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Chapter 1

Introducing Cryptic Crosswords

In this chapter, I explain to you the absolute basics of cryptic crosswords. 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. (Stunt clues were used, never fear!) I list the main cryptic clue devices, with brief explanations, and tell you about indicator words.

I've also included a rather handy checklist of my top tips for making a start on any crossword, as well as my top cryptic solving tips.

Getting a Handle on Crossword Terminology

There are a few terms that are good to know when discussing crosswords.

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.

A letter in the grid that's part of both an across and a down word is said to be *checked*. A letter that's part of just one word is *unchecked*.

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

In cryptics, the letter count is in brackets at the end of the clue; this tells you how many letters are in the answer. The letter count also tells you whether a hyphen is present in the answer, or the answer contains more than one word, which can be very helpful information.

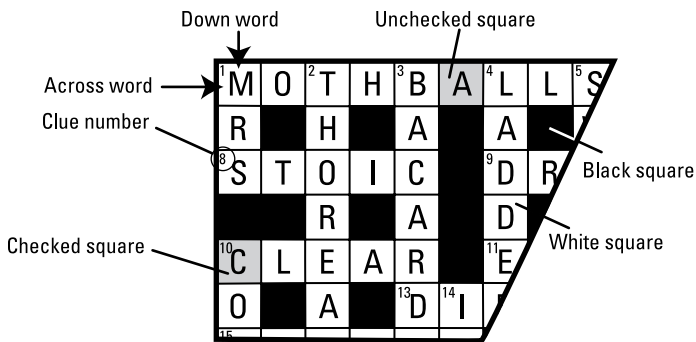


FIGURE 1-1: The basic elements of a crossword grid.

Understanding Clues and Discovering Answers

The initial surface meaning you get when first reading a cryptic clue is intended to mislead you — but not permanently. The tussle between clue writer and clue solver is meant to be a friendly competition, always weighted in your favour. After all, the setter does want you to solve their clues — eventually!

Your task is to see beyond the distracting surface meaning and look for the true meaning of each clue. You need to look at every single word in the clue, one by one, to see what they might mean within the clue, rather than reading the clue as a phrase.

As well as breaking the clue down into its individual words, some other general principles can be applied to most clues to help you. In the following sections, I provide 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, you heard 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 of the answer.

Finding the definition within the clue

The definition may be disguised somewhat, but, trust me, it's there! It 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 off at a slight tangent to it. 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 a straight synonym for the answer, or it may require a bit more of a stretch of the imagination, such as *they would be good for picnics* = SANDWICHES, which clearly isn't a dictionary definition for sandwiches.

Sometimes a definition in a clue presents you with an example of something, and you need to extrapolate the definition from this example. These clues often have *perhaps*, or similar in the clue wording.

So be prepared to look a little further afield for meanings or synonyms for the definition in the clue, because the answer may not be the most obvious word that comes to mind.

The definition part of the clue may also suggest, say, a noun on the surface reading, but in fact be defining a verb.

Having fun with wordplay

The wordplay part of the clue is (hopefully!) where the enjoyment comes in.

Solving the wordplay side of the clue should give you the same answer 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 then you get that oh so 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.

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

- »» Anagrams
- »» Charades, or linked words
- »» Containers, or words inside other words
- »» Homophones, or words that sound like other words
- »» Reversals
- »» Deletions
- »» Double definitions
- »» Hidden words

At the end of this chapter I give you a very brief run-down on what each clue device is. For a proper discussion about these devices, please see my other book *Solving Cryptic Crosswords For Dummies*.

Looking out for indicator words

Along with the definition and some wordplay, many cryptic clues also include indicator words. These vital words indicate the sort of wordplay device involved.

For example, anagram indicators are words included in the clue like *cooked*, *damaged*, *insane* and *mixed up* — words that indicate you need to alter the letter order of some of the words in the clue to get the answer.



WARNING

While indicator words often highlight the existence of a word-play device in a clue, they may also be a perfectly ‘innocent’ part of a totally different type of clue, such as the definition. Remember to think of all possibilities when working on clues!

Getting a handle on linking words and punctuation

Even the small words and punctuation used in cryptic clues can be important — or an attempt to slow you down!

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 and phrases such as *a*, *and*, *can be*, *from*, *gets*, *has*, *in*, *is*, *reveals*, *with* and *yielding* (among many others). Not all clues have them, however, so depending on whose crosswords you’re solving, you may come across these a lot, or not often at all.

Linking words usually give a sense of equality (this equals that), or show that one part of the clue results in the other. Keep in mind, though, that a word that looks like a linking word might be another part of the clue, such as part of the definition, or anagram fodder.

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. A question mark can sometimes indicate a need to think a bit more laterally. An apostrophe s (’s) is often an abbreviation of *is*.

