WHAT'S HIDDEN IN THE CLUES?
A Guide To Solving Cryptic Crosswords

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Introduction: Digging the cryptic

A crossword puzzle isn’t just a latticework of numbered white squares peppered with black ones, holding a set of clues and being held by a clueless solver. Well, yes, that’s what it starts out as. But soon (read: after many worthwhile hours of head-scratching and pencil-biting and grunting and cursing and filling), the grid transforms into a lively household abuzz with alphabets that call out to each other animatedly from across its floors and rooms, lockdown or not.

So, here’s the first thing you need to keep in mind when you pick up a cryptic crossword — the crossword-setter is a sly bloke who is actively trying to bamboozle you. Out of love, of course. Meaning, for instance, if a cryptic clue reads...

“Costly honey (4)”

... the answer is not likely to be a really expensive brand of bottled honey like ‘APIS’. It’s more likely to be ‘DEAR’ (which is not to say that affection is a costly emotion). And... that would be a Double Definition, one of the friendliest types of clue.

In a quick crossword, the clue points straight to the answer. It tests only your ability to directly recall a word or phrase that is synonymous with what the clue has defined. But a cryptic clue deliberately presents itself as a tangled knotty phrase so that you can have all the more fun unravelling it. If solving a quick clue gives you a “yay” moment, unpacking a cryptic clue can give you a “Eureka” moment, because cracking a cryptic clue is really an achievement you can be proud of.

If you think a crossword is just an annoyingly abstruse jumble of words — well, yes, not going to lie to you, it is somewhat that — then you’re missing the kicks for the shoes. You have to stick with the clue/question till the answer is unravelled. Patience isn’t just a virtue. It’s a solver’s best weapon.
In eminent cruciverbalist David Astle’s immortal words: “If you put faith in me, like any solver needs to do in a setter, in the end, I will deliver the answer. But you will need to swing the bat at the piñata nice and hard. I don’t spill my lollies easy.”

Astle may talk about faith, but solving a cryptic is all about logical rationality. The cryptic crossword entices you to solve a riddle in exchange for that most rewarding feeling — joy of discovery. But in order to do so with any degree of repeatable success, you’d do well to know how cryptics work. There are many methods, or cryptic devices, that setters employ to obscure or obfuscate the answer. Know these, and the only thing standing between you and a filled-up grid is your patience.
Elements of a cryptic clue

A cryptic clue is a bald-faced lie. It doesn’t mean what it says on its surface. What you read on the surface will hardly ever lead you to the intended answer. The surface reading, the literal meaning of the clue’s prose, is the camouflage looking to misdirect you. It’s the cryptic reading that you want to home in on.

A cryptic clue may read like mumbo-jumbo, but is actually purely logical. Which means, it can be grasped easily — if not necessarily solved as easily — if you think of it as an algebraic equation. And there are broadly just three simple parts to a cryptic clue. The equation goes:

Definition + Wordplay + Nothing else = Eureka moment

Definition

This is part of the clue that is synonymous with the answer. While this straight-up means the answer, it may not always be the most straightforward synonym (the setter will make sure of that). ‘Dog’ defines ‘PURSUE’, or ‘see’ simply means ‘DATE’, or ‘means’ means ‘MECHANISM’ — the English language is tricky, and the cryptic setter has zero qualms about exploiting that to the fullest.

Pressure on steeplechaser to get new horse (7) — **PRANCE**

*(TH Cryptic #12821 by Karaoke)*

In the above example, the word ‘horse’ is the definition. The rest is...
Wordplay

Now, the setter is terribly upset that the straight definition has already spoon-fed you the answer. So, they decide to misdirect you a little, for funsies, by playing a game of charades with you. Of course, the wordplay isn’t only a tool of misdirection. It can actually serve as a useful method to confirm your guess out of a variety of possible answers. In fact, this is what makes The Guardian’s crossword expert Alan Connor claim incredibly that “cryptic clues are easier than quick ones”. And he’s right in a way. Whereas quick clues just pose the question, cryptic clues come with the answer sheet. Albeit written in code.

Rest assured, once you understand how the setter’s devious mind works, you will be able to logically build the answer as easily as a 6-year-old child prodigy builds the Eiffel Tower with Lego blocks.

