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CRYPTIC CROSSWORDS: WHAT IS THEIR DEAL ANYWAY

by Francis Heaney

Cryptic crosswords can be very confusing for the uninitiated. You might look at one and think, “What kind of smug, insufferable person thinks they’re so superior, writing something so absolutely inscrutable?” The answer is me. I am that kind of person. But those of us who write cryptics don’t want them to be inscrutable—we want you to solve them! Yes, the clues are meant to be tricky and misleading, but our goal is for you to figure them all out eventually. The first step to doing that is understanding the rules of cryptic clues.

What if you already know how to solve cryptics, but you’re interested in becoming one of those smug, insufferable cryptic crossword constructors yourself? This guide will help you too, by explaining some construction rules you might not have known about, and some pitfalls to avoid. Some tips are maybe more than a beginning solver really needs to deal with, so those have been moved to a sidebar like this one.

CRYPTIC CLUE STRUCTURE

Each clue in a cryptic crossword is its own self-contained puzzle, containing two parts: a *definition* and *wordplay*, each of which lead to the answer in their own way, and either of which may come first. The definition is what it sounds like: it defines the answer just like a standard crossword clue does, though not necessarily in the most direct way. The wordplay part of the clue leads to the same answer, but does so by using one or more of the many tricks we’ll be exploring very soon, assuming you aren’t already like, nah.

At the end of the clue will be a number in parentheses: the *enumeration*, which tells you the length of the answer. You might think, “Well, can’t I just look at the grid to see how long the answer is?” but enumerations will give you extra information about phrases and hyphenated words that the grid will not. MAIN COURSE, for instance, would be enumerated as (4,6), and NO-BRAINER as (2-7).

The apparent meaning of a clue’s wording at first glance is the *surface sense*; the trick is to look past the surface sense to figure out the *cryptic reading*—that is, the way to interpret the clue so as to find the way the definition and wordplay are being indicated. For instance, let’s study the clue “Solver confused Romeo and Juliet, e.g. (6)”.

The first thing to do is to figure out where the dividing point is between the wordplay and definition. In this case, it’s here: [Solver confused / Romeo and Juliet, e.g.]. The first half of this clue is wordplay, indicating an anagram: the letters of SOLVER are mixed up (“confused”) to make a word whose definition is “Romeo and Juliet, e.g.”: LOVERS. The word “confused” is an *indicator*—that is, a word cryptically giving you instructions about the wordplay. Indicators may tell you to spell a word backward, put a word inside another word, use a word’s homophone, or something else. We’ll go through all the standard types of cryptic clues below, but before we do that, there’s another detail to know about finding the dividing point in a clue.

In the case of the clue above, there were no additional words besides the definition and wordplay. In some clues, though, there may be a *joiner*—a word or phrase that serves as a sort of segue between the two parts of the clue. For instance, take the clue “Boat found in reflecting pools (5)”. When interpreting the cryptic reading, it may help to imagine the clue as a kind of equation, or a set of instructions: A word meaning “boat” can be found in “reflecting POOLS” (that is, POOLS spelled backward). The answer is SLOOP.

Some other examples of joiners you might see are “WORDPLAY is DEFINITION” (or “DEFINITION is WORDPLAY”); “WORDPLAY becomes DEFINITION”; or “DEFINITION from WORDPLAY.”

Note that most joiners only work in one direction; that is to say, you might see “WORDPLAY becomes DEFINITION,” but never “DEFINITION becomes WORDPLAY,” because it doesn’t follow a logical order: you perform the wordplay to get the answer to the definition, or you figure out the definition by solving the wordplay. The joiner, if there is one, reflects that logical order.

Sometimes the joiner is not a separate word; it might also be an apostrophe-S at the end of the first half of the clue. For instance, in the clue “Protagonist’s part in ‘The Rock’ (4)”, the apostrophe-S, in the surface sense, looks like part of a possessive. In the cryptic reading, however, it’s short for “is.” So interpreting a clue as an equation in a more literal way, we can read that as [“protagonist” = part in THE ROCK], leading to the answer HERO (hidden in “tHE ROck”). It may seem confusing that a word can be used one way in the surface sense and another way in the cryptic reading, but think of it this way: the cryptic reading is the “real” version of the clue. The surface sense is camouflage meant to hide the cryptic reading. Any part of the clue could be used in two different ways in the two readings, possibly even changing pronunciations in the process.

