

Cryptic Classroom #8: Combination Clues

By Warp Ran Amok after DNA Ran Back

If you have read every Cryptic Classroom article since its debut in September 2021, congratulations! You have perfect attendance. After studying the eight lessons taught in this series, you'll be ready to tackle the final exam. It has been crafted by over 30 cryptic enthusiasts and is designed to test your understanding of all types of wordplay...but you'll have to wait until the next issue for that. This month, your final lesson will demystify one of the trickier forms of cryptic wordplay: the combination clue.

By definition, combination clues are straightforward: They have more than one type of wordplay. This is quite common for long grid entries. Let's consider the answer EXCOMMUNICATING. While it's possible to make an anagram for this word ("unexciting comma" or "Mexican gum tonic"), constructors strive for a variety of clues in a puzzle, and it is too easy to rely on this type of wordplay. So, let's consider how EXCOMMUNICATING can be dissected to create a combination clue. To do this, a constructor must decide how to account for every letter in the answer. For starters, I see EX, followed by the word COMING, which is interrupted by a letter M and some letters that rearrange to spell A TUNIC. The wordplay to express these parts could be, "former spouse en route, embracing male and a tunic in tatters." There's a lot going on in this clue. A charade starts the clue (EX), and an abbreviation (M for male) plus an anagram (A TUNIC) make up the fill in a container (COMING). Adding a literal portion gives us the following combination clue:

Former spouse en route, embracing male and a tunic in tatters: defrocking (15)

Try this combination clue:

Auto drives backward within 5,280 feet of a sign (7)

The answer is MIRACLE (a sign). You can see CAR (auto) reversed within the word MILE, which is 5,280 feet.

Stepping away from combination clues for a moment, there are a few odds and ends used in cryptic clues that didn't warrant a full article but are important to know:

- Letters may be represented in wordplay as Roman numerals, compass directions, chemical elements, or other common (and sometimes uncommon) abbreviations.
- Individual letters of a word can be indicated through clever phrasing. Can you tell which famous tennis player is spelled out with "heart of glass, head of state, Beethoven's fifth, end of innocence?"
- Spoonerisms occur from time to time. Named after the frequently tongue-tied Reverend Spooner, this clue requires the solver to switch the lead sounds of two words (e.g., Pop Tart becomes top part). These clues always reference Rev. Spooner in the wordplay.

On the next page I present a strategic approach to solving cryptic crosswords using the tips we have learned over the entire course. Consider this your ultimate crib sheet!