

Learning how to solve cryptic crosswords

What is involved?

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About this document

This document has been written for people who are interested in learning how to solve cryptic crosswords.

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Summary

The key points to take from this document are that:

- solving cryptic crosswords is an enjoyable pastime that exercises the mind
- anyone who can solve quick crosswords will be able to learn how to solve cryptic crosswords
- learning any skill takes time and effort
- acquiring a skill is easier and quicker with access to effective learning resources
- an author of learning resources will need competence in solving and setting cryptic clues. How good the learning resources are will depend on the authors skills and experience in teaching, and in designing learning content
- beginners should evaluate the suitability of learning resources before committing time and effort to their use.

Why solving cryptic crosswords is a skill that needs to be learnt

The different types of crossword

A crossword is a puzzle that consists of a grid and a set of numbered clues. The answers to each clue are entered in the grid in the corresponding numbered position.

Crosswords are published in newspapers, magazines and online. Collections of crosswords are also available in book form and in puzzle magazines.

The two most common types of crossword puzzle published in the UK are:

- quick crosswords
- cryptic crosswords

They differ in the way that the clues work.

Quick crosswords

In this type of puzzle, each clue is typically a single word and the answer is a synonym of the clue — another word which has the same meaning. For example:

Clue: Purchaser (5)

Answer: BUYER

The relationship between the clues and the answers is straightforward and obvious. Anyone who can speak English and can spell will be able to attempt a quick crossword.

Quick crosswords are not necessarily easy, however. Many words in English have a number of possible synonyms, and also the words used in a puzzle may be less familiar.

Clue: Spanish gentleman (7)

Answer: HIDALGO

In general, the quick crosswords published in the national broadsheet newspapers are more challenging than those published in consumer magazines and the tabloid newspapers.

Cryptic crosswords

In a cryptic crossword, the relationship between the clues and the answers is not obvious. You need to know how cryptic clues work in order to be able to solve them.

Cryptic clues are written in a form of code — they contain hidden instructions that tell the solver how to arrive at the answer. There are a number of different types of cryptic clue and some general principles about how the hidden instructions are presented.

Example cryptic clue

Here is an example of a cryptic clue to illustrate this:

Change models infrequently (6) SELDOM

This is an Anagram clue, and the answer is arrived at by rearranging the letters in the word 'models' to give a word meaning 'infrequently'.

MODELS \Rightarrow SELDOM

How the hidden instructions work

In an Anagram clue, there are three parts to the hidden instructions:

- an indicator to tell the solver to perform an anagram
- the ingredients for the anagram
- a definition of the answer

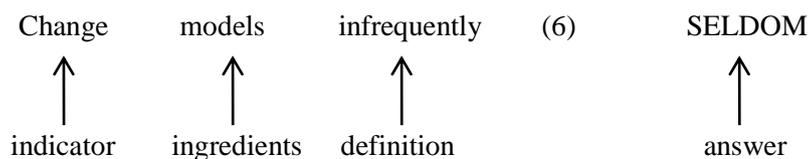
In the example

'change'

'models'

'infrequently'

This can be illustrated in a diagram:



The hidden instructions in this clue are:

rearrange the letters in 'models' to form a word which means 'infrequently'.

Other types of cryptic clue

There are a dozen basic types of clue, and most of these work in the same way as the Anagram clue — they have an indicator, ingredients and an answer definition. The way they differ is in the operation the solver has to perform to arrive at the answer. For example:

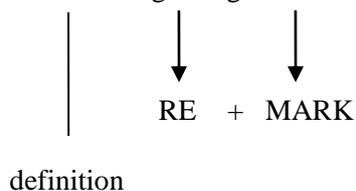
<u>Clue type</u>	<u>Operation</u>	<u>Ingredients</u>	<u>Answer</u>
Anagram	rearrange the order of a group of letters	models	SELDOM
Deletion	remove one or more letters	track	RACK
Reversal	reverse the order of letters	lager	REGAL

Some of the clue types are not based on performing operations on groups of letters, but on the sounds of words and their meanings.

Other aspects of clue construction

Often the solver has to substitute synonyms for the ingredients given in the clue in order to arrive at the answer. This is illustrated in the following Charade clue:

Clue: Comment regarding blemish (7) Answer: REMARK



In a Charade clue, groups of letters are added together to form the answer. Unlike the Anagram clue, a Charade clue doesn't need an indicator.

