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A GUIDE TO READING AND SOLVING CRYPTIC CLUES

1 - Introduction

Some crosswords are tests of your 'general knowledge'. Some are 'concise' type where you find new words that mean the same as the given clue.

What we will be looking at here, however, are 'cryptic' type crosswords, where you are given an assortment of words and ideas to play around with to get your solution.

With these, typically only part of the clue will define the answer you are looking for, the rest gives building blocks and hints on how to tease out an answer.

The word 'Cryptic' means hidden ...

cryptic adjective

cryp-tic | \ 'krip-tik \

Definition of cryptic

- 1 a : having or seeming to have a hidden or ambiguous meaning : MYSTERIOUS
// cryptic messages
// cryptic prophecies
- b : marked by an often perplexing brevity
// cryptic marginal notes
- 2 : serving to conceal
// cryptic coloration in animals
also : exhibiting cryptic coloration
// cryptic animals
- 3 : not recognized
// a cryptic infection
- 4 : employing cipher or code

(Taken from the Merriam Webster Dictionary)

The emphasis is very much on the 'hiding away' of the answer, use of 'codes'.

Perplexing, ambiguous, hindering recognition ...

For anyone who likes a word puzzle, a single cryptic crossword will give you a whole assortment of them. Newspapers have been featuring crosswords for over 100 years. All word puzzles are reputed to be good for deferring dementia and increasing vocabulary; cryptic versions are reckoned to improve lateral thinking and creativity too. But mostly it is just for the fun of the challenge.

There are a whole variety of different clue types ...

These notes are an introduction to some of the typical of wordplays and tricks that a cryptic crossword setter might use; hints on what to look out for, and examples with solutions. Subsequent chapters will look at specific types of clues in turn, with samples to try for yourself.

Here is a first example of a cryptic crossword clue

Fuel company with a shortfall finally (4)

Cryptic clues, on the surface, look like a single, although often quite complicated, sentence. This is followed by a number to indicate how many letters long the required answer is, and also whether its a single word or multi-word phrase.

E.g. (10), (4,3,4), (6-6) indicate a 10 letter word, a three word phrase, or hyphenated answers respectively. The clue above needs a 4 letter single word solution.

The first thing to understand is that only part of a cryptic clue is the 'definition' of what the answer will be. The rest are 'ingredients' to mess around with to uncover your solution; words to rearrange or translate or somehow assemble into a new combination. The definition will typically be at the start or the end of the clue.

If you simply read the clue as a complete sentence, then in 99% of cases it will make no sense whatsoever, and not help in the slightest at getting an answer. This takes some getting used to if you have done only general knowledge or concise crosswords previously !! But once you get used to the idea, it can be helpful because really you've got two clues in one, both leading to the same answer.

In this example, the definition *could* be the first part - fuel or fuel company maybe - or could be the last bit - finally or shortfall finally. This is what you need to pick out. The rest is building blocks to get to a word or phrase that fits this definition.

In this case, what you have is a solution built up of different elements, taking these out from the ingredients and then chaining them together. The word **'with'** is a bit of hint that this will be the case.

CO is a common abbreviation for Company

With A - literally with the letter A tagged onto this, and

Shortfall finally to give you L - indicating to use the final letter of the word shortfall.

CO + A + L gives you the word Coal, which is a type of fuel, so fuel is the definition.

You've found a word that both fits the definition AND relates to the rest of the clue, so ...

Clue Solved ✓ .

Different Clue Types

This example above however is just one format of cryptic clue - referred to as a 'chain' clue or a 'charades' clue - (like in a game of charades if you can't act out the whole word you might split it into separate syllables and mime each of them in turn). But this is just one of many possibilities.

Other formats include:-

- Hidden words, where the answer is literally embedded in the clue
- Anagrams, where you rearrange the letters of one or more ingredient words
- Sandwich combinations, where ingredients lead to one word within another
- Double definitions, where two parts of the clue lead to the same solution
- Single clues - where you get just a definition, but often a very obscure one!
- Homophones where the you need a word that sounds like part of the clue
- Manipulations like reversing a word, or truncating it to something shorter.

