

HOW TO PLAY

THE SECOND NUMBER

Read the machine. Wake the block. Don't become it.

The rules in plain words, with examples.

Part 1 · Learn it in 10 minutes Part 2 · The full game

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Plus a one-page cheat sheet.

West Dayton Edition · a cooperative game for 1-5 players, ages 12+

How to Play The Second Number

A cooperative game for 1 to 5 players, ages 12 and up. Your first game takes about 25 minutes.

This is the easy guide: everything you need to play, in plain words, with examples. The full rulebook (RULES.md) has every detail, but you don't need it to start.

Part 1 · Learn it in 10 minutes

What the game is about

Every deal has two numbers. The **first number** is the one they show you: "\$375 today!" The **second number** is the one they hide: the fee, the deadline, the interest, who's really making money.

You and your friends are neighbors on the West Side of Dayton. Deals keep showing up: payday loans, rent-to-own couches, "free" first months. Behind all of them is one **Machine** that squeezes the neighborhood.

Your job, **together**: learn to read the second number, teach each other, and wake the neighborhood up before the Machine takes it over. Everybody wins together or loses together.

The six words you need

Word	What it means
Read	How well you can read deals in one neighborhood (0 to 3). Read 1 shows the cost. Read 2 shows the deadline. Read 3 shows who's behind it.
Trust	Your energy for helping people. You spend it to teach and to bargain. (0 to 5)
Shady	What you pick up when you take a shortcut. Too much and you go over to the Machine.
Squeeze	How hard the Machine is gripping a neighborhood (0 to 3). At 3, that neighborhood is captured .
Clarity	How awake a neighborhood is (0 to 3). At 3, it's awake , and the Machine can't touch it.
Props	Respect you earn by lifting people up. The player with the most at the end is the table's MVP.

The neighborhoods are called **districts**: Lending, Housing, Labor, Health and Education.

How a deal card works

Every deal card has a **front** that everyone can see, and three hidden layers. You can only read as deep as your Read in that district:

Layer	What it tells you	You need
Front	The pitch: "Rent is only \$950!"	nothing
● Red	The cost. Is it a trap or an honest deal? What does it really cost?	Read 1
● Amber	The clock. The deadline, and what happens when you miss it.	Read 2
● Blue	The connection. Who's really behind it.	Read 3

The red layer also shows the trap's **lever**: the layer you have to be able to read to beat it (red, amber or blue).

On paper, you read the hidden layers through **Grandma's red reading glasses** (the red lens). On the website, you drag the glasses over the card.

Example. The front says "Quick Cash: \$375 today. One flat fee: \$56.25." With Read 1 you see the red layer: "That fee is a 391% yearly rate." Now you know it's a trap.

Your three choices

When you face a deal, you pick one:

Choice	On an honest deal	On a trap
TAKE it	Real help! +2 Trust, +1 Clarity, +1 Props.	The shortcut. It helps the neighborhood right now (–2 Squeeze, or +2 Clarity if there's no Squeeze), but you take +2 Shady .
WALK away	You turned down real help. –1 Trust.	Safe. Nothing happens.
NEGOTIATE (costs 1 Trust)	You haggled away real help.	If your Read reaches the trap's lever, you beat it : –1 Squeeze, +1 Clarity, +2 Props. If not, you got played : +1 Squeeze.

The big idea: seeing a trap isn't the same as beating it. Read 1 tells you it's a trap. To bargain it down, your Read has to reach its lever.

Can't read it at all? At Read 0 you only see the front. Most deals are traps, but walking away from an honest one costs Trust. That's why you study.

The shortcut, and the Fall

TAKE on a trap is really tempting: it's the fastest way to save a district that's about to be captured. But every shortcut puts Shady on you. **At Shady 6, you Fall:** you go over to the Machine, and on your turns the Machine moves through you. Your friends can bring you back.

Before you take a shortcut, **say the price out loud:** "Taking this saves Housing, but I get +2 Shady, and I'm already at 4." Then decide together.

Your first game: the Block Party (25 minutes)

Start here. It uses just three districts, **Lending**, **Housing** and **Education**, and leaves everything else in the box.

Setup. Everyone starts with **2 Trust**, **0 Shady** and **Read 0** everywhere. Put the round marker on round 1.

