

- » Learning crossword basics
- » Untangling cryptic clues and making a start on a cryptic crossword
- » Finding out the benefits of solving crosswords

Chapter 1

Introducing Cryptic Crosswords

In this chapter, I explain to you the absolute basics of crosswords in general and of cryptic crosswords in particular. I set out the common crossword terminology so you can find your way around the grid with ease, and reveal the anatomy of a cryptic clue (no clues were harmed in the process!). I list the main cryptic clue devices (which are all explained in detail in the subsequent chapters in Part 1), and tell you about indicator words. I even walk you through your first cryptic clue, step by step!

The basic equipment you need to do cryptic crosswords is listed, and I've included a rather handy checklist of my top tips for making a start on any crossword, as well as my top cryptic crossword solving tips. Solving cryptics also provides mental benefits, and I touch on these briefly.

Getting a Handle on Crossword Terminology

A few terms are good to know when discussing crosswords. I'll start with the absolute basics, in case you're not familiar with crosswords at all.

A crossword puzzle consists of a grid of black and white squares, some of which are numbered, and a set of clues placed near the grid. Crossword grids are usually an odd number of squares across and down — common grid sizes are 13×13 and 15×15 .

Tiny *clue numbers* are placed in the corners of some of the squares, at the locations where a word starts. Once you've solved a clue, you write the answer into the grid, starting the word at the corresponding number on the grid. Answers can be entered either horizontally, called *across* entries, or vertically, called *down* entries.

So, for example, the answer to clue '8 across' is written into the grid, with the first letter going in at the white square with the tiny '8' in the corner, and the letters following subsequently across the grid. The clue numbers aren't used for anything else; they simply connect the clue and its answer to the correct position in the grid.

Starting at the corresponding clue number, as with across clues, down clues are written into the grid, from top to bottom.

The white squares of a grid are generally called just that — the *white squares*. The black squares can be called the *darks*, *blanks*, *blocks* or simply the *black squares*. In this book, I use the term *black squares*.

A white square that's part of both an across and a down word is said to be *checked*, *keyed* or *crossed*. A white square that's part of just one word is *unchecked*, *unkeyed* or *uncrossed* (makes a crazy sort of sense!). In this book, I use the terms *checked* and *unchecked*.

Figure 1-1 shows the basic elements of a crossword grid.

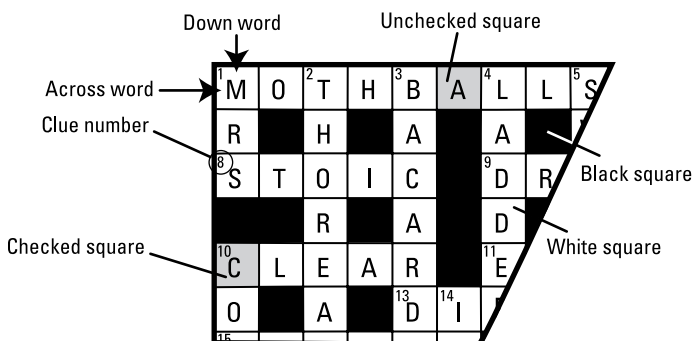


FIGURE 1-1: The basic elements of a crossword grid.



REMEMBER

Some differences exist between the crossword styles popular in different countries. For example, American crossword grids are fully checked, with every white square in the grid being crossed by both an across and a down word. British grids have many more unchecked letters. (See the sidebar ‘Looking at the difference between British- and American-style crosswords’ for more on these different styles.)

The clues for a crossword are usually printed in two columns, one for the across clues and one for the down clues. In cryptics (and many British-style quick, non-cryptic crosswords), the *letter count* is in brackets at the end of the clue, which tells you how many letters are in the answer. Of course, you can discover this information for yourself by counting the relevant squares in the grid. However, the letter count also tells you whether a hyphen is present in the answer, or the answer’s more than one word, which can be very helpful information. These quick clues illustrate these uses of the letter count:

Radiator additive (4-6) = ANTI-FREEZE

Decorative legume (5,3) = SWEET PEA

LOOKING AT THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN BRITISH- AND AMERICAN-STYLE CROSSWORDS

The crossword was invented in 1913 by Arthur Wynne, a British journalist living in New York, and from there it evolved differently in the United States and the United Kingdom. This has led to various differences in these puzzles, depending on where you live.