You are supposed to use the wordplay section of the clue, to build the answer bit by bit. Every word of the wordplay is a hint pointing at a chunk or bit of the answer. Think of the words in the wordplay as Lego blocks with instructions. To use some crossword terminology, the Lego blocks are called ‘fodder’ and the instructions are ‘indicators’ which tell you in what way you are supposed to assemble the blocks to form the final answer. The indicator tells you what type of cryptic device/s is/are being deployed in the clue.

\[
\text{Wordplay} = \text{Cryptic device} + \text{cryptic device} \\
\text{Cryptic device} = \text{Indicators} + \text{Fodder}
\]

So, in the Karaoke clue above, you would build the answer ‘PRANCER’ by using each word of the wordplay. ‘Pressure’ (which is commonly abbreviated as P) sits on top of RACER (which is another word for ‘steeplechaser’) and there is an N (another common abbreviation for ‘new’) in between. The indicator ‘to get’ instructs you to put the N inside RACER (because ‘steeplechaser to get new’).
Nothing Else

This is the best part. Remember, a cryptic crossword is all logic and reason. Which means that while the clue may try to bamboozle you, it will never betray you.

As TH Cryptic setter Afterdark puts it, “...the beauty of cryptic crosswords rests on rules and grammar. That creates a level playing field between setter and a solver. [The rules make] crosswords a lateral thinking word game as against scrabble, a vocabulary testing board game.”

If at any point you get stuck and sense frustration creeping up on you, remember that the famous The Guardian setter Arachne once confessed, “I can’t even solve my own clues after a few days, once I’ve forgotten the answers.” So, the trick is just to hang in there, keep your wits about you, and keep in mind what TH Cryptic setter KrisKross says: “Solving is tough but if the clue is fair, it is definitely possible, and gives a lot of satisfaction.”

Also, never forget that you don’t have to go it alone. You should take help from the grid. As you start with the easy clues and get some letters filled into their squares, the remaining ones become easier to solve. Crossing letters are part of the deal in crosswords (hence the term). Cold-solving (figuring out an answer without any crossing letters to help you) is not always possible with the trickier clues.

And that’s really all there is to it! Oh, wait... there’s a lot more. Read on to know the full extent of duplicity involved in wordplay. And also all the tools you need to acquire to see through it.
If you’re someone who has lapped up all the quick crosswords life has thrown your way and have opted for cryptic crosswords in search of a challenge upgrade, then this will be your bread and butter. This is the clue type that most closely resembles what you are used to in a quick clue, where you have to simply come up with another word for something.

A double definition, as the name suggests, offers you two definitions for the answer. It could come in the form of a simple two-word clue like...

*Gasps, “Trousers!”* (5) — **PANTS**
... where ‘gasps’ is a verb and ‘trousers’ is a noun, and the punctuation doesn’t matter.

*(TH Cryptic #12329 by Incognito)*

Or...

*Orlando’s flower* (5) — **BLOOM**
... which expects you to realise that actor Orlando Bloom has a surname that could be a rose by another name.

*(TH Cryptic #11873 by Incognito)*

One or both of the definitions could be a phrase:

*Counterfeiting work done by a Smithy* (7) — **FORGING**
... where one definition is ‘counterfeiting’ and the other is ‘work done by a Smithy’, which presumably includes metal fittings for kitchen counters.

*(TH Cryptic #11846 by Incognito)*
Rice wine for Munro (4) — SAKI
Hector Hugh Munro was a British humorist who went by the pen-name of Saki, which he perhaps chose after having downed a bit of rice wine.

(TH Cryptic #12770 by Incognito)

DDs can get rather cryptic too. Look out for tongue-in-cheek clues like...

Slims down and gets rid of wrinkles perhaps (9) — DECREASES
Obviously, if something ‘slims down’ it decreases. And not all that obviously, if something ‘gets rid of wrinkles perhaps’, it de-creases, as in ‘removes creases from’.

(TH Cryptic #12109 by Dr. X)

If this clue is solved, it is sacked! (2,3,3) — IN THE BAG
This is more of a combination of two cryptic definitions pushed into one clue.

(TH Cryptic #12601 by Gridman)

Where a mineworker might be having money problems (2,1,4) — IN A HOLE
If you’re low on cash, you’re figuratively in a hole, so a mineworker is usually in one both figuratively as well as literally.

(TH Cryptic #12109 by Dr. X)

Question a model (5) — POSER
One of the quirks of English is that the question itself is a poser, not necessarily the person posing one. A person posing (intransitively) could well be a model.