Finally, bear in mind that cryptic clues never have any extraneous words—every word is used somehow as part of the definition, wordplay, or joiner (if there is one). But sometimes words that seem unimportant turn out to be important after all. For instance, in the clue “Go stare at a search engine (6)”, the “a” in the clue is simply part of the definition (“a search engine”) leading to the answer GOOGLE (GO + OGLE). But in the clue “A perfume is rising (6)”, the “a” is used as part of the wordplay (A + SCENT) to get to the answer ASCENT.

Now let’s look more closely at the various types of wordplay you’ll see in cryptic clues.

DOUBLE DEFINITIONS

The simplest type of cryptic clue is the *double definition*. This type of clue is an exception to the rule that every clue contains a definition and wordplay. Double definition clues still have two parts, but both parts are definitions. “How does this even count as wordplay???” you may well ask. The answer is, the two definitions must be unrelated to each other. For example, “Run into a farm animal (3)” is not a good clue for RAM, because the two definitions are related. (We get the sense of “run into” for RAM from the fact that rams like to headbutt things.) But a clue for RAM that you might see is “A farm animal’s memory (3)”, in which the two definitions of RAM have completely different etymologies. Sometimes a clue will bend this etymology rule, if the senses have drifted very far apart, but it’s a good guideline to bear in mind.

In some double definition clues, the two definitions may lead to different pronunciations of the same spelling of a word, as in “A doorway’s charm (8)” for ENTRANCE. In others, one definition may lead to a single word while the other leads to a phrase; the enumeration will only indicate one of the two, usually the one that’s a single word. An example of this is “Attack a farm animal (4)” with the answer GOAT (or, as a synonym of “attack,” GO AT).

HIDDEN WORDS

Another simple kind of wordplay is the *hidden word*, in which the answer appears in the clue itself; the tricky part is noticing that it’s there. For instance, in the clue “It’s a short distance passing through mountain chains (4)”, the answer, INCH, is found “passing through” the phrase “mountaIN CHains.” There’s more than one way that an answer may be hidden, though, besides just reading left-to-right in consecutive letters. Words may be hidden backward, as in “Batman’s butler looking back through powder flasks (6)”, which clues ALFRED (hidden “looking back” in “powDER FLAsks”). Or they might be hidden in bits and pieces, as in “Slytherin is getting head starts, alas (4)”, in which the “starts” of “Slytherin Is Getting Head” reveal the answer, SIGH, or in the clue “Drive along outskirts of Rio Grande (4)”, in which the answer, RIDE, is literally along the outskirts of the phrase “RIo granDE.”

ANAGRAMS

The *anagram* is a very common type of cryptic wordplay, and has perhaps the widest range of possible indicators. Words that might indicate that you need to anagram something are synonyms of “repaired,” “upset,” “mixed-up,” “drunk,” “lost,” “moving,” “confused,” “dancing,” “disorganized,” “crazy,” “different,” and more ... there are really quite a lot of possibilities. Here’s one thing that will help you when solving an anagram: all the letters to be anagrammed must appear in the clue. You’ll never be asked to think of a synonym for a word and then anagram that synonym. So, for instance, “Mothers tossed something in a lunch box (7)” is a clue you might see for THERMOS (MOTHERS tossed), but not “Some parents tossed something in a lunch box (7)”, which unfairly asks you to figure out that “some parents” means “mothers” before you start anagramming. Now, you might ask, why am I telling you about things you won’t see? Well, this will help you eliminate possibilities of how to interpret a clue while you’re solving. (Also, if there are any people reading this guide for tips on writing cryptic clues, I want to make sure they know not to do this!)

One thing you might notice after solving a few cryptics is that some indicators can be used to suggest multiple kinds of wordplay. For instance, “oddly” is a common anagram indicator, as in “Britney Spears, oddly, is creating Christians (13)” (cluing PRESBYTERIANS). But it could also be used for yet another variant of a hidden word clue, in which a word is hidden in alternating letters (in the case of this indicator, the odd letters), as in “Barbarian, oddly, is a genius (5)”, which clues BRAIN, hidden in the first, third, fifth, seventh, and ninth letters of BaRbArIaN.

