

# WORD CIRCLE PUZZLES\*

*Thanks to Chip Schlegel*

**Activity Objective:** Arrange given words into a valid circle of connections.

**Facilitated Objective:** communication, commitment (over-commitment), failing forward (trial and error), resilience, active engagement, helping (using “Help” Cards), and resource management

**Needs & Numbers:** You need index cards (any size) and markers to make the Word Circle Puzzle cards (instructions follow). Each player should have at least one card, so you might need more than one set of cards. The puzzles work well with 2 to 40 players.

**Time:** 10 to 30 minutes (depending on puzzle length)

## Puzzles

The basic idea of Word Circle Puzzles is to take a group of single words and link each word with another word so they form a common (or, not-so-common) phrase, word, or other proper arrangement. For example, a common phrase using two words might be “board game” or “finger food.” Common words from two single words might be “infuse” or “weekend.” Examples of card-to-card arrangements include:

- compound words (e.g., catwalk)
- commonly known expressions (e.g., peace out)
- words that commonly occur in sequence (e.g., back stage)
- proper nouns (e.g., Kingpin, Wallace—names can be legal combinations)
- word combinations without the punctuation (e.g., top-secret)

The challenge of Word Circle Puzzles is to connect a group of single words into a continuous circle. Any two adjacent words in the circle combine to form either one single word, a two-word phrase, or another arrangement noted above (reading the circle clockwise—to the right).

For example, take 6 word cards: power, chain, man, plant, mail, and food. The physical arrangement of the cards would be: man, power, plant, food, chain, mail (see picture). In this arrangement, the words create the following combinations:

manpower, power plant, plant food, food chain, chain mail, mailman

To play, create sets of Word Circle Puzzle cards. Some word sets, in the correct answer order, are provided to get you started. Simply write the words on index cards—one word to each card. Or, create card templates on the computer, type in the puzzle words, one to a card, print out the set, cut, and play. Laminate them for long-lasting fun.

---

\* Chip Schlegel introduced Word Circles as a teambuilding activity during a workshop at the National Challenge Course Practitioners Symposium (see [www.leahy-inc.com](http://www.leahy-inc.com) for more about this great gathering). Groups worked together in a variety of ways to solve a word puzzle that culminated into a word circle with no beginning and no end. (The Word Circle Puzzle Starter Kit, including 12 presentation ideas and 18 original puzzles, is available at [www.training-wheels.com](http://www.training-wheels.com). See the [FUNdoing.com](http://FUNdoing.com) blog for lots of free word sets).

### SOMETHING TO CONSIDER

Word Circle Puzzles are biased in connection to who developed the particular puzzle. Sixth graders may not know word combinations adults might know. An east-coaster might not know combinations developed by a west-coaster. A Canadian might not know combinations created by an American. A creative way around this is to divide larger groups into smaller groups that each make up their own puzzle for the whole group to solve. It takes more time, but the process is valuable.



You and your groups can create your own puzzles—another community building activity in and of itself. Just make a list of words that connect together as described earlier.

### Word Circle Puzzles

**5 Card Puzzle:** there, for, ever, more, over (connects to there)

**6 Card Puzzle:** back, band, age, class, work, force (connects to back)

**7 Card Puzzle:** shade, tree, frog, kick, turn, off, night (connects to shade)

**12 Card Puzzle:** bear, cub, scout, group, think, back, hook, shot, put, forward, pass, over (connects to bear)

**13 Card Puzzle:** fall, line, cut, glass, ceiling, fan, club, house, call, sign, over, act, out (connects to fall)

**14 Card Puzzle:** ice, hockey, stick, ball, bearing, wall, clock, radio, station, wagon, wheel, chair, lift, off (connects to ice)

**15 Card Puzzle:** lot, us, age, bracket, creep, feed, stock, pile, driver, ant, acid, test, copy, machine, dry (connects to lot)

