

General Principles for Cryptic Crosswords

Every clue has two parts: a straightforward definition and a second definition. The parts can appear in either order and should not overlap except entirely. Although there should not be a third part, many setters use extra words to connect the two other parts to give a better surface reading. The third part is known as a fulcrum or pivot by setters who use them, and as slop or flab by those who do not. Fraser Simpson is notable as a current setter who does not use third parts and yet achieves good surface readings.

The key to decoding the cryptic definition is to recognise that the words in the clue can have a different meaning than in their everyday sense. The words in the wordplay part are often instructions of how to use the other words or how to manipulate the letters of the other words. Therefore some words need to be treated as sequences or sets of letters, other words are treated as straightforward definitions, and others refer to other words in the clue. This may sound daunting but it is much easier than it can sound.

For the most part you can ignore the punctuation in a cryptic clue as it is only to help create a pleasant or misleading surface reading. The exception is that proper nouns must be capitalised although any word can be too. The enumeration at the end of the clue tells you how many words and letters are in the answer, e.g. (7) means 1 word of 7 letters; (3,5) means two words, the first of 3 letters and the second of 5; (1-3) means a 4 letter word with a hyphen after the first letter.

The main types of cryptic clues as outlined in the following notes:

- **anagrams** (in which letters are rearranged)
- **reversals** (in which words are written with their letters in reverse order)
- **homophones** (in which the clue is a word that sounds like the answer)
- **deletions** (in which part of a word is removed or only some letters are used)
- **containers** (in which one word is placed inside another)
- **hidden answers** (in which the answer is printed in the clue), and
- **charades** (in which the answer is described in steps as in the game charades) .

The parts can be in any order but if they overlap they must overlap completely. Such clues are known as **& lits**. An frequent example **Terribly enraged! (7)** in which terribly indicates an anagram and is part of the definition of the answer, namely **ANGERED**. Many setters indicate & lit. clues by ending them with an exclamation point.

There are also **double definitions** and **cryptic definitions**.

Double definitions provide two straightforward definitions for the same word (or words that are spelled the same way). An example of a double definition is **Metal chair (4)** meaning a four-letter word that could be clued by the definition 'metal' and also the definition 'chair'. In this case the answer is **LEAD**.

Cryptic definitions are more common in UK crosswords than North American ones. The clue will be the answer to a humorous riddle-like definition. For example, the answer to **Yet they enjoy some standing at a meeting (8)** from the Gemini crossword in the Globe & Mail for 2016-01-26, is **CHAIRMEN**.

Of course, there can be other types of cryptic crossword clues but nine above make up almost every clue one is likely to encounter in the popular cryptic crossword.

General Principles for Cryptic Crosswords (cont.)

There are two general rules that I think will help everyone solve well-formed cryptics:

1. The setter does not have to say what he (or she or they) mean but they must mean what they say.

Jenni Chandler wrote in “Deciphering cryptic clues ...” (part of CrosswordAcademy.com, ©2008, at <URL:<http://www.crosswordacademy.com/crypticclues.html>>):

As you work through the puzzle deciphering clues, you can be confident that a cryptic crossword compiler will *always* say what she or he means. Even if at first sight it may not seem so, the information you need is there in front of you.

This cryptic law is known as Afrit's Injunction after A.F. Ritchie, a noted British compiler of the 1930s and '40s known as Afrit. In 1949 he wrote:

We must expect the composer to play tricks, but we shall insist that he play fair. The Book of the Crossword lays this injunction upon him: "You need not mean what you say, but you must say what you mean." This is a superior way of saying that he can't have it both ways. He may attempt to mislead by employing a form of words which can be taken more than one way, and it is your fault if you take it the wrong way, but it is his fault if you can't logically take it the right way.

2. Good clues are said to contain exactly three parts:
 - i. a straightforward definition,
 - ii. a secondary or cryptic definition,
 - iii. nothing else.

However cryptic definitions are an exception to that principle.