In England and Commonwealth countries, two varieties of crossword exist: The *non-cryptic* or *quick* crossword, which has definition or synonym clues, and the *cryptic crossword*, which is devious and difficult (and the reason you’re reading this book!).

(continued)

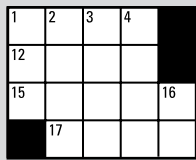
(continued)

The words included in British-style crosswords, both quick and cryptic, tend to be 'normal' words, from a very wide (and occasionally archaic) vocabulary, proper names, the occasional foreign word and some abbreviations. In general, crossword setters try to avoid 'unpleasant' words in their grids — including names of lethal or severe diseases, sexual terms, gory words, swear words or racial slurs. These are thought to be poor form. Many British-style crosswords include a letter count at the end of the clue in brackets.

British-style crossword grids have a higher proportion of black to white squares than American grids. Quick crosswords have around 25 per cent black squares, and cryptic have around 35 per cent black squares. They are based on a sort of chequerboard pattern, with symmetrical grids. (The grid shown in Figure 1-1 is a British-style crossword grid.)

British-style crossword grids are seen worldwide, especially in Commonwealth countries such as Australia, Canada, New Zealand, India and South Africa.

In the United States, a nearly solid 'white' grid, with very few black squares, is most common. American crosswords often include brand names, abbreviations, slang, foreign words, sections of phrases, suffixes, prefixes and even word fragments. The grid structure dictates this sometimes odd assortment of letters — creating a completely overlapping grid of words is very hard, after all! The figure included with this sidebar shows a section of an American-style crossword grid.



American crosswords often have a theme and a title, which provides a clue to the theme. Generally the three to five theme entries are the longest words in the puzzle, and are placed symmetrically within the grid. American clues are quite varied, ranging from straight definitions to puns, quasi-cryptic clues and plenty of hard 'quiz' clues. While the straight definition clues are basically the same style as British quick

(non-cryptic) crossword clues, the other varieties of clues often trip up those who aren't used to them! American clues don't have the letter count at the end — which generally makes the clue more difficult, because you don't get an indication of whether the answer contains more than one word, or whether it's hyphenated.

While a few newspapers in the United States do publish cryptic crosswords, they're rare. American cryptics also use the British-style grid, with a higher proportion of black squares. This has led to a misconception in America that only cryptics have this sort of grid.

Both American and British crosswords have sets of rules that setters have to follow: The grids need to be symmetrical, and one- and two-letter words aren't allowed. On top of this, many other clue-writing conventions also exist.

Neither the American nor British crossword is better or worse than the other; they're just different and both styles are challenging in their own ways. One thing to keep in mind when solving cryptics is that you don't need quite as many checked letters, because every cryptic clue provides two ways of finding the answer!

Understanding Clues and Discovering Answers

I know that cryptic clues look impenetrable when you first see them, and, to be honest, this is what the clue setter is trying to achieve!

When you first read a cryptic clue, the initial meaning seems very strange. This *surface meaning* is intended to mislead and distract you — but not permanently. The tussle between clue writer and clue solver is meant to be a friendly competition, but one that's always weighted in your favour. After all, the clue setter wants you to solve the crossword — eventually!

Your task is to see beyond the distracting surface meaning and look for the true meaning of each clue. A key factor in uncovering this true meaning is learning to read a clue word by word. This involves looking at every single word and assessing what each word might mean in the clue, one by one, rather than reading the clue as a little sentence or phrase.

As well as breaking the clue down into its individual words, some other general principles can be applied to most clues. In the following sections, I provide lots of tips on breaking clues down and getting started on working out answers.

Dissecting cryptic clues

Each cryptic clue is basically a very concise mini-puzzle. A cryptic clue contains a *definition* and a bit of *wordplay*. Yes, that's right. Cryptic clues contain the definition of the answer, in plain sight, such as you'd find in any quick, non-cryptic, crossword clue. However, cryptic clues also include other elements to point you in the right direction.

