There is no shortage of excellent guides to parsing cryptic crosswords' clues. In fairness to those unfamiliar with the medium, I offer the following for inclusion with *Excruciverbiage®* volumes:

A proper clue consists of two parts: a primary definition (i.e. "definition") and a subsidiary definition (i.e. "wordplay"). The wordplay aspect encodes the steps necessary to produce the same sequence of letters—the same word or phrase—defined by the primary definition. The two parts must appear one after the other, although either part—definition or wordplay—can appear first. Occasionally, linking words are employed between the two parts, but a clue, in order to be fair to solvers, must be constructed as "definition, then wordplay" or "wordplay, then definition." [Should the previous description be inadequately clear, the setter must not embed the definition within separate wordplay pieces, nor should the setter surround the wordplay with multiple words of the definition.] A fair clue, however, will have a surface reading that evokes an image different from the clue's primary definition.

It is customary to indicate the number of letters in the entry using parentheses following the clue. One might expect the numeral to be unnecessary if the grid shows the appropriate number of letters, but some entries will be multiple-word phrases or will contain hyphens; more-challenging cryptics would indicate the number of words but not their length, while easier examples will show the number of letters in each word. An example would be (2,5) to indicate a two-word phrase consisting of a two-letter word followed by a five-letter word (such as "in error"); the same entry could be indicated as (7, two words) if the setter is less kind. Entries should always be genuine words or phrases that could be found in a dictionary (the *Chambers* dictionary is generally considered to be the standard), so "white light" or "skylight" would be acceptable, but "white sky" would not.

Common types of clues are described below:

- **Anagram** clues are often among the easiest to unravel despite the enormous variety of indicators that one might encounter. [Anagram clues have far more indicators than do other types of clues. The reader can opine as to the reason why.] Such clues tend to be simple to write as well as to recognize, and composers are cautioned to minimize the number of anagrams in the clue set. The **indicator** (word or words) for an anagram suggests breakage, abnormality, repair, or transformation; that indicator must abut the letters to be rearranged (commonly called the anagram's **fodder**).

  Only direct anagrams are perceived to be fair to solvers, so the anagram fodder must be clearly visible in the clue and cannot be a synonym of the word to be anagrammed. As an example of what not to do, "Braved rattle snake (5)" is not a fair clue for DARED; "rattle" is an acceptable anagram indicator (suggesting that the letters should be 'shaken up'), but while an ADDER is a type of snake, so is a VIPER, CORAL snake, COBRA…there are far too many possibilities, even with the definition "braved" present. The surface is also lacking—it nearly works to evoke an image of facing down a venomous creature—but "rattlesnake" is now a single word, and misrepresenting it as "rattle snake" is inaccurate and therefore a poor effort.

  A more proper example would be "Doctor bugs me, yet I do not mind (2,2,5)". A clue must be divisible into two parts, and this one is. One can draw, figuratively or literally, a line to separate wordplay and indicator from definition. As this is our first example of a 'real clue', let us suppose that "Doctor" is the definition. The remainder of the clue would therefore be indicator and wordplay. "Bugs" is perhaps an anagram indicator, whether viewed as imperative ("bug" the following letters—not the preceding, as we have tentatively identified "doctor" as the definition—but then "bugs" would be grammatically incorrect as an instruction) or as an adjective (also displaying incorrect grammar, as "buggy" would be a proper adjectival form). Were that so—were "bugs" the anagram indicator in this example—the remainder of the clue would have to be the anagram's fodder, as we believe "doctor" to be the definition. The enumeration in parentheses, however, indicates a total of nine letters in the entry, and therefore the anagram's fodder must contain nine letters: "me yet I do not mind" has too many letters. The definition need not be a single word, so one might briefly consider "doctor bugs". An ENTOMOLOGIST, apart from having too many letters and existing as a single word, could be slyly defined as [a] 'bug doctor' but never as a 'doctor bugs'—the preposition 'of' must be stated, not implied. Adding more words from the beginning makes for a definition even worse than "doctor" alone. It seems that the definition is on the right, rather than on the left, side of the clue. Indeed, "doctor" is the anagram indicator—a common one at that, because the word "doctor" has multiple meanings and helps to disguise the anagram device. As the anagram indicator must be adjacent to its fodder, we need only anagram the next nine letters after "doctor", which would be "bugs me yet". "I do not mind" is therefore the definition of the three-word phrase produced by anagramming ("doctoring") "bugs me yet", and we can obtain "BE MY GUEST" (equivalent to "I do not mind") as the phrase we seek.