(TH Cryptic #11578 by Arden)

The Double Definition most often appears as a two-word clue that may or may not have a link word (mostly a preposition like ‘for’ or ‘and’ or ‘or’) connecting the two.

A word to the wise. Remember we said the double definition was the one clue type that most closely resembled a quick clue? Well, that is also exactly what makes it most unlike a cryptic clue and, therefore, perhaps harder to spot and unravel in a cryptic grid. Two-
word DDs may be dead giveaways, but it takes practice to detect and differentiate a phrasal DD from the usual cryptic charade.
3.

Position Indicators

By default, the words inside a cryptic clue are arranged in the order they are to be unpacked in for the answer. But sometimes, the setter includes helpful placement indicators to tell us how to arrange or order them, especially if the clue’s words are laid out of sequence. They can tell you whether a set of letters is contained by another, inserted into another, follows another, or precedes another. These indicators appear adjacent to the word whose position they are specifying.

*Tragic Greek Figure, skinny, next to the German* — **LEANDER**

LEAN + DER

Here, a synonym for ‘skinny’ gives you LEAN, which you place ‘next to’ DER (which is a German word for definite article ‘the’ in masculine gender) to form LEANDER (who is one of those star-crossed lovers we get in Greek mythology).

*(Everyman #3831)*

*Discharge duty in pursuit of revenge finally (8)* — **EMISSION**

E + MISSION

Here, ‘duty’ gives you MISSION and it comes ahead of E, which is ‘revenge finally’. But you place the E first because of the position indicator ‘in pursuit of’ implying duty after revenge.

*(Skulldugger #12561 by Skulldugger)*

*Explosives danger quashed by Emergency Services (8)* — **GRENADES**

GRENAD + ES
This clue makes GRENADeS (another word for ‘explosives’) by anagramming (as indicated by ‘quashed’) the word ‘danger’ to form GRENAD, and then putting it next to (the word ‘by’ suggests that it is adjacent to, as in ‘cottage by the lake’) ES (which is an abbreviation for Emergency Services).

(TH CRYPTO 11147 by Afterdark)
One of the easiest and most intuitive ways to think of a word is as a sequence of individual alphabets, right? Well, so it is for setters. So, as you enter the battleground of cryptics, one of the most important weapons you need to pile up in your arsenal is a list of commonly-used abbreviations, because cryptic clues are littered with them.

For example, if in a clue you see the word ‘small’, ‘south’, or ‘son’ you can safely say that there is probably an S somewhere in the answer. If you see the word ‘ship’, you can guess that the answer has two Ss. (Crossword setters just love to refer to nautical terms, just a heads up.)

An exhaustive list of crossword abbreviations would be exhausting to compile as well as go through. But there are certain categories that lend themselves to abbreviations and we solvers should be on the alert for.

**Roman Numerals**

Once cryptic crossworders realised that Ancient Romans used letters of the Latin alphabet to write their numbers out, there was nothing to stop them from bringing roman numerals into the 1,009 (MIX). With this method, you can work up a variety of letters using some combination of the alphabets ‘I’, ‘X’, ‘L’, ‘C’, ‘D’, ‘M’.

**Nautical**

Crosswording vocabulary recognises at least three ways of denoting ‘sailor’ as an abbreviation — AB (able-bodied seaman), J (for Jack), OS (ordinary seaman). Then there’s the easy three-lettered word TAR, from back when they used to call seamen Jack
Tars. And then, there’s this whole set of abbreviations for the word ‘ship’ — SS from steamer ship, MV from merchant vessel, RMS from Royal Mail Ship, RV from research vessel, to name but a few. RN is an abbreviation for ‘fleet’, or Royal Navy. Crossword setters also make use of some very pithy words for “sailor’s cry” that we needn’t go into here because they’re more exclamations than abbreviations.

**Periodic Table Of Elements**

You don’t need to be a chemist or lab technician to hold your own on this front. Your 10th-grade chemistry class should hold you in good stead. Dust off your periodic table and recall elementary symbols like FE for Iron, AU for gold, O for oxygen, and such. The word ‘metal’ can feature quite frequently in clues too and could be pointing to anything from TIN, AL, to PB.