Finding the definition within the clue

The definition may be disguised somewhat, but, trust me, it's there! It usually resides at the start or end of the clue (not in the middle). A major key to cracking cryptics is to locate the definition within each clue.



REMEMBER

The definition part of a cryptic clue may not be an exact dictionary synonym for the answer — it may be a bit of a tangent away from that. It does have to be a fair definition, though, and has to match the part of speech of the answer (so a plural answer has to have a plural definition, for example).

The definition part of the clue may be similar to a regular non-cryptic crossword clue, such as *old vehicles* = TRAMS, or it may require a bit more of a stretch of the imagination, such as *they would be good for picnics* = SANDWICHES, which (while it's the definition section of a cryptic clue) isn't a dictionary definition for sandwiches.

Sometimes a definition in a cryptic clue presents you with an example of something and you need to extrapolate back from this example to the definition (these sorts of definitions are used in non-cryptic crosswords, too).

These sorts of clues often have *perhaps*, *for instance* or *for example* in the clue wording as well, and tend to work best where the answer is the name of a group of things. For example, BIG CAT could be defined in the clue as *lion, perhaps*, and MOUNTAIN could be defined as *Olympus, for example*.

At its most tangential, a river may be defined as a *flower* (it's something that *flows*, so therefore it's a *flow-er* — you may now groan!). So be prepared to look a little further afield for meanings or synonyms for the definition section of the clue, because the answer may not be the most obvious word that first comes to mind (and is likely to be more devious and obscure in harder cryptics).

The definition part of the clue may also suggest, say, a noun on the surface reading, but in fact be defining a verb. For example, *chip* in a clue may read initially as a noun meaning 'potato chip', but the setter is defining an answer that's actually a verb, meaning 'break off'.

Having fun with some wordplay

The wordplay part of the clue is (hopefully!) where the fun comes in. The setter may have used an anagram, reversed the letters or used some other device as another way of getting to the answer. You may also see the wordplay section of the clue referred to as the *subsidiary indication*, or just *subsidiary*, in various places.

Solving the wordplay side of the clue should give you the same answer as provided by the definition part of the clue. This means you get confirmation right away that you've got the right answer — something I love about cryptic clues. The wordplay and the definition should both lead to the same answer, and you get that satisfying 'Ah haaa!' moment.



TIP

Because each cryptic clue contains the definition and a bit of wordplay, once you've figured out which part of the clue is the wordplay element, the remainder of the clue can automatically be pinned down as the definition, and vice versa.

Roughly eight main types of wordplay devices are used in cryptic clues, as follows:

- » Anagrams (Chapter 2)
- » Charades, or linked words (Chapter 3)
- » Containers, or words inside other words (Chapter 4)
- » Subtractions (Chapter 5)
- » Reversals (Chapter 6)

- » Homophones (Chapter 7)
- » Double definitions (Chapter 8)
- » Hidden words (Chapter 9)

Looking out for indicator words

Along with the definition and some wordplay (refer to the preceding sections), many cryptic clues also include *indicator words*. These vital words are pointers to the sort of wordplay device involved, and give you some help on how best to solve the clue. For example, anagram indicators are words included in the clue like *stirred*, *mixed up*, *broken*, *cooked*, *muddled* and *confused* — words that indicate you need to alter the letter order of some of the words in the clue to get the answer.



TIP

Setters make the indicator words fit the clue. If they're writing a clue that has a surface meaning related to, say, motor racing, they choose indicator words that tie in with this theme — so an anagram indicator in such an automotive clue is likely to be something like *crashed*, *smashed up* or *broken down*, rather than *stirred* or *cooked*, for example.



REMEMBER

Setters try their best to disguise indicator words, and your task as the solver is to figure out the separate elements within a clue — that is, which words are the indicators, which are other parts of the wordplay and which are part of the definition.

Understanding linking words, punctuation and abbreviations

Even the small words and punctuation used in cryptic clues can be important — or an attempt to slow you down! Abbreviations are also widely used in cryptic clues, and are a common cause of confusion and frustration among new solvers.

