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## About Crossword Construction Standards

### De Facto Standards

Here, The Muses explore the principles that govern the structure and other characteristics of the American de facto standard crossword puzzle.

Start This  
Feature At Its  
Beginning

Beginner's Guide  
To Constructing  
Crosswords

[referral and link to Farrar bio and link to crosswords history and game pages]

Among her more important innovations was establishment of the standard grid structure for the crossword puzzle. She is the source of virtually all the construction design practices followed by constructors today. they do not conform to her designs because there is a standards body that says they must; they adopt her policies because it's smart to do so.

so called Diametrically symmetrical rule-----. in direct opposition; being at opposite extremes; complete: diametrical opposites; a diametrical difference.

For example, as played in the U.S. today, most crossword puzzles are organized into a square box that, when folded corner-to-corner, is symmetrical; black boxes on one-half exactly cover black boxes on the other half. Another way to say this: Pick up a puzzle from any edge and hold it up; now turn it upside down. The arrangement of black squares will look exactly the same. These are her innovations.

Some of her other innovations:

- ▶ Answer boxes are contiguous.
- ▶ Black squares should take up no more than one-sixth of the diagram.
- ▶ Diagrams should have an odd number of squares on a side. This creates a central square and allows answers to go across or down the exact center of the puzzle.
- ▶ Every letter must be in two words, across and down. No single letter can be between wedged two black squares. (This characteristic is a feature of American, not English puzzles).
- ▶ All words must be three letters or longer.
- ▶ There may be no clusters of words that are isolated from the rest of the puzzle by black squares.

At the *New York Times*, she instituted the idea of making puzzles more difficult day-by-day as the week went on, with Monday's puzzle the easiest. She strove to publish puzzles that were visually appealing. She also introduced the concept of the theme puzzle, in which many or most of the clues and answers relate to a common subject. And she set a high bar for intelligence, wit, ingenuity, and style.

During the 1930s and 1940s in the United States this developmental process propelled the puzzle into a serious adult pastime and popular crossword designs gradually began to emerge as standbys. Among these new ideas was the concept of the theme puzzle. A theme puzzle is a crossword in which some or all the clues revolve around a single, unifying or dominant idea or motif. The mes can vary widely from one puzzle to another. A theme might be a particular work of art, the corpus an author, to a consistent way of constructing answers by combining two words into one.

Another important innovation in the U.S. involved the layout of the grid structure of the "standard" American crossword puzzle. Of course, it consists of rows and columns of the boxes where the solver writes letters and words. But did you know that the American design conforms to a specific kind of pattern? the pattern consists of a symmetrical arrangement of black and white squares laid out inside a square polygon formed with four equal sides.

Imagine a diagonal line running from the upper left corner of the large square polygon to the opposite corner. Imagine another diagonal line running from the upper right corner to the opposite corner. Also imagine a line along the center of any side running from right to left and another line across the center of the opposite side from top to bottom. With this arrangement, if folded along any of these lines, the pattern of black and white squares on one side of the line will match the pattern on the other. The nature of this match can vary from one puzzle to another.

This American crossword puzzle structure is not standard in the sense that it is regulated in some way or that constructors are obliged to follow it; it is a traditional, de facto standard, the one that appears most often in puzzles published in America. It is the most common grid format because most constructors voluntarily follow it most of the time. theydo so because it is tried and true and because solvers find it pleasing.

(More about grid patterns and matches elsewhere in this feature.)

See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crossword\\_puzzle#Types\\_of\\_grid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Crossword_puzzle#Types_of_grid) for grid patterns and list of themes.

Different kinds of matches: simple ones are exact; rotations around horizontal and vertical lines through center.. Explain double rotations around diagonal and center lines. Central column on each edge.

[See solver section for list of types of themes from Newman's Book]

Another important innovation in the U.S. involved the grid structure of the "standard" American crossword puzzle. The American design consists of a diagonal, symmetrical pattern of black and white squares laid out inside a square polygon which has four equal sides.

Imagine a diagonal line running from one corner of the large square polygon to the opposite corner. With this arrangement, if folded along this diagonal line, the pattern of black and white squares on one side of the line will exactly match the pattern o the other. Two such diagonals are possible but it doesn't matter which diagonal you choose.

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## Margaret Farrar

The theme puzzle and the standard U.S. grid structure are the original contributions of Margaret Farrar, a seminal figure in the field of the crossword puzzle. During the 1930s and 40s she devised most of the defining characteristics of the U.S. crossword puzzle.

Many U.S. crossword puzzle innovations and de facto standards originated with the tenure of Margaret Farrar as editor of the *New York World* and the *New York Times* crossword puzzle columns. Referred to by some as the First Lady of Crosswords, her occupancy of that illustrious chair was perhaps the most fruitful and salubrious in puzzle history. On her watch, many of the key characteristics of the modern American puzzle were devised and established as "standard."

- ▶ Explore Margaret Farrar's place in the history of the game and her contributions to crossword puzzles. See a description of the definitive characteristics of the U.S. crossword at the Muse's biography of Margaret Farrar: [click here](#).
- ▶ Explore the grid structure of the American-style puzzle further at the Wikipedia web site page on Types of Grid. Compare grid-styles popular in Britain, Australia, Japan, and other countries: [click here](#).

## Hints And Suggestions

Margaret's principles and rules aimed at improving appearance. You do too.

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