CHARADES

The type of wordplay known as a *charade* is related to the parlor game “charades,” in which something is clued by breaking it up into smaller bits and cluing those smaller bits. In the game of charades, that’s most commonly done by taking a multi-word phrase and cluing the words individually, but in a cryptic, the parts of a charade are less obvious. For instance, the clue “Bright old South American coming down (12)” leads to the answer INCANDESCENT (“bright”), a charade of INCAN (“old South American”) + DESCENT (“coming down”). The parts of a charade may just be listed in sequence without any words in between, or there may be indicators suggesting that you join the parts together, like the “and” in this clue: “Frank is able to, and did (6)”, leading to the answer CANDID (a synonym of “frank,” from CAN + DID). Note that the DID in that clue was given directly and was not clued via a definition; the parts of a charade may be indicated either way.

A charade’s components will not necessarily be given in order, in which case indicators will tell you how to arrange them, such as in “Runner and dog, perhaps, chasing car (6),” in which PET (“dog, perhaps”) is “chasing” CAR to make CARPET (“runner”). Another type of indicator you might see is one telling you to put part of the charade inside other parts, as in “A demanding person and I going into store stocking fabric (8)”, in which the answer, MARTINET (“a demanding person”) is made up of MART + I + NET; the letter I is “going into” MART (“store”) and NET (“stocking fabric”). This sort of indicator will show up again soon in another clue type.

A note about the grammar of that last clue: Because of the way words can serve different purposes in the surface sense and the cryptic reading of a clue, the puzzle writer must make sure that the grammar works in both versions. In the clue above, “I” is a first-person pronoun in the surface sense, but in the cryptic reading, it represents the letter “I,” which would take a third-person verb. So the clue could not be, for instance, “A demanding person and I go into store stocking fabric (8),” because while “I go into...” makes sense on the surface, in the cryptic reading, the correct verb would be “[the letter] I goes into...” The trick is to find a verb that works either way. Verbs ending with “-ing” and past tense verbs come in handy for this sort of thing.

CONTAINERS

In a *container* clue, something gets inserted into something else, but unlike a charade, where, say, one word might go between two words, in a container, a word will elbow its way *inside* a word, as in the clue “Drunk nestled in bed and looked embarrassed (7),” in which LUSH (“drunk”) is “nestled in” BED to get BLUSHED (“looked embarrassed”). That’s an example of an indicator telling you to put a word inside another; alternately, it may tell you to take a word and place it outside another, as with “Archie taking possession of Vietnam’s premier record collection (7)” in which ARCHIE is “taking possession of” V (the first or “premier” letter of “Vietnam”) to get the answer, ARCHIVE (“record collection”).

REVERSALS

The *reversal* is just what it sounds like: something gets spelled backward. We’ve already seen one earlier in which the word being reversed was directly given in the clue (“Boat found in reflecting pools (5)” = SLOOP), but reversal clues commonly use synonyms, as in “Guard’s identification badge flipped over (7)”, in which a word meaning “identification badge” (NAMETAG) is flipped over to get a word meaning “guard”: GATEMAN. In general, a reversal clue will make it clear which half of the clue is the part being reversed and which is the definition, either by placing the tag at the very beginning or very end of the clue or by separating the two parts of a clue with a joiner, so it’s clear what the indicator applies to. In the rare case that you see a reversal clue that doesn’t follow this guideline, you’ll need to use the crossing letters to confirm the intended answer.

DELETIONS

Some *deletion* clues have specific names (more on those momentarily), but they all basically boil down to the same thing: you delete something and end up with a new word or phrase. You’ll always be told, in some way, exactly what to delete. For instance, in a *beheadment*, the indicator will tell you to delete something’s first letter, as in “Train track’s path cut off at the front (4)”, in which TRAIL (“path”) is literally cut off at the front to get RAIL (“train track”). Other beheadment indicators include “leaderless,” “after the first,” “without starting,” “losing face,” and the like. If the indicator tells you to delete something’s last letter, that’s a *curtailment*, such as “Idea isn’t quite finished, however (6)”, in which THOUGHT (“idea”) isn’t quite finished (that is, stops just before its last letter), giving you the answer, THOUGH (“however”). Other curtailment indicators include “endless,” “incomplete,” “shortened,” “reaching no conclusion,” etc.

