CRYPTIC CROSSWORD PUZZLES

Why they are just about the only have a meal back around two end of liners and a headless beer (7) for me.¹

I don’t think Cryptic Crosswords are for everyone. It seems that some people have brains that just don’t work the way these puzzles expect brains to work. So it’s understandable, and normal, that they can’t stand cryptic puzzles.

But some people haven’t come across these puzzles; some seem to have an interest in them, but can’t make head or tail of the clues; and some are attracted to them, but have only a very limited success in cracking the clues. Those are the people I have in mind here. I don’t want anyone to miss out on the joys and challenges and brain-teasing pleasure of Cryptic Crossword puzzles just because they are unaware of how they really work.

¹ If this sentence seems to be a load of gobbledygook just read the word puzzles in place of the smaller font words. You can anticipate that by the time you get to the last page, you will understand it completely! If that’s a prospect you don’t even want to imagine, you better stop reading right here.
I’ve always enjoyed crossword puzzles. It’s fun to play around with words. As you do that you learn more about them. Around the time I turned 30 I realized my vocabulary was not as extensive as I thought it ought to be. So as a way of dealing with that deficiency I made a more determined foray into crossword puzzles. In the process I was introduced to many words I did not normally use, and was taught a wider range of meanings for words I did use. Having to resort to a dictionary or a thesaurus to complete a puzzle helped with this. I enjoyed the mental game that crosswords provide and the larger vocabulary they promote.

About a decade later I came across cryptic crosswords. And I found them far more enjoyable – and still do. Cryptic crosswords aren’t just a dry mental game; they’re a game of wits. Cryptic crosswords aren’t just a game played with a thesaurus; they’re a game played against a person – a person who knows a thesaurus backwards (or at least seems to). Cryptic crosswords are a battle of wits against a setter – as those who compile cryptic crosswords call themselves.

And as compilers of crosswords, setters are mischievously devious – wonderfully devious – people. That’s what makes the battle of wits so engaging and fascinating. Oh yes, they get your mind working; but their aim is to lead you astray, to get your mind going in the wrong direction. Setters want to confuse you; they want to win the contest by deliberately tying your brain in knots. They want to get you to the point of wanting to put their crosswords through the shredder, and/or of finding that your brain has been reduced to a quivering mass of jelly. What a game they promise!

Despite the dire consequences they seem to threaten, it is still possible to engage in a battle of wits with people like that. It’s even possible to outwit these devious setters, and to avoid the confusion and the brain meltdown that may envelop the unwary. And in the process, to really enjoy the contest. What I enjoy is the humour in the clues. I enjoy the clever, the wonderful, the unexpected, and the twisted ways in which words are used. I enjoy laughing along with the setter as I see the deceptions and traps I avoided or didn’t avoid. Sure, setters may have a somewhat warped sense of humour – but I can cope with that – and during the game I get to know something about the personalities of the various unnamed setters I lock wits with.

Cryptic crosswords involve you in a game with a person – a game with a person who may seem to live in the thesaurus, but who dares to use words, and put words together, in far from serious ways.
Understanding cryptic crosswords

I remember times when I went through every clue in a cryptic crossword, and couldn’t solve even one. They made no sense. I didn’t know where to start, or how to start. But if I happened to come back to the puzzle later in the day, or an hour or even 10 minutes later, the solutions started to come. This told me that the key to dealing with setters is to let your brain relax – you can take them on. Sure, allow them to smile as they anticipate the confusion their devious clues will impose on you. But let them hear you laugh as you anticipate the wits-victory just around the clue’s next corner.

So the trick to a successful engagement with a setter is to take a brain-relaxed approach to the clues. Together with that you need to be aware that a cryptic crossword clue is not to be approached as if it’s a normal crossword clue or a normal sentence.

Normal crosswords usually give you just one word (sometimes a phrase), and the solution is a synonym (a word that has a similar meaning). You know you have the right synonym when the letters of this word fit in with the other letters that go into the other squares of the crossword grid.

Cryptic crossword clues are usually something approaching a sentence. This sentence may not seem to make much sense – and there is a reason for that. But you can make sense of it. The cryptic clue will include the word for which you need to find a synonym (just like a normal crossword), but this word is going to be combined with the rest of the sentence. The rest of the sentence is the fun part, the play-around part, the contest of wits part, the part that has nothing logically to do with the answer – often, in fact, it’s meant to lead you away from the solution. But when you finally unravel the clue you will also have all the proof you need that you have the correct synonym.
Understanding the clues in cryptic crosswords

The structure of cryptic clues is very important. Although setters have an amazing scope for confusing the solver, there are still definite rules that they follow. Those rules provide a limit to the havoc they can wreak in your mind, and keeps open the possibility that you will arrive at the solution.

It’s important to realize that every word in the clue is important. No word is irrelevant, and no irrelevant word is included. Usually clues have three parts: the word or phrase which is a synonym for the solution; the confusing, play-around, cryptic bit of the sentence; and a word (or two) linking these two parts. Setters can fill your mind with confusion right from the start because of the structure they give to the clue. The clue sentence can either be: synonym, link, cryptic bit, or: cryptic bit, link, synonym. So the synonym is always at the front or the rear – you are just not sure which end that is for each clue. And by the wording of the clue the setter deliberately tries to promote and feed this unsureness. After a while, however, you will find that you start to develop a feel for the order of the parts in each clue – although it often seems to me that setters are aware of this and they deliberately use this ‘feel’ you may have to fool you. When setters want to compile clues that are more difficult they tend to leave out the link – but by the time you are able to handle clues like that, it doesn’t really matter very much – or so I’ve heard.

Looking for the link is often a good first step towards a successful cracking of the clue. The link can often provide pointers to identifying which end is the synonym. Link words are many and various, and include words like: and, is, for, being, to make, gives, results in, produces.

