

Four Card Code

Solution

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September 7, 2026

Use the first card to give the suit and a starting rank. Use the order of the other three cards to give a number from 1 to 6.

Five cards cannot all have different suits: there are only four suits. Choose two of the same suit. Think of their ranks as numbers around a clock:

$$A, 2, 3, \dots, 10, J, Q, K, \quad \text{then back to } A.$$

In one direction around this 13-position clock, the distance between the two ranks is at most 6. Show the card at the start of that shorter forward journey in slot 1, and hide the card at the end. Thus the hidden card has the same suit as the first card, and is 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 ranks ahead.

There are three cards left to place. Agree beforehand on a way to order *all* cards: for example, by rank first, breaking ties by clubs, diamonds, hearts, spades. Among these three remaining cards, call the lowest *L*, the middle *M*, and the highest *H*.

Put them in slots 2–4 using this code:

Distance	1	2	3	4	5	6
Order	<i>LMH</i>	<i>LHM</i>	<i>MLH</i>	<i>MHL</i>	<i>HLM</i>	<i>HML</i>

Your accomplice reads the suit and starting rank from slot 1, reads the distance from slots 2–4, and counts forward by that many ranks.

Example. Suppose the chosen pair is the 4 and 9 of hearts. Show the 4 of hearts first, hide the 9 of hearts, and put the remaining cards in the order *HLM*, meaning “advance 5.” The accomplice announces the 9 of hearts.

Wrap around when necessary: three steps after a queen are king, ace, two. The method always works; the particular other three cards do not matter.

History and sources: [companion history PDF](#).