

AN INTRODUCTION TO CRYPTIC CROSSWORDS by Andrew J. Ries

Cryptic (or British-style) crossword puzzles are set apart from straightforward American-style crosswords by the cluing conventions. Each cryptic clue has two parts: 1) a definitional hint and 2) a wordplay-based hint. It's up to the solver to decipher which part of the clue is the definition and which is the wordplay. The best cryptic clues balance these two parts of the clue so well that the misdirection is subtle but satisfying.

What are the general tricks of the trade?

THE DEFINITION

The definitional part of the clue provides a straightforward hint to the answer. Because the wordplay part of the clue provides another way to solve the answer, the definitional part of the clue oftentimes is less precise than a standard crossword clue would be. As a rule, the "general category" can define a "specific type" of that category, but the "specific type" cannot define the "general category." For instance, "beer" can serve as a definitional hint for LAGER, but "lager" cannot serve as a definitional hint for BEER.

Consider the two examples below.

Example: Unopened dairy product, say (5)

Answer: UTTER. "Say" is the definitional part of the clue, as "say" is a synonym for "utter." "Unopened dairy product" is the wordplay part of the clue – it is an example of a letter deletion (it clues "butter" without its "opening" letter), which is more thoroughly described in point #7 below.

Enumerations: The (6) at the end of the above clue is the enumeration (or the number of letters) of the clue's answer. Enumerations can also indicate hyphenated words; for example, MERRY-GO-ROUND would be enumerated (5-2-5). Enumerations for multi-word entries are separated by commas; for example, TURN ON A DIME would be enumerated (4, 2, 1, 4).

Example: Prize is returned piece of furniture (6)

Answer: REWARD. "Prize" is the definitional part of the clue, as it is a synonym for "reward." "returned piece of furniture" is the wordplay part of the clue – it is an example of a reversal, which is more thoroughly described in point #2 below. Note the use of "is." This is an example of a **linking word** or phrase, which are occasionally used in cryptics. Linking words are neither a part of the definition or wordplay part of the clue, but they

allow for a smoother surface reading of the clue. Think of linking words as a transition point between the wordplay and the definition (or vice versa), or an “equal sign” in a math equation. In the above example, the process described in the wordplay element “equals” prize. Other common linking words are “for,” “becomes,” “makes,” or simply “s”.

THE WORDPLAY

The wordplay part of the clue can be presented in a number of ways. Cryptics generally employ the following most-common wordplay forms when presenting clues.

1. Anagrams

Anagramming is arguably the most frequently-employed wordplay technique in a cryptic crossword. The anagram will be signaled by an indicating word or term synonymous with “jumbled” or “not right” – think terms like “mixed up,” “confused,” “out of order,” or terms like “off,” and “terrible,” and “wayward.”

Example: Criticize bad umping (6)

Answer: **IMPUGN.** “Criticize” is the definitional part of the clue, as criticize is a synonym for “impugn.” “bad umping” is the wordplay part of the clue. “bad” serves as an indication to anagram the word “umping,” which upon doing so leads to “impugn.” The letters to be anagrammed will always be included in the clue, always adjacent to the anagram indicator. This is significant in that most other cryptic wordplay techniques do not explicitly show the letters that must be manipulated within the clue. Anagrams, however, will always include the anagrammed letters in the clue.

2. Reversals

Another frequently-employed wordplay technique is to reverse words. Reversal indicators include “coming back,” “in reverse,” and “returning.” For down clues, reversal indicators include “coming up,” “rising,” and “climbing.”

Example: In retrospect, “menace” of comics fame morally transgressed (6)

Answer: **SINNED.** “In retrospect, “menace” of comics fame” is the wordplay half of the clue. “In retrospect” signals that “‘menace’ of comics fame” – DENNIS – needs to be reversed. DENNIS when flipped spells SINNED. “Morally transgressed” is the definitional part of the clue, as it describes the definition for SINNED. Unlike anagrams, which will always display the letters to be anagrammed within the clue, reversals (and most other cryptic conventions) require the solver to solve a clue and also execute the

wordplay. In the above example, you first have to figure out that “menace” of comics fame’ clues DENNIS, which is then placed “In retrospect” as per the first part of the clue.

3. Double definitions

One common, but simple, technique is to use two different definitions for the same word. This technique is best used when a word has two very divergent meanings (or pronunciations, even).

Example: Continue summary (6)

Answer: RESUME. “Continue” is a synonym of “resume” (the two-syllable verb), and “summary” is a way to describe a job “résumé” (the three-syllable noun).

4. Charades

Words can also be clued as being made up of smaller words in the entry. Breaking down a longer word into a series of smaller words side-by-side is another common cryptic cluing technique.