Here are some examples:

i.  A highway gives tour around Evans Head (5)

    My first glance suggests that gives is the link. So I can read the clue this way: A 5-letter synonym for a highway is the same word I can get from playing around with tour around Evans Head. So I’m working with the structure: A highway (synonym) gives (link) tour around Evans Head (cryptic bit).

ii. Doctor Han amused – and not feeling guilty! (9)

    If I ignore the punctuation (which the setter includes mainly to create more confusion) and assume that the link is and, then I can read the clue in this way: The 9-letter word I get from playing around with Doctor Han amused, and which is also a synonym for not feeling guilty, will be the solution. So I am working with the structure: Doctor Han amused (cryptic bit) and (link) not feeling guilty (synonym).

iii. Ends up with the draw for an expression of relief (4)

    If I assume that for is the link, then I can read the clue in this way: The 4-letter
word I get from playing around with *ends up with the draw* will give a synonym for *an expression of relief*. So I’m working with the structure: *Ends up with the draw (cryptic bit) for (link) an expression of relief (synonym)*.

iv. A dead heat involving three inexperienced drivers results in drink (6)
If I assume that *results in* is the link, then I can read the clue this way: The 6-letter word I get from playing around with *a dead heat involving three inexperienced drivers* will give a synonym for *drink*. So I’m working with the structure: *A dead heat involving three inexperienced drivers (cryptic bit) results in (link) drink (synonym)*.

v. Five loves – and five hundred loves – being a cult of sorcery (6)
If I assume that *being* is the link, then I can read the clue in this way: What I get from playing around with *five loves and five hundred loves* will become a 6-letter word that means *a cult of sorcery*. So I’m working with this structure: *Five loves and five hundred loves (cryptic bit) being (link) a cult of sorcery (synonym)*.

I have deliberately called these structures ‘assumptions’. That way I leave open the possibility of maybe having to approach the clue in a different way. And I’m refusing to discount the devious nature of the setter. Only when the solution finally pops out do I know I have read the clue in the right way.

Now, to avoid rushing too quickly to the next step, and to offer a bit of practice at looking at the structure of cryptic clues, here are some clues for you to work out for yourself. Which part is the *synonym*, the *cryptic bit*, and the *link*? I think it’s easier to start with the *link*.

1. A regret about being more superior (7) *
2. Not big but left with new title (6) *
3. Let go when costing nothing (4) *
4. Single occasion for prisoners to have (4) *
5. Disaster but a hit in the big smoke (8) *
6. The soldier meets a little one and makes him a huge one (5) *
7. Rush occupation (6) *

Here are some answers so you can see how you went. But remember, we are only working

* Clues marked with an asterisk are from cryptic crosswords compiled by David Sutton. You will find his puzzles in the Adelaide Advertiser, Sydney’s Daily Telegraph, the Herald-Sun in Melbourne, and the Courier-Mail in Brisbane.
with assumptions as this stage. We will come back to these clues later to move on to the solutions.

1 Did you have *being* as the link, with *a regret about* as the synonym, and *more superior* as the cryptic bit? Yes, that’s possible.

Did you have *being* as the link, with *a regret about* as the cryptic bit, and *more superior* as the synonym? That is also possible.

2 How about *but* as the link, *not big* as the synonym, and *left with new title* as the cryptic bit? I go that way because *left with new title* sounds more confusing, or more involved, than the more straight-forward *not big* – so it’s more likely to be the cryptic bit.

3 Did you have *when* for the link, *let go* for the synonym OR cryptic bit, and *costing nothing* for the cryptic bit OR the synonym? Or even *let go* (synonym) *when costing nothing* (synonym). Any of these are possible.

4 It sounds like *for* is the link, *single occasion* is the synonym, and *prisoners to have* is the cryptic bit (again because it seems a little more involved).

5 I reckon the link is *but*, and *disaster* is straightforward enough to be the synonym, and *a hit in the big smoke* the cryptic bit.

6 This is tricky. But how about: *and makes him* for the link (even though that’s an unusual wording for a link), *the soldier meets a little one* for the cryptic bit (to go on further seems a little too confusing), and *a huge one* for the synonym (to include any of the previous words doesn’t seem to make a synonym possible).

7 A 2-word clue means there is no link. Neither word sounds very cryptic, so I’m going for: *rush a synonym*, *occupation a second synonym*.

If you would like some extra confidence-boosting help in working out the structure of clues, then (at least for a start) work on puzzles that have both cryptic and quick (or normal) clues. This helps because the quick clues and the synonyms in the cryptic clues must themselves be synonyms.

So let’s take 1 above: *A regret about being more superior*. Since the quick clue is *more eminent* then *being more superior* must be the synonym part of the cryptic clue.

Now it’s time to move on to the next challenge that setters throw at solvers: How does making assumptions about the structure of the clue open the way to the solution? What do I do next?
Solving cryptic crossword clues

I have found that now I have to focus my attention on the cryptic bits of the clues – that’s where the real battle of wits with the setter will take place. These cryptic bits let you know what kind of a game the setter is going to ask you to play as you try to solve each clue.

Let me begin this section with a few general remarks. More detail will be given as each type of clue is described.

Setters design the cryptic bits in each clue to comply with certain specific word games. They have a handful of games at their disposal, and use one of them in each clue. Usually each clue is categorized according to the name of the game that’s been used in its cryptic bit. Setters also usually point to the game they are using in each clue by the use of what I like to refer to as game-indicator words.

Some of these games (or cryptic playing around, if I can call it that) involve playing around with the meaning of words. Others (and maybe this is more common) consist of playing around with the letters in the words. Others play around with the sounds of words. Still others play around with abbreviations and initials. And setters will even throw into some games elements of other games.

