

AN INTRODUCTION TO CRYPTIC CLUES

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Cryptic clues usually appear in puzzles called cryptic crosswords, a very popular format for people who like a little extra challenge in their word puzzles. Cryptic clues often appear in non-crossword form as well.

If you're new to cryptic clues (usually appearing in cryptic crosswords), don't fear. They follow a formula: each clue has two parts, possibly with a few words connecting the two parts, like a hinge. One part is a normal meaning for the answer; it is the kind of clue you might see in a traditional crossword for the answer. The other part, however, is wordplay to lead you to the answer. So each cryptic clue offers you two ways to get to the correct answer! If you solve the clue in both ways, you can be certain you have the correct answer.

The reason that this does not make them twice as easy, however, is that the two parts can appear in either order, often without anything such as a punctuation mark clearly dividing the two parts. Each clue offers the challenge of figuring out the split and figuring out how the wordplay actually works.

There are some common types of clues, and we'll explain how they work:

DOUBLE DEFINITION:

This type of cryptic clue subverts the “one part is wordplay” assumption by still being composed of two parts but with both of those parts being different definitions for the same word. The two definitions may require the word to be pronounced differently, but they will be spelled the same.

Example: *“Bewitch doorway” (8).*

“Bewitch” clues ENTRANCE as a verb, to hold someone's attention, but “doorway” clues ENTRANCE as a noun, the thing one enters a building or room through.

ANAGRAMS:

These clues are the easiest to solve for many people but they are also the most flexible in terms

of what indicators (the words that tell you what wordplay to perform) can appear. The letters of your answer appear in the wordplay half of the clue, all together, but they are scrambled out of order (for the answer). The anagrammed letters will be next to a word or phrase with a semantic meaning of confusion, disarray, or rectification.

Example: *“World's broken heart” (5).*

“Broken” indicates to anagram the letters of HEART to get EARTH. The apostrophe and letter S are connecting the two parts in the form of the contraction for “is,” even though it may look like a possessive at first! The normal part of the clue is “World.” A trick to finding anagrams is when a word or set of consecutive words in the clue, next to an indicator as explained above, has the same number of total letters as your enumeration.

HIDDEN ANSWERS:

These clues put the answer directly in the clue, but usually broken up over several words (but they can appear within a single word sometimes!). The word(s) that contain your answer will be indicated by a word or phrases with a sense of secrecy or containment, such as “hidden,” “housed by,” “standing in,” or “part of.”

Example: *“Superman, for example, found in the room” (4).*

“Found in” indicates to look at the letters in THE ROOM. Indeed, the word HERO appears in it, broken up by a space. Sometimes articles can be part of an indicator or part of the text having wordplay performed upon it, so consider both options. The normal part of the clue is “Superman, perhaps.”

CHARADES:

These clues break the answer up into pieces, much like a rebus puzzle, but with just text, rather than images. If the pieces are in order, there may be no indicators that the answer is broken up.

Example: *“Distant object: obsolete coin” (8).*

“Distant” clues FAR, and “object” clues THING, which combine into FARTHING. The normal part of the clue is “obsolete coin.”

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CONTAINERS:

These clues also break up the answer into pieces, but one piece has to go inside the other. These will be indicated by word or phrases meaning containment, holding, embedding, or surrounding. These indicators can look similar to the indicators for hidden answers at first glance!

Example: *"Satisfies primates holding round green vegetables" (8).*

"Primates" clues APES, and "round green vegetables" clues PEAS. "Holding" indicates that APES will go around PEAS: AP(PEAS)ES, clued by "satisfies."

REVERSALS:

These clues provide a word or phrase that can be reversed to form your answer. They will be indicated by a word or phrase about changing direction.

Example: *"Upside-down piece of baited device" (4).*

"Piece" clues PART, which "upside down" indicates to reverse. This results in TRAP, clued by "baited device."

DELETIONS:

These clues will tell you to remove the front, the end, the middle, or the outside of a clued word or phrase. Sometimes they will give you the exact text to perform the wordplay on, like a hidden answer clue.

Example: *"Household pests cut off top of trousers" (4).*

"Trousers" clues PANTS. To "cut off top" of them, remove the first letter, P, to get ANTS, which is clued normally by "household pests."

SHIFTS:

These clues will tell you to move a letter or letters forward or backwards in the alphabet, with the most common type called "Caesar shifts." Look for an indicator word or phrase that conveys moving forwards or backwards.

Example: *"Advance in a career" (3).*

Advance indicates to move the letters IN A forward in the alphabet. Without any indication of how much to move them forward, a single shift of one is

the most appropriate. J comes immediately after I in the alphabet; O comes after N; B comes after A. This results in JOB, clued by "career."

ABBREVIATIONS:

Within charades, sometimes a word or phrase may be cluing a letter (or a few letters) rather than an entire word that you need to use in your wordplay. Consider words that are part of common abbreviations or have shortened representations. NATO letters, Roman numerals, and chemical symbols are often used (but not exclusively!)

Example: *"Foxtrot and Tango grab hold of one tantrum" (3).*

"Foxtrot" and "Tango" are both NATO letters, representing F and T, respectively. "One" is a number, which is represented by I in Roman numerals. "Grab hold of" indicates a container: that FT contains the I that follows "grab hold of." This results in FIT, which is clued by "tantrum."

SUBSTITUTIONS:

Usually within charades, this wordplay tells you to replace a word or letters in a clued word or phrase with other words or letters. The text involved in the substitution may often be an abbreviation as well.

Example: *"Blackbeard (and others) turning scores into dozens of sky captains" (6).*

"Blackbeard (and others)" clues PIRATES, "scores" clues RATES, and "dozens" clues LOTS. Turning the RATES in RATES into LOTS results in PILOTS, clued by "sky captains". ("Of" is a connecting word.)

COMPLEX CLUES:

Cryptic clues on the harder side will often combine multiple of these wordplay techniques into a single clue. Although not an exact science, the length of a clue might *clue you in* on how much wordplay is happening.