

When I write a themeless, I start out with a “seed entry” – a fresh or interesting entry that I want to build the grid around. In this case, I started with EXCUSE YOU, which I picked because it’s colloquial and it’s got an X in it. As a bonus, it has lots of vowels, which makes it relatively easy to fit in the grid.

A very standard kind of themeless grid is the triple-stack, which has three stacked entries on one edge of the grid. If I wanted to build a triple-stack with EXCUSE YOU, I’d probably put it in the second row from the top, because it has lots of vowels, and vowels go well in the second position. (It’d also go well in the third row, but not the first – especially because not many words start with X either.)

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9		10	11	12	13	14
15	E	X	C	U	S	E	Y	O	U	16				
17										18				
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Next, I want to pick an entry to go above it, since the top row is the most constrained (if I was doing a stack at the bottom of the grid, the bottom row would be the most constrained – generally, the ends of words are more constrained than the middles). With a U in 4-Down, it would be nice to fit a Q above it. The X pretty much has to have a vowel above it (specifically A, E, or O), and an S would go nicely in 3-Down between the vowel and the Q. Luckily SC- is a great opener. And of course, the Q is almost certainly going to be followed by a U.

1	2	3	S	4	Q	5	U	6	7	8	9		10	11	12	13	14
15	E	X	C	U	S	E	Y	O	U				16				
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Now I check my word list to see what words fit that pattern. There aren't very many, but luckily, SASQUATCH is one of them, and not only is it a colorful word, it fits nicely above EXCUSE YOU. In the below grid, the only down entry that might prove difficult is 6-Down, which has to start with AE. But there are still a decent number of words that start with AE. If I hadn't gotten lucky with SASQUATCH, I would have had to scratch the idea of using a Q, and found another entry that goes nicely on top of EXCUSE YOU.

1	S	2	A	3	S	4	Q	5	U	6	A	7	T	8	C	9	H		10	11	12	13	14
15	E	X	C	U	S	E	Y	O	U									16					
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You'll notice I added another black square. That's because in a triple-stack, there has to be a 3-letter entry crossing the stack at some point, by definition. If you didn't have one, it would be a quadruple-stack! (Which is certainly possible, but much more difficult.) I could have put the 3-letter entry at, say, 9-Down – it wouldn't quite be a quadruple-stack, but it would be three 9s on top of an 8, which is still very tough to pull off. The best bet is to put the 3-letter entry around the middle, so neither of the fourth-row words are too long. I put it at 5-Down because it's a flexible option: USE, USA, USO, USS, and USD are all possibilities.

Now for the third row, I use the same sort of reasoning I used for the top row: What letters would go well with the patterns I already have? The most constrained column is 6-Down, as I've mentioned, so I'll start with that. I'll stick an R after the AE, because lots of entries start with AER. I could even put a black square after AER if I needed to and clue it as [____ Lingus], but that's not a great entry, so I'd like to avoid doing that if possible. QU pretty much has to have a vowel after it (aside from a few possibilities like QURAN), so that one's pretty constrained too. And there aren't too many things that start with TY, although a nice thing is that it could be a vowel (as in TYING) or a consonant (as in TYPE). I won't go through all the details of this part; it involves a lot of trial and error. But it's a good exercise to try it yourself and see what you come up with.

1	S	2	A	3	S	4	Q	5	U	6	A	7	T	8	C	9	H		10	11	12	13	14
15	E	X	C	U	S	E	Y	O	U									16					
17	T	H	R	E	E	R	I	N	G									18					
19		E					20		N							21							
22		A				23			G							24							
25		D									26												
					27				28														
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I ended up with THREE-RING in that spot. I could actually break the triple-stack structure a bit and make it THREE-RING CIRCUS, which is the exact length to span the entire grid. I'm not going to do that for now, but it's a possibility to keep in mind for when I'm working on the top right corner.

Putting in THREE-RING now forces me to make certain decisions about the grid pattern. AXH- pretty much has to be AXHEAD, and TYI- pretty much has to be TYING. More conveniently, HUG- happens to be a word by itself, so I can add a black square below it to seal that section of the grid off a bit. (I don't have to do that, of course – I can make the word HUGE or something else starting with HUG-. But this way, the top left and top right corners are relatively independent, which will make the grid easier to fill.)

