

Solving Cryptic Crosswords by Trazom

Cryptic crosswords can seem dauntingly nonsensical at first glance. But the fundamental principles of cryptic clueing are actually quite simple.

Every cryptic clue can be read as a (somewhat) sensible phrase or sentence. In reality, however, it has two separate parts. One is a definition, like those in a standard crossword puzzle. The other part uses some form of wordplay to steer you to the intended answer. It is called the wordplay, the subsidiary indication, or simply the subsidiary. These two parts provide independent indications of the same answer. Either part may come first in the clue. Sometimes a word or two, suggesting how the two parts work together, may come in between; more often, the definition and wordplay will simply occur side by side. In any case, they will never overlap or intermingle.

This means that, with a few exceptions, every clue either begins or ends with a definition of the answer. The catch is that you have to find the break between definition and wordplay. The constructor tries to challenge you with clues whose surface meaning puts you off the scent—for example, with a clue whose parts split in the middle of a common two-word phrase, or by seeming to use a word as a verb that is really meant as a noun. Cryptic clues may also use punctuation in whatever manner seems most likely to deceive; solvers are warned to ignore punctuation (except in two special cases mentioned below).

Cryptic clues generally direct you (albeit deceptively) to the type of wordplay involved. Here is a tour of the eight common types of wordplay, along with hints on how to spot them. The number in parentheses following a clue tells you how many letters are in the clue answer.

In *The Enigma*, non-MW entries (e.g., names from popular culture) are permitted and not tagged. Entries from other MW references (e.g., NI2) are indicated.

I. Anagrams

(known as transposals in the NPL, where “anagram” has a more limited meaning)

Probably the most common cryptic clueing technique is to form the answer by rearranging the letters in a word or group of words as they appear in the clue—making, for instance, *paternal* from *prenatal*, *honestly* from *on the sly*, or *Episcopal* from *Pepsi-Cola*. A wide variety of words can signal an anagram: among them are anything suggesting disorderly, misshapen, drunk, crazy, or simply bad or wrong—also repaired, fixed, shuffled, in motion, and so on. Here is an elementary example:

Inebriated pirates travel about (7)

The wordplay, *inebriated pirates*, tells you to find an anagram of *pirates* that means “travel about.” The answer is *traipse*.

Anagrams may involve more than one word in the clue. For example:

Doctor is venal—get a preacher (10)

This time, the wordplay is an instruction. It tells you to “doctor”, or alter deceptively, the letters in *is venal* get to form a word meaning “preacher”, i.e., *evangelist*. In the example, the dash provides part of the clue’s surface sense and is ignored in the wordplay itself.

2. Charades

As in the flat type (or the game) of this name, an answer can be broken down into two or more words that appear in succession; for example, *consummate* is made up of *con*, *sum*, and *mate*. The subsidiary indication may simply list these words, or their synonyms, in order; components of a charade may also be joined by words like *at*, *by*, *near*, *before*, *after*; or (in Down clues) *on*, *over*, or *beneath*. A simple example:

Growth on the face must be sore (8)

The answer, *mustache*, joins *must* and *ache* ("be sore"). Charades may be composed of more than two words. For example:

Minstrel shows dance, gaining a buck (9)

The answer, *balladeer* (defined by "minstrel"), shows *ball* ("dance") gaining *a deer* ("a buck").

3. Containers

One word is placed within the letters of another word; in *courthouse*, for instance, *thou* is contained within *course*. This technique is signaled by such words as *inside*, *holding*, *swallowing*, *within* (and its deceptive opposite, *without*), and *around*. For example:

Discovered calf in grass (8)

Here the word *veal* (clued by "calf") is in *reed* ("grass") to make *revealed*, defined by "discovered."

4. Reversals

An answer is identified as another word read in reverse—as, for instance, *timer* and *remit*, or *stressed* and *desserts*. This kind of clue is signaled by such hints as *backwards*, *returning*, *heading west*, *from right to left*, or (in Down clues) *upward* or *rising*. For example:

Spies bring silverware back (6)

The clue tells you to bring *spoons* ("silverware") back to get the answer *snoops* ("spies").

5. Homophones

Words that sound the same but are spelled differently, like *through* and *threw* or *bizarre* and *bazaar*, can be the basis of a clue. Look for indicators like *spoken*, *aloud*, or *they say*. For example:

Shakespeare, I hear, is excluded (6)

When you hear *bard* ("Shakespeare"), you get the answer, *barred* ("excluded").

6. Deletions

Some answers are formed by deleting a letter or group of letters from another word—removing the beginning of *islander*, for instance, leaves *slander*, while *deadliness* without its concluding letter produces *deadlines*. The subsidiary may indicate the position of the letter to be deleted with words like *beheaded*, *endlessly*, or (in a Down clue) *topless*; or it may specify a particular letter or letters to be omitted. Here is an example of each type:

Pins: superfluous without an end (7)
Power plant lacks a spiritual leader (6)

The answer to the first clue, *needles*, is *needless* (“superfluous”) without its final letter. In the second clue, *reactor* (“power plant”) lacks *a*; this gives the answer, *rector* (“spiritual leader”).

7. Double definitions

Perhaps the simplest type of wordplay provides a second definition of the answer, preferably in an unrelated sense. For instance:

Holler “Author!” (6)

The answer, *bellow* or *Bellow*, is clued in two different meanings. Often the second definition can be a punning or whimsical one; by convention, such clues are flagged with a question mark. Here is an example:

Oinking tendency? (8)

The answer, *pendant*, is clued normally by “tendency”, and punningly, as *pendant*, by “oinking”.

