The Basics of Cryptic Crossword Solving by LeXman

A cryptic clue consists of two parts: the definition and the wordplay.

The definition is just like a clue in a standard crossword. "Walk" could be clued as "Stroll," or "Four balls," or "Evening's recreation, for some," etc. In the example clues below, I always underline the definition part of the clue.

It's the wordplay part of the clue that tends to throw people. This half of the clue is a kind of riddle that spells out – letter by letter and/or letter sequence by letter sequence – the clued word

The combination of definition and wordplay turns every cryptic clue into a set of instructions – a set of instructions for solving itself.

Consider the clue: "Rupture Earth's core (5)." "Rupture Earth's" is the wordplay portion of the clue, and the definition is "core."

Rupture Earth's core (5) → Number of letters in the solution

Rupture (anagram) the letters E-A-R-T-H → to find a word that means "core"

The answer is "heart."

The catch is that there is no rule about which comes first. You could just as easily start this same clue, using the same wordplay, with the definition half of the clue: "Center of Earth deformed (5)"

Here are the 9 main types of wordplay you find in cryptic crosswords:

Wordplay	Explanation
ANAGRAM	Like the transposal flat base: "Rupture Earth's core (5)" Anagram (rupture) the letters E-A-R-T-H to get a word that means "core" = HEART
REVERSAL	Like a reversal in a flat base: "Take bar back (3)" Find a word for "take" by spelling a word meaning "bar" (BAN) backwards ("back") = NAB
DELETION	A letter or word is removed from one word, creating another – like the deletion or word deletion flat base: "Defeat without a wager (3)" Delete the letter A from a word meaning "defeat" (BEAT) for a word meaning "wager" = BET
INSERTION	Like the deletion flat base, in reverse: "Help taking me in a direction (5)" Put the word "me" in a word for "help" (AID) for a word meaning "in a direction" = AIMED
CHARADE	Like the charade flat base: "Money from Princess and me (4) Find a word for "Money" by combining a word for "Princess" (DI) + the word "me" = DIME
HOMOPHONE	Like the homonym flat base: "Talk about average appearance (4) A word for "average" (MEAN) that sounds like ("talk about") a word for "appearance" = MIEN
HIDDEN	Word is hidden inside a word or phrase: "Piece of furniture in lots of apartments (4)" Find a word for "Piece of furniture" within ("in") the phrase "lots of apartments" = SOFA
DOUBLE DEF	The clue has no wordplay, just two different definitions: "Carry animal (4)" Find a word for "carry" (BEAR) that is the same as a word for "animal" (BEAR)
LETTER BANK	Like the Letter Bank flat base: "Hardier ingredients bring about medical condition (5 7)" Use the letters H-A-R-D-I-E-R for the name of a "medical condition" (HEART-DISEASE)