Now that may sound complicated. But it’s nothing you and I can’t handle while still enjoying the process, and the challenge, and the surprises we meet. But it can get just a wee bit more complicated. From what I’ve told you about setters I guess you wouldn’t be surprised if I told you that they will do all they can – quite deliberately – to confuse you as much as they can in this playing around process. They will bend the rules for the games as much as they can. They will use the same game-indicator words to point to different games. They will make the wording ambiguous to send you off in the wrong direction. Yet it’s in this cryptic playing around that their humour shines the brightest, their deception becomes the sneakiest, their cleverness rises to the highest levels, and your enjoyment of all this gives you the best chuckles.

So let’s look in turn at the different kind of clues – and therefore the different kind of games – setters will throw at you. Let’s see the ways in which these clues can to be approached so the solution finally pops out, often to surprise you. And all for your enjoyment!
1. Anagram clues

In these clues the cryptic bit contains the game of anagrams (letters to be mixed up to form new words). Game-indicators in cryptic bits pointing to anagrams include words like: mix, ruin, out, broken, doctor, confuse, around, upset, become, organize, mess up, injured, bent (to mention just a few). Sometimes setters can add confusion by having too many letters in the anagram word and then use game-indicators like: but not, left out, without to point this out. Or on the other hand they can have too few letters in the anagram word and use such game-indicators as these to point out what needs to be included: including, with, also.

Suppose a setter wants to write a cryptic bit for an anagram clue for the word POST. All these (and many more) would be possibilities for his devious mind:

- stop out – which the solver would need to read as: the letters in ‘stop’ out of order (that is, an anagram of stop). The anagram game-indicator is out.
- Doctor Pots – which the solver needs to read as: anagram, or tamper with (which ‘doctor’ can mean) the letters in ‘pots’. The game-indicator is doctor.
- points broken but not in – which the solver reads as: break up (anagram) the letters in ‘points’ but do not include the letters ‘in’. The game-indicator is broken.
- top ruined with a bend inside – which the solver would need to read as: ruin (anagram) the letters in the word ‘top’ and place the letter ‘s’ (you’ve heard of an S bend!) inside. The anagram game-indicator is ruined.

Now we can solve the anagram clues among the examples given on page 4. Looking for game-indicators included in the cryptic bits, there’s an around in i. ‘Tour around Evans Head’, and a doctor in ii. ‘Doctor Han amused’.

So taking the first one:

i. A highway gives tour around Evans Head (5)

If we go with the assumption that the structure is: A highway (synonym) gives (link) tour around Evans Head (cryptic bit), we now need to see if we can read the cryptic bit as a game of anagrams. Tour around Evans Head becomes: the letters in ‘tour’ scattered around followed by the head (or first letter) of ‘evans’ – which becomes rout followed by e, which is route – and that’s a synonym for a highway. The solution has to be ROUTE.

Now the second one:

ii. Doctor Han amused – and not feeling guilty! (9)

Assuming the structure is: Doctor Han amused (cryptic bit) and (link) not feeling guilty (synonym), then the cryptic bit can be read as: tamper with the letters in ‘han amused’. Playing around with those letters the anagram unashamed
emerges. This happens to be a synonym for *not feeling guilty*. So the solution is UNASHAMED – the setter’s aim to confuse has failed.

Now to give you some practice in playing the anagram game here is a selection of clues for you to work on (the first two come from the list on page 5 which you’ve already worked on). Your task is to:

i. identify the structural parts (the *link*, the *synonym*, the *cryptic bit*) in each clue,

ii. find the anagram *game-indicator* in the *cryptic bit*, pointing to the fact that this is an anagram clue,

iii. use and sharpen your emerging anagram skills to create a new word. This word, the solution, will have a similar meaning to the *synonym* in the clue.

a. A regret about being more superior (7) *

b. Not big but left with new title (6) *

c. A wavy line is the flower of Egypt (4)

d. Nameless wanderings of commercial traveller (8) *

e. Claiming no damages from dirty work? (4,6) *

f. Fresh blooding to remove old characters, in a numbers game (5) *

g. Abject aide-de-camp dropped cape for the crown (6) *

h. The poor sap’s poorer indicator of possession (10) *

Let’s see how you went:

a. We were not sure at first about the structure of this clue, but a glance at the quick clue made us confident that the structure is: *a regret about* *(cryptic bit)* **being** *(link)* more superior *(synonym)*. There is extra evidence that *a regret about* is the cryptic bit because it contains the only *game-indicator* *(about)* in the clue – which can indicate an anagram game. And the number of letters in *a regret* matches the number of letters required (7). That’s also strong evidence that an anagram is the way to go. An anagram of *a regret* (or as the clue puts it: ‘a regret about’) gives greater – a synonym for more superior. So GREATER it is!

b. Let’s stay with our assumption (on page 5): *not big* *(synonym)* **but** *(link)* **left with new title** *(cryptic bit)*. In this cryptic bit *new* seems to be the *game-indicator* for an anagram. So if we put *left* *(L)* with a new *(anagrammed)* *title* we can get *little*. And a synonym for ‘not big’ is LITTLE.

c. The structure seems straight-forward: *A wavy line* *(cryptic bit)* **is** *(link)* **the flower of Egypt** *(synonym)*. The anagram *game-indicator* is likely to be *wavy* and there are 4 letters in *line*. The anagram that jumps out to me is NILE, but is that the flower of Egypt? Well, the setter has led you astray by hoping you will think garden-flower, when we need to think flower, as in a flowing river. [And this is a common trick by setters.] So the flow-er of Egypt is indeed the NILE.
d. Did you get this structure?: Nameless wanderings (cryptic bit) of (link) commercial traveller (synonym). The game-indicator pointing to a game of anagrams is wanderings, and the number of letters in nameless match the number in the solution (8). Let these letters wander around and you can come up with SALESMAN – a commercial traveller.

