

## What Makes the Stumpers Tough?

Several factors combine to make them so:

-- In themed crosswords, the longest answers always have some sort of common relationship, and getting the first theme answer will often give you a useful hint about the remaining ones. The titles of themed puzzles are meant to assist you in figuring out the theme as well. With themeless crosswords, you get none of this help.

-- Compared to the Monday-Friday crosswords, there are more longer words and fewer shorter words. Longer words are harder to think of than shorter ones just because they're longer, and getting a letter or two of a 10-letter word, for example, will much less of a help to you than a letter or two of a five-letter word.

-- Unlike easier crosswords, there will be very few clues whose answers will be obvious to you right off the bat.

It's also worth mentioning how these puzzles aren't made difficult: by using what Will Shortz of the New York Times calls "uninteresting obscurities" in clues and answers. This means that you'll never see unusual words in the clues, and well over 99% of the time, the answers to our themeless crosswords will be words that you know, or are worth knowing.

Let's pull back the curtain and show you what goes through crossword authors' minds as they prepare the clues for their puzzles. (In case you ever wondered, crosswords' answer diagrams are always created first, then the clues.)

## What Makes Easy Clues Easy

Let's say that the answer to 1 Across is PINE. If this were to be an easy crossword, two possible clues might be "Type of tree with cones" and "Household cleaner scent." Both of these clues point to the answer in a direct, unambiguous way, as the clues for easy puzzles should always do.

Do you see why "with cones" was included as part of the first clue? Because otherwise, the clue would just be "Type of tree," and while this isn't tricky in any way, there are many, many types of trees spelled with four letters. So, adding "with cones" eliminates every type of tree other than the pine from your mental list of possible answers.

As for the second clue, we started it with "Household" because the first word of "Cleaner scent" could be misinterpreted as an adjective (the comparative form of "clean") instead of the noun that we intend it to be. Placing "Household" in front prevents any such unintentional confusion.

## Tough Clues 101

Now, we'll turn this reasoning around. Let's say we're writing the clues for a tough crossword, and 1 Across is PINE. Besides "Type of tree," "Long" would also be a difficult clue for PINE, even though it's a straightforward synonym.

That's because "long" has many different meanings, and can be different parts of speech as well-- an adjective, verb, or noun.

It's not only words but also common phrases that can have multiple meanings. For example, "Strike out" can mean "fail," "erase," or "begin."

Multiple-meaning clues can be especially devious at times, when they're phrased in such a way to make you think they have only one possible interpretation, when in fact there's another. I call these nasties "Deliberate Misdirection" (DM) which I liken to the red herrings commonly tossed about in mystery novels, to distract you from what's really going on.

Here are the devices commonly used in DM clues:

-- Grammatical Ambiguity

The grammatical form of the answer can be disguised by using verbs like "set," "put" and "quit," whose present and past tenses are identical. Nouns like "fish," "sheep," and "series," whose singular and plural forms are identical, are often used as well. There are also ways to make an answer that's a certain part of speech seem like another. "Dashing" can be a form of the verb "dash," but it can also be an adjective meaning "stylish" or "energetic."

-- The Capital Conundrum

Since the first word in crossword clues is always capitalized, clever wording can mislead you into thinking that word is a common noun, when it's really a proper noun. Example: "Price selection" for ARIA (a reference to opera star Leontyne Price).

-- The Idiom Gambit

I love finding well-known English idiomatic phrases that always have one specific meaning, "pulling them apart" for the literal meaning of their individual words, then "putting them back together" to interpret literally for the clue.

Consider the idiom "Well fixed," which the dictionary tells us means "prosperous." Taking the words in that phrase literally, it could mean "repaired in an excellent manner," which is precisely how I once used "Well fixed" to clue the answer GOOD AS NEW.

-- Double Trouble

Two-word phrases where neither word is taken at its "face value" can be especially devious. The clue "Fine skipper" sounds like "excellent ship's captain." But "Fine" can also be a noun (a monetary penalty) rather than an adjective, and "skipper" can mean "one who skips" as well as a captain. If both words in "Fine skipper" were to be interpreted in their less-than-obvious ways, the clue would mean "Someone who skips paying a monetary penalty," and the answer would likely be SCOFFLAW.

Pretty mean stuff, huh?

The good news for you, the solver, is that even the most difficult crosswords will not have more than a handful of DM clues like these, because they're extremely difficult to devise. But nearly all tough puzzles will have a few of them, and you should always be on the lookout for them.

Two other frequently seen "tricks of the trade" are worth mentioning:

-- Strange Letter Combinations

I've recently used FT KNOX KY, AJ FOYT IV (race-car driver and grandson of racing great A.J. Foyt) and EFPTOZ (start of a standard eye chart) as answers for difficult crosswords. You can see how one might have nearly all the letters filled in for any of these and still not be sure what the answer was.

-- Multi-Word Shorties

Solvers are generally not expecting multiword answers of six letters or less. So that's why you'll often find them in Saturday Stumpers. They're often colloquialisms that you won't find in the dictionary, like I QUIT, WHY ME and SO WHAT.

