

SCAPEGOAT

The Game of "Use It Or Lose It"

Players: 3–6 | **Time:** 15–20 Minutes | **Age:** 10+ | **Weight:** Easy to learn, hard to trust

Components: 1 Standard Deck (52 cards)

1. THE CONCEPT

It's the end of the year. Your department must spend its budget exactly—or someone pays the price.

- **Underspend?** Someone gets cut. The weakest performer takes the blame.
- **Overspend?** The person who broke the budget faces the audit alone.
- **Exact Zero?** Suspiciously perfect. Everyone faces scrutiny together.

You're climbing the corporate ladder. As you rise, you gain capacity. Reach the top, and you stop managing the budget—you start setting it.

2. THE GOAL

Everyone begins as **Junior Staff** with a **Hand Size of 4**.

Your goal is to be Promoted until you reach **Hand Size 6**.

- **Promotion:** Hand Size +1
 - **Demotion:** Hand Size -1 (minimum 1)
 - **Victory:** Reach Hand Size 6 and you win immediately.
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3. SETUP

The Year

The budget is divided into **Quarters**. Each Quarter has a target of **20**.

Players	Quarters	Total Budget
3	2	40
4	3	60
5	4	80
6	5	100

Deal

Shuffle and deal **4 cards** to each player.

The Table

Clear the centre. This is where you'll build your Quarters, left to right.

Start Player

Each player reveals one card from their hand. **Lowest** card goes first. Return cards to hands.

- **Rank (low to high):** A – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7 – 8 – 9 – 10 – J – Q – K
 - **Suit (low to high):** ♦ – ♣ – ♥ – ♠
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4. CARD VALUES

Face Up

Play the card face up. Add its true value.

Card	Value
Ace	1
2–10	Face Value
J, Q, K	10

Face Down

Play the card face down. It's worth **10**, no matter what it actually is.

- **Black (♠ ♣)**: Safe. Just padding.
- **Red (♥ ♦)**: Fraud. Creates audit risk.

THE ACE PARADOX

Spending: Aces are worth 1. The safest card to play.

Promotion: Aces beat Kings. The best card to hold.

The Choice: Spend the Ace to survive, or hoard it to win?

5. GAMEPLAY

Play proceeds clockwise. On your turn, play exactly one card to the current Quarter.

Building Quarters

Lay cards left to right, splayed so values are visible. You're trying to fill each Quarter to **20**.

1. **Play:** Add your card to the current Quarter.
2. **Count:** Add its value to the Quarter's total.
3. **Check:**
 - **Under 20:** Quarter stays open. Next player continues.
 - **20 or more:** Quarter closes.
 - Leave your card where it is.

- Any **overflow** (points above 20) carries to the next Quarter.
- Announce: "*Quarter closed. Carry X.*"
- If this was the **Final Quarter**, the round ends immediately.

4. Draw:

Draw back up to your Hand Size.

Overflow Example

Q1 is at 18. You play a 6. Total: 24.

Q1 closes. Your 6 stays there. Next player starts Q2 at 4.

Face Down Example

Q1 is at 14. You play face down (counts as 10). Total: 24.

Q1 closes. The hidden card stays there. Next player starts Q2 at 4.

The Deadline

If play returns to the Start Player for a **third time** (two full trips around the table) and the Final Quarter isn't filled, the round ends as an **Underspend**.

The deadline doesn't reset between Quarters. It's a global limit for the entire year.

6. END OF ROUND

The round ends when the Final Quarter is filled (20+) or the Deadline hits.

Note: Earlier Quarters hitting exactly 20 just close cleanly. Only the Final Quarter triggers special consequences.

OVERTSPEND

Final Quarter finished above 20.

The player who played the final card is the **Scapegoat**.

The Audit:

1. Scapegoat collects all face-down cards from all Quarters.
2. If none exist, the audit passes. Go to Promotion.
3. If any exist, Scapegoat shuffles them and reveals **one** at random.

Result:

- **Red:** Scapegoat is Demoted. Everyone else goes to Promotion.
 - **Black:** Everyone goes to Promotion.
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PERFECT ZERO

Final Quarter finished at exactly 20.

The player who played the final card is the **Closer**.

The Audit:

1. Closer collects all face-down cards from all Quarters.
2. If none exist, the audit passes. Go to Promotion.
3. If any exist, Closer shuffles them and reveals **one** at random.

Result:

- **Red:** Everyone is Demoted. No Promotion this round.
 - **Black:** Everyone goes to Promotion.
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UNDERSPEND

Deadline hit before the Final Quarter was filled.

