

HOW TO SOLVE CRYPTIC CROSSWORDS

So, you've never solved cryptic crosswords before! I'm so sorry. (You may retroactively interpret that as "I'm so sorry you've missed out on the pleasure of solving cryptics" or as "I'm so sorry for having inflicted a cryptic upon you", depending on how you feel when you are done.) Or perhaps you would just like a refresher course in how they work. Whichever the case, let's do this.

When you first see a cryptic clue, your reaction is likely to be "What the hell is even happening here?" But when you get right down to it, it's not that complicated. Well, maybe a little bit complicated. However! With a little practice (and the help of this extremely helpful, well-written, and not at all biased tutorial), it will soon be second nature to you. We'll start with the basics.

A cryptic clue is divided into two parts: a **definition** and **wordplay**, either of which may come first, followed by an **enumeration** giving the length of the answer. For instance, take the clue "Swell general getting mixed up (7)". On the surface, this clue appears to be about a well-liked military man who, like someone looking at their first cryptic clue, doesn't know what the hell is going on. (This is called the "**surface sense**" of the clue.) However, if we correctly divide the clue into two parts, we can interpret it as a sort of equation (called the "**cryptic reading**"): "Swell = general getting mixed up". "Swell" is the definition, which works like a regular crossword clue. On the other side, "general getting mixed up" tells us that the letters in GENERAL are getting mixed up—that is, anagrammed. Anagramming GENERAL gives us ENLARGE, a synonym of "swell" and the answer to the clue. Anagram clues are very common, and the part of the clue that instructs you to perform the anagram (called the "indicator") can be many different things—"active", "crazy", "renovated", "dancing", and "busted" are just a few examples. Also, as you can see from the use of "swell" in that clue, words are often used misleadingly, having one meaning in the surface sense and another in the cryptic reading. That's something you'll want to remember to stay on the lookout for.

All right! So, we've covered the basics of how cryptic clues are constructed, and one of the commonest types of wordplay, the **anagram**. But of course there are many more kinds of wordplay besides anagrams that clues can use. So many. So, so many. Settle in, is what I'm saying.

Another common type of wordplay is the "**charade**", which is a more concise way of saying "stringing words and letters together to make a longer word". Here's an example of a charade clue: "That woman improvises

for some officers (8)". The two parts of this clue are divided by "for", called a "**linking word**". Clues may or may not have linking words, but if they do, they will still make sense when interpreting the cryptic reading. In this case, we can interpret the reading as: "That woman + improvises" substitutes for "some officers", or SHE + RIFFS = SHERIFFS. Parts of a charade may be clued sequentially with no words between them, or with indicators that suggest placing the parts together or alongside each other, such as "Appreciate advertisement near swamp (6)": ADMIRE = AD + MIRE. The parts of a charade may not necessarily be presented in order; for example, in "Quickly going behind car's outer shell (8)", the indicator tells you that APACE should go behind CAR to make CARAPACE.

In a "**container**" clue, one word goes inside another to make a new word. This can be indicated as a word going around another word, as in "Have dinner, eating lamb cooked with fire (8)", interpreted as FEED (have dinner) going around (eating) LAMB to make FLAMBEED; or as a word going inside another word, as in "Vase hidden in bed damaged by fire (6)", in which URN is hidden inside BED to make BURNED.

In a "**reversal**", a word is spelled backward to make another word. For instance, the clue "Sent back beer fit for a king (5)" tells you that LAGER (beer) should be spelled backward (sent back) to make REGAL (fit for a king). Charades and containers may also contain reversed parts.

A clue may also be a "**deletion**", in which the removal of a letter (or letters) from a word makes a new word. The removed letter or letters may be indicated directly, as in "Rodent failing to leave boat (3)", in which we are told to remove F (failing) from RAFT to get the answer RAT; or "Mr. Franklin started forgetting about Georgia (3)", in which we forget about the GA (Georgia) in BEGAN to get the answer BEN. The removed part may also be indicated by its position in the word from which it is deleted—for instance, "Clergyman losing head, setting fires (5)" indicates that PARSON loses its first letter (its "head") to make ARSON.

The sort of indicator used in that last deletion is also often used to contribute what is sometimes called "**bits and pieces**" to the wordplay. The phrase "head of state" in a clue may indicate the letter S, the "head" of the word STATE. "Artichoke's heart" may indicate C (the central letter of ARTICHOKE); "marathon's finish", N; "fourth of July", Y.

All of the above types of wordplay can be combined in various ways, but there are also a few types of wordplay that generally stand alone. A “**homophone**” clue relies only on the sounds of words; for instance, “Hear tale-teller’s antique instrument (4)” indicates that we should hear the sound of LIAR (tale-teller), reinterpreting that sound to get LYRE. Homophones may sometimes be charade-like, indicating that the sounds of multiple words should be combined. For instance, take the clue “Wait in complete uncertainty on the phone (4,3)”. “On the phone” indicates the auditory nature of the wordplay, and we combine the sounds of WHOLE (complete) and DOUBT (uncertainty) to get HOLD OUT (wait). (“In” is a linking word.)

Another standalone type of wordplay is the “**hidden word**”, in which the answer is hidden in the clue in plain sight. For example, in the clue “Forever and always displaying porch (7)”, the answer VERANDA is displayed in “foreVER AND Always”. Hidden words may sometimes be hidden in nonconsecutive letters (alternating letters, initials, or final letters, e.g.).

Then there is the “**double definition**”, in which both halves of the clue are definitions of different senses

of the answer. For instance, “Washington mountain getting more precipitation (7)” clues RAINIER and “Two-wheeled vehicle was low (5)” clues MOPED. The pronunciation of the two senses of the answer often changes, but does not have to (as in “Eats birds (8)”, cluing SWALLOWS).

A very rare type of clue is the “**& lit.**” (short for “and literally”), which you won’t see in most puzzles, but since we’re here, I’ll tell you about it. In this type of the clue, the wordplay and the definition are *the same*. (Pause for “Ooooooooooh” from crowd.) This type of clue is generally indicated with an exclamation point (though if a clue happens to have an exclamation point, that does not necessarily mean it is an & lit. clue). For example “Poe and Eliot! (5)” can be read as both a definition for POETS (Edgar Allan Poe and T.S. Eliot) and a cryptic reading for POETS (POE + T.S.).

And then every once in a while you’ll run across some wordplay that doesn’t exactly fit any of the above categories, although what you must do will always be spelled out by the cryptic reading in some way. You just have to be ready for anything, basically! Good luck.

—Francis Heaney