On your turn, take 2 actions (3 if you're playing alone). Pick from:

Action	What it does
Study	+1 Read in a district. +1 Props.
Face a deal	Draw a deal from a district, read what you can, then TAKE, WALK or NEGOTIATE.
Teach	Give a teammate +1 Read in a district where you read better than they do. Costs 1 Trust. +2 Props.
Gather	Hang out with the block: +2 Trust (up to 5), –1 Shady.

Teaching tip (call and response). When you teach, read a deal's red layer out loud. If your learner says the second number back to you, you each get +1 Props.

After everyone's turn, the Machine strikes. It hits the district that's closest to waking up: **+1 Squeeze** and **–1 Clarity** there. How many times it strikes depends on the round:

Players	Strikes in rounds 1 to 8
1 or 2	0, 1, 1, 1, 0, 1, 1, 1
3	1, 2, 2, 2, 1, 2, 2, 2
4	3 every round
5	4 every round

You win the moment **2 of the 3 districts are awake** (Clarity 3).

You lose if **2 districts are captured** (Squeeze 3), or if round 8 ends.

Shortcuts in the Block Party. Taking a trap gives you 2 Shady chips, and helps a little less (+1 Clarity instead of +2). At 3 chips, hand them back and **sit out your next turn**. Nobody Falls in the Block Party.

When you've won a Block Party, you're ready for the full game.

Part 2 · The full game (45 to 60 minutes)

What's different

- All **five districts**: Lending, Housing, Labor, Health, Education.
- Each player has a **Role** with a special power.
- A **Scenario** sets the starting trouble.
- A hidden **Owner** is running the Machine. Figure out which one it is.
- **Gathering places** (the Commons), each with a bonus.
- **Patterns**: when the Machine grips several districts at once, it gets worse.
- **The Underworld**: the final act, where you expose the Owner.

Setup

1. Pick a **Scenario**. For your first full game, use The Audit or A Quiet Year.
2. Shuffle the 4 **Owner** cards. Put one face-down under the board without looking.
3. Each player picks a **Role**, and starts with 2 Trust, 0 Shady and Read 0 everywhere. (The Elder starts with Read 1 everywhere.)
4. Find your table size:

Players	Actions per turn	Machine strikes per round
1	5	1, 1, 1, then 2 (repeat)
2	3	1, then 2 (repeat)
3	3	3
4	2	1, then 2 (repeat)
5	2	2, then 3 (repeat)

The strikes are printed on the round track, so you don't have to remember them.

The roles

Role	Special power
The Translator	Teaches for free.
The Student	Learns double: +2 Read when taught.
The Elder	Starts with Read 1 everywhere. Once a game, can Teach the History of a district: it wakes up instantly. Read the History card out loud.
The Veteran	Blocks two Machine strikes per game.
The Organizer	Beating a trap drops Squeeze by 2 instead of 1.

A round, step by step

1. **Start of the round:** once per game, you may call **the Cookout** instead of taking turns (see below).
2. **Everyone takes their turn**, one player after another.
3. **The Sou-Sou** (optional): the block can save together (see below).
4. **Check the board:** if all the Clarity on the board adds up to **9 or more**, the Underworld opens.
5. **The Machine moves:** it strikes, it muddies, then the Scenario, the Owner and any Patterns act.
6. **Check:** did you lose? If not, start the next round.

All the actions

Action	What it does
Study	+1 Read in a district. +1 Props.
Face a deal	Draw a deal from a district. Read it. TAKE, WALK or NEGOTIATE.
Teach	+1 Read for a teammate where you read better. 1 Trust (free for the Translator). +2 Props.
Gather at a place	+2 Trust, –1 Shady, plus that place's bonus.
Reach	Bring a Fallen friend home. Costs 2 Trust. They come back with 4 Shady. +3 Props.
Trace a thread	Only after the Underworld opens. Needs Read 3 in an awake district. +2 Props.
Expose	Once you've traced enough threads: you win .

The gathering places (the Commons)

Every time you gather, you go somewhere real on the West Side. You get +2 Trust and –1 Shady, plus:

Place	Bonus
The Barbershop & Beauty Shop	Your next Teach this turn is free.
The Church	–2 Shady instead of –1.
Adventure Central (Wesleyan MetroPark)	Your next Study this turn gives +2 Read.
Gem City Market (the co-op grocery)	Your next deal this turn: draw 2, pick 1.
Grandma's Kitchen Table	Once a game: everyone gets +2 Trust.

