The Once and Present Crossword

AFTER MORE THAN 100 YEARS, CROSSWORDS CONTINUE TO THRIVE, WITH MANY OPTIONS FOR SOLVING ELECTRONICALLY

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No other type of puzzle can equal the pleasure of solving a good crossword. I'm going to explain why I think that is, offer a few tips on how to tackle a crossword and help you find a puzzle that's just the right fit, especially online.

I say all of this as a lifelong puzzle solver, but also as a professional puzzle maker. I've been writing crosswords for 20 years and many other types of puzzles from even earlier on: mazes, brain teasers, word searches, math problems, hidden pictures, anagrams, sudoku and other word puzzles.

Crosswords have been around a long time. The first, a diamond-shaped "Word-Cross Puzzle," was created by Arthur Wynne in 1913. It appeared in the now-defunct New York World. The New York Times crossword didn't start up until 1942, to help people cope during World War II. Prior to that, The Times had deemed the pastime a "sinful waste in the utterly futile finding of words, the letters of which will fit into a prearranged pattern."

More than a century after its invention, the crossword is still going strong. But there's a lot of new competition. As smartphones and computer tablets have proliferated, so have the number of puzzles and games made for them. Taking a quick look at the iTunes App Store, I found 3,200 puzzle apps, plus another 1,000 word games — and that was just the ones starting with the letter "A"! And then there's the plethora of video games, each offering the kind of action-packed graphics a crossword can only dream of.

Still, all of these flashier, often noisier options pale in comparison to the intelligent and multi-dimensional challenge of solving a good, old, black-and-white crossword. The task is simple, and yet totally engrossing. Vocabulary, general knowledge and wordplay are involved. So are flexible thinking, strategizing and being able to recognize words with just a few letters in place.

Some studies appear to show better memory, attention and reasoning among people who regularly solve word puzzles. Crosswords that push and surprise you can offer even more brain exercise. There's another less scientific benefit — solving the "problem" a crossword presents, with just one correct solution lying in wait, is really satisfying. Life is rarely as cooperative.

"Crosswords are designed to stump me!" some people say. The exact opposite is true. Crosswords are written to be conquered, to make you feel smart. If you fail at a crossword, either the author and editor haven't done their jobs, or much more likely, you're solving a puzzle designed for a more experienced solver. One more thing can especially help — a good strategy.

Prefer to solve on paper?
Most online crosswords offer an option for printing puzzles.

CROSSWORD SOLVING TIPS

You don't need to know every answer to complete a puzzle. Each letter in the grid is part of two answers. If you have no idea what one answer is, see if you can fill in some answers that cross it. Those letters will help.

Establish footholds. Fill-in-the-blank clues and three-letter answers are often easier to get. Plant a few of those in the grid, then expand outward.

There are rules for how clues are written. For example, if the clue is an adjective, the answer is an adjective. Likewise, if the clue is plural, the answer will be plural. Hint: If you see a plural clue, that's a free pass to put an "S" at the end of an answer. It won't always be right, but the odds are pretty good it will be.

Another helpful thing to know is the "substitution test." A clue can substitute for its answer, when used in a sentence. For example, "Slipped up" is used as a clue for ERRED: They slipped up = They erred.

A question mark at the end of a clue is a signal that wordplay is afoot. Beware of puns and double meanings!

Many puzzles have themes. Several long answers, symmetrically positioned, will be related somehow. Spotting one or two, and figuring out the theme, might help in getting another theme answer.

Some crosswords, such as those in The New York Times, increase in difficulty as the week progresses. The Monday-Wednesday puzzles are "easy," although a little harder each day. Thursday is the tricky day and Friday and Saturday feature hard themeless puzzles. Sunday puzzles are of only medium difficulty, but larger.

Blue: The question mark at the end of this clue signals wordplay is afoot: What Halloween creatures use to get into haunted houses?
Orange: Write in an "S" when the clue is plural. It'll likely be right.
Pink: Only very easy puzzles will tell you when an answer is two words.

Like anything, crosswords become easier the more regularly you do them. You'll get a better feel for the editor's "voice" and also begin to see some of the same "crosswordese" answers, words such as APSE, EPEE and ERATO. These won't appear often in good puzzles, but like weeds, a few are bound to be lurking.

In some easier puzzles, a two-word answer will be signaled with "2 wds." at the end of the clue. But many puzzles won't give you that information; it's for you to discover. Abbreviations are handled in one of two ways: "abbr." will appear at the end of the clue; or the clue will contain a word that isn't usually abbreviated.

If you're stuck, take a break. Empty the trash or go get the mail. When you return to the puzzle, things will often miraculously fall into place. Is it the subconscious working, a fresh set of eyes, or something else? Nobody really knows, but studies have confirmed the phenomenon, and it works!