  As a final note—again, because this is the first example of a cryptic clue we are parsing together—there is a superfluous comma in the clue. Punctuation that assists in creating surface meaning but is not part of the definition or wordplay is acceptable. Commas, colons, semicolons, and quotation marks are almost always filler. [The subtleties of apostrophes are not addressed here.]

- **Hidden answer** clues are also easy to identify, as the letters to be entered appear in sequence within the clue. For that reason, setters tend to include one or two hidden word clues at most in any puzzle. Hidden entries can be contained within a single word of the clue ('incontrovertible', for example, contains TROVE as an unbroken sequence); across multiple words (as in '…cilanTRO VExes…'); as initial letters of consecutive words (an **acrostic** clue such as 'THOMAS ROBINSON OWNS VAST ENTERPRISE…'); or letters in a regular pattern ("Morsel oboist regularly selected (3)" = BIT).

- **Homophone** clues use a limited set of indicators to connect an entry with its sound-alike word(s). "Bogus enemy audible (4)" could be used to clue FAUX (= "bogus"). In this example, the indicator appears after the homophone, so there is no doubt as to its application. The enumeration (four letters, rather than three), further assists solvers, as the homophonic term FOE has the wrong number of letters for entry. Homophone indicators placed between the definition and wordplay can present difficulty for solvers; "Bogus, audible enemy (4)" can only be solved using enumeration, as the homophone indicator "audible" could apply to both "bogus" and "enemy".

- **Container** (container and contents) clues' wordplay describes one set of letters within another. Exterior and interior letters could be entire words. Unlike anagram and hidden-word clues, the container and contents need not be visible in the clue. As an example, "Innovator's unit put into wharf (7)" is a container clue representing PIONEER, in which ONE ("unit") is contained within ("put into") the letters of PIER ("wharf"). The apostrophe-s combination here—but not always—means "is", so that "innovator" (PIONEER) is (the result of) ONE "put into" PIER.

- **Deletion** clues, as their name implies, include an indicator that signals one or more letters are to be removed from the subsidiary (wordplay) definition to produce the entry represented by its (primary) definition. The deletion indicator could suggest removal of the first letter, last latter, central letters, outside letters, alternating letters, or a specific letter. Alternating-letter deletion indicators can appear in place of selection indicators ("Morsel oboist's regularly ignored (3)" = BIT). A single-letter indicator along with a deletion indicator can be employed to signal removal, as in "Cane woman's not used for leg joint (3)" = HIP (WHIP minus 'W'). Single-letter indicators must be genuine, reasonably-common abbreviations or cues; the setter is not allowed to invent abbreviations such as 'dog = D'.

- **Reversal** clues include indicators that suggest that a letter sequence is to be inverted. The letters to be reversed are sometimes visible in the clue but are usually defined as part of the wordplay. "Bring over snare segment (4)" could be a clue for PART (= TRAP—"snare"—reversal ("bring over")).

- **Double definition** clues tend to be short and to lack wordplay, although linking words may be used to connect the two definitions. Ideally, the two meanings will arise from unconnected sources; in practice, such examples are rare. A proper double-definition clue, however, will employ meanings that do not overlap. "Wolf Canyon (5)" uses two senses of GORGE; a purist might complain that both senses arise from the same source.

- **Charade** clues, in which the pieces to be assembled are described in the wordplay, are often the most common sort observed in cryptic crosswords. They are not necessarily the easiest to write, nor to solve. Solution is made more difficult when a charade includes words that would, in other types of clues, be indicators. Single-letter abbreviations are frequently employed. An example could be "Trim cold edge (4)", with "cold" indicating 'C' and "edge" a synonym of "lip". "Cold edge trim (4)" appears to lack a verb but has acceptable surface—perhaps better than the original as it has greater potential to mislead.

- Many clues are complex, with multiple types represented in a single clue. One might be instructed, via wordplay, to reverse a set of letters described in a charade. ELIOT might be clued as "English work brought back for writer (5)"; 'E' to represent "English" is a standard abbreviation, followed by "work (TOIL) brought back", produces ("for") the name of the "writer".

- Solvers may encounter other devices—Spoonerisms, movement of letters within a word, substitutions, and more—but the list above includes the most common types of clues. Regardless, the clue must indicate its solution, even if the surface is designed to mislead. Alistair Ferguson Ritchie, composing under the name "Afrit", states the setter's maxim: "I need not mean what I say, but I must say what I mean." The first clause states that misleading surface is expected; the second demands fair definitions and wordplay.