

Solving Cryptic Crosswords - Summary (by roy)

At first glance, clues in a cryptic crossword seem to read as normal, though unusual, English sentences and phrases. This **surface meaning** is sometimes played for comic effect, but it is actually irrelevant for the purposes of solving. Instead, each clue is a puzzle in its own right which consists of two parts, split somewhere in the middle, to be determined by the solver. In most clues, one part of the clue is the **straight part**, or the definition of the answer, while the other part is the **cryptic part**, which explains how to derive the answer. The two exceptions to this rule are Double Definition and &lit clues (see below).

Cryptic clues can be considered more complete than standard American-style crossword puzzle clues because they are, in essence, self-confirming – once the solver gets the answer, they can be reasonably confident that they are correct. They are only ambiguous up until the point they are cracked. So, although cryptic crosswords present a greater challenge, many solvers also consider them more satisfying to solve. The self-confirming nature of the clues also means that cryptic crosswords become too easy when too many letters are known. For this reason, unlike American-style crosswords, cryptic crosswords almost always have unchecked letters (that is, letters which only appear in one entry). To be fair to solvers, entries in cryptic crosswords almost always have “dictionary nature,” which eliminates phrases and partials. Finally, many, if not most, advanced and “variety” cryptics have additional tricks added to make them even harder to solve.

Every part of a cryptic clue is a potential for wordplay, including everything used in American-style crosswords and then some. The word “mad,” for example, could mean anagramming is required, the letters “mad” are part of the answer word, or some, but not all, of those letters are in the answer word, depending on how it is modified (“initially mad” means M, while “mad heart” means A), or that “mad” is the definition or part of the definition of the answer word.

Here are the eight most common types of wordplay, along with hints on how to spot them.

1. **Anagrams** scramble the letters of the word into another word.
2. **Charades**, as in the flat type (or the game) of this name, have an answer that is broken down into two or more words that appear in succession; for example, *consummate* is made up of *con*, *sum*, and *mate*.
3. **Containers** place one word within the letters of another word; in *courthouse*, for instance, *thou* is contained within *course*.
4. **Reversals** reverse the letters of a word into another word.
5. **Homophones** sound the same but are spelled differently, like *through* and *threw* or *bizarre* and *bazaar*.
6. **Deletions** are formed by deleting a letter or group of letters from another word.
7. **Double Definitions** provide a second definition of the answer, preferably in an unrelated sense.
8. **Hidden Words** have the answer given explicitly in the clue, but camouflaged within another word or other words.

One of the best ways to solve cryptic crosswords is to look for something that might be an **indicator** word that gives you a clue about the wordplay type. Some common examples (and nowhere near all of them) would include:

Wordplay	Some Possible Indicators
Anagrams	doctor, mad, crazy, mixed up
Charades	at, by, near, before, after; or (in Down clues) on, over, or beneath
Containers	inside, holding, swallowing, within and (its deceptive opposite) without, and around
Reversals	backwards, returning, heading west, from right to left or (in Down clues) upward or rising
Homophones	heard, spoken, aloud, or they say
Deletions	beheaded, endlessly, or (in a Down clue) topless; or it may specify a particular letter or letters to be omitted.
Double Definitions	By convention, when the second definition is a pun or whimsical one the clue is flagged with a question mark.
Hidden Words	seen in, running through, or in part

Solving Cryptic Crosswords - In Depth (from an article by Trazom)

Cryptic crosswords can seem dauntingly nonsensical at first glance. But the fundamental principles of cryptic clueing are actually quite simple.

Every cryptic clue can be read as 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. It is called the **wordplay**, the **subsidiary indication**, or simply the **subsidiary**. 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; more often, the definition and wordplay will simply occur side by side. In any case, they will never overlap or intermingle.