The next page gives some examples of these further types of clues, and how you get to the solution. Note that answers are given alongside the clue, so if you want to attempt them yourself, grab a sheet of paper and cover up the right hand column ...

If you are new to cryptic crosswords, the answers almost certainly will NOT jump out at you straight away - it is a skill that does need some practice. The following sections, however, will take a deeper dive into each of the different clue types in turn, to get more familiar and comfortable with each in turn - before moving on to looking at doing a crossword puzzle as a whole.

**Be aware though, that while you play around with the words,
the cross-word setter tries to play around with your brain!**

The way that cryptic clues are written will typically try to mislead you and send you off on the wrong tangent and disguise the right solution. It is you versus the crossword setter to work out which words are there as a definition of what the answer means, and then why the other words are being provided too.

It's a bit like learning a foreign language, that you need know how a sentence is put together before you know which are the verbs, nouns, adjectives etc. Expect to take a bit of time just to tune in to the clue writing formats, and don't expect to instantly be able to polish off a full crossword. Note too that some puzzles are harder than others - look out for 'quick cryptic' crosswords, which typically have smaller grids and shorter answers, and a higher proportion of clues where the answer is within the words of the clues. (More info to follow on where to find suitable practice puzzles and help to work through them.)

But for now just a taster of some of the different types of clues you will come across...

Some more example clues

How to get to the solution can differ from one clue to the next, but here's a few examples of the types of different word plays you are likely to come across ...
Answers are alongside, plus a more detailed explanation in footnotes below.

Maybe the answer, or at least the letters needed to form the answer, are right there in the wordplay part of the clue ...

The answer is there to find literally HIDDEN within the clue:

Sales campaign includes dishonest scheme (4) SCAM¹

Colour odd bits of house (3) HUE²

Or the clue gives words that are an ANAGRAM of your answer:

Swindler hurtles around (8) HUSTLER³

Or maybe you find alternate expressions and then work with these ...

Finding a solution that FITS BOTH HALVES of a clue:

Familiar Sun to Sat? (8) EVERYDAY⁴

Put pen to paper, did you say? That's correct. (5) RIGHT⁵

Or find a new word, and then ADAPT it somehow

Nobleman ahead of schedule for the most part (4) EARL⁶

Or find sub-elements to 'CHAIN' or 'SANDWICH' together

Choose alien person to encourage workers to strike (6) PICKET⁷

Small enough to try (6) SAMPLE⁸

Detective Sergeant drinking beer in the Valleys (5) DALES⁹

See footnotes below for detail on how these example clues lead to the answer.

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- ¹ Definition part of clue is 'dishonest scheme'. The phrase 'sales campaign' literally has the word 'SCAM' appearing within it. 'Includes' is a hint to look for something on these lines.
- ² Definition is 'colour', take the first, third and fifth (odd) letters of house to get the answer HUE
- ³ Definition part of the clue is 'swindler'. Take the letters of 'hurtles' and reorder them; 'around' is a hint to turn the preceding word into a new one, by shuffling letters into a new order for 'HUSTLER' (a type of swindler).
- ⁴ From Sunday to Saturday is literally 'every day' of the week, something familiar is an 'everyday' occurrence - so you can get to the solution of 'EVERYDAY' from both parts within this clue
- ⁵ To put pen to paper is to 'write', but "did you say" is a hint that you might need a word that sounds like this (a homophone) rather than the word as it stands. 'That's correct' is another word for right. Both parts of the clue therefore get you to the same 'RIGHT' answer
- ⁶ Ahead of Schedule is 'early', but you're only using this answer 'for the most part', i.e. dropping its last letter to give you 'EARL' to fit the definition of nobleman.
- ⁷ Definition is encourage workers to strike - PICK means choose, ET is an alien - sandwiched together.
- ⁸ Definition is 'to try' as in to take a taste, to try something out. Swapping small for its abbreviation S (as in clothes sizes) then following this with 'ample' (synonym for enough) gives you 'SAMPLE'
- ⁹ Definition is 'valleys', and you take DS as an abbreviation for the police rank, and then put 'ale' in the middle of this ('drinking' it in?) to get 'DALES'