This introduction is excerpted from *Word Salad*, our comprehensive guide to cryptic crosswords. For more information, visit www.leftfieldcryptics.com.

Solving Cryptic Crosswords

…especially our puzzles

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Our puzzles are part of a long tradition known as cryptic crosswords, which use a style of clueing more dependent on wit and wordplay than on pure knowledge. These clues can seem daunting at first glance, but the underlying principles are fairly simple. This chapter offers a basic guide to solving cryptics.

Every cryptic clue appears to be a (somewhat) sensible phrase or sentence. In reality, however, it has two separate parts. One is a definition, like those in a standard crossword puzzle; the other part uses some form of wordplay to steer you to the intended answer. These two parts provide *independent* indications of the same answer. Either part may come first in the clue. Sometimes a word or two, suggesting how the two parts work together, may come in between; alternatively, the definition and wordplay may simply occur side by side.

This means that almost every clue either begins or ends with a definition of the answer, but it's up to you to find the break between the definition and the wordplay. We will try to challenge you with clues whose surface meaning puts you off the scent—for example, by splitting the parts of a clue in the middle of a common two-word phrase, or by seeming to use a word as a verb that is really meant as a noun. We may also use punctuation in whatever manner seems most likely to deceive, so remember that you can generally ignore punctuation in clues. In fact, once in a while, we may even omit a space, for example writing "dovetail" where we really mean "dove tail."

In each puzzle, we hope to have clues with a wide range of difficulty, and answers from a wide variety of sources extending from everyday language to any branch of human knowledge. Our primary goal is to entertain you, but we also hope to expand your vocabulary and perhaps get you to look at the English language a little differently. And although the conventions outlined here will almost always be in force, we reserve the right to tweak, bend or even break them as the antic muse dictates.

Here is a tour of the types of wordplay we use most often, along with hints on how to spot them. The number in parentheses following a clue (the *enumeration*) tells you how many letters are in the clue answer. We will return to each clue type in more detail, later in the book.

1. Anagrams

Perhaps the most common cryptic clueing technique is to form the answer by rearranging the letters in a word or group of words as they appear in the clue—making, for instance, INSTEAD or DETAINS from SAINTED. Many words can signal an anagram; among them are anything suggesting *disorderly*, *misshapen*, *drunk*, *crazy*, or simply *bad* or *wrong*—also *repaired*, *fixed*, *shuffled*, *in motion*, and so on. For example:

Inebriated pirates travel about (7)

The wordplay, "inebriated pirates," tells you to find an anagram of PIRATES that means "travel about." The answer is TRAIPSE. "Inebriated" in this case is the *anagram indicator*, and "pirates" is the *anagram fodder*.

We write more about anagrams in Chapter 15, where we also address other anagram variants.

2. Charades

An answer can be broken down into two or more words that appear in succession; for example, CONSUMMATE is made up of CON, SUM, and MATE. We may simply list these words, or their synonyms, in order in the clue, or we may join them by words like *at, by, near, before, after*, or (in Down clues) *over* or *beneath*. For example:

Growth on the face must be sore (8)

The answer, MUSTACHE, joins MUST and ACHE ("be sore"). Notice that some parts of a charade might be given literally, like MUST in this example, while others might be indicated through a synonym.

We write more about charades in Chapter 16.

3. Containers

One word is placed within the letters of another word; in COURTHOUSE, for instance, THOU is contained within COURSE. This technique is signaled by such words as *inside*, *holding*, *swallowing*, *within* (and its deceptive opposite *without*), and *around*. For example:

Discovered calf in grass (8)

Here the word VEAL (clued by "calf") is in REED ("grass") to make REVEALED, defined by "discovered."

We write more about containers (known as *sandwich clues* by some in the UK) in Chapter 21.

4. Reversals

An answer is identified as another word read in reverse—as, for instance, TIMER and REMIT. This kind of clue is signaled by such hints as *backwards*, *returning*, *heading west*, *from right to left*, or (in Down clues) *upward* or *rising*. For example:

Spies bring silverware back (6)

The clue tells you to bring SPOONS ("silverware") back to get the answer SNOOPS ("spies").

Read more on reversals in Chapter 18.

5. Homophones

Words that sound the same but are spelled differently, like THROUGH and THREW, can be the basis of a clue. Look for indicators like *spoken*, *aloud*, or *they say*. For example:

Shakespeare, I hear, is excluded (6)

When you hear BARD ("Shakespeare"), you get the answer, BARRED ("excluded").

Also be on guard for the occasional phonetic version of another clue type. For example, DEAN is a phonetic reversal of NEED. Read more about phonetic clueing in Chapter 19.

6. Deletions

Some answers are formed by deleting a letter or group of letters from another word. Removing the beginning of UPRAISED, for instance, leaves PRAISED, while SPITE is simply SPRITE without the R. The wordplay may indicate the position of the letter to be deleted with words like *beheaded*, *endlessly*, or (in a Down clue) *topless*; or it may specify a particular letter or letters to be omitted. An example:

Pins: superfluous without an end (7)

NEEDLES is NEEDLESS ("superfluous") without its final letter.

We write more about deletions in Chapter 28.

7. Double definitions

Perhaps the simplest type of wordplay provides a second definition of the answer, often in an unrelated sense. For example:

Holler "Author!" (6)

The answer is BELLOW.

