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A GUIDE TO READING AND SOLVING CRYPTIC CLUES

6 - Moving on

So what are the next steps for a beginner ?

So you are now able to do a basic cryptic crossword. You can spot the anagrams and concealed words. You know to look out for double definitions and homophones and the very occasional clue that is just a single but quite cryptic definition. You've seen how to pull out different elements (synonyms, abbreviations, etc.) from the ingredients for charade type clues and then do assorted chaining together, sandwiching, subtracting, reversing (or anything else that is hinted at) to arrive at a final solution. You have seen multiple examples of words that are in the clues to act as 'indicators' of what type of clue it is ...

But can you pick up any crossword and complete it now? The answer to that will almost certainly be a definite 'No', but that doesn't mean you're not learning.

You've got the tools, but you still need to practice; to build up the mental 'muscles' to think a bit more laterally rather than just taking the first idea that springs to mind; and to get more experience to be able to spot more obscure indicators and more sneaky traps that setters set. You also need to grow a bit of a vocabulary of words and abbreviations that you will probably never see outside of crosswords !!

The key thing is to keep that focus on the clues you CAN solve and not be too concerned about the one's you can't at this stage. Measure your progress against where you started from and not against how others do.

The ideal option is to find a crossword that is about the right level, and set time aside to (daily, weekly, on just any days you don't have to be anywhere else ...) to repeatedly practice with different examples of puzzles from this source. Work quickly through the clues to fill in any that seem more obvious, and just skip ones that you can't see what they are asking for. Then do a slower pass, picking through the remaining clues word by word, hopefully now with the benefit of having some letters in place from earlier answers, to see if new ideas come to mind. Then a final check through again to see if there are any answers where you now have really useful letters, that are worth a third pass.

But if you are then stuck, stop. Look how far you got and pat yourself on the back.

Especially on the slower 2nd pass, remember not to read the clues as if meaningful sentences as a whole. Instead read them **word by word**, and focus on

1. what is potentially **a definition** (remembering these are always a first bit or the last bit, never tucked away in the middle of a clue)
2. what is potentially **an indicator** - such as mixed up, it's said, encloses, etc. and
3. what's left - to act as **a second definition OR as ingredients for a word play**.

If a bit of looking up or googling helps get you there, **do it**. The fun is in tackling a cryptic riddle, not in taking a basic vocabulary test!! Any words in the clue that you are vague about, check a dictionary or ask google to 'define' that word. If you're struggling to get an alternate word (synonym) to use in a charade clue, look up options in a 'thesaurus'. If a charade suggests a word you don't know, then look up that word to see if it a) exists and b) fits the definition; and learn new vocabulary!

Note that it is equally valid whether you get to the solution via the cryptic wordplay route, or whether you get there by spotting an answer that fits and then realising how the wordplay *could* have got you there. Either way you've still got that clue fully solved, merely just exercised different parts of the brain in the process of doing so.

Often you can pick a puzzle up again later in the day and find that with a fresh mind you can add more answers. (Though sadly not always guaranteed.)

If you get stuck with only two or three clues solved, then that particular puzzle is too hard at this stage. On the other hand, if you're just filling nearly everything in on the first pass, you need a harder one. Try a variety of sources as each will have its own style and level of difficulty. Be aware too that most crossword suppliers use a team of setters; some days your brain will just tune in to how one setter sets their clues, the next day a different setter baffles you. Some grids will have lots of anagrams and concealed words and double definitions, others will have a higher proportion of the (often rather trickier) charade type clues. Every crossword solver therefore has good days and bad days.

At some point however you should draw a line and decide you've done as much as you can on one particular puzzle. BUT if you want to improve - then DON'T leave it there. It is a real learning exercise to then get solutions to any clues you missed.

Get the solution and see if you can now understand how this relates to the clue. This is the best way to learn new setters tricks. If you don't understand, ask another crossword enthusiast or refer to crossword blogs. If you're working from a daily newspaper, typically you have to wait till the next day to get the solution. If working through a crossword book, check the solution at back of book while the puzzle is still fresh in your mind. For online puzzles often you can get solutions either by using 'reveal' for one word at a time, or by opting to 'auto-complete' the whole grid.

Even if you only 'see' the solution in hindsight, or need it explained to you, it still adds to your knowledge and experience of how to deal with a clue of this type.

Easy Crosswords and Hard Crosswords

So what makes a hard crossword harder than easy ones? Well first, 'size matters' as much in a crossword as in a jigsaw puzzle. A bigger grid can mean longer answers - and hence a lot more letters as ingredients for an anagram, and also more requirement to do the 'charades' thing to get multiple elements to build up into a longer answer; also more scope to have multiple clue types in one, for example a charade that includes an anagram or a reversal... More clues to solve too.

But also setters of harder crosswords tend to be more inventive and come up with much more variety in their indicator words, so it's often harder to spot what is the definition and what is the ingredients. And they will deliberately aim to lead you astray, with words that look like they mean something they don't! Also often solutions are more 'lateral' - i.e. not the obvious thing that comes to mind, rather a word or phrase that you probably know but that won't be the first thing you think of.