Appreciating abbreviations

Abbreviations are widely used in cryptic clues, to add one or a few letters to the wordplay. Thousands of words can be used as ‘abbreviation indicators’. Most of these are abbreviations you are familiar with, such as *right* = R and *east* = E. However, many are more unusual. For example, *first* = IST, because it looks a bit like 1st. There is a list of some abbreviations in Chapter 2. Getting the common abbreviations under your belt will really help you crack the cryptic code!

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:

Knave's wild dog is missing Al (4)

On first reading, I'm trying to make you imagine a villain's wild dog pining for his mate, Al. This is the surface meaning — try to ignore this imagery!

In this case, the definition is *Knave*, and the wordplay is *wild dog is missing Al*. The clue should be read as, ‘A *wild dog* without *Al* also means *knave*.’ Can you see the answer? Yes, it's JACK (JACKAL without AL).

Planning Your Attack

Here are my tips for making a start on any crossword:

- » Don't try to do the clues in order. Any answer you can put into the grid makes it easier for you to solve the words that cross over.

- » Draw a hyphen or bar on the grid when a clue's letter count shows the answer is hyphenated or more than one word.
- » 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 as they have fewer possible solutions.
- » Look for clues where the answer looks like it may be a plural and pencil in an S at the end of these clues.
- » If an answer you're pencilling in to the grid results in an unlikely letter pattern in the crossing-over word, sorry to say, but your answer may be wrong.
- » If you're very stuck on a clue, leave it for a while. Often the answer suddenly seems completely obvious, after a break!



TIP

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

- » The definition of the answer is in the clue, either at the start or end of the clue.
- » 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.
- » Look at each word in the clue one by one, rather than together as a sentence. Don't ignore a single word! Many words indicate abbreviations, and lead to one or two letters (such as *north* = N).
- » It's generally safe to ignore most punctuation and all capital letters in clues.

- » The definition has to match the part of speech and tense of the answer.
- » Use a thesaurus to look for synonyms for words near the start or end of a clue.
- » Practise and practise and practise. This is a difficult puzzle genre, it takes time to improve.

Touching on Cryptic Devices

There isn't room here to go into the workings of each cryptic device in detail (see *Solving Cryptic Crosswords For Dummies* for in-depth explanations and practice crosswords). However, I have put together this little list to help you remember the basics of each clue type, and what sort of words are used as indicators for each device.

Anagrams

The letters to be jumbled up (the fodder) are in plain view in the clue. Abbreviations can be included in the fodder. Indicators give a sense of being awkward, broken, confused, jumbled, mad, mixed, rebuilt, sick and so on. The longest words in a grid often have anagram clues.

Charades

One part comes after another in order, adding up to give the answer and abbreviations are often used.

Indicator words are not generally found in these clues; when used, they give a sense of things being added on, or coming one after the other. This is a very common clue device, and it is often used in conjunction with other devices.

Containers

This is another very common cryptic device, and can be used in combination with other devices. One word, or set of letters, is put inside another word or set of letters. Indicator words give a sense of insertion or containment, or of being put inside or within something else.

Homophones

Homophones are a less common cryptic device, and a crossword may have none, or just one or two.

The answer sounds the same as a different word, but they are spelt differently and mean different things. Indicators include words that give a sense of things being spoken, broadcast, noisy, or listened to.

Reversals

A whole word, or a set of letters, is reversed to form another word, or part of a word in these clue types. Indicators of reversals are words that give a sense of things being reversed, backwards, sent back, and so on. This is a common cryptic device, and often used in conjunction with other devices.

Deletions

With this device, letters are deleted from words to get to the answer. Indicators are words that give a sense of something being cut off, lost, removed, and so on. Letter position can also be indicated with words such as head, finally, middle, borders, half, and so on.

This is a very common device, and is often used in conjunction with other cryptic devices.

Substitutions are a rarer form of deletions, where one letter is substituted for another. Indicator words such as for, instead of, replacing, and so on are used.

Double definitions

These clue devices present two definitions for the same word, one after the other. No other wordplay is used, and they can be very short.

Double definition clues don't usually have indicator words, apart from a few words like and, but, for, gives, makes, or, and that.

Hidden words

This is a less common clue device. Hidden word clues have the answers within the clue, in plain view. The answer is hidden amongst the letters of words in the clue. Sometimes the words are hidden as alternating letters. Indicator words give a sense of containment.

Abbreviations

Abbreviations are widely used in all cryptic crosswords. Many words in cryptic clues lead to abbreviations of one or a few letters. Looking up single letter entries in a dictionary will reveal many of them. Learning the commonly used cryptic abbreviations will help your skill in solving cryptics enormously.