This means that, with a few exceptions, every clue either begins or ends with a definition of the answer. The catch is that you have to find the break between definition and wordplay. The constructor tries to challenge you with clues whose surface meaning puts you off the scent -- for example, with a clue whose parts split 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. Cryptic clues may also use punctuation in whatever manner seems most likely to deceive; solvers are warned to ignore punctuation (except in two special cases mentioned below).

Cryptic clues generally direct you (albeit deceptively) to the type of wordplay involved. Here is a tour of the eight most common types of wordplay, along with hints on how to spot them. The number in parentheses following a clue tells you how many letters are in the clue answer.

1. Anagrams

(known as [transposals](#) in the NPL, where "[anagram](#)" has a more limited meaning)

Probably 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, [paternal](#) from [prenatal](#), [honestly](#) from [on the sly](#), or [Episcopal](#) from [Pepsi-Cola](#). A wide variety of 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. Here is an elementary 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](#).

Anagrams may involve more than one word in the clue. For example:

Doctor is venal -- get a preacher (10)

This time, the wordplay is an instruction. It tells you to "doctor," or alter deceptively, the letters in [is venal get](#) to form a word meaning "preacher," i.e., [evangelist](#). In the example, the dash provides part of the clue's surface sense and is ignored in the wordplay itself.

2. Charades

As in the flat type (or the game) of this name, 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](#). The subsidiary indication may simply list these words, or their synonyms, in order; components of a charade may also be joined by words like [at](#), [by](#), [near](#), [before](#), [after](#); or (in Down clues) [on](#), [over](#), or [beneath](#). A simple example:

Growth on the face must be sore (8)

The answer, **mustache**, joins **must** and **ache** ("be sore"). Charades may be composed of more than two words. For example:

Minstrel shows dance, gaining a buck (9)

The answer, **balladeer** (defined by "minstrel"), shows **ball** ("dance") gaining **a deer** ("a buck").

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."

4. Reversals

An answer is identified as another word read in reverse -- as, for instance, **timer** and **remit**, or **stressed** and **desserts**. 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").

5. Homophones

Words that sound the same but are spelled differently, like **through** and **threw** or **bizarre** and **bazaar**, 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").

6. Deletions

Some answers are formed by deleting a letter or group of letters from another word -- removing the beginning of **islander**, for instance, leaves **slander**, while **deadline** without its concluding letter produces **deadlines**. The subsidiary 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. Here is an example of each type:

Pins: superfluous without an end (7)

Power plant lacks a spiritual leader (6)

The answer to the first clue, **needles**, is **needless** ("superfluous") without its final letter. In the second clue, **reactor** ("power plant") lacks **a**; this gives the answer, **rector** ("spiritual leader").

7. Double Definitions

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

Holler "Author!" (6)

The answer, [bellow](#) or [Bellow](#), is clued in two different meanings. Often the second definition can be a punning or whimsical one; by convention, such clues are flagged with a question mark. Here is an example:

Oinking tendency? (8)

The answer, [penchant](#), is clued normally by "tendency," and punningly, as [pen chant](#), by "oinking."

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](#). Here is an example:

Cheese stored in Baroque fortress (9)

The answer, [Roquefort](#), is literally stored in the words [Baroque fortress](#).

9. 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: clues often involve individual letters or strings of letters that are not words. So be on the lookout for Roman numerals, compass points, common abbreviations -- left and right indicating L and R, for instance -- or less common ones, which should be hinted at with indicators like [briefly](#) or [in short](#). *Enigma* cryptics stick to MW abbreviations, generally making note of those (NI2 or NI3) not in 11C.

There are also 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](#)); similarly, [Brahms' Second](#) is R, [Norwegian leader](#) is N, and [the Heart of Dixie](#) is X (or possibly IXI).

10. & lit.

In any case, there will always be a "straight" definition as well as a tricky subsidiary to guide you to the clue answer -- with one special exception: sometimes the entire clue is both the definition and the wordplay. An 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 (or "terribly"). 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; some editors and composers choose not to mark it.