e. The structure seems to be: Claiming no damages (cryptic bit) from (link) dirty work (synonym). An anagram game-indicator here is damages; and the number of letters in the rest of the cryptic bit (claiming no) adds up to 10, the number we need. Keeping the synonym (dirty work) in mind, these letters can go through a damaging process to produce COAL WORKER.

f. This clue is a little more difficult – just to get you thinking! The most likely link seems to be in. The synonym could be fresh, or fresh blooding, or game, or numbers game. For the cryptic bit I tend to lean toward the first part of the sentence because it seems more confusing. So how about: fresh blooding to remove old characters (cryptic bit) in (link) a numbers game (synonym). Looking at the cryptic bit fresh (in the sense of new or renew) could be a game-indicator for an anagram. However, an anagram of blooding has more than the required 5 letters. BUT the cryptic bit follows with the instruction to remove old characters (that is, the letters in ‘old’). Now we have just 5 letters – b,o,i,n,g – and made fresh, the letters form BINGO – a numbers game.

g. After working through the previous clue this one’s a piece of cake! – once you’ve checked in the dictionary that abject means miserable, awful. So the structure is likely to be: abject aide-de-camp dropped cape (the confusing cryptic bit) for (link) the crown (synonym). Abject becomes the game-indicator for an anagram. So the cryptic bit can be read as: make aide-de-camp awful having first dropped the letters in cape. The letters remaining are aidedm (the required number of letters for the solution), and anagrammed they form DIADEM, a synonym for crown.

h. Now another difficult one, but pointing to another way in which setters show their deviousness. The first part seems too complicated to be the synonym, and I can’t find a link. So let’s assume the structure is: the poor sap’s poorer (cryptic bit) indicator of possession (synonym). The anagram game-indicator could be poor or poorer, so let’s count up the letters in various words, and, leaving the game-indicator out, the only way to get a total of 10 is with sap’s poorer. The game-indicator is therefore the poor. Now we can read the cryptic bit as: the poor (i.e. the anagrammed) sap’s poorer. But can sap’s poorer be anagrammed to mean an indicator of possession? Finally the penny drops: APOSTROPHE. A clever clue!

These examples highlight the liberties setters take in their choice of game-indicator words for anagrams. They are good at making this indicator blend in with the rest of the sentence, and are quite creative in their use of words that may suggest an anagram. So game-indicators can be easily missed. I’m often surprised at how easily I don’t see them. But in the battle of wits another look at the clue, and then another, finally makes the game-indicator pop out. And the solver can revel in the creativity of the setter!
2. Hidden word clues

In these clues the cryptic bit hides the solution within other words. Setters also use an amazing variety of game-indicators for hidden words clues. Some worth mentioning are: within, part of, shortly, inside, contained by, hidden. Sometimes setters even stoop to hiding the solution in reverse order! But then they will include game-indicators such as: back, reverse, going to the west, regressing; and in a down clue: rising, upwards, to the north. Sometimes the solution’s letters can be hidden in other words as every second letter, with such game-indicators as: odds, evens, every other, regularly. Or they can hide the solution word as the first letters of a series of words, with such game-indicators as: starts, heads, capitals; or as the last letters with such game-indicators as: ends, tails, lasts; or as the first and last letters of a series of words, with such game-indicators as: edges, borders, ends, limits.

Here are examples of cryptic bits that use hidden word clues for the word POST:

- part of apostle – which the solver needs to read as: hidden as part ‘apostle’.
- reverse in it so poorly – to be read as: in reverse order within ‘it so poorly’.
- every second poor site – to be read as: every second letter in ‘poor site’.
- the heads of plenty of school teachers – to be read as: the first letters of the words ‘plenty of school teachers’.
- the edges of piano seat – to be read as: the first and last letters of ‘piano’ and ‘seat’.
- centre supports and half mast – to be read as: the centre of ‘supports’ and half of ‘mast’.

Again we can solve the hidden word clue among the examples given on page 5. There is the game-indicator, ends, in the cryptic bit of:

iii. Ends up with the draw for an expression of relief (4)

Assuming the structure of this clue is: Ends up with the draw (cryptic bit) for (link) an expression of relief (synonym), then the cryptic bit can be read as: the ends of ‘up with the draw’. The ends of each of these words happen to be p h e w. And PHEW is an expression of relief.

Now here is a brief clue, using a trick that setters often use:

Informal shape (4)

Assuming the structure is: Informal (cryptic bit) shape (synonym) [without any link], then the cryptic bit can be read as: ‘in formal’, with in as the game-indicator. And within ‘formal’ is form – a synonym for ‘shape’ – so FORM is the solution. It pays to give any word that begins with in- a second look.
Now some practice in hidden word games. The first comes from the list on page 5. Your task is to:
i. identify the structural parts (the *link*, the *synonym*, the *cryptic bit*) in each clue,
ii. find the hidden word *game-indicator* in the *cryptic bit*, pointing to the fact that this is a hidden word clue,
iii. use and sharpen your emerging skills to find the hidden word. This word, the solution, will have a similar meaning to the *synonym* in the clue.

a. Single occasion for prisoners to have (4) *
b. Skilled work seen at the party (3) *
c. Dressing up in costumes, I annoy amateurs (10) (down clue) *
d. A little unpredictable after raising drink (5) (down clue) *
e. New recruit concealing a dead end to beginners (5) *