The hidden instructions in this clue are: add a word meaning 'regarding' to a word meaning 'blemish' to form a word that means 'comment'.

Abbreviations (such as P for Parking) are often used to provide one or more letters in the answer. The same result can also be achieved through more cryptic methods.

More than one type of clue can be combined together to form a Compound clue – for example a Charade clue in which one of the ingredients is an anagram.

In summary, the cryptic code is not elaborate—it consists of some general principles about how clues are constructed and a limited number of different types of clue. From these simple building blocks a potentially limitless variety of original clues can be constructed.

Solving cryptic crosswords is a skill that is learnt

Because of the special way cryptic clues work, you need to learn how to solve them.

This involves:

- understanding the principles of how cryptic clues work and the different types of clue
- becoming familiar with some special meanings and functions words can have in a clue
- developing solving skills which put this knowledge into practice.

Some common myths about cryptic crosswords

If someone who doesn't know how cryptic clues work tries to solve a cryptic crossword, they will find it virtually impossible to get any of the clues. Giving them the answers won't help either, because they will appear to bear little relation to the clues.

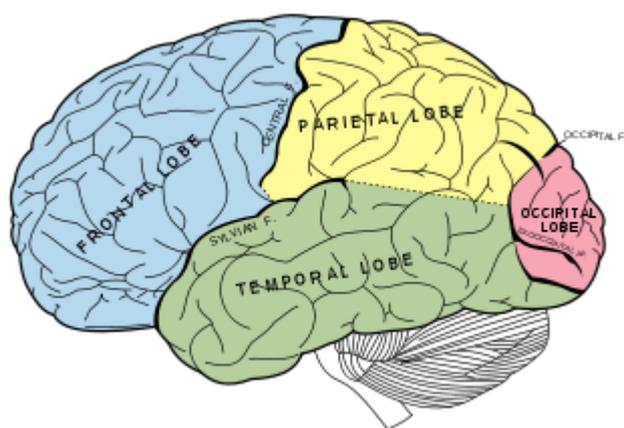
This impasse can be very frustrating for the novice, and may result in them giving up on cryptic crosswords. They will also wonder how it is that other people are able to solve cryptic crosswords whereas they can't. This can lead them to one of two wrong conclusions:

“My brain doesn't work like that”

You don't need a special brain to be able to solve cryptic clues — you just need to learn how they work and develop the skill of solving them. It's the same as driving a car, speaking a foreign language or playing a game of cards — all of these skills can be learnt, and any brain can learn them.

“You need to get inside the mindset of the person that sets the puzzle”

Fortunately, you don't need to establish a psychic rapport with the setter! All crossword setters use the same basic rules for how cryptic clues are constructed, and this is what you need to learn. Once you have learnt what's involved in solving clues, you are playing the same game as the setter and you will be able to develop the skill of interpreting the clues.



You don't need a special brain to solve cryptic clues – you just need to learn how they work, and then build your skill in solving them.

What are the benefits of learning this skill?

Learning a skill is a reward in itself—it is gratifying to learn how to do something new and it contributes to our personal development.

An enjoyable pastime

People enjoy doing cryptic crosswords.

Cryptic clues present a challenge, and it is satisfying to solve them. Every clue has an apparent meaning and a hidden interpretation that leads to the answer, and added enjoyment comes from appreciating the way a clue has been constructed; this may involve an element of humour, the way the apparent meaning misleads the solver, or the elegance of the construction.

Exercising the mind

Solving cryptic crosswords exercises the mind, providing a workout for various cognitive faculties. It calls on the memory for the meanings of words and phrases and for general knowledge. Solving clues involves interpretation, and arriving at the answer may require the application of logic, deduction and lateral thinking.

Learning something new

Because of the way cryptic clues work, it's possible to solve a clue even though the answer or part of the clue is not something you knew. This could be a word or phrase, a particular meaning of a word or an item of general knowledge that you didn't already know.

Mitigating mild cognitive impairment

Doing crosswords may help reduce the development of mild cognitive impairment. The following is an extract from the Alzheimer's Society UK website:

There is some evidence that exercising the mind as well as the body can also help reduce the risk of MCI (Mild Cognitive Impairment) and dementia. Intellectually stimulating leisure activities such as card games or crossword puzzles in mid-life may allow the brain to build up a 'reserve capacity' that can help prevent or delay the onset of dementia. Keeping socially active may also help to reduce risk.

http://www.alzheimers.org.uk/site/scripts/documents_info.php?documentID=120

However, we should be cautious about making extravagant claims. There is no evidence that changes in the brain associated with dementia have been reduced by activities like crosswords.