Cryptic clues may have *linking words* in them, which help the clue to read well, and connect the definition and the wordplay to each other. These are generally short words (prepositions and conjunctions) and phrases such as *a*, *and*, *can be*, *causing*, *from*, *gets*, *has*, *in*, *is*, *provides*, *reveals*, *showing*, *with* and *yielding* (among many others). Not all clues have them, and setters and newspapers have different standards and preferences about their use, so depending on whose crosswords you're solving, you may come across these a lot, or not often at all.

Properly used, linking words should serve some function within the clue, usually giving a sense of equality (this equals that, so words such as *is*, *has* or *with* could be used), or showing that one part of the clue results in the other (with words such as *causes*, *yields* or *reveals* used).

Another thing to be aware of is punctuation in clues — it's generally there to confuse you, and make the superficial meaning read better. In general, it's safe to ignore it. You can also ignore any accents or other marks on letters. A question mark can sometimes indicate a need to think a bit more laterally, or indicate a particularly devious pun! And an apostrophe s ('s) may actually be an abbreviation of *is* or *has*. More on this in Chapter 2.

Cryptic setters often need to come up with ways of adding one or two letters to the wordplay. Rather than just saying 'Add an N' (that would be too easy, wouldn't it?!), they prefer to say 'Add an abbreviation for north'. Getting to grips with the hundreds of cryptic abbreviations is an essential part of learning to solve cryptic clues. Many abbreviations are obvious, and can be found in any dictionary (such as the chemical elements and common uses, such as *left* = L), but many are much less obvious (*excellent* = AI, because it looks like A1) or dated. I discuss abbreviations in more detail in Chapter 10.



REMEMBER

You may sometimes come across less common and harder sorts of grids and clues, particularly in British crosswords. These include barred grids, which have thick bars instead of black squares, and 'complete the obscure literary quotation' clues. I don't cover these rarer cryptic devices in detail in this book. If you really get into cryptics and want to take your solving to a higher level, I've provided a list of good resources for furthering your education in Chapter 18.

Putting it all together

Launching into a real cryptic clue can help you get a feel for the different elements within the clue. Take, for example, the following:

A headless brain drops (4)

On first reading, the setter (who me?!) is trying to make you imagine a squishy disembodied brain splatting onto the ground. This is the *surface meaning* — the first impression you get when reading a clue. Try to put this imagery out of your mind!

In this case, the definition is *drops*, and the wordplay is *headless brain*. The clue should be read as, ‘A *brain* without its *head* (that is, its first letter) also means *drops*’. Another trick in this clue is that *drops*, which you might at first read as a verb (meaning ‘falls’), is actually a noun, as in ‘drops of water’. Can you see the answer? Yes, it’s RAIN (BRAIN without B). That wasn’t too bad, was it?

Getting started on the grid

As with most things in life, before you launch into solving cryptic crosswords, you should get yourself organised and do some planning.

Gathering your equipment

Before you tackle a cryptic crossword, gather your equipment (it won’t take long!). The first thing you need is your brain — which is attached, so that one’s easy.

Even the most experienced solvers make mistakes on cryptics, so a pencil and eraser are advisable.



TIP

I love using an erasable pen, because I find the darker ink easier to read than pencil, and it’s still easy to correct errors. Plus you can look cool — ‘Yeah, I do cryptics in ink!’ — just don’t reveal your secret!

Scrap paper is always handy. You need a place to work out anagrams and write down your ideas about clues.

You’re likely to find some reference books very helpful — have a dictionary, thesaurus, crossword dictionary, and possibly a phrase book or two with the basics of languages like French, Italian, Spanish and German close at hand. Knowing the addresses of certain websites and online solving aids is also helpful.



TIP

Crossword dictionaries are particularly useful when solving cryptic crosswords. Apart from providing lists of synonyms, they include commonly used abbreviations, lists of cryptic indicators, foreign terms and lists of many other things (from constellations and rivers to characters from Shakespeare’s works) sorted by letter length.

DISCOVERING THE HISTORY OF CROSSWORDS

Word grid puzzles have been around for thousands of years, but crosswords as we know them today are only about 100 years old. The first crossword was published in 1913 by Arthur Wynne, a British journalist living in New York. He was the chief editorial writer for the *New York World*, and part of his job was to come up with a page of puzzles for the Sunday edition of the paper. On 21 December 1913, he published his newest puzzle invention, entitled 'Word-Cross Puzzle'. It was a diamond-shaped grid, with a clear centre, without any black squares (so all the letters in all the words overlapped, or were checked). A few weeks later a typesetter at the newspaper made a mistake, and titled it a 'Cross-Word' — and this name has stuck ever since. Later on, Wynne added the black squares, and it started to look like the puzzle we all know today.