Let’s see how you went:
a. Earlier we assumed for the structure: *single occasion* (*synonym*), *for* (*link*), *prisoners to have* (*cryptic bit*). In the cryptic bit the *game-indicator* for a hidden word game could be *to have*. Then we can read the clue: A 4-letter synonym for *single occasion* is held by *prisoners*. Inside *prisoners* is ONER – which can describe a single occasion event.
b. The structure seems to be: *skilled work* (*synonym*) *seen* (*link*) *at the party* (*cryptic bit*). The *game-indicator* for a hidden word is probably *at*. Now we can read the clue: A 3-letter synonym for *skilled work* can be seen hidden in *the party*. And there it is: ART.
c. I reckon this one’s a bit tricky. Assuming there’s no *link*, the structure is: *dressing* (*synonym*) *up in costumes, I annoy amateurs* (*cryptic bit*). The hidden word *game-indicator* is *in*; but in a down clue we add the ‘up’ and make it *up in*. So we read the clue as: A 10-letter synonym for *dressing* is hidden reading upwards (or backwards) in *costumes I annoy amateurs*. And after some searching MAYONNAISE pops out.
d. Another down clue. Again no *link*. The structure is: *little unpredictable after raising* (*cryptic bit*) *drink* (*synonym*). The *game-indicator* for a hidden word game is a *little* and as a down clue we take note of *after raising*. So the clue can be read as: A little 5-letter piece of *unpredictable*, read upwards (or backwards) is a synonym for *drink*. The solution: CIDER.
e. This one is tricky, too. *Concealing* immediately jumps out as a hidden word *game-indicator*. Then the structure would be: *new recruit concealing* (*cryptic bit*) *a dead end to beginners* (*synonym*). Then trouble arises: there doesn’t seem to be a 5-letter word concealed in *new recruit*, and a 5-letter word with the same meaning as the synonym part doesn’t suggest itself. So give the setter a chuckle for a good red herring and start again. Another possible structure seems to be: *new recruit* (*synonym*) *concealing a dead end to beginners* (*cryptic bit*). Now the *game-indicator* is *beginners*. So the clue now reads: A 5-letter word for *new recruit* is to be found as the beginning letters of the words *concealing a dead end to*. Those letters are CADET – a synonym for *new recruit*. 
3. Container clues

In these clues the cryptic bit puts one word within another to make the solution word – or (to put it in other words, and using more technical language) one word is bracketed by another, or one word contains another. Some of the game-indicators for these clues are: within, without, outside, inside, around, brackets, enclosing, involving, held by, in prison.

Here are some examples of the cryptic bits of container clues:

- scam about paintings – which the solver would need to read as: a word for ‘scam’ containing a word for ‘paintings’. A scam is a con, and painting is art – so putting con around art gives CARTON.

- hospital department in a layer of wood – to be read as: a hospital department inside a word for ‘layer of wood’. So ENT inside ply – PLENTY.

- confused number in a strand of yarn – to be read as: a ‘strand of yarn’ containing an anagrammed number. So it’s ply containing ent (anagram of ten) – PLENTY.

There’s a container clue in the examples on page 5 – the game-indicator involving in the cryptic bit gives it away:

iv. A dead heat involving three inexperienced drivers results in drink (6)

Assuming the structure is: A dead heat involving three inexperienced drivers (cryptic bit) results in (link) drink (synonym), then the cryptic bit can be read as: a word for ‘a dead heat’ contains three inexperienced drivers. A dead heat is a tie and learner (L) and provisional (P) drivers are inexperienced. So of all the possibilities of putting three l’s and p’s inside ‘tie’ the only word you can make is TIPPLE – which is a synonym for ‘drink’.

And here’s a container clue that’s about as devious as you can get:

Alter my hold on flipping dog.*

There is no link in this clue. ‘Alter’ seems to point to an anagram, but that’s a deception. ‘Hold’ is the game-indicator, pointing to a container clue. The structure is: alter (synonym) my hold on flipping dog (cryptic bit). So it needs to be read as: A synonym for ‘alter’ is obtained from ‘my’ holding on to (or containing) flipping (that is, upside down) ‘dog’. A common name for a dog is Fido, flipping it gives odif, and when contained by ‘my’, the result is MODIFY – a synonym for ‘alter’.

I reckon a setter’s ability to confuse reaches its climax in container clues. Just consider this: A container clue for CARTON can be worded: art inside con (art placed in con), or art outside con (art, with con placed outside), or con outside art
(con placed outside of art), or con inside art (con, with art placed inside). Don’t you just love container clues – at least when you finally see it the way the setter does!

Now some practice in playing container games. The first comes from the list on page 5. Your task is to:

i. identify the structural parts (the link, the synonym, the cryptic bit) in each clue,

ii. find the game-indicator in the cryptic bit, pointing to the fact that this is a container clue,

iii. use and sharpen your emerging skills to find the container word. This word, the solution, will have a similar meaning to the synonym in the clue.

a. Disaster but a hit in the big smoke (8) *
b. Reminder to take right antidote (4) *
c. Bundled and crammed full of silver (8)
d. Cooker finds gold in small pecan nuts (8) *
e. Put me in and change for the better (5) *
f. It’s agreed? Detectives indeed! (7)
g. R2-D2, for example, produces an odour with rubbish about (5)

Let’s see how you went:

a. When we looked at this clue earlier we assumed the structure to be: Disaster (synonym) but (link) a hit in the big smoke (cryptic bit). The game-indicator in the cryptic bit for a container clue is in. And we can read the clue as: An 8-letter word for disaster is really a synonym for a hit placed inside a synonym for the big smoke. So place A LAM [lam is a word for hit that setters like] inside CITY, for a synonym of disaster: CALAMITY.

b. The structure seems to be: reminder to take right (cryptic bit) antidote (synonym). The game-indicator for a container clue is probably to take. So the clue can be read as: a synonym for reminder with right inside it will give a 4-letter synonym for antidote. So CUE with R inside gives CURE, an antidote.

c. The structure seems fairly straightforward: bundled (synonym) and (link) crammed full of silver (cryptic bit). The game-indicator in the cryptic bit pointing to a container clue is full of. Now we can read the clue as: An 8-letter synonym for bundled is the same word you get by putting a synonym for silver inside a synonym for crammed. PACKED with AG (the chemical symbol for silver) inside is PACKAGED – a synonym for bundled. [Setters often use ag as an abbreviation for silver; or, which is an old word for the colour gold.]

