Cryptic Crosswords – The Rules

A cryptic crossword is like a normal crossword, except that each clue must have two parts – a straight definition of the word and a construction of the word through wordplay. Either part may come first, but they do not overlap. You would think this would make solving these clues easier than a regular crossword clue because there are two ways to arrive at the same answer, but that isn't always true.

The challenge for the constructor is to devise a clue that disguises the dividing point with a clever surface reading. The clue is not allowed to have extraneous words that are not used in either the definition or the wordplay. The only exception to this is what we call "connector words" - words used to connect the definition to the wordplay such as; for, to, in, is, and, from, with, resulting in, etc.

For example, consider this clue:

Relentlessly pursues Rock Hudson (6)

On the surface it looks like someone is stalking a movie star, but if you remember the general rule you know that each clue must have a definition part and a wordplay part. The number in brackets tells you that the answer has 6 letters and you notice that Hudson has 6 letters, and that if you "rock" (anagram) those letters you get HOUNDS which satisfies the definition "Relentlessly pursues".

Notice that the wordplay is signaled by an indicator word(s) – in this case "rock" is used to signal an anagram. There are literally hundreds of anagram indicators – any word or words that mean move around, destroy, improve, funny/odd, etc. can be used as an anagram indicator. The anagram is one of the main wordplay types.

The other common types of wordplay are: reversals, homophones, deletions, double definitions, container/insertion, hidden answers, and charades. Each is described below with an example:

Reversals: Word(s) written in reverse order to yield the answer. Of course there must be something in the clue to indicate this. For example: Intelligent trains backing up (5) for SMART (TRAMS reversed). For Down answers the reversal indicator may be something that indicates upward movement such as "up" or "rising".

Homophones: Word(s) sounding like the answer word with a phrase such as "we hear" to signal this. For example: Pressure to pause for the audience (6) for WEIGHT ("wait")

Deletions: Word(s) having a letter deleted at the beginning, end, or in the middle to yield the answer word. The location of the deleted letter must be indicated by the clue. Some examples: "Rob loses face being angry (5)" for IRATE (PIRATE missing the first letter or "face") [Notice how "Rob" is used as a noun in the surface sense, but as a verb in the cryptic reading. This is a favourite trick of constructors. Also note "being" as a connector word – see discussion of **Connector words** below.] "Examine detailed car (4)" for AUDI (AUDIT missing the last letter or "detailed"); Cored fish for baked meat dishes (4) for PIES (PIKES missing the middle letter or "cored")

Double Definitions: The wordplay is a second unrelated definition of the answer. Often these clues have only two words. For example: "Support remainder (4)" for REST.

Container/insertion: One word is inserted into, or contained by another word. A container example: Support Norm taking sick (6)" for P(ILL)AR – see how "par" literally takes "ill". Norm is capitalized to throw you off – another favourite trick of constructors. An example of an insertion: "Everybody breaking into terrible song (6)" for B(ALL)AD.

Hidden answers: The answer is literally hidden inside the clue words. For example: Houseguest has to make a transition (5) for SEGUE (hidden in houseguest as indicated by "Houseguest has"). The answer could also be hidden in reverse: "Sped around in homemade cars (5)" (RACED is hidden backward or "around" in homemaDE CARs). Another way to hide words is using the first letters of a phrase: "Colour starts to fade under constant hot sun in Arizona (7)" for FUCHSIA (as indicated by "starts to")

Charades: The answer word is a composition of two or more other words. For example: "Sailor to achieve goal (6)" for TAR+GET.

Some other things to watch for:

Abbreviations: Some examples: Doctor for DR or ME; direction for N,S,E, or W; married for M; Roman numerals: One for I, C for hundred, 1,000 for M; State postal codes (e.g. Maine=ME); musical terms (note = DO, RE, MI, etc.) and there are many others

Unusual definitions: For example "neat" is a type of cow; butter could mean ram (something that "butts")

Misleading punctuation: An example: State "I had returned ring" for I+DAH+O (the constructor is trying to get you to see state as a verb instead of the noun which is the definition). This clue combines a charade with a reversal.

Necessary punctuation: A clue with an exclamation point at the end indicates an "& lit." clue (meaning "and literally"). This type of clue is unique in that the entire clue serves as the definition and also the word play. For example: Dog in wild! for DINGO ("dog in wild" is an anagram of "dog in" to get DINGO and a definition for DINGO is also "dog in wild").

A clue with a "?" indicates a pun. For example: Long story - a movie on the Internet? (4) for EPIC (an E-PIC could be a movie on the Internet like E-MAIL is mail on the Internet)

Connector words: A clue may sometimes contain words like "is", "in", "of", "from", resulting in" which are not part of the definition or the wordplay, but instead are used to connect the two parts of the clue. Most constructors will try to avoid using these, but sometimes they are necessary for a smooth reading of the clue. An example is the word "being" in the clue for IRATE under **Deletions** above.