

Guide to Cryptic Crosswords

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WHAT THE HECK ARE CRYPTICS?

In almost all ways, a cryptic crossword is just like a regular crossword. It has clues and answers and a grid to record them in. And, like a regular crossword, a cryptic clue is synonymous with its answer. However, a cryptic clue has an additional element of wordplay.

Before I get into the different types of wordplay, here are a few things to note:

- The regular part of the clue is its first or last word(s).
- Whatever isn't part of the regular clue is wordplay.
- Punctuation is not typically meaningful, and can even be deceitful.
- The answer key always explains the nature of the wordplay.

WORDPLAY TYPES

Here are several methods used to create a cryptic clue. A clue may use just one of these methods or may combine several.

Anagrams

Letters in the answer are scrambled to form a new word or words. The clue that you are to scramble the letters are words like "mix" "blast" or "confuse."

Q: *Blade words are broken (5)*

A: SWORD (*sword anag.*)

"Blade" is a synonym for SWORD. The letters in "words" are 'broken' to make SWORD.

Containers

The answer can be found within a longer word or words. The clue that the answer is hidden are words like "swallows," "hidden within" or "boxed by."

Q: *Crow his keystone hides Manhattan need. (7)*

A: (cro)WHISKEY(stone)

"Manhattan need" is a synonym for WHISKEY. The words "Crow his keystone" hide the word WHISKEY. Note that this time the real clue is at the end of the sentence.

Synonyms

The answer is built from a synonym or synonyms.

Q: *Racquet sport happening after evil fortune. (9)*

A: BAD+MIN+TON

“Racquet sport” is a synonym for BADMINTON. “Happening” is a synonym for “ON”, and it comes “after” synonyms for “evil” (BAD) and “fortune” (MINT).

Double Synonyms

The clue is actually two synonyms for the same word.

Q: *Film fire* (5)

A: SHOOT (2 defs.)

“Film” and “fire” are both synonyms for SHOOT.

Reversals

The answer is made by flipping another word.

Q: Cookware flipped organ control knob (4)

A: STOP (*pots* rev.)

STOP is a synonym for “organ control knob.” “Cookware” is one synonym for “pots,” and “pots” when “flipped” is STOP. However, in this case, the answer could be either SPOT or POTS; the correct answer would be revealed by other letters in the grid.

Deletions

The answer is made by removing letters from another word. Look for hints such as “first off” (remove first letter), “odds from” (remove odd numbered letters) or “heart of” (central letters).

Q: Secure clock loses face

A: (c)LOCK

LOCK is a synonym for “Secure.” The “face” of the word “clock” is its first letter, C. This clue also employs a play on the phrase “lose face,” but that’s just for fun.

Constructions

The answer is made by assembling various short words, references, symbols, and short forms.

Q: Famous ‘Lady’ Washington precedes Lithium Festival of Lights

A: DI + WA + LI

DIWALI is a synonym for “Festival of Lights.” The Famous ‘Lady’ is DI, WA is short for Washington, and LI is the chemical symbol for Lithium .

Letter Bank

The answer is made from reusing and anagramming letters in a word. The tip-off that you are supposed to reuse the letters are phrases like “with duplicates,” “cloned” or “recycled.”

Q: *Knocked out by chopping and reusing dates. (8)*

A: SEDATED (letter bank)

SEDATED is a synonym for “knocked out.” The letters in the word “dates” have been duplicated and anagrammed to create the answer.

Homophones

The answer and an element of the clue have the same pronunciation but different spelling. Look for hints such as “has the sound of,” “echoes” and “for an auditor.”

Q: *Serious remained to the audience (5)*

A: STAID (*stayed* hom.)

STAID is a synonym for “serious.” “Remained” is a synonym for STAYED, which would sound like STAID if spoken “to the audience.”

Letter Swap

The answer is created by swapping a single letter from a word in the clue.

Q: *“Don’t think so,” rope making RN (4)*

A: NOPE (letter swap)

NOPE is a synonym for “don’t think so.” Swapping the R in “rope” for an N creates the answer.

Puns

These clues break the rules a bit and are often the most challenging. Unlike other cryptic clues, they don’t always have a straightforward clue, just pure wordplay. They are identified by a question mark.

Q: *Flee to a double Dutch city? (4,4)*

A: SKIP TOWN (pun)

SKIP TOWN is a synonym for “flee.” (They won’t always be so clear.) A city that loves Double Dutch could jokingly be referred to as a real SKIP TOWN. Yes, they can be groaners! Note that only the word “Dutch” was capitalized – you can’t trust punctuation!