d. The structure seems obvious: cooker (synonym) finds (link) gold in small pecan nuts (cryptic bit). The container game-indicator is in. Now we can read the clue as: an 8-letter synonym for cooker is found by putting a synonym for gold in small and pecan going nuts (that is, anagrammed). So AU (the chemical symbol for gold) being put inside S (for small) + the letters p,e,c,a,n gives SAUCEPAN – a synonym for cooker. [In cryptics au is often used as an abbreviation for gold; as is or, which is an old word for the colour gold.]
e. This simple looking clue proves to be a bit tricky. The obvious structure with and as the link doesn’t get you very far. Not does using for as the link. The way to proceed seems to give weight to the in as the game-indicator for a container clue. Then the structure becomes: put me in and (cryptic bit) change for the better (synonym). Now the clue can be read as: Putting me in and gives a 5-letter synonym for change for the better. AMEND means change for the better. [This is a good example of the setter’s wonderfully devious way of leading the solver astray!]

f. Obviously there is no link in this clue. Now which is the cryptic bit, and which the synonym? Perhaps there is the game-indicator for a container clue – the in of indeed! Then the structure would become: it's agreed (synonym) detectives indeed (cryptic bit). And we can read the clue as: a 7-letter synonym for it’s agreed can be obtained by putting detectives in deed. The result of that is: DE - CID (for detectives) - ED. And DECIDED means it's agreed. [Whenever you see the word indeed in cryptic clues always keep that this may be how the setter is using this word.]

g. This structure is a little easier: R2-D2, for example (synonym) produces (link) an odour with rubbish about (cryptic bit). The game-indicator for a container clue is about. The clue can be read as: A 5-letter synonym for R2-D2, for example will result in a synonym for an odour with a synonym for rubbish around it. So BO (that’s an odour) with ROT around it is: ROBOT. And R2-D2 is one example of a robot. [The use of BO for words like odour, smell, scent is common in cryptic puzzles.]
4. **Charades clues**

In charades clues the *cryptic bit* breaks the solution word into a number of pieces and offers clues for each part in turn. It’s like a sum: clue+clue+clue=answer. Usually the clues follow each other with nothing separating them and nothing indicating when the next clue has started. The best game-indicator for charades clues (probably the only game-indicator) is the lack of a game-indicator. In these clues the setters cleverness seems to come to the fore.

Here are some examples of *cryptic bits* of charades clues for the word PRUDENT:

- *quietly impertinent; not hungry* – which the solver would need to read as: quietly + impertinent + not hungry. In music quietly is indicated by *p*, impertinent is *rude*, and if ‘not’ is hungry it would be *nt* (just after a big meal, of course, it would be ‘noot’). So we have *p+rude+nt=PRUDENT*.

- *spin, you hideaway a model* – which the solver would need to read as: spin + you + hideaway + a model =. ‘Spin’ (in politics) is *PR*, ‘you’ these days is *U*, a ‘hideaway’ is a *den*, and we’ve all heard of a *T* model Ford. So *pr+u+den+t=PRUDENT*.

- *softly the Queen united a penny, a type of mail, and new junction* – which the solver would need to read as: softly + the Queen + united + a penny + a type of mail + new + junction =. Softly in music is *p*, *R* for *Regina* stands for the Queen, in football teams *U* stands for United, in LSD, (for pounds, shillings and pence) *d* is the abbreviation for a penny, a type of mail is *e-mail*, *n* is an abbreviation for new, and in driving we come to *T* junctions. So *p+r+u+d+e+n+t=PRUDENT*. The setter must have been having a bad day when he compiled this clue – or else he was trying to use as many abbreviations as he could – abbreviations often used in cryptic clues.

And now we can solve the final clue in the examples on page 5: This one has no game-indicator in the cryptic bit. So it may be a charades clue.

v. **Five loves – and five hundred – loves being a cult of sorcery (6)**

Assuming the structure is: Five loves and five hundred loves (*cryptic bit*) being (*link*) a cult of sorcery (*synonym*), the solver needs to read the cryptic bit as five + loves + five hundred + loves =. In Roman numerals *V* is five and *D* is five hundred, and a score of *love* in tennis is *O*. So *V + O + O* (the clue says more than one love) + *D + O + O* = *VOODOO*, a ‘cult of sorcery’.

Here’s a very clever charade clue I came across some time ago:

Where you have to go, and almost set free (5)

The link seems to be *and*, and it’s hard to see what is the synonym and what is the cryptic bit. But going down that path doesn’t seem to get the solver anywhere. So this clue needs a new approach. By trial and error it turns out
that there is no link and the structure is: where you have to go and almost set (cryptic bit) free (synonym). The lack of a game-indicator can point to a charade clue, so we end up reading it like this: where you have to go + almost set = free. Where you have to go, especially when you have to go, is the loo, almost 'set' is of course set – which, when added together, gives LOOSE, a synonym for 'free'.