Wynne's new puzzle quickly became very popular in the United States, but it took nine years for it to cross the Atlantic and appear in the United Kingdom. This happened in 1922, in *Pearson's Magazine*. The first *Times* crossword (that bastion of difficult cryptic crosswords!) was printed in February 1930.

Crosswords became so wildly popular that in the 1920s they were even deemed to be a public menace! The craze for solving these puzzles led to dictionary damage in libraries, and made (according to the *Tamworth Herald*, in 1924) 'devastating inroads on the working hours of every rank of society'. Some libraries took to blacking out the crosswords in their newspapers to stop readers from hogging the papers. Crosswords were even blamed as 'the final blow to the art of conversation' and for breaking up homes — you have been warned!

Nowadays, finding a newspaper that doesn't include at least one crossword is rare. Thousands of websites are devoted to crosswords. Many newspapers and other providers are heading into the future with online puzzles that can be either printed out from a website or solved interactively on your computer or mobile device. Certainly, no sign exists of any reduction in the crossword's popularity!

These sorts of reference books and crossword dictionaries are especially useful when you're first learning about solving cryptics — before long, you won't need to rely on them quite as often. I discuss helpful websites, apps and books in Chapter 18, and provide lists of some abbreviations and other resources in the Appendix.



REMEMBER

I use resources such as dictionaries and phrase books when I'm *creating* cryptic crosswords, so I see no reason why you shouldn't use them in *solving* them. It certainly isn't cheating. The *minority* of solvers don't use references. Solving cryptics is an ongoing educational experience, and meant to be fun, after all. Unless you're actually in a cryptic crossword competition, where reference books are banned, go for it!

Planning your attack

So, you've got your brain, tools, reference books and websites to hand. What next? Here are my tips for making a start on any crossword, whether cryptic or quick:

- » Don't try to do the clues in order. The order you solve the clues in doesn't matter, and any answer you can put into the grid makes it easier for you to solve the words that cross over. Read through all the clues and see if any jump out at you as being something you think you can answer.
- » Draw a hyphen or bar on the grid when a clue's letter count shows the answer is hyphenated or more than one word (see Figure 1-2).
- » Check out the letter count, looking for shorter or very long words. Shorter words can be the easier words to guess, but so too can long words, because they have fewer possible solutions.
- » Look for clues where the answer looks like it may be a plural. Pencil in an S at the end of these clues. They may, of course, be an irregular plural (like MICE, FUNGI or DATA), but putting the S in might help.
- » If you have some checked letters (especially less common letters like K, Y, J, Z, V and W), see if you can just guess the word that goes into the space. If you have K_A_ _ for instance, a few options are KHAKI, KNACK, KNAVE, KOALA, KRAAL (an enclosure for stock or an enclosed village), KRAIT (a snake) and KRAUT (Sauerkraut).

- » If you're tackling a crossword online, use the 'hint' or 'cheat' function to reveal one or two of the longer words, which cross over the starting letters of other words. If solving a puzzle in a book, have a sneak peek at the answers, and pick out one or two long words to fill in. Having initial letters can really help.
- » If an answer you're pencilling in to the grid results in an awkward letter pattern in the crossing-over word, your answer may be wrong, sad to say. For example, not that many words start with X, V doesn't appear before S within words, and practically no words end with J. This sort of information can help you restrict the possible answers for a clue.
- » If you're very stuck on a clue, leave it for a while, even overnight. You may be surprised at what your subconscious can do. Often the answer suddenly seems completely obvious, after a break. And remember — this is supposed to be fun!
- » Crosswords in newspapers often get harder as the week goes on, so make a start with Monday and Tuesday puzzles, and avoid the weekend ones until you're more proficient.

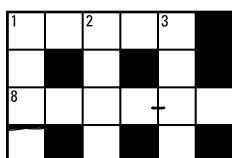


FIGURE 1-2: Mark on the grid where words are hyphenated (8 across) or the answer consists of two words (1 down).