When the answer isn't a "dictionary word" but is instead a proper noun (person, place, brand name, etc.), the clue will generally be made difficult not by trickery, but with a fact about that answer that you may not know. For example, a tough clue for ENGLAND might be "Hundred Years' War participant," rather than the easier "Redcoats' homeland" or the easier-still "Where London is."

## Your Personalized Self-Study Course

### Step 1: Master the Techniques

If you've never completed (or even attempted) a Stumper, here's how to get started.

The first step to gain a thorough understanding of all the "toughening-up" devices presented here. The most effective way of achieving this is to review every clue and answer for a bunch of Stumpers, perhaps five or so.

Starting with 1 Across, look at each clue, then its corresponding answer when published in your paper (or immediately, online). Before you move on to the next clue, be sure of two things: that you understand how the clue leads to the answer, and you understand how and why the clue is difficult or tricky. If, after a few moments, you still don't "get" a particular clue, you should consult an appropriate reference source (dictionary, encyclopedia, Internet, etc.). This last step is crucially important! Even if you're not in the habit of looking up clues, you must not skip over a clue if you don't understand it.

Once you do complete this exercise diligently for five or so puzzles, you'll have a depth of insight about what makes tough crosswords tough that can't be obtained any other way.

Something else to try for additional practice: Before you begin any of my easier Monday-Friday puzzles, take a good look at its title, and think of as many possibilities for the theme as you can. Since puzzle titles are intended to give you just a hint about the theme without revealing too much, puzzlemakers often use the same wordplay techniques for their titles as they use in crafting tough clues.

My all-time favorite title for a puzzle I created: "Something Wicked This Way Comes," where a candle had to be drawn in certain squares to represent the letters C-A-N-D-L-E. What does the title have to do with that? The second word "Wicked" isn't the two-syllable synonym for "evil," it's a one-syllable word for "having a wick."

## Step 2: Try a Stumper

Before you pick up your pencil, you should first review all the clues--without looking at the answers this time. What you're looking to do is: not necessarily figure out any answers, but zero in on which of the techniques you've learned is being used for each clue. Remember to be suspicious of the obvious meaning of every clue on the page.

When you've completed your clue review, then start solving by filling in any answer anywhere in the puzzle that you think you know. If you're having trouble getting started, here are a few tricks that experienced solvers use:

-- The comparative and superlative forms of adjectives (usually ending in -ER and -EST) are very difficult for clue writers to disguise. An adjective ending with -ER will usually have a word like "More" or "Comparatively," paired with a synonym of the answer. "Less" followed by antonym of the answer is also common, such as "Less iffy" for SURER. So, even if you don't know the full answer to a clue like this, you will be pretty safe in filling in -ER or -EST at the word's end.

-- If the answers to two clues cross on their last letter, and they both appear to be plurals, it's highly likely that the last letter of both words will be S.

-- The bottom row Across of every crossword consists entirely of letters that end Down words. The letters most likely to end English words are S, D, R, E and T. That's why you'll often see answers like REAL ESTATE, SESAME SEED and STRESS TEST on the bottom row of puzzles. So have those letters in mind as you examine the last-row clues. This technique also applies to the rightmost column of every crossword, where every letter of the Down words must end a word Across.

## Step 3: Chart Your Progress, and Learn from Each Puzzle

If you get stuck anywhere in the solving process, be sure to get help! "Help" might be looking up just one answer in the back of the book, or looking up the meaning of an unfamiliar word. You'll often find that just one additional word will be enough for you to figure out many more words yourself. But it's OK to look things up as much as you want.

What's important is that you don't go on to the next puzzle until you understand all the clues of the current one. So be sure to complete the puzzle, no matter how many hints you need to give yourself. Then, review each clue and answer as in Step 1, to extract all the information you can, for you to use in the future. Chart your progress by keeping track of how many "hints" you needed to give yourself.

Even if you can't fill in a single letter in the first Stumper you try without

help, you've made progress if you've correctly identified the "gimmick" behind even one clue.

Step 4: Repeat Steps 2 and 3

If you continue to do Saturday Stumpers in this manner, will you see a steady improvement in your skills? No other result is possible! The more familiar you are with the tricks and techniques used in these puzzles, the better you'll do. Follow this plan diligently, and you also be learning new words, new meanings of words, and new facts along the way. And that will surely improve your ability to complete any crossword, no matter how tough it is.

Final Words

Many solvers I've spoken to would never look up a puzzle answer they don't know. That's their privilege, but I can tell you that, a year from now, their solving skills will be at the same level that they are today.

If you have even the slightest notion that it's "cheating" to look up an answer, banish it from your mind immediately. As your teacher and "crossword coach," I can tell you with complete confidence that, not only is it "not cheating," learning the things you don't know is the only proven path to puzzle-solving improvement.

So, I wish you well in your quest to conquer Saturday Stumpers. Stick with the methods I've outlined here, and you'll not only start to see progress, you'll get a wonderful feeling every time you apply something you've learned to crack a tough clue.

Remember this: While you might think of a Stumper as a battle between yourself and the puzzlemaker, it's a battle that I, the editor, would really prefer that you win. Honest!

Good luck!

Stan Newman