CRYPTIC CROSSWORDS

"A cryptic crossword is a crossword puzzle in which each clue is a word puzzle in and of itself." Cryptic crossword clues (with some exceptions) have two parts: wordplay and definition. The wordplay part tells you how to get the answer by solving a puzzle and finding the letters, while the definition part is similar to regular crosswords, in that the solution is a synonym of this part of the clue. There are some rules ("Ximenean") that are commonly followed, and the definition is always at one end of the clue, i.e. either at the start or at the end.

The combination of the wordplay part and the definition part might read like a nice little phrase or sentence with a meaning ("surface") that can be misleading. A well-constructed clue has a good surface that reads smoothly, and has proper grammar in both the surface reading and the wordplay/parsed reading.

The following is a quick summary of how cryptic crosswords work. There is a lot of information on the internet for people starting with cryptics, and this document borrows heavily from the Wikipedia page on it. There are many blogs (crypticcrosswords.net, fifteensquared.net, crosswordunclued.com, to name a few) dedicated to cryptics, and you can find a host of information on how to solve and construct clues on these sites.

Types of clues

Depending on how the wordplay works, there are a few types of clues. Some clues can use mixtures of these wordplay examples as well. Look out for indicator words that might hint at what kind of clue it is.

1. Anagrams

An anagram clue requires a rearrangement of a certain part of the clue to form the answer. This is usually indicated by words such as "strange", "bizarre", "muddled", "wild", "drunk", or any other term indicating change. One example:

> *Chaperone shredded corset. (6)*

gives ESCORT, which means chaperone and is an anagram of corset, indicated by the word shredded. Note that indirect anagrams (where you have to find the anagram of a synonym of a word in the clue) are frowned upon. You will always find the letters you need to anagram in the clue itself.

2. Charades

Here, the answer is formed by joining individually clued words to make a larger word (namely, the answer). For example:

> *Outlaw leader managing money. (7)*

The answer is BANKING formed by BAN for "outlaw" and KING for "leader".

3. Containers

A container clue puts one set of letters inside another. So:

Apostle's friend outside of university. (4)

gives PAUL ("apostle"), by placing "pal" ("friend") outside of "U" ("university"); the "'s" could be treated as indicating possessive in the 'surface reading' or as short for 'is' in the wordplay reading.

4. Deletions

Deletions involve removing a part of some word to get to the answer. An example:

Beheaded celebrity is sailor. (3)

The answer would be TAR, another word for "sailor", which is a "celebrity", or star, without the first letter.

A similar example, but with a specification as to the letter being removed:

Bird is cowardly, about to fly away. (5)

The answer is RAVEN, which means "bird" and is craven, or "cowardly", without the first letter (in this case c, the abbreviation for circa or "about").

5. Double definitions

A clue may, rather than having a definition part and a wordplay part, have two definition parts. For example:

Not seeing window covering. (5)

would have the answer BLIND, because blind can mean both "not seeing" and "window covering". Note that since these definitions come from the same root word, some purists would not allow this clue. It is more proper to require both parts to come from different roots, as in this clue:

Eastern European buff. (6)

which gives POLISH.

6. Hidden words or Telescopic clues

When the answer appears in the clue but is contained within one or more words, it is hidden/telescopic. For example:

Found ermine, deer hides damaged. (10)

gives UNDERMINED, which means (cryptically at least) "damaged" and can be found as part of "Found ermine deer". The word "hides" is used to mean "contains".

7. Initial letters or Acrostic clues

The first letters of part of the clue are put together to give the answer. An example of an initialism:

Initially amiable person eats primate. (3)

The answer would be APE, which is a type of primate. "Initially" signals that you must take the first letters of "amiable person eats" – "ape".

8. Homophones

Homophones are words that sound the same but have different meanings, such as "night" and "knight". Homophone clues always have an indicator word or phrase that has to do with phonetics, such as "reportedly", "they say", "utterly" (here treated as "utter(ing)-ly" and not with its usual meaning), "vocal", "to the audience", "auditioned", "by the sound of it", "is heard", "in conversation" and "on the radio". An example of a homophone clue is

We hear twins shave. (4)

which is a clue for PARE, which means "shave" and is a homophone of pair, or "twins". The homophone is indicated by "we hear". Note that the answer is "pare" and not the other homophone, since the definition is at the end (and hence "twins" cannot be the definition).

9. Reversals

A word that gets turned around to make another is a reversal. For example:

Returned beer fit for a king. (5)

The answer is REGAL. "Lager" (i.e., "beer") is "returned" to make regal, i.e. fit for a king.

10. Cryptic definitions

These are the only kind of clue to not have separate wordplay and definition parts. Here the clue appears to say one thing, but with a slight shift of viewpoint it says another. In other words, a pun is involved. For example:

Flower of London? (6)

gives THAMES, a flow-er of London. Here, the surface reading suggests a blossom, which disguises the fact that the name of a river is required. Notice the question mark: this is often used by compilers to indicate this sort of clue is one where you need to interpret the words in a different fashion.

11. Spoonerisms

A relatively uncommon clue type, a Spoonerism is a play on words where corresponding consonant clusters are switched between two words in a phrase (or syllables in a word) and the switch forms another pair of proper sounding words. For example: "butterfly" $\Rightarrow$ "flutter by".

Both the solution word or phrase and its corresponding Spoonerism are clued for, and the clue type is almost always indicated by reference to William Archibald Spooner himself (or the "Reverend"). In contrast to all other clue types, this makes them almost impossible to disguise. But that doesn't necessarily make them easy. An example of a Spoonerism clue is:

Spooner's monsoon journey is a disaster. (5,5)

The answer is TRAIN WRECK ("disaster"). The Spoonerism is "rain trek" ("monsoon journey").

12. "&lit."

An "&lit." clue is not a clue type, but, rather a variant on an existing clue. "&lit" stands for "and literally so". In this case, the entire clue is both a definition and a cryptic clue. This is the hardest

type of clue to construct. For example:

> *God incarnate, essentially! (4)*

The answer is ODIN. The Norse god Odin is hidden in "god incarnate", as clued by "essentially", but the definition of Odin is also the whole clue, as Odin is essentially a God incarnate. This satisfies the "& lit." requirement. Another example:

> *Spoil vote! (4)*

would give the answer VETO; in the cryptic sense, "spoil" works as an anagram indicator for "vote", while the whole clue is, with a certain amount of licence allowed to crossword setters, a definition.

Tips for solving

1. Try to identify the definition part, which is separate from the wordplay part. Especially as a beginner, I have found that looking up synonyms for definition parts of a clue helps me get to the answer, and then I can parse the wordplay part.

2. Sometimes, abbreviations are used in the solution for words in the clue. E.g. DR from doctor. Looking up abbreviations for words when you are stuck on a clue can be helpful. There are many commonly used crossword-isms that seem arcane and are rarely used in modern language ("sailor" = "tar" or "ab" and "model" = "T", for example). There are many online lists of these abbreviations, and Wikipedia even has historical notes on how they came about!

3. Some clues are easier than others, so do these first to get crossing letters.

4. Look for 'indicator' words. Some indicate anagrams, some indicate reversal, others indicate insertions or deletions. Words that tell you to do something with letters can help you identify what kind of clue it is.

5. Telescopic clues are usually the easiest to solve. So scan the clues for hidden words!

6. Anagram clues are usually second easiest to solve. Look for these first. I will not judge if you use an anagram solver for clues, although some in the crossword community consider this cheating.

7. Note that punctuation can be misleading in cryptic crosswords! Try to ignore commas and hyphens and other separators.

Happy solving and setting!