**State Codes**

It helps if you know the abbreviations for States. If you know that Arizona is AZ, Tamil Nadu is TN, Connecticut is CT, and so on, you can easily sniff out that it’s an abbreviation clue as soon as you see a geographical area named in the clue.

**Directions**

North is N, South is S, East is E, West is W. And then you have the diagonals NE, NW, SE, SW.

**Musical Notations**

If you see the word ‘note’, you can be quite sure that one of DO, RE, MI, FA, SO, LA, and TI are potential candidate letters. You also have P for ‘soft’, which comes from the symbol for pianoforte in western classical music; F for ‘loud’ or forte, FF for fortissimo or ‘very loud’; and A through G for anytime you read the word ‘key’.

Other common crossword abbreviations can be gleaned from what you might see in any headline of The Hindu. For instance, if you see ‘Minister’, jot down MP; WI is ‘West
Indies'; IND is ‘India’; SA ‘South Africa’; ‘peacekeepers’ is UN; and so on and so forth, ‘ETC.’

And then there are some abbreviations that have been shipped over to India from England exclusively through Crosswords, like ER means ‘Queen’ (because, Elizabeth Regina); RA, when not abbreviating Research Assistant, is an artist (because, members of the Royal Academy of Arts are Royal Academicians). These, you’ll just have to pick up as you go along. That’s the long and short of it, really.
Anagrams

Quite often, the setter jumbles up some or all of the letters in the answer and all you have to do is rearrange them to get part of the solution or all of it. Anagrams can be a lot of fun. In fact, word jumble, a popular game in its own right and a regular feature in many newspaper supplements, is based entirely on anagrams.

For example, PARLIAMENT happens to be an anagram of PARTIAL MEN (hm, makes you think, doesn’t it?).

Harry Potter fans will remember that TOM MARVOLO RIDDLE is an anagram of I AM LORD VOLDEMORT.

And not to go all meta on you, but A RAG MAN is an anagram of ANAGRAM.

The Anagram gambit is regarded as among the lower-hanging fruit, as cryptic concealment devices go. You are given part or all of the answer’s letters in an anagram, and can see them in front of you. This makes it slightly easier to visualise the answer. Many solvers start with the anagram clues and start filling up the grid with crossing letters, which make life easier as you go about unraveling the rest of the puzzle.

Setter Afterdark advises us to sniff out the anagram clues and get them out of the way first. “I deliberately follow ‘eat the frog’ technique and get done with the longer ones that yield many crossings.”

Of course, the challenge then lies in detecting that it’s an anagram that’s involved in the first place. So, how does one get wise to an anagram?

Well, the word to be anagrammed (called the fodder) is brought to our attention by an anagram indicator (anagrind, for short). The anagrind is a word that is usually suggestive of movement, alteration, or confusion. If you see words like ‘tumbling’ ‘for a change’, ‘askew’, be prepared to reshuffle the letters of the adjacent word or phrase.
Arrive at car he crashed (5) — REACH
Definition = ‘Arrive at’; Fodder = ‘car he’; Anagrind = ‘crashed’

‘Crashed’ is just the sort of word that indicates an anagram. If you ‘arrive at’ someplace, you REACH it. Consider this a crash course in anagramming.

(TH Cryptic #12928 by Incognito)

Mysterious nuclear explosion (7) — UNCLEAR
Definition = ‘mysterious’; Fodder = ‘nuclear’; Anagrind = ‘explosion’

By anagramming the letters of ‘nuclear’, you get UNCLEAR, which is a synonym for ‘mysterious’. The way in which the word ‘explosion’ acts as an anagram indicator is through its suggestion of movement — violent movement at that.

(TH Cryptic #11121 by Mac)

If the setter wants to one-up you, he may effectively disguise even an anagram clue. But there are generally certain telltale signs that you are in the presence of an anagram:

- A dynamic-sounding word might be an anagrind.
- Past participle, a word ending in -ed may characterise an anagrind.
- An Adverb, ending in -ly could well be an anagrind.
- An adjective like ‘different’ or ‘dizzy’ obviously suggests that a change is in order.
- A Gerund, a word ending in -ing, indicates movement and, therefore, should indicate an anagram.
- A long, clunky surface may be indicative that the setter has had to struggle to keep it tight because the anagrammable answer had awkward letters.
Here’s an anagram clue that has a long clunky surface with an odd sort of anagrind...