Deletions can happen anywhere, of course. In “Trap heartless person conducting an inquest (6)”, “heartless” tells you to delete the middle letter of CORONER (“person conducting an inquest”) to get the answer, CORNER (“trap”). You might also be instructed to delete specific letters of the alphabet; for instance, “losing time” can be an indicator to delete the letter T (an abbreviation for “time”), while “right away” might be an instruction for the letter R (“right”) to be taken away. You might also need to delete more than one letter. For example, in “Limitless dry spell is hard to endure (5)”, DROUGHT (“dry spell”) has its “limits” (that is, its first and last letters, which might also be indicated by “edges” or “borders”) removed to get the answer, ROUGH (“hard to endure”). It’s also possible that an entire word could be deleted, in what’s essentially the opposite of a container clue.

HOMOPHONES

Unlike most clue types, in which you manipulate letters, *homophone* clues are concerned with sound—specifically, words that sound alike. For instance, take the clue “Hotel room is pleasant, we hear (5)”. The way we hear SWEET (“pleasant”) is the same as the answer, SUITE (“hotel room”). Other homophone indicators include “said,” “on the radio,” “audibly,” “in conversation,” and so on. Homophones may be made up of multiple words in sequence, like a phonetic version of a charade, as in “Reportedly show mink to driver (9)”, in which we take the sounds of SHOW + FUR (“mink”) to get CHAUFFEUR. Note that you will never be asked to combine phonetic and non-phonetic wordplay; all the wordplay in any homophone clue must be phonetic.

As with reversal clues, a homophone clue will generally be constructed so that it’s clear which part of the clue the indicator is referring to, but you may sometimes see a clue in which it’s ambiguous, and you’ll need to use the enumeration or the crossing letters to confirm the answer.

& LIT.

The *& lit.* (short for “and literally”) is the rarest sort of clue, which is an exception to the rule that every clue must contain two parts, because the entire clue is both the wordplay *and* the definition. This type of clue is quite difficult to write, and so you won’t see it often. It’s generally indicated by an exclamation point (or sometimes a question mark) at the end of the clue. For example, in “Leaders of Islam managing all mosque services? (5)” the entire clue is a definition of the answer, IMAMS, also indicated cryptically as the first letters of “Islam Managing All Mosque Services.” If a clue ends with an exclamation point or question mark, it’s not *necessarily* an & lit. clue (and odds are it isn’t, given how infrequently they appear), but it’s a possibility to keep in mind.

SO, THAT’S IT THEN?

Oh heavens no. Clue types can be put together into all sorts of combinations. You might get a combination of a charade, container, and anagram, like “Open-minded monarch will be seen after “Flipper”—around three, roughly (12)”, in which KING (“monarch”) follows FIN (“flipper”), which contains an anagram of THREE to get F(REETH)IN + KING, or FREETHINKING (“open-minded”). All sorts of combinations of different kinds of wordplay might appear in the same clue—although, as noted above, no clue may be only partly phonetic.

You might also run across a clue that uses wordplay not covered by any of the above clue types, like a spoonerized phrase, a letter moving from one position to answer, a letter being replaced by another letter—anything that can be clearly (if cryptically) described is fair game.

OK, COOL, I MEAN THAT’S A LOT BUT IT SOUNDS LIKE NOW WE’VE REALLY COVERED ALL THERE COULD POSSIBLY BE TO—

Sorry, hang on, just a little more! The above is indeed all the basics you should know for solving traditional cryptics, also sometimes called *black-square cryptics*. There are other, more complicated cryptics out there, called *variety cryptics*, which typically have grids in which words are separated by bars instead of by black squares. Variety cryptics have additional rules that are specific to each puzzle, which will be explained to you (though not necessarily *fully* explained). Here are some examples of the types of rules you might see in a variety cryptic:

- Some crossing entries have different letters at their intersection; change those conflicting letters to a third letter that makes new words in each direction. The new letters, read left to right, will spell a thematic answer.
- The central Across entry is unclued. Each clue in the puzzle has an extraneous letter that must be removed before solving. Those extraneous letters, read in order, spell the missing clue for the central Across entry.
- Sixteen answers in the puzzle must be modified before being entered into the grid; there are four different types of transformation (performed on four answers each). The four types of transformation are for you to determine. Enumerations have been withheld.

This all might sound extra intimidating, but just remember: the basic rules underlying cryptics are the same, even in a variety cryptic. Bear the extra conditions in mind, but don’t get too hung up on them. Solve what you can and chip away at the puzzle, and soon you’ll get used to whatever additional rules have been thrown at you, and before you know it, you’ll be finished and ready for your next one!

BUT ACTUALLY THERE’S ONE MORE THING, THOUGH, RIGHT?

No, that’s pretty much all I got right now. Have fun!