

Learning how to solve cryptic crosswords

What is involved?

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Henry teaches beginners how to solve cryptic crosswords and is the author of *Learn How to Solve Cryptic Crosswords: A Course for Beginners*

About this document

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

Contents

	Page
Why solving cryptic crosswords is a skill that needs to be learnt	2
What are the benefits of learning this skill?	6
Will I be able to learn this skill?	7
How can I learn?	8
How can I find a good book for beginners?	10
<i>Learn How to Solve Cryptic Crosswords</i>	11

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 should 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
- for an adult beginner, a book is a practical learning resource that is readily available
- how good the book is will depend on the authors skills in teaching and designing learning content, and practical experience of teaching this skill
- the book should start with the simplest ideas and easiest clues, and build in stages to the advanced aspects of the subject. This makes it much easier for beginners to learn
- beginners should evaluate the suitability of a book before purchasing it.

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 sort of code—they contain a hidden set of instructions which 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

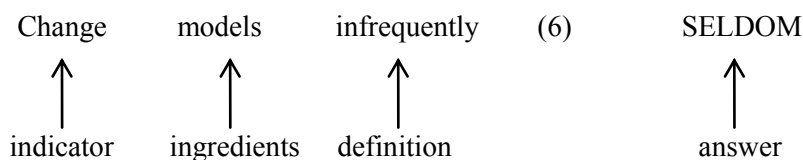
In the example

'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:

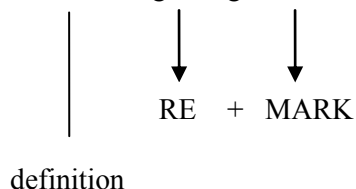
<u>Clue type</u>	<u>Operation</u>	<u>Ingredients</u>	<u>Answer</u>
Anagram	rearrange the order of a group of letters	models	SELDOM
Deletion	remove one or more letters	track	RACK
Reversal	reverse the order of letters	lager	REGAL

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.

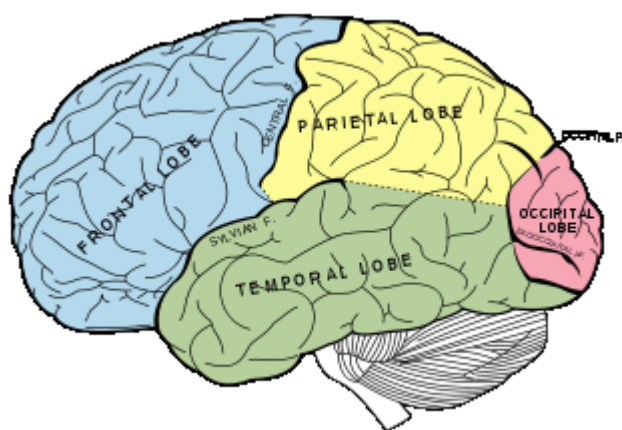
This impasse can be very frustrating for the novice, and may result in them giving up on cryptic crosswords. They will also wonder how it is that other people are able to solve cryptic crosswords whereas they can't. This may lead them to one of two wrong conclusions:

“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 adult brain can learn them.

“You need to get inside the mindset of the person that set 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 were already familiar with. 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, an individual needs:

- 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 an individual needs 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 are able to do the easier quick crosswords, you should be able to learn how to do the easier cryptic puzzles—and with practice and application 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 and also the quality of the learning resources at their disposal.

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

How can I learn?

Some people learn how to solve cryptic crosswords from their parents while they are growing up. This route will not have been available to everyone, and in adulthood there is much less likelihood of finding access to a personal coach in this way.

Trial and error

Trying to solve cryptic crosswords without any guidance on how cryptic clues work is virtually impossible. People who try this method will abandon the attempt, and often 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.

There are two broad categories of learning resource:

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 for face-to-face teaching is that it is transitory—a lot of the 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 requirement for a teacher, premises and time slots also 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.

For many beginners, a book is going to be the most practical learning route.

Crossword puzzles for practice

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.

It's essential that a book for beginners provides exercises and puzzles that start off being 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 book for beginners?

The problem with any book is that it's difficult to assess what it's like until after you have read it.

For a book which is 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 from a range of books:

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

The quality of the book will depend on the author

To write a book which teaches beginners how to solve cryptic crosswords, an author will need:

- to know how to solve and set cryptic crosswords—being able to set cryptic clues enables the author to design practice material to reinforce the key learning points
- to be a competent teacher and have practical experience of teaching this subject
- skills and experience in authoring learning content.

How effective the book is will depend critically on the authors teaching abilities, and these are a function of aptitude, training and experience. Details about the author are usually available on the back cover of a book.

Inspecting the book

A book that teaches cryptic crosswords should look like an exercise book rather than a novel:

- with the content presented as a 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.

Evidence that the book works

The most valuable recommendation is evidence that the book “does what it says on the tin” – that beginners have used the book and it worked for them. The author should have tested the methodology and learning content before publishing the book, and there should be evidence of this on the back cover or author's website.

The price of the book

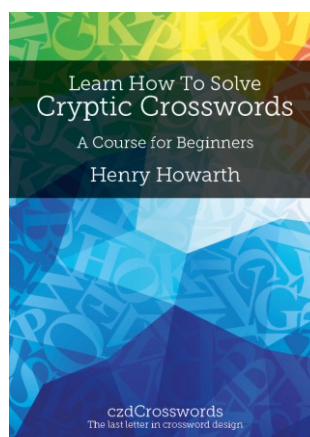
The price of a book is the least important criteria to consider. Choosing a book because it's cheap to buy will be a waste of time and effort if the book is an ineffective learning resource.

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.

Learn How to Solve Cryptic Crosswords: A Course for Beginners

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 £10.46 + £2.99 postage in the UK



Learn how to solve cryptic crosswords with this step-by-step course

If you are intrigued by cryptic crosswords and would like to learn how to solve them, then this book is for you. It has been written for beginners and provides everything you need to develop your solving skills.

Start with the basics and progress to the more advanced ideas

The book takes you on a carefully planned route through the subject, making it easier to learn. It starts with the basic ideas and simplest types of clue, and gradually builds to the more advanced aspects of clue solving.

Clear explanations with illustrations for all the different types of clue

Each topic is explained clearly, with examples to show how the various types of clue work. Diagrams are used to support written explanations, illustrate key ideas and engage different styles of learning.

Exercises and practice crosswords to consolidate your learning

We learn best by doing, and each topic is followed by exercises and practice clues. All of the practical activities have been designed to reinforce the key learning points and every chapter ends with practice puzzles to consolidate your learning.

The foundations for an enjoyable and stimulating pastime

Cryptic crosswords are fun to do and exercise the mind—they jog memories, stimulate thinking and often result in learning something new. This book provides what you need to know in order to solve cryptic puzzles. It also explains how you can practise and develop your solving skills further.

About the author

Henry Howarth teaches beginners how to solve cryptic crosswords. This book uses the successful teaching method and learning content that he has developed on the face-to-face courses he runs. Henry has a lifelong interest in crosswords and has published puzzles in magazines. He is a qualified teacher and an experienced author of learning resources for adults.

Order from the Book shop at www.lulu.com