In the examples below, see how much easier an 8 letter anagram is than a 12 letter one; what do you do when 'braised' or 'in a stew' could both be anagram indicators; and can you think laterally for a two word phrase for something you can't trust in 4? How about the final two clues where it's not just a single simple wordplay step...ⁱ

1. A diet not working as a remedy (8)
2. What big, mean delinquent has time for diminutive fighter (12)
3. What may be puffin, braised in a stew (7)
4. Rocky hurt by mane one shouldn't trust (5,4)
5. Month in dispute - something black about that old conflict (6,3)
6. Health worker, poorly insured, firm admitted (8,5)

In harder puzzles, setters will also typically use more obscure replacements for providing elements in charades clues. If it's an abbreviation, it's more likely to come from specialist fields such as cricket terms or professional qualifications. Examples here are RA for artist (Royal Academy member), RE for engineer (Royal Engineers army corps). You also might get foreign words (like '...the german ..' which could be DER, DIE or DAS, or '...of french...' for DE). You learn these little tweaks as you go!

You also more often see charade replacement words which are **examples** of something, rather than direct abbreviations or synonyms - e.g. instead of River representing just the letter R, you now need to find the name of an actual River (DON, EXE, DEE); similarly for girl (EVE, JO, DI) or suchlike. Typically the 'example' used will be something quite short so it can easily form part of another word.

Note though that these examples will often be what gives more useful strings of letters to the crossword setter, rather than the obvious examples that come to mind - e.g. a fish is more likely to be a LING, or GAR or EEL or DAB rather than your everyday cod. A city is more likely to be LA, or ELY or UR than it is to be London or Paris. (UR in case you wondered is a Sumerian city mentioned in the bible!)

You can if you wish buy 'crossword dictionaries' that will have lists of possible examples of e.g. specific fish types, male and female names, names of rivers, etc.; abbreviations from different sources; and various other useful 'help' ideas.

You also get more obscure ways for pulling in just part of a word - no longer just first/last letters (like M for 'final exam' or LG 'extremely long'). Maybe points of a compass - e.g. 'West Ham' (H), 'East of Eden' (N); or mid letters - e.g. heart to heart (A); plus concatenated words to make these harder to spot - e.g. B from 'bonehead'. Directional words may also be used for indicators of word order in sandwich formation, especially in down clues - 'holding up', or 'to the north of' or 'on'.

Finally '?' Do look out for question marks, used to tell you that this clue definitely needs you think laterally, that the setter is warning you there's a trick involved ... But ignore other punctuation or capitalisations, which can be freely added so the clue looks like a readable sentence even when irrelevant to clue solving!

A last few examples:ⁱⁱ

7. Paper a bit "old", in need of redesign (7)
8. National Trust supports the first female function (5) (used as a down clue)
9. Fifty-five in river search (5)
10. Herd suffering with encroaching river given new shelter (8)
11. Cheerful, like Blighty, and flighty? (5-7)
12. After a jumble sale: gain what a number will bring? (9)

So, in summary: lots to learn, but best done gradually over time, **so this is the end of these 'how to' notes**. Now it is just keep doing the puzzles, take the opportunity to learn from any solutions you missed this time, and slowly you WILL gain more knowledge of how setters try to fool you, which is the key to getting more skilful over time. While hopefully continuing to enjoy the challenge in the process.

ⁱ Examples 1:

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|---|----------------|
| 1. A diet not working as a remedy (8) | ANTIDOTE |
| 2. What big, mean delinquent has time for diminutive fighter (12) | BANTAMWEIGHT |
| 3. What may be puffin, braised in a stew (7) | SEABIRD |
| 4. Rocky hurt by mane one shouldn't trust (5,4) | URBAN MYTH |
| 5. Month in dispute - something black about that old conflict (6,3)
<i>JAN sandwiched inside ROW which itself if sandwiched inside TAR</i> | TROJAN WAR |
| 6. Health worker, poorly insured, firm admitted (8,5)
<i>STRICT sandwiched inside an anagram of INSURED</i> | DISTRICT NURSE |

ⁱⁱ Examples 2

- | | |
|--|---------------|
| 7. Paper a bit "old", in need of redesign (7) (<i>quotes added just to confuse</i>) | TABLOID |
| 8. National Trust supports the first female function (5) (<i>NT holding up - i.e. below - EVE</i>) | EVENT |
| 9. Fifty-five in river search (5) (<i>DEE as example of a river, roman numerals LV within</i>) | DELVE |
| 10. Herd suffering with encroaching river given new shelter (8)
<i>(Herd anagram (suffering) with example river OUSE sandwiched in (encroaching) to this)</i> | REHOUSED |
| 11. Cheerful, like Blighty, and flighty? (5-7)
<i>(? hinting not a normal clue, 'light' is heart of both Blighty and flighty, commas as distraction)</i> | LIGHT HEARTED |
| 12. After a jumble sale: gain what a number will bring? (9)
<i>(Jumble (anag of) sale: gain, after 'a' - diff meaning of number as pain killer, colon as distraction)</i> | ANALGESIA |