What the Machine does

- **It strikes** the districts closest to waking up: +1 Squeeze each, **never the same district twice in one round**.
- **It muddies** your best unfinished district: -1 Clarity.
- **An awake district (Clarity 3) is safe** from the Machine, until the Underworld opens.
- **Patterns:** when every district in a set is at Squeeze 2+ (Housing and Lending: **Redlining**), flip that Pattern card and read it aloud. It squeezes harder each round until you pull one of its districts below 2.

The hidden Owner

One of four Owners is under the board, and it acts from round 1. Watch the board and guess which:

- **The Algorithm:** one extra strike every round.
- **The Lobbyist:** leans on your strongest unfinished district every round.
- **The Debt Buyer:** shortcuts cost 1 more Shady, and anyone carrying Shady loses Trust each round.
- **The Recruiter:** each round, a random player loses 1 Read somewhere.

Coming together

- **The Cookout** (once a game): instead of taking turns, the whole block eats and compares paperwork. Everyone gets +2 Trust, -1 Shady, +1 Props, and catches up to the best reader at the table in one district.
- **The Sou-Sou** (a savings circle): after everyone's turn, each player with Trust may put 1 into the pot. When the pot reaches 4, the next player in the circle uses it to **clear 2 Squeeze** from any district, with no Shady. It's the honest payday loan.
- **The Green Book** (once a game): when a strike would capture a district, open it and that strike lands nowhere, like the guide Black travelers used to find safe routes.

The Underworld: how you win

When the board's Clarity adds up to 9, **flip the Owner card**. Now it fights in the open: an extra strike every round, and it can knock an awake district back down.

To win, **trace 3 blue threads** (2 if you're playing alone). Each thread needs a player with **Read 3** in an **awake** district. Then take the **Expose** action. The block wins.

How you lose

- **2 districts are captured** (Squeeze 3), or
- **everyone has Fallen**, or
- **round 12 ends**.

Scoring

Win or lose, the player with the most **Props** is the one who lifted the most people. You never get Props for taking shortcuts.

How high did you climb before you turned into the thing you were fighting?

Part 3 · Other ways to play

Solo: just you

Finished the book and want to play tonight? Choose **1 player**.

- You get **5 actions** a turn (3 in the Block Party).
- There's nobody at the table to teach, so you **Teach a neighbor**: spend 1 Trust in a district where you have Read 1 or more, and it gets **+1 Clarity** (and you get +2 Props). That's how one reader wakes a whole district.
- You only need to trace **2 threads** to win.

Overlord: one player is the Machine

One player plays against everyone else. There's no hidden Owner: the Overlord chooses the Machine's moves each round (strike, muddy or tempt, which takes 1 Trust), following the same "never the same district twice" rule. The computer can play the Overlord too.

- **Counterfeits**: the Overlord has 3 fake "honest" deals it can slip onto a pile. They look like real help until you have **Read 3**. TAKE one and you're conned (+1 Squeeze, -1 Trust).
- **"Is that your handwriting?"** Once a game, a player may ask the Overlord if they touched the last deal's district this round. It costs 1 Trust, and the Overlord must answer truthfully.

House rules (optional extras)

Turn any of these on once your table knows the game:

- **Fine-print dice**: roll a die to decide where a trap's lever is (1-3 red, 4-5 amber, 6 blue), so nobody can memorize the deck.
- **The Terrell rule**: being taught gives you Read but not protection. If you confront a trap there before the block has your back, it backfires (+1 Squeeze). Gathering anywhere covers you.
- **Endless deals**: the numbers on deals change every time, so you have to do the math yourself.
- **Work it out (the math variant)**: with endless deals, figure out the second number before you look under the glasses. Great for classrooms.
- **Close reads**: one layer short of a trap's lever? Roll a die; a 5 or 6 talks them down.
- **"Render?"**: once (and again after the Cookout), a teammate who reads a district better can read a deal for you.
- **Sign-now clocks** (on by default): some deals push you to "sign now!" Count down from 15. The deadline is always fake: when it runs out, nothing happens.

The campaigns: one story, many games

Play a series of games where what happens carries forward. Each **chapter** is one game with its own setup and twist. Play them in order as one family, or play any chapter on its own.