TIP

Here's a list of tips specifically for solving cryptic crosswords:

- » The longest words in a cryptic crossword often use anagrams in their clues.
- » The definition of the answer is in the clue, usually at the start or end of the clue. Locating the definition is an important step! Also keep in mind that the definition itself may be a little obscure, and not an obvious dictionary definition or exact synonym.
- » If you think you know what the answer may be (just from the definition), see if you can work backwards from it to figure out whether the wordplay section of the clue fits your answer.

- » Ignore the obvious 'surface' reading of the clue and instead look for the hidden meaning.
- » Look at each word in the clue one by one, rather than together as a sentence. Don't ignore a single word!
- » Ignore most punctuation, and all capital and accented letters in clues. Keep in mind that one or two words in the clue may lead to an abbreviation.
- » The definition has to match the part of speech and tense of the answer. So if the clue seems to be indicating a past tense verb, the answer should be a past tense verb as well. The same goes for plurals and so on.
- » Use a thesaurus to look for synonyms for words near the start or end of a clue — you can often stumble upon the answer this way and then figure out what the cryptic wordplay means after the fact. This is a perfectly acceptable strategy!
- » When you're first learning about cryptics, stick with one setter or series. Every setter writes clues slightly differently, and you're likely to be more successful if you get to know *one* setter's style and idiosyncrasies well, rather than trying a wide range of puzzles from lots of different newspapers and setters.
- » Practice and practice and practice. No book (no, not even this one) can enable you to instantly master this difficult puzzle genre. Solving cryptics takes practice. Practice daily if you really want to master them completely, and practice weekly if you're keen to be able to solve them well. As much as I'd love to have you grasp everything in this book rapidly, the reality is, if you're new to cryptic crosswords, there is a great deal to learn. With practice, and with the help of this book, you can improve — just don't expect it to be immediate.

Refer to the section 'Dissecting cryptic clues' for more on working through cryptic clues.

Benefiting from Crosswords

Despite initially having been blamed for most of society's ills (refer to the sidebar 'Discovering the history of crosswords' for more on this), crosswords in general are a fantastic way to

improve your vocabulary, and cryptic crosswords in particular can improve much more than this. Solving cryptics uses your lateral-thinking skills, and develops your puzzle-solving skills. You need to look for alternative meanings beyond the surface meaning of the clues, think of all possible interpretations and meanings of each word in a clue, and become widely read in a host of areas.

While research has shown that physical exercise has many benefits — physical and mental — as you age, ‘intellectual exercise’ has been shown to be very valuable as well.

EYEWITNESSES AND CRYPTICS

In a fascinating piece of unusual research published in 2006, Dr Michael Lewis at the School of Psychology at Cardiff University studied the effects of reading and solving Sudoku, regular non-cryptic crosswords and cryptic crosswords on people who then were asked to identify faces in a staged identity parade. He was interested in seeing whether these ‘time-filling’ tasks (which are often done by people waiting to be called upon in these situations) would affect the accuracy of participants’ performance.

In a very unexpected result, Lewis found that doing cryptic crosswords had a significant impact on the subjects’ ability to carry out their facial recognition tasks, with much poorer results — while the other three activities didn’t have this effect (and were roughly equal).

Lewis suggests that this may be something to do with the mental effort of suppressing the immediate and obvious meaning of the words in the clues, and that this ‘suppression of the obvious’ may also affect face recognition in the brain — however, exactly what’s going on isn’t clear. Some other tasks, such as describing an object a few minutes before doing the same identity parade tasks, also have a similar effect.

One lesson can be taken from this — if you’re ever called upon to pick someone out in an identity parade, steer clear of the cryptics!

Some studies show that the risk of developing dementia, including Alzheimer's disease, may be reduced by such activities as solving crosswords, reading and playing card games. One important aspect that has been discovered about this sort of 'mental training' is that if you want to improve a particular function, such as your memory, you need to do activities that practice that skill, such as concentration and memory games. So, if you're keen to improve your lateral-thinking skills, vocabulary, general knowledge and reasoning, cryptic crosswords are the perfect medicine!