1	S	2	A	3	S	4	Q	5	U	6	A	7	T	8	C	9	H			10	11	12	13	14
15	E	X	C	U	S	E	Y	O	U										16					
17	T	H	R	E	E	R	I	N	G										18					
19	T	E	A	R			20	O	N							21								
22	L	A	P	I	23	S		24	G							25								
26	E	D	S	E	L	S										28							29	
					30					31	32								33					
34	35	36			37														38			39		
40					41			42											43					
44						45										46						47	48	49
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58											59					60								
61											62													
63											64													

This grid looks fillable, so I'll run with it (leaving open the possibility of tweaking it, like the THREE-RING CIRCUS possibility I mentioned earlier). You'll learn through experience to get a sense of what grids are likely to be cleanly fillable and what grids aren't. If you use software, you can also run the AutoFill function. If I run AutoFill on this grid in Crossword Compiler, it will come up with a bunch of high-scoring fills, which tells me that it's possible. But the opposite isn't necessarily true – even if AutoFill fails to find anything, the grid might still be fillable, because your wordlist will never include every possible entry.

Now I need to fill the rest of the grid, but in what order? Generally, you want to start with the most constrained parts of the grid, and leave the least constrained for the end. In this case, that means I should start with the center, because it feeds into the rest of the grid. Once the center is filled, the other three corners will be relatively isolated from each other. The other constrained section is 8-Down. There aren't many words that fit there that work with the across entries. CONOR is one but that makes ONO, which appears super often in crosswords, so I want to avoid it if possible. CONEY looks much better, since it makes ONE, a perfectly ordinary word. There are many fewer words start with GY than GR, but there are enough to work with. Since there are so few, I'll go ahead and fill one in, and try to fill in the center based on that. GYM SOCKS is nice and colorful, so that's what I'll go with.

1	S	2	A	3	S	4	Q	5	U	6	A	7	T	8	C	9	H		10	11	12	13	14
15	E	X	C	U	S	E	Y	O	U									16					
17	T	H	R	E	E	R	I	N	G									18					
19	T	E	A	R		20	O	N	E		21												
22	L	A	P	I	23	S		24	G	Y	25	M	S	O	C	K	S						
26	E	D	S	E	L	27	S				28											29	
				30				31	32							33							
34	35	36		37										38		39							
40				41		42								43									
44					45						46				47	48	49						
	50								51	52		53											
54								55		56		57											
58								59				60											
61								62															
63								64															

Again I won't go into detail about the process of filling the center, because it's a lot of trial and error. But here's what I came up with:

1	S	2	A	3	S	4	Q	5	U	6	A	7	T	8	C	9	H		10	11	12	13	14
15	E	X	C	U	S	E	Y	O	U		16												
17	T	H	R	E	E	R	I	N	G		18												
19	T	E	A	R		20	O	N	E		21	T											
22	L	A	P	I	23	S		24	G	Y	25	M	S	O	C	K	S						
26	E	D	S	E	L	27	S				28	I	Q	T	E	S	T	29	S				
				30	S	E	E	31	T	32	H	R	U		33								
34		35	36		37	W	I	R	E	T	A	38	P		39								
40				41		42	N	E	P	H	R	O	43	N									
44					45						46	E				47	48	49					
	50								51	52		53											
54									55		56		57										
58									59				60										
61									62														
63									64														

Before I do anything else, I have to make sure the top right is fillable. Here I use AutoFill again. Restricting it to only words that are scored at 50 or higher on my wordlist, AutoFill comes up with exactly 100 fills. That's few enough that I can just look through them and pick the one I like the most. 100 seems like a lot to look through, but most of them are variations on the same few general patterns. A lot of them contain EUNICES, for example, and plural proper names aren't great fill, so I can ignore those.