The Long Ledger follows one West Dayton family across six eras:

Chapter	Era	The twist
1 · Freedom's Ledger	1865-1877	Nobody starts able to read. The Freedman's Savings Bank looks like honest help until Read 3.
2 · Up North	1910s-1940s	The family just arrived: Health and Education open in round 3.
3 · The Map	1930s-1960s	Redlining from day one. Sign the League together to fight back.
4 · Voice	1955-1970	Call the March once a game. Watch for deals meant to buy off organizers.
5 · The Plants Close	1990s-2009	Choose: defend what you built, or let one district go.
6 · Today	2018-	The History your family lived comes back, and the Owner shows every face it wore.

Between chapters, the family keeps:

- **The Family Ledger**, a score from –10 to +10 (wins and awake districts add; losses and captured districts subtract).
- **Stickers** on the districts: woken ones are **Rebuilt** (they start stronger), captured ones are **Scarred** (they start weaker).
- **A Family Decision** after each chapter (go north now or save one more season? stay or move?) that changes the next chapter.
- If you lose a chapter, **the community rallies**: everyone starts the next one with +1 Trust.

Book One follows the novel *The Second Number* in four chapters:

Chapter	The twist
1 · The Chain	A Block Party where every lesson gets passed on to one more person.
2 · The Net	A county job at the Desk: easy Trust, but you can't face deals or teach while you're there.
3 · The Crown	The Overlord offers someone a crown that keeps them from Falling, while everyone else pays for it.
4 · The Empty Throne	Nobody can Expose the Owner until everyone has taught. No single leader.

Playing on paper? Every chapter has a printed **envelope** with its rules page, era deal cards and reference cards. The first chapters include the family sheets and stickers.

Part 4 · Everything the website does

Play free in any browser at the game's website. Nothing to install, no accounts.

- **Learn to play:** a 30-second comic tells the story, then the **Coach** walks your first game with you. It glows on the move it would make and says why. Turn it off any time.
- **Play on everyone's phones:** one device is the table; everyone joins with a four-letter code and plays their own seat. Deal cards stay private on the reader's phone.
- **It saves itself.** Close the tab and pick up exactly where you left off.
- **Sound and access:** sound you can mute; plays with a keyboard alone; reads every move to screen readers; **Plain cards** if the red lens doesn't work for you; colors that work for color-blind players.
- **En español:** switch to Spanish at the bottom of any page. Each phone at a table can choose its own language.
- **Solo, Overlord, the campaigns** and every **house rule** are in the setup screen.
- **The dollar count:** at the end of every game, the points turn back into real money: what the block signed, what it walked away from, and what it stayed out of.
- **How did it go?** An optional three-tap question at the end of a game helps make the game better. No names.
- **Endless deals:** practice reading fresh deals, one at a time.
- **Read your own deal:** type in a real offer (a phone plan, a car loan) and see its second number and its real yearly rate. Nothing you type leaves your device.
- **A block that remembers:** play the full game again as the same block, and the next game starts where this one left off.
- **Family codes:** move a campaign family to another device by copying a short code.
- **Your City editions:** make the game about your own side of town: your neighborhoods, gathering places, local history, local deals, real help nearby, and your own pictures.
- **For teachers:** the **Teacher's guide** (one class period, two printable pages) and the **Teacher's view**, which adds up a whole class's games from short codes students copy at the end. No accounts.
- **Print and play:** free PDFs of the full kit (cards, board, rules) and the teacher's guide, in English and Spanish, and the chapter envelopes (in English).

Cheat sheet

When	What to remember
Reading	Read 1 = the cost (trap or honest?). Read 2 = the clock. Read 3 = who's behind it.
Beating a trap	NEGOTIATE (1 Trust) works only if your Read reaches the lever.
Honest deal	TAKE it. Walking away costs 1 Trust.
The shortcut	TAKE a trap: saves the district now, +2 Shady on you. Say the price out loud first. At Shady 6 you Fall.
Teaching	Read the red layer aloud. If they say the second number back, +1 Props each.
The Machine	Strikes the districts closest to waking (+1 Squeeze), never the same one twice a round. Awake districts are safe until the Underworld opens.
Win (Block Party)	2 of 3 districts awake.
Win (full game)	Clarity adds to 9 → Underworld opens → trace 3 threads (Read 3, awake districts) → Expose.
Lose	2 districts captured · everyone Fallen · out of rounds (8 in Block Party, 12 in the full game).
Once a game	The Cookout · the Green Book · Grandma's Kitchen Table.