The department couldn't justify its budget. Someone gets cut.

Procedure:

1. Everyone reveals **one card** from their hand.
2. **Lowest** card is Demoted.
 - Rank (high to low): A – K – Q – J – 10 – 9 – 8 – 7 – 6 – 5 – 4 – 3 – 2
 - Suit (high to low): ♠ – ♥ – ♣ – ♦
3. All revealed cards are discarded. Everyone draws **one card**.
4. No Promotion this round.

The Ace that would've won you a Promotion is now your only protection against the axe.

7. PROMOTION & DEMOTION

Promotion

Only happens when instructed by the resolution above.

1. **Reveal:** Everyone eligible reveals **one card** from their hand.
2. **Compare:** Highest card wins.
 - Rank (high to low): A – K – Q – J – 10 – 9 – 8 – 7 – 6 – 5 – 4 – 3 – 2
 - Suit (high to low): ♠ – ♥ – ♣ – ♦
3. **Resolve:**
 - **Winner:** Discards revealed card. Draws **2 cards**. Hand Size +1.
 - **Losers:** Discard revealed card. Draw **1 card**. Hand Size unchanged.
4. **Victory:** If the Winner reaches Hand Size 6, they win immediately.

Demotion

- Discard **one card** of your choice.
- Hand Size permanently drops by 1.

- You can be demoted all the way to Hand Size 1.
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8. NEXT ROUND

- 1. Clear:** Gather all cards from the table into the discard pile.
 - 2. Reshuffle:** If the draw deck runs low, shuffle the discard pile.
 - 3. Start Player:**
 - If someone was Promoted: they start.
 - If no Promotion: the player who ended the round starts.
 - 4. Reset:** New year. Q1 starts at 0.
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QUICK REFERENCE

Card Rankings

Context	High to Low
Spending	K, Q, J, 10 ... 2, A
Promotion	A, K, Q, J ... 2
Underspend	A, K, Q, J ... 2
Start Player	K, Q, J ... 2, A

Suit (high to low): ♠ – ♥ – ♣ – ♦

Round Endings

Outcome	Trigger	Audit	Demotion	Promotion
Overspend	Final Q > 20	Scapegoat reveals 1	Scapegoat if Red	Yes (minus Scapegoat if Red)
Perfect Zero	Final Q = 20	Closer reveals 1	Everyone if Red	Yes if Black/Clean

Outcome	Trigger	Audit	Demotion	Promotion
Underspend	Deadline	None	Lowest card	None

Turn Summary

1. Play one card
2. Add to Quarter total
3. If Quarter ≥ 20 : close it, carry overflow
4. Draw to Hand Size

DESIGN NOTES

Power is a ladder built from selective accountability.

The Ace Paradox: Your best card for climbing is your safest card for surviving. You can't have both.

The Sacrifice: Every Promotion costs you something. Winners spend their best card. Losers cycle their hands. Nobody coasts.

The Deadline: Hoard too long and the budget catches you. The cards you saved become your only defence.

The Pit: There's no floor. Hand Size 1 means one card, no choices, total vulnerability. You're not eliminated—you're humiliated.

The Memory: Fraud buried in Q1 can surface in the final audit. The system remembers.

Junior Staff (4 cards): Few options. Frequently blamed.

Executives (6 cards): Six times the capacity. They watch, they wait, they win.

The higher you climb, the easier it is to stay clean—and to let everyone below you take the fall.

FAQ

Do Aces count as high or low?

Depends on context:

- Spending: Low (worth 1)
- Promotion: High (beats Kings)
- Underspend: High (saves you)
- Start Player: Low (goes first)

What if I'm at Hand Size 1 and get demoted?

Discard your only card, draw back to 1. Rock bottom, but still in the game.

Where does the overflow card go?

It stays in the Quarter it closed. Only the number carries forward.

Do earlier Quarters hitting exactly 20 trigger Perfect Zero?

No. Only the Final Quarter matters for that.

Can the Scapegoat win Promotion?

Only if the audit passes (Black or no hidden cards). Red means they're out.

Why reveal a low card for Promotion?

To lose on purpose. Sacrifice trash, draw fresh. You're not winning this round—you're setting up next year.

Why play a red card face down?

Speed. Face down always counts as 10. Sometimes closing a Quarter fast is worth the risk.

Does the Deadline reset between Quarters?

No. Two orbits total for the whole year.

Can someone at Hand Size 1 still win?

Yes. Draw an Ace, win a Promotion, climb back. Unlikely, but possible. Nobody's ever truly out.

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