Again some practice, this time for playing charades. The first comes for the list on page 5. Your task is to:

I. identify the structural parts (the link, the synonym, the cryptic bit) in each clue,

II. use and sharpen many of the skills you've used so far to decipher the charades.

This word, the solution, will have a similar meaning to the synonym in the clue.

a. The soldier meets a little one and makes him a huge one (5) *
b. At first glance, blue heelers stick together (4) *
c. A low heart-warming bachelor produced a festival in Melbourne (6)
d. Not out to excavate for nothing, Blue! (6) *
e. Record junk mail, then wash your hands of it (8) *
f. Tips over and breaks out of spheres (4) *
g. Plotting, with prisoners, main crime? (10) *
h. Somehow gets you to call by signalling (9) *

Let's see how you went:
a. When we looked at this clue earlier we assumed the structure is: the soldier meets a little one (cryptic bit) and makes him (link) a huge one (synonym). The clue can be read as: the soldier + a little one = a huge one. So, GL (an American soldier) + ANT = GIANT.
b. The structure seems to be: at first glance blue heelers (cryptic bit) stick together (synonym). Now we can read the clue as: the first letters of glance + the heelers (end letters) of blue = stick together (a 4-letter word). So, GL + UE gives GLUE.
c. The structure looks like: A low heart-warming bachelor (cryptic bit) produced (link) a festival in Melbourne (synonym). (Now just don’t guess – work it out!). This clue can be read as: a low + the heart (the middle letter) of warming + bachelor = a festival in Melbourne. So let's play charades: A low (at least out in the paddock) is MOO + M + BA = MOOMBA. [Setters like to use moo as a synonym for low.]
d. The most likely structure must surely be: not out to excavate for nothing (cryptic bit) blue (synonym). Which, in cryptic talk is: not out + to excavate + nothing = blue. So: IN + DIG + O = INDIGO (a blue colour). [Setters also like to use blue for words like sad, down, depressed.]
e. This clue has a structure that easier to work out: record junk mail (cryptic bit) then (link) wash your hands of it (synonym). To be read as: record + junk (that is, anagram) mail = an 8-letter synonym for wash your hands of it. So: DISC + LAIM = DISCLAIM.
f. The structure seems to be: tips over and breaks out (cryptic bit) of (link) spheres (synonym). The translation is: the tips of over + the outsides of breaks = spheres. That is:
OR + BS = ORBS.

g. Again the structure is a little tricky, but I’d finally do for: plotting (synonym) with (link) prisoners, main crime (cryptic bit). To be read as: plotting = prisoners + main crime. A prisoner is sometime referred to a CON, and main can mean ‘to do with the sea, so a main crime is PIRACY. So our charades is: plotting, or CONSPIRACY = CONS + PIRACY.

h. The some in this clue could point to a hidden word clue, but that ends up leading nowhere. So a rethink is needed to start with the structure: Somehow gets you to call (cryptic bit) by (link) signaling (synonym). This can be read as: an anagram of gets + you + to call = signaling. So: GEST + U + RING = GESTURING.
5. Homophone clues

Homophone means *same sound*, so these clues are based on words that sound the same, but have a different spelling and a different meaning. (For example, heard and herd; lax and lacks; pair, pear, and pare). Game-indicators for homophone clues include: *sound like, to the ear, said to be, hearing*. The game-indicator can be to be the *link* word in the clue, and sometimes you may not be sure which of the two homophones is the solution.

Here are some examples:

The celebrity is said to tick over (4)

The structure of this clue is: the celebrity *(synonym)* is said *(link)* to tick over *(synonym)*. So the solver would need to read this as: a synonym for ‘the celebrity’ sounds the same as a synonym for ‘to tick over’. The homophones are IDOL and IDLE. Since ‘is said’ can be linked with either synonym, which word becomes the solution depends on the letters in the grid squares filled in by other solutions.

Checks listener’s rules (6) *

The structure of this clue is: checks *(synonym)* listener’s rules *(cryptic bit)*. So the solver would need to read this as: a synonym for ‘checks’ sounds the same as a synonym for ‘rules’. The homophones are reins (as in controls, reins in horses) and reigns. The solution is REINS.

Man, for example, is usually the centre of the church, by the sound of it (4)

The structure of this clue is: man, for example *(synonym)* is *(link)* usually the centre of the church, by the sound of it *(cryptic bit)*. So the solver would need to read this as: a synonym for ‘man, for example’ is the same as ‘usually the centre of the church’ at least going by the sound of the word. The homophones are isle (as in, for example, the Isle of Man) and aisle (usually churches have a centre aisle) – the solution is ISLE because the clue ties ‘by the sound of it’ with aisle, and also because the solution has 4 letters.

Now some practice for playing the game of homophones. Your task is to:

i identify the structural parts (the *link*, the *synonym*, the *cryptic bit*) in each clue,

ii use and sharpen many of the skills you’ve used so far to work out the two words that sound the same, and then which is the solution.

a. Sounds as if it’s possible to be small (4)

b. Became aware of modern sounds (4)
c. Changes course when you hear about the levy (5)
d. Scare away from the sound of just one foot protector (4)
e. An argument over what you were told the fuse did (4)

Let's see how you went:

a. The structure of this clue is: sounds as if it's possible (cryptic bit) to be (link) small (synonym). The clue can be read as: a synonym for it's possible sounds like a synonym for small. The homophones are: might and mite. The solution is MITE.

b. The structure seems to be: became aware of (synonym) modern sounds (cryptic bit). Now we can read the clue as: a synonym for became aware of sounds like a synonym for modern. The homophones are: knew and new. The solution is KNEW.

c. The structure is straight-forward: Changes course (synonym) when (link) you hear about the levy (cryptic bit). The homophones are: tacks and tax. The solution is TACKS.

d. The structure: scare away (synonym) from (link) the sound of just one foot protector (cryptic bit). Of the homophones, shoo and shoe, the solution is SHOO.

e. The structure: An argument (synonym) over (link) what you were told the fuse did (cryptic bit). Of the homophones, blue and blew, the solution is BLUE.
6. Double meaning clues

Double meaning clues are usually quite brief. They can be just two words (or two phrases) both synonyms for the solution, without any link, or cryptic bit.

Here are some examples:

Think highly of nothing in tennis (4) *

The structure of this clue is: think highly of (synonym) nothing in tennis (synonym). So the solver would need to read this as: a synonym for ‘think highly of’ is ‘nothing in tennis’. The solution is LOVE.