If you're a purist, you can fill the grid manually. Again, use the principle of starting with the most constrained elements. In this case, it's 12-Down, since there aren't too many entries that fit that pattern, whereas there are almost limitless possibilities for 13-Down, for example. Anyway, below is the auto-filled grid that I chose:

1	S	2	A	3	S	4	Q	5	U	6	A	7	T	8	C	9	H			10	I	11	N	12	D	13	R	14	A
15	E	X	C	U	S	E	Y	O	U										16	T	O	R	O	S					
17	T	H	R	E	E	R	I	N	G										18	S	T	I	C	K					
19	T	E	A	R			20	O	N	E						21	T	H	I	N	K	S							
22	L	A	P	I	23	S		24	G	Y	25	M	S	O	C	K	S												
26	E	D	S	E	L	27	S						28	I	Q	T	E	S	T	29	S								
				30	S	E	E	31	T	32	H	R	U			33	D	U	A	L									
34		35	36		37	W	I	R	E	T	A	38	P			39	P	R	Y										
40				41			42	N	E	P	H	R	O	43	N														
44					45								46	E			47	48	49										
		50									51	52			53														
54											55			56		57													
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63										64																			

Now the most constrained element is 27-Down: it has to be SEINING or SEINERS. I like SEINING better, so I go with that. TREND fits nicely alongside it, since -IN and -ND- are versatile combinations. Now filling in 50-Across will separate the two remaining corners from each other, so I pick my favorite entry that fits there, which happens to be APPENDIX. (Actually, I tried a few other options in that spot first, but didn't come up with fill that I liked.)

I could even try the AutoFill strategy on the bottom right. But in this case, it would result in a ton of fills, and it would take a long time to sift through them all. So I'll start filling it manually. The most constrained element here is 52-Down, because it starts with an X. I'll go with X-AXIS, because fitting another X in would be a nice bonus if it works. For 51-Down, I'll again follow up the principle of trying to alternate consonants and vowels, which means using something like IRATE or INANE. As it happens, I can't come up with any fills that I'm particularly excited about with IRATE, but INANE does yield this:

1	S	2	A	3	S	4	Q	5	U	6	A	7	T	8	C	9	H		10	I	11	N	12	D	13	R	14	A
15	E	X	C	U	S	E	Y	O	U										16	T	O	R	O	S				
17	T	H	R	E	E	R	I	N	G										18	S	T	I	C	K				
19	T	E	A	R				20	O	N	E								21	T	H	I	N	K	S			
22	L	A	P	I	23	S		24	G	Y	25	M	S	O	C	K	S											
26	E	D	S	E	L	27	S												28	I	Q	T	E	S	T	29	S	
					30	S	E	E	31	T	32	H	R	U					33	D	U	A	L					
34	N	35	H	36	L			37	W	I	R	E	T	A	38	P			39	P	R	Y						
40	B	E	E	41	R			42	N	E	P	H	R	O	43	N												
44	C	R	A	I	45	S	I	N							46	E	M	O	47	P	O	48	P					
		50	A	P	P	E	N	D	51	I	52	X			53	S	T	A	R	E								
54	P	L	Y	I	N	G			55	N	A	56	S			57	C	R	A	W								
58	E	D	E	N	S				59	S	A	X	O	60	P	H	O	N	E									
61	G	R	A	T	E				62	K	N	I	F	E	E	D	G	E										
63	G	Y	R	O	S				64	Y	E	S	A	N	D	Y	E	S										

And I have a completed grid! A few points that I didn't mention earlier:

1) It's a good idea to check for duplicates at every step of the way. (Duplicates are pairs of entries that are either exactly the same, or contain forms of the same word – e.g. having the entry USE twice, or having USED CAR and USEFUL. These are a no-no, unless the repeated word is something small like an article or a short preposition.) Another perk of software is that it can check for you. Crossword Compiler generates a list of all the pairs of entries that have a string of three or more letters in common. Notice that this won't catch everything, though – MAN/MEN and EAT/ATE are duplicates, but they don't have a three-letter string in common. Checking at least once for every section of the grid you complete is a good rule of thumb. It's way less of a hassle than having to tear apart a completed grid when you notice a dupe at the end!

2) None of this should be taken as the definitive way to write themeless crosswords. These are just the strategies that I use, and while they definitely overlap a lot with other constructors'

strategies, everyone has their own style. The best way to develop the style that works best for you is through lots of practice.

3) The triple-stack is also just one grid type among many. Another popular grid type these days is the stagger-stack, popularized by Andrew Ries, where you've got three entries of the same length in the middle three rows or columns, but staggered instead of in a rectangular stack. In many ways, this format allows for more flexibility than a traditional triple-stack. And of course, there are grids that can't neatly be categorized into a specific format. Again, practice will give you a sense of how best to build grids to showcase your seed entries.