There is no doubt that keeping the mind active promotes a sense of well being and enhances the quality of life. Any medical benefits are a bonus.

A hobby that is easy to pursue

You don't need any special or expensive facilities to solve crosswords — just a supply of puzzles, which are easy to come by, and a pencil if solving on paper. It's a hobby you can pursue on your own and it's also fun to solve puzzles with other people.

Will I be able to learn this skill?

The requirements for learning

In order to learn how to solve cryptic puzzles, you need:

- the desire to do so
- the time and space to devote to developing a new skill
- access to appropriate, effective learning resources
- some prerequisite skills and knowledge.

Prerequisites

The prerequisite skills and knowledge are:

- language skills — a working knowledge of the English language equivalent to that of a native speaker. In particular, a broad vocabulary and the ability to spell
- generic thinking skills — such as logic, deduction and problem solving.

Most adults in English speaking countries have both these prerequisite skill sets and are constantly using them.

As is the case with quick crosswords, there are easier and more challenging cryptic puzzles. If you can do the easier quick crosswords, you should be able to learn how to do the easier cryptic puzzles — and with practice progress to the more challenging puzzles.

Time and application

Learning any worthwhile skill requires dedicating some time and effort.

With a comprehensive and effective learning resource, it is feasible to learn the fundamental skills and knowledge for solving cryptic crosswords in about 30 hours. You would then be able to solve the easiest puzzles and make headway with puzzles at an intermediate level of difficulty.

Mastering any skill requires considerably more time and application. It will take most people many more hours of practice and skill development to be able to complete the more challenging puzzles published in the national broadsheet newspapers.

People vary in their aptitude for particular skills and activities. How quickly and how far someone progresses with their solving expertise will depend on the individual. Using effective learning resources will give you a good head start.

Anyone who can solve quick crosswords will be able to learn how to solve cryptic crosswords.

How can I learn?

Some people learn how to solve cryptic crosswords from a relative while they are growing up. This route will not be available to everyone, and in adulthood it may be hard to find access to a personal coach in this way.

Trial and error

Trying to solve cryptic crosswords without any guidance on how the clues work is virtually impossible. Most people who try this approach will give up and come to the wrong conclusion — “my brain doesn’t work like that”.

Using learning resources

An adult beginner needs access to learning resources that can serve as a teacher, enabling them to build their knowledge and skills quickly and effectively.

Dedicated learning resources exist in the form of face-to-face courses, books and apps. The practical advantages of each type is covered in the following sections:

Face-to-face teaching

For cryptic crosswords, this typically involves a teacher and a group of learners — ideally no more than about 15.

Face-to-face teaching is interactive and this has a number of advantages. Learners can:

- ask questions of the teacher
- make contributions and participate
- learn from the other members of the group.

When available, face-to face teaching is normally delivered in one of the following formats:

- short tutorials — about 2 ½ hours
- one day courses — about 6 hours
- weekend courses — about 12 hours
- weekly classes — eg 6 sessions of 1 ½ hours

Half-day tutorials are ideal for people who are short of free time, and should enable learners to understand the principles of how cryptic clues work and get some practical experience of solving clues. A weekend course provides enough time to cover every aspect of the subject and develop a comprehensive set of basic solving skills. A series of classes helps to bed learning in, with ‘homework’ provided to increase the amount of practical activity.

The main limitation of face-to-face teaching is that it is transitory — some information presented may not be remembered. This can be mitigated by the provision of supporting materials such as worksheets, course books and slide sets.

The need for a competent teacher, premises and an arranged time all place practical limitations on the availability of face-to-face teaching.

Books

A book can be available 24/7 on a permanent basis, and this has a number of advantages for learners:

- they can schedule in study time when it suits them
- they are in control of the amount of time allocated to each topic
- they can refer back to any of the learning content when required.

The main disadvantage of a book is that it is not interactive — the learner can't ask questions from an expert along the way.

The ideal scenario for a beginner would be a blend of face-to-face teaching and access to a book, and this is most effective when the course and book have been designed so that they can work together in this way.

Apps

The rapid uptake of smartphones makes learning with an app an option for many people today.

