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DEMYSTIFYING THE CRYPTIC CLUE

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(Originally published in the August 2017 issue of *The Enigma*)

Note: This article is not a discussion of the different ways that cryptic clues can work (reversals, homophones, charades, etc). There are already many articles on the subject, including an excellent one in the Guide and on the NPL website. This article is less about the mechanics of cryptic crosswords and more about the state of mind that is most helpful when you are trying to solve one.

Many people are intimidated by cryptic crossword puzzles. Use of the word “cryptic” seems to suggest that the whole point of these puzzles is to be as indecipherable as possible. But the truth is that cryptic clues are not designed to be cryptic, but to be solvable. Every clue in a cryptic must follow a set of strictly-adhered-to rules. It's a coded language, but both the constructor and the solver know the code. When you know the code, you quickly see that each cryptic clue contains within it the instructions for how to decode it. It's a puzzle box that, when you press it in just the right way, opens itself.

Think of each cryptic clue as an instruction. For example:

Woman in general assembly (4)

To a seasoned solver, this isn't a statement about gender diversity in a legislative body. Most of the words in a cryptic clue aren't meant to be read for their meaning at all, but rather viewed as objects that can be manipulated in specific ways.

The clue above can be more accurately read as:

Find a four-letter word (“4”) meaning “Woman” inside (“in”) the string of letters “G-E-N-E-R-A-L-A-S-S-E-M-B-L-Y.”

The answer, of course, is “lass.”

When you look more closely at the original clue, you can see that the language is a little stilted. The more natural phrase would be “Woman in *the* general assembly.” But the word “the” in this case would get in the way of the coded instruction, and so most constructors will avoid using it. This is an important point: the best cryptic crossword constructors aren't those who are the best at fooling their solvers so much as the ones who are very good at hiding these tell-tale signs that the sentence should not be taken at face value (what is called the clue's “surface sense”).

Another thing to point out here is that the clue could just as easily have been presented in the opposite order, with the cryptic part coming first:

General assembly includes woman (4)

which you now know should really be read as:

*Included in the string of letters “G-E-N-E-R-A-L-A-S-S-E-M-B-L-Y,”
find a four-letter word (“4”) meaning “Woman”*

And the answer is, of course, exactly the same.

There are two basic rules to solving cryptic clues. The first one is that you have to start by figuring out which end of the clue—the front or the back—is the non-cryptic part. In the first version of our clue, the non-cryptic part is in the front, while in the second version, it's in the back. But both clues are equally valid and are solved in the same way.

The second rule to solving cryptics is even more important: ASSUME NOTHING. Take the following cryptic clue:

Expand general assembly (7)

Here's “general assembly” again, so it's easy to assume that this clue will work much like the earlier one.

The problem is that this doesn't leave us with much else to work with. “Expand” what? Which part of the clue is just a stream of letters (like “G-E-N-E-R-A-L-A-S-S-E-M-B-L-Y” in our first clue) that we need to manipulate? If you can train your brain to stop reading this phrase for its surface meaning, and instead keep an eye out for cryptic-crossword-style coded instructions, you'll see that, in this clue, “general assembly” isn't a two-word phrase at all. The proper way to interpret this clue is:

*Find a seven-letter word (“7”) for “Expand” by
anagramming (“assembly”) the letter string “G-E-N-E-R-A-L”*

...which gives us the answer “enlarge.”

This is a common cryptic clue trick: using a two-word phrase to hide the division between different parts of the clue (in this case, between the string of letters you must manipulate and the instruction for how to manipulate it.)

There's only one way to get good at finding these sorts of hidden instructions, and that's by solving cryptic crosswords—lots and lots of cryptic crosswords. Find some easier, more accessible constructors to begin with. Get comfortable with the idea that, at first, you might not always complete the grid. Fall for all the common tricks (like using the phrase “Fourth of July” to clue the letter “Y”) a few times—until they start to leap right out at you whenever you come across them in future puzzles.

There's one last misconception about solving cryptics that I want to dispel: that a good puzzler solves each and every clue by decoding the cryptic part first. I consider myself a pretty decent solver, and I'd say that I solve the cryptic part of the clue first only about one-fourth of the time. Another one-fourth of the time, I figure out the word I'm looking for from the non-cryptic part of the clue and the enumeration, and then decode the cryptic part to confirm that my guess is right. The other half of the time—most of my success in any given cryptic—comes from getting a few of the letters from the crossing words in the grid and guessing the answer from that—which is exactly how most people solve non-cryptic crosswords as well. I then check both the cryptic and non-cryptic parts of the clue to confirm that my guess is right. In this way (because there are at least three different ways to break into any given clue), cryptic crosswords are easier, not harder, to solve than the non-cryptic variety.

But more important than this, cryptic crosswords are fun. Every puzzler knows the joy of the “aha!” moment when you solve a clever puzzle. In a good cryptic, each clue is a puzzle, and you get a dozen “aha!” moments one after the other. It takes an investment of time and effort to learn how to solve cryptics, but you'll quickly find that this investment pays back great dividends.

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