8. Hidden words

In this type, the answer is printed explicitly in the clue, but camouflaged within another word or other words; look for indicators like *seen in*, *running through*, or *in part*. Here is an example:

Cheese stored in Baroque fortress (9)

The answer, *Roquefort*, is literally stored in the words *Baroque fortress*.

9. Miscellaneous techniques

These examples present cryptic clueing techniques in their pure form. In practice, these types of clues are often combined. For example, a clue may ask you to contain an anagrammed word within another word, or to read a hidden word in reverse.

Another complication: clues often involve individual letters or strings of letters that are not words. So be on the lookout for Roman numerals, compass points, common abbreviations—*left* and *right* indicating *L* and *R*, for instance—or less common ones, which should be hinted at with indicators like *briefly* or *in short*. *Enigma* cryptics stick to MW abbreviations, generally making note of those (NI2 or NI3) not in online MW.

There are also more cryptic ways to indicate parts of words. For example, *The Fourth of July* can mean the letter *Y* (the fourth letter in the word *July*); similarly, *Brahms’ Second* is *R*, *Norwegian leader* is *N*, and *the Heart of Dixie* is *X* (or possibly *IXI*).

10. & lit.

In any case, there will always be a “straight” definition as well as a tricky subsidiary to guide you to the clue answer—with one special exception: sometimes the entire clue is both the definition and the wordplay. An example:

Terribly evil! (4)

The answer, *vile*, is defined by the entire clue. But the clue serves simultaneously as the wordplay, indicating that the answer is *evil* anagrammed (or “terribly”). This is known as an **& lit.** clue (“and literally so”—the term goes back to cryptic

crosswords' British roots). Conventionally, it is marked with an exclamation point; some editors and composers use a question mark or choose not to mark it.

Cryptic crosswords often use a British-style diagram, in which words are separated by heavy black bars instead of black squares.

Many cryptic crosswords feature a theme or gimmick. A puzzle may have special rules for entering clue answers into the diagram, for instance. You may have to reverse the letters or delete letters, for instance. You may have to follow directions that become clear only as you work. The clue answers are distinguished from the diagram entries, or lights.

Guidelines for Composing Cryptic Crosswords

by Sibyl

These are some brief additions to and repetitions from the solving article, which covers almost everything you need. I hope that *Enigma* cryptic crosswords will continue to be adventurous, taking risks and pushing boundaries not necessarily taken or pushed elsewhere.

Diagrams are generally symmetrical, as in regular crossword puzzles; they don't necessarily have black spaces. Entries from 11C, NI3, NI2 are so tagged.

Diagram entries (lights) should be approximately fifty percent checked—approximately two-thirds checked in bar puzzles. (A "checked" letter is one that appears in more than one word.)

Avoid extraneous words. According to British cryptic composer Azed (Jonathan Crowther), a good cryptic clue has three parts:

1. the definition,
2. the subsidiary indication—wordplay—and
3. nothing else

An occasional word beyond that—almost always between the two parts—may be acceptable on behalf of surface sense. Common linking words include *and* and *with*. There may be no indicator, just an implied colon.

Some puzzlers object to one-word clues with two parts (*halfwits* for *WI*, *figurehead* for *F*). However, this kind of clue appears regularly in British cryptics and occasionally in U.S. puzzles.

Indirect anagrams aren't allowed. In the example given above, *inebriated freebooters travel about* would be an indirect anagram: the solver must find the right synonym for *freebooters* (*pirates*) and then anagram that word. This construction is considered too difficult.

These guidelines may be superseded by the themes or gimmicks in puzzles with themes or gimmicks.

See *The Enigma* masthead for the name and address of the current cryptics editor. Be sure to send the clues with their enumerations; a blank, numbered grid; and a separate page (or a separate email) with answers and their explanations. If the diagram entries are different from the answers, send the filled-in diagram as well. Note if any answers are capitalized, not in online MW, or not MW at all.

Some cryptic forms have been published as forms in recent years, to encourage solvers to learn cryptic techniques.

These symbols are commonly used to explain the clues:

*	anagram: traipse*
+	charade: must + ache
()	container: re(veal)ed
(R)	reversal: snoops (R)
" "	homophone: "barred"
[]	deletion: re[a]ctor
(2)	double definition: bellow (2)
(H)	hidden words: roquefort (H)
{ }	additional comments

Note that several types may be involved in a single answer: for example, must* + ache for a transposal of *smut* or *tums* plus charade.

Some Observations on Cryptics by Hot

[an excerpt from his article "Cryptic Thoughts"]

The appeal of a good cryptic crossword stems from the rich, multidimensional web of word relationships and connections. This web has three components: the clues, the diagram, and the puzzle's gimmick (or theme). There is a lot of redundancy here: the clues provide two ways to get the answer, the diagram offers one-half or more checked letters, and the gimmick often provides additional information about some answers.

Cryptics could be too easy, given this wealth of overlapping information. A good puzzle should seem nearly impossible at first, but provide ways to progress that make the solution possible. At first, only some of the web is visible. As the solver advances, each additional part revealed adds to the total available information. The art of construction is to find ways to hinder the solver's progress without making it impossible. There are three parts to this art:

- devious clueing,
- gimmicks that tamper with the usual clueing routine (for example, a letter added or omitted from the wordplay),
- gimmicks that present obstacles to entering the lights into the diagram.

Fairness requires balance. Square-dealing principles and diagram standards help provide a framework for construction. If some information is taken away by the gimmick, more information has to be provided elsewhere. For example, if some words are unclued, information is taken away; but if those words are all related by a common theme, information is given back. If some clues are eccentric, others should be familiar; if an answer is obscure, its clue should not be.

I would like to suggest that the following clueing rule is the only one we need: *the clue must read grammatically and correctly, at both surface and cryptic levels.* This is the essence of "square dealing".