Apps offer two advantages over books:

- app developers can add an interactive element to the learning process
- people tend to have their mobile phones with them as matter of course, making it easier to fit learning into busy lives.

A disadvantage of mobile phones and tablets is that the screen size limits the amount of information that can be displayed. In contrast, an A4 book can fit a whole puzzle with all the clues, solutions and explanations on a two-page spread.

Crossword puzzles for practice

Newspaper puzzles are for people who already know how to solve them

The cryptic crosswords published in newspapers and magazines are for people who already know how to solve them. They are designed to provide an appropriate challenge to regular solvers, and the most challenging appear in the national broadsheet newspapers. Published crosswords are not designed for beginners to learn how to solve them.

Beginners need practical work at an appropriate level of difficulty

It's essential that learning resources for beginners provide exercises and puzzles that start off easy, and get progressively more difficult as the more complex aspects of clue construction are introduced. This enables the learner to progressively build their competence and avoids the negative impact of being confronted with practice material before they are equipped to deal with it.

Once someone has acquired a basic set of solving skills, they will be able to able to develop further through practicing with published puzzles. Crossword blogs on the internet are a useful resource for improvers, because they provide explanations of how the answers to published puzzles are arrived at.

How can I find a good learning resource?

The problem with any learning resource is that it's hard to assess it until after you have used it.

For a resource designed to teach a cognitive skill — like solving cryptic crosswords — the way topics are presented, the order in which they are presented and how they are supported by practical exercises are all critical to delivering successful learning outcomes.

There are a number of aspects to consider when choosing a learning resource:

- the credentials of the author
- inspecting the resource
- evidence that the resource works.

The quality of the resource will depend on the author

To design the content for a book or app that teaches beginners how to solve cryptic crosswords, an author will need the following skill set:

1. Solving and setting cryptic crosswords — being able to set cryptic clues is a pre-requisite to designing examples and practice material that illustrate and reinforce key learning points.
2. Teaching and practical experience of teaching this subject.
3. Skills and experience in authoring learning content.

Anyone who has mastered a skill will be able to teach it badly!

It is skills in teaching and authoring learning content that will separate the sheep from the goats.

Inspecting the resource

A resource that teaches cryptic crosswords should look like a course — a structured programme of learning:

- starting with the easiest topics and building to the more advanced aspects
- with practical activities integrated with theory exposition all the way through
- and diagrams supporting written explanations

It is possible to inspect books on the internet and in shops, and an app should allow you to download a trial sample for free.

Evidence that the resource works

The most valuable recommendation is evidence that the resource “does what it says on the tin” — that beginners have used the resource and it worked for them. The author should have tested the methodology and learning content before publication, and there should be evidence of this in the product or at the author's website.

The price of the resource

The price is the least important criteria to consider. Choosing a learning resource because it's cheap to buy will be a waste of time and effort if it's no good.

The price of a paper back book is largely dependent on the format and quantity of paper used. A larger book will be more expensive, but has the advantage when learning that more information can be presented on a single page. A smaller book has the advantage of being more portable.

Appendix: CZD Crosswords learning resources

Learning made easier

Henry Howarth has developed an approach that makes it easier for beginners to learn the skill of solving cryptic crosswords:

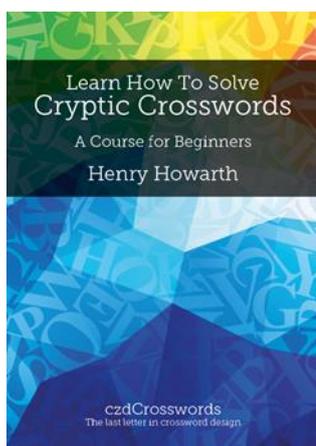
- starting with the basic ideas and easiest types of clue, and building step-by-step to the advanced aspects
- supporting each topic with examples and exercises that reinforce key learning points
- completing each learning module with practice puzzles designed to consolidate learning.

The approach was first developed teaching groups of beginners on face-to-face courses. This enabled the teaching methodology and learning content to be fine tuned and proven to work well.

This approach is used in all the learning resources authored by Henry Howarth:

- the book *Learn How to Solve Cryptic Crosswords*, available worldwide
- the app *Learn Cryptic Crosswords* for iPhones, iPads and Android phones and tablets
- face to face courses taught in the UK.

Find out more at czdcrosswords.co.uk



Book



Courses



App

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