Commonly stole when given a small cut (6) *

The structure of this clue is: commonly stole (synonym) when given (link) a small cut (synonym). So the solver would need to read this as: a synonym for ‘stole’ in everyday language is a synonym for ‘a small cut’. The solution is NICK.

Not sparkling yet (5) *

The structure of this clue is: not sparkling (synonym) yet (synonym). So the solver would need to read this as: a synonym for ‘not sparkling’ is a synonym for ‘yet’. The solution is STILL.

Ring bridge tax (4)

The structure of this clue is: ring (synonym) bridge tax (synonym). So the solver would need to read this as: a synonym for ‘ring’ is a synonym for ‘bridge tax’. The solution is TOLL.

Setter’s quarry (4) *

The structure of this clue is: setter’s (synonym) quarry (synonym). So the solver would need to read this as: a synonym for ‘setter’s’ is a synonym for ‘quarry’. The solution is MINE (‘setter’ means the compiler of the puzzle, and ‘setter’s’ is what belongs to him).

Now for some practice playing the game of double meanings. The first two come from the list on page 5. Your task is to:

I identify the structural parts (the link, the synonym, the cryptic bit) in each clue,

ii use and sharpen many of the skills you’ve used so far to work out the meaning in common.

a. Let go when costing nothing (4) *
b. Rush occupation (6) *
c. Unpopular with children but they will amount to something (4) *
d. An attack where the actors work? (5) *
e. He refuses to eat more quickly (6) *
f. Tie up in back office (4) *
g. Workplace where idle skaters may be found? (6) *

Let's see how you went:
a. When we looked at this earlier there were a few options for the structure. After some trial and error it seems there may be a way forward by going with: *let go (synonym) when costing nothing (synonym)*. The double meaning solution is FREE.
b. The structure we suggested earlier was: *rush (synonym) occupation (synonym)*. The double meaning solution is CAREER.
c. The structure is: *unpopular with children (synonym) but (link) they will amount to something (synonym)*. The double meaning solution is SUMS.
d. The structure is: *an attack (synonym) where actors work (synonym)*. The double meaning solution is ONSET.
e. The structure is: *he refuses to eat (synonym) more quickly (synonym)*. The double meaning solution is FASTER.
f. The structure is: *tie up (synonym) in (link) back office (cryptic bit)*. The clue can be read: A 4-letter synonym for *tie up* is the same word as a synonym for *office* when it is written backwards. The solution is MOOR.
g. The structure is: *workplace (synonym) where idle skaters may be found (synonym)*. The double meaning solution is OFFICE (OFF-ICE).
7. Rebus clues

A rebus is a puzzle in letters or pictures. It’s not possible to use pictures in a crossword puzzle, but there is a scope for letters. Rebus clues are not used very often in Cryptic puzzles but now and then they appear.

Here are some examples of rebus clues:
- VXX. The solution is: five (V) times (X) ten (X): FIFTY.
- Draw. The solution is: BACKWARD.
- backflow. The solution is: WOLF.
- ega. The solution is: OVER-AGE.
- gBo. The solution is: ‘b’ in ‘go’ – BINGO.

8. Other clues

Of course, there will be others clues that don’t exactly fit the categories listed above. And it’s impossible to describe these aberrations, these breakings of rules, these devious tricks. Solvers just need to remain alert, and keep a wide-open mind to what may be going on.

There are also other abbreviations and clues that setters love. Things like:
in for at home and out for away from home;
op for work (an abbreviation for opus);
ad for notice (an abbreviation of advertisement);
doctor(s) can be abbreviated AMA, DR, GP, MO, MD, DOC, or even DD (for Doctor of Divinity);
n, s, e, w can be used as abbreviations for directions (as in compass directions) or for partners or opponents in the game of bridge;
and sign can refer to one of the signs of the Zodiac.
But I won’t mention any of these because I don’t want to take away from you the joy of discovering for yourself all these kind of tricks used by setters to make cryptic crosswords the fascinating battle of wits that they are.
FINALLY

Let me summarize the procedure that works for me as I approach cryptic clues.

Step 1. Try to work out the structure of the clue. Finding the link is often the first step in this task – always remembering that some clues don’t have a link. The cryptic bit tends to be the more complicated part of the clue, containing words and phrases about which you might wonder ‘why on earth did the setter use these words?’ The synonym resembles a normal crossword clue.

Step 2. Concentrate on the cryptic bit. Look for words (I’ve called them game-indicators) that might suggest one (or more) of the games setters use. Finding the game the setter used to set the clue means that the solution will almost miraculously pop out. Game over!! BUT, if you can’t find the game, or the solution, go to step 3.

Step 3. Relax your brain, take a break, congratulate the setter for his/her temporary success at confusing you, misleading you, tying your brain in a knot, and go back to step 1 to see if you can come up with a different structure – or a different anything.

IF you find yourself going through these 3 steps over and over again, then relax your brain, take a break, congratulate the setter for his/her temporary success, and move on to the next clue. When your solving ability has been somewhat restored from solving other clues, come back to this clue again. AND remember, the battle of wits doesn’t mean that you have to end up solving every clue. Set your own standard – maybe solving 90% of the clues, or 60%, or 40%, or 6 of them, or just 1 of them is sufficient. Good grief, managing to solve just one cryptic clue gives enough pleasure, enough fun with words, enough wits exercise, enough sense of accomplishment, to get you through to the arrival of tomorrow’s cryptic crossword! Surely!!

Setters are devious people – far too devious just to do what others expect of them. And a battle of wits in which I engage is not just conducted according to the way in which my brain works. My brain is getting into grips with another brain. I need to think devious, too. So, in cryptic crosswords anything can happen – and that’s another reason to love them! You may even find yourself (in time – in a long time?) solving them completely! See even thinking about cryptic crosswords, makes you chuckle!

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www.stillersite.wordpress.com