It's okay to cheat. As Will Weng, the second editor of the New York Times crossword, once said, "It's your puzzle. Solve it any way you like." Some people think doing a Google search to find out the capital of Albania is fine. Or ask another person nearby, turning your solve into a group effort.

Know when to cry "Uncle!" There's no point torturing yourself if a section just won't fall. Crosswords are supposed to be fun! Live to fight another day and take a look at the answer grid, or part of it. Sometimes knowing even one missing letter will unlock everything.

Theme answers are generally the longest horizontal ones in the puzzle.

FINDING THE RIGHT PUZZLE

If you're intimidated by crosswords, a great way to wade in is with the New York Times daily "Mini" puzzle. Each crossword is only five squares wide by five deep, and with easyish clues. Best of all, they're available free online, on the Times crossword app and in the printed newspaper.

The Times app also offers packs of Midi crosswords, another step up in size, with 9x9 grids. Some of those are free, but most are $2.99 or $3.99 per pack. The Times full-size, 15x15 puzzle is the only one on this page that isn't free. A subscription runs $39.95/year. However, it's sometimes offered at half price, and that includes access to every Times crossword since 1993.

As I mentioned before, The Times ramps up the difficulty during the week, with themeless puzzles on Friday and Saturday. The Los Angeles Times and the Wall Street Journal follow a similar model, although their puzzles are a bit easier. Because of that, you might want to try starting with one of them. The Wall Street Journal also offers a contest puzzle every Friday. Another good daily option is the Newsday puzzle, which starts out easier than all three but ends up with a killer Saturday Stumper.

One of the best places to solve the Los Angeles Times crosswords online is, surprisingly, on the Washington Post website. You'll also find a top-notch Sunday crossword there, written by Evan Birnholz. It's g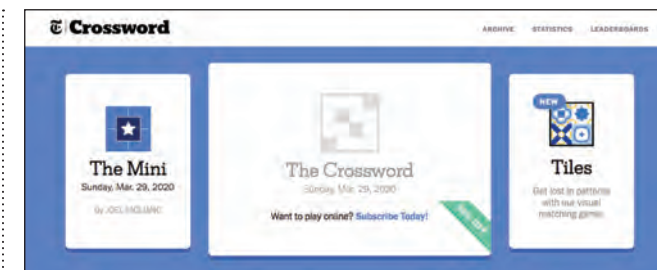enerally of medium difficulty, but it ranges in both directions. There's also a "Classic" Sunday crossword by the ever-mirthful Merl Reagle and a monthly music crossword by Pete Muller.

Andrews McMeel offers two daily crosswords, the USA Today and Universal puzzles. Both are of easy-medium difficulty every day and always have a theme. Improvements in the quality of these puzzles have been made in recent years, especially with the hiring of two young, super-bright editors, David Steinberg for the Universal and Erik Agard for the USA Today crossword.

If you're into pop culture, there are two free apps offering easy and light daily puzzles. Both feature 13x13 grids. Crosswords With Friends has a different category each day, such as Music Monday or Wayback Wednesday. The Daily POP app offers a similar range of categories, including one called Book Smarts. For both, a few long answers will fit that day's theme, with the rest of the content consisting of common vocabulary and general knowledge.

On the print side, the Indian River Press Journal offers five crosswords every day, including ones from the New York Times and Los Angeles Times, as well as several smaller puzzles.
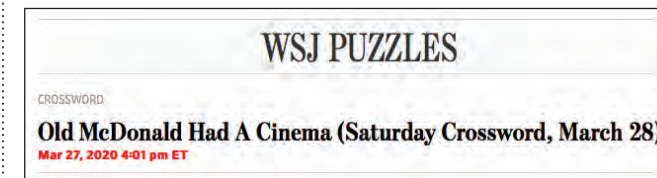
That should give you plenty of options. But if you'd like even more, Diary of a Crossword Fiend has links to some other sites, including several quality indie crosswords. Just go to: https://crosswordfiend.com/download. ❧
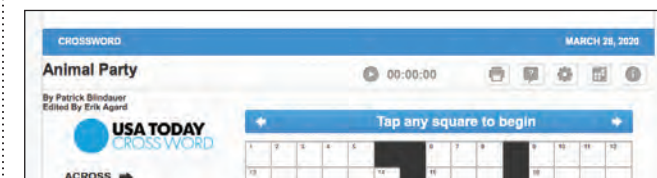

The New York Times — https://www.nytimes.com/crosswords

LA Times and WaPo — https://www.washingtonpost.com/crosswords

Wall Street Journal — https://blogs.wsj.com/puzzle

Newsday — https://www.newsday.com/entertainment/extras/crossword-puzzle-1.6375288

USA Today — https://puzzles.usatoday.com

Universal — http://syndication.andrewsmcmeel.com/puzzles/crosswords

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