**16 Card Puzzle:** straw, vote, down, hill, top, hat, trick, out, side, dish, pan, fry, cook, up, stream, bed (connects to straw)

**17 Card Puzzle:** team, spirit, level, best, man, hole, out, crop, up, scale, down, town, ship, load, line, drive, home (connects to team)

**22 Card Puzzle:** lock, in, flight, deck, chair, lift, off, spring, training, camp, fire, alarm, clock, wise, crack, down, town, house, guest, room, key, pad (connects to lock)

**24 Card Puzzle:** food, bank, run, dry, clean, cut, short, order, form, at, best, man, date, book, lung, power, pack, rat, race, me, an, on, guard, dog (connects to food)

## Procedure

There are a number of suggested setup procedures to choose from, depending on your programming needs. Keep in mind the presentations here are only a few of the many ways to use Word Circle Puzzles.

**Presentation Idea 1:** Hand out 1 or 2 words of the puzzle to each player, making sure each player has at least one word. Tell them each word has another word that follows it. In the end they will have a circle of words with no beginning and no end, and no words left over. (See what they do with these directions.)

**Presentation Idea 2:** Simply give one person in the group all the word cards for the puzzle (maybe someone you want to observe taking on a leadership role; however, this doesn't guarantee this person will lead). Be sure the group understands how Word Circle Puzzles work, and then see what happens.

**Presentation Idea 3:** Hand each person in the group a word from the puzzle. If you have extras, give out a second word to some of the players. Tell the players they each must have at least one word card in their possession at all times, and they can give away any additional word cards.

**Presentation Idea 4:** (Make sure your group understands how Word Circle Puzzles works before trying this idea.) Hand out 1 or 2 word cards to each player making sure each player has at least one word. Ask the group to solve the puzzle without talking. As in Idea 3 each player must have at least one word card in his or her possession at all times—additional cards can be given away.

**Presentation Idea 5:** When you have more word cards than people (no more than 4 extra cards), make sure every player receives a card. Then, place the extra cards on the floor/table, word side down (or you, as the facilitator, can hold on to them). The group can look at any of the extra cards when everyone in the group, by consensus, agrees. Each card may be looked at one time (or more, depending on your group's needs) for 5 seconds.

### NOTE

The challenge level of each Word Circle Puzzle is speculative. Here's how I gauge it at this time. The more "word combination distracters" (WCDs) a puzzle includes, the longer it takes to solve it—making it, timewise, more challenging. A WCD is a combination of two words within the puzzle that work together but are not part of the solution. (The WCD dynamic is interesting to observe. Some players do not like to give up a "safe connection.") So, whether the puzzle has more or less words does not necessarily indicate its challenge level. In most cases, however, the longer puzzles usually have more distracters.

## Safety

There doesn't seem to be any safety issues with Word Circle Puzzles; however, frustration can be a factor. Be sure your group is ready for the challenge level you present.

## Facilitation

The Word Circle Puzzle kit I created also contains "help" cards—"Tell Us One Combina-

tion” and “One Minute with a Dictionary.” I often give these to a group at the start of the challenge (depending on how much help I think they might need), and let them know they can use them at any time without penalty. Interestingly enough, most groups choose not to use them, even when they are stuck. When talking about this during the reflection process, it usually comes down to wanting to solve the challenge “on their own,” they didn’t want help, or they felt it would be cheating. Digging into this, we often find out that help can be a good thing. Sometimes, I remind groups that they have help cards; with other groups, I don’t bring it up again after I hand them out.

### **Observations/Questions**

Instead of specific questions, due to the variety of presentation ideas, here are a number of conceptual areas you could expect to emerge from Word Circle Puzzles:

- The roles players took as they played
- Forms of communication that were used during the activity
- The understanding of the activity and how it changed over time
- Consensus/flexibility with the word combinations
- The energy level of the activity
- Collaboration—asking/giving help
- What success and failure looked/felt like
- Frustration
- Progression of challenge
- Time constraints

*Additional Ideas:*