One of the definitions can be a punning or whimsical one; by convention, such clues are flagged with a question mark. For example:

Oinking tendency? (8)

The answer, PENCHANT, is clued normally by "tendency," and punningly, as PEN CHANT, by "oinking."

Note that on occasion, we have been known to use triple or even quadruple definitions. We write more about double definitions in Chapter 20.

8. Hidden words

In this type, the answer is printed explicitly in the clue, but camouflaged within another word or other words; look for indicators like *seen in*, *running through*, or *in part*. For example:

Cheese stored in Baroque fortress (9)

The answer, ROQUEFORT, is literally stored in the words BAROQUE FORTRESS. We write more about hidden words in Chapter 22.

9. Rebus clues

In American-style crosswords, a "rebus" denotes entering multiple letters in one square. This has not been a feature of our puzzles, at least so far. Rather, we use the word "rebus" in a sense closer to its traditional (and dictionary) meaning: a representation of a word or phrase by pictures or symbols. For example, we have used the letter O as wordplay for the phrase SECOND-IN-COMMAND. Another example:

Earth despair? (6,5)

The answer is BROKEN HEART. "Earth," being an anagram of HEART, is BROKEN HEART. In a sense, this is backwards, since the wordplay is in the answer, not in the clue.

Because rebus clues are unconventional, it's common to find them flagged with a final question mark. We write more about this in Chapter 25.

10. Letter banks

Consider the word SENSELESSNESS. It consists solely of the letters in the word LENS, repeated as often as needed. In the argot of the National Puzzlers' League, this is called a letter bank, and LENS is the "bank" for SENSELESSNESS. This concept yields two possible types of cryptic clues:

Nanny has all the ingredients for midsummer madness (9)

The answer is NURSEMAID, the bank for "midsummer madness." More often, the clue goes in the other direction:

Snatch, using every element as needed in whatever way possible (5-2-5-3)

"Snatch" is the bank for CATCH-AS-CATCH-CAN. Read more about letter banks in Chapter 24.

11. Miscellaneous techniques

These examples present cryptic clueing techniques in their pure form. In practice, these types of clues are often combined. For example, a clue may ask you to

contain an anagrammed word within another word, or to read a hidden word in reverse.

Another complication is that clues can often involve individual letters or strings of letters that are not words. So be on the lookout for Roman numerals, compass points, and common abbreviations—left and right indicating L and R, for instance. There are also slightly more cryptic ways to indicate parts of words. For example, "The Fourth of July" can mean the letter Y (the fourth letter in the word JULY). We write about single letters, abbreviations, and letter pairs in Chapters 26 and 27.

12. &lit.

A clue will generally contain a "straight" definition as well as tricky wordplay to guide you to the clue answer. But sometimes the entire clue is *both* the definition and the wordplay. For example:

    Terribly evil! (4)

The answer, VILE, is defined by the entire clue. But the clue serves simultaneously as the wordplay, indicating that the answer is EVIL anagrammed. This is known as an &lit. clue ("and literally so"—the term goes back to cryptic crosswords' British roots). Conventionally, it is marked with an exclamation point, but remember: Sometimes an exclamation point is just an exclamation point.

Read more about &lit. clues in Chapter 23.

The rules of the game?

The above, by and large, are the clueing conventions we adhere to, along with most cryptic constructors. When you're solving one of our puzzles, these conventions will guide you to most answers. However, be warned that the only rules you can be sure we will respect consistently are these two:

1. Each clue will provide at least two paths to the answer, and at least one of those will be a definition.
2. There will be a legitimate way to parse each clue in order to get a valid cryptic reading, which will lead to the solution via wordplay or an additional definition.

Clues that satisfy these requirements do not always fit into a straightforward catalog of clue types, because wordplay comes in many shapes and forms. Some of those do not fall neatly into these or any predefined categories. For example, we consider puns to be a perfectly legitimate form of wordplay in a cryptic clue. Heck, they are the most common form of wordplay in everyday life, as well as in "vanilla" (non-cryptic) crosswords. We write about puns and other offbeat clues in Chapter 31.

For another example, take this clue:

Something you might put on at mealtimes:

(7)

The answer (FEEDBAG) is given in musical notation. This clue does not fit exactly anywhere on the list above, but in our opinion, it is definitely a legitimate cryptic clue.

Themes and cross-references

In approximately one-third of our puzzles there is some sort of theme: perhaps several entries that are related, or many clues that share a particular characteristic. In general, this does not affect clueing, but on rare occasions it might lead to nonstandard clues. When it does, we make sure to hint in one of the clues at what is going on. Read more about themes in Chapter 3.

Once or twice a year, we use a barred diagram, in which thick bars instead of black squares separate the diagram entries. When we do this, the puzzle will have an introduction that will reveal a theme for the puzzle, and hint at any departures from standard clueing. Read more about bar diagrams in Chapter 8.

Sometimes a clue is not self-contained, yet is also not part of a full-fledged theme. This can happen when it references another entry in the diagram, referring to it by the number of the clue. In extreme cases, clues may mutually refer to each other. We write about that in Chapter 33.

Fair is fair

Our puzzles are meant to be solved, and while difficulty will vary from clue to clue and from one puzzle to the next, we hope that we are always fair. (We write more about this in Chapters 41 and 60.) If you find the puzzles challenging at first, don't give up! Use this book as a guide, look at the answers to clues you failed to solve, and discuss them with friends—you will certainly get better.