Example: Dump youngster’s flask (7)

Answer: CANTEEN. “Dump youngster” is the wordplay part of the clue. “Dump” defines “can” in that they are synonyms for “relieve of one’s job duties,” and “youngster” defines “teen.” “Flask” is the definitional part of the clue, as a CANTEEN is a type of water flask. The “s” after “youngster” is the linking word – this is a common trick, to make the linking word (which is the contraction of “is”) appear to be a possessive use of the apostrophe.

5. Containers

Similar to charades, another common wordplay technique is to describe one word being “contained” in another, rather than being side-by-side. Common indicators of containers include “holding,” “keeping,” and “around.” The word being contained can also be indicated using terms like “surrounded by,” “among,” and “within” or “in.”

Example: Imperfect G-man embraces ordinance (6)

Answer: FLAWED. “Imperfect” is the definitional part. “G-man embraces ordinance” is the wordplay part. “G-man” signals FED; “embraces” is the container indicator; “ordinance” signals LAW. So it plays as FED “embracing” LAW, or F(LAW)ED.

6. Homophones

Homophones, or words that sound alike but are spelled differently, are another common approach to cryptic clues. Indicators of homophones include “sounds like,” “reportedly,” or “spoken.”

Example: I heard taxi passenger is unbiased (4)

Answer: FAIR. “I heard taxi passenger” is the wordplay part. “I heard” signifies a homophone of “taxi passenger,” which is FARE. “Is” is the linking word that links the wordplay part and the definitional part. “Unbiased” is the definitional part, as it is synonymous with FAIR.

7. Deletions

Another common wordplay technique is to signal the deletion of one or more letters. Commonly the letters deleted are either at the beginning (common indicators: “headless,” “without its leader,” or “primarily lacking”) or the end of the entry (common indicators: “lacking a tail,” “all but the finale,” or “mostly”). Single or multiple letters may also be deleted from the middle (which may be indicated by “heartless,” or “lacking a center,” e.g.).

Example: Ocean animal loses tail (3)

Answer: SEA. “Ocean” is the definitional part of the clue, as it is a synonym of “sea.” “animal loses tail” is the wordplay part of the clue, as it signifies SEAL without its last letter (or its “tail”).

8. Hidden Answers

Sometimes the answers to cryptic clues are staring you right in the face! Hiding answers across clue word(s) is another classic approach to cryptic cluing. The answer can be hidden within entirely another word (such as EVEN contained in ELEVENTH) or group of words (such as EVEN contained across the words JESSE VENTURA). Hidden answer indicators include “found in,” “discovered in,” or “throughout.”

Example: Surrender inside police department (4)

Answer: CEDE. “Surrender” is the definitional part of the clue. “inside” indicates the answer is found within the phrase “police department.”

9. &lit.

A rare (but extremely pleasing) cryptic cluing technique is known as the “&lit.” (“and literal”) clue. Here, the wordplay part of the clue *also serves as the definitional* (or literal) *part of the clue*. These clues are rare because, well, not many words lend themselves to such sublimity. &lit. clues are traditionally suggested by an exclamation point at the end of the clue.

Example: Awfully vile! (4)

Answer: EVIL. “Awfully” is the anagram indicator,” and “vile” anagrams to EVIL. There is no definitional half of the clue, as the surface sense of the wordplay - “Awfully vile” - also serves as the definition of the entry.

10. Multi-Faceted Clues

Many cryptic clues employ several of the above techniques. Consider the following:

Example: Officiate trials surrounding empty informer’s coolers (13)

Answer: REFRIGERATORS. “Officiate trials surrounding empty informer” is the wordplay part of the clue. “Officiate” indicates REF (as in to referee or officiate a sporting event); “trials” = RIGORS, which “surround” or go around “empty” = E* and informer = RAT. So that’s REF + RIG(E + RAT)ORS. “Coolers” is the definitional part of the clue. So here we have a container clue and a charade clue working hand-in-hand.

*Note the use of a word cluing a single letter, as in the case of E being indicated by “empty” in the clue. In situations like this, the single letter must be commonly identified on its own as an abbreviation. For instance, H can be identified in a cryptic singularly by the word “hot,” as H is commonly used on water faucets to stand for “hot.” However, being a component of a commonly-known acronym is not enough to allow each letter of that acronym to act as a standalone referent for a single letter. For instance, “security” cannot solely clue the letter “S,” even though it is common abbreviated in “NSA.” In this case, an indicator would be required; for example, “head of security” could fairly indicate a singular S.

The above is not a comprehensive list, but these are the most common approaches you’ll see in cryptic crossword clues. Cryptics can seem impossible at first glance, but the more cryptics you solve, the more you’ll get the hang of how to make sense of the cluing conventions. Fair warning, though – once you get hooked on cryptic crosswords, you’re hooked for life!