face?
- Given what we've learned today, what is the most important action that we should take?
- What international law would you suggest for combating global terrorism?
- In her book, *Life's 2% Solution*, Marcia Hughes recommends that you commit just 2% of your time—or 30 minutes a day—doing something truly gratifying. What 30-minute task would you recommend to everyone?

- What action idea from the video that you just watched would you immediately implement?
- If you were invited to make a recommendation to a policy committee for the prevention of sexual harassment in your organization, what would you recommend?
- What is one stereotype that most people hold about sub-Saharan Africans?
- If you were contacted by intelligent alien life from another planet, what would be the first question that you would ask?
- What suggestion do you have for talking to someone in English whose first language is different?
- What is a major false expectation held by most people who have been assigned to an overseas job?

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Primary source: Dr. Sivasailam “Thiagi” Thiagarajan, The Thiagi Group, [thiagi.com](http://thiagi.com).

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Peregrine Performance Group, LLC  
631 Fifth Street, Suite 204  
Santa Rosa, CA 95404  
[www.peregrine.us.com](http://www.peregrine.us.com)  
707.324.3122