_Swarming action of COVID wronger, perhaps? (12) — OVERCROWDING_

Definition = swarming action; Fodder = ‘covid wronger’; Anagrind = ‘perhaps’

Here, you have the word ‘perhaps’ acting as an anagram indicator on the grounds of suggesting confusion or doubt.

_(TH Cryptic #12912 by Spinner)_

Beware, setters may try to mislead you slyly in other ways, by presenting two words that look like indicators next to each other, leaving you in doubt as to which is the real indicator and which the fodder...

_Figure altering randomly (8) — TRIANGLE_

Definition = figure'; Fodder = ‘altering’; Anagrind = ‘randomly’ The word ‘altering’ sounds like it must be anagram indicator. In this case it is actually the fodder. Both ‘altering’ and ‘randomly’ have the 8 letters required by the enumeration, so you need to figure out which of the two more plausibly spells out a synonym for ‘figure’.

_(TH Cryptic #10712 by Tester)_

Anagram clues generally make the fodder available for you as a given. In a bid to be fair to the solver, most cryptic crossword setters avoid Indirect Anagrams, where the anagram fodder might be a synonym of a displayed word that you first have to think of correctly with before applying the anagrind to it. If you’re looking at a The Hindu Cryptic puzzle on your screen, rest assured, you will not need to grope in the dark for a word to anagram!
Picking And Unpicking Letters

Here’s a clue type that will remind you of those good times when you went out to a hotel and selected items from a breakfast buffet table lined with everything from Continental, to South Indian, to English, to Chinese. You could populate your plate with the bread toast at the beginning, or head over to the very end for some dim sum, or sample some idlis from the centre. Or mix and match, of course. With the Letter-picking device, the setter will tell you which combination of dishes to put on your plate.

The Letter-picking device may have us pick or drop letters from a word that’s already given in the wordplay or from a synonym we must derive from a wordplay word.

You may have to pick letters from the start. Cues for this sort of indicator are ‘head of’, ‘start to’, ‘at the outset’ etc., which suggest that the letter/s you need are at the beginning of a word.

*Group without legendary leader is lost (5) — BLANK*

BANK (an example of a ‘group’ — of elevators) goes around (as indicated by ‘without’) L (‘legendary leader’ means the first letter of ‘legendary’) and draws a BLANK

*(TH Cryptic #12907 by KrisKross)*

You may have to pick letters from the end. Cues for this include ‘lastly’, ‘at the end’, ‘finally’, etc.

*Cameras all over the place capturing extremely heinous slaughter (8) — MASSACRE*
An anagram (as indicated by ‘all over the place’) of ‘cameras’ is MASACRE, which is ‘capturing’ or encircling an S, because ‘extremely heinous’ instructs us to pick the furthermost or last letter of ‘heinous’, which is S.

*(TH Cryptic #12345 by Spinner)*

If you see the word ‘central’, ‘heartily’, ‘essentially’ or the like, you can safely surmise that you may have to select the middle letter/s of the adjacent word.

*They invaded England from heart of France, breaking usual rules (7) — NORMANS*

You get AN from ‘heart of France’ (the middle letters of frANce) which are inserted into (as indicated by ‘breaking’) NORMS (synonym for ‘usual rules’).

*(TH Cryptic #12942 by Dr. X)*

If the fodder has an even number of letters, like ‘France’, the middle should comprise two letters. If you’re talking about an odd-numbered word, like ‘England’, it would be the single letter that splits the word into two equal parts — in this case L.

Sometimes, you may have to leave out the last letter of a word. In such a case, look out for indicators like ‘endlessly’, ‘in brief’, or ‘unfinished’. You get the idea.

*Rescue returning Greek character after one time endless prank (9) — EXTRICATE*

An ‘endless prank’ can be thought of as ‘trick’ with its end cut off to give TRIC. ‘One time’ in its adjective form can mean EX. And Eta is a ‘Greek character’ that, because the clue says it is ‘returning’, is to be reversed and spells out ATE.

*(TH Cryptic #12707 by Incognito)*

Instructions to leave out the first letter may come with indicators like ‘headless’, ‘topless’ or ‘beheaded’ and suchlike.

*Amasses beheaded nails (5) — TACKS*
Here, you think of another word for the verb ‘amasses’, which could be ‘stacks’.
Then because it is beheaded, you remove the first letter, to leave behind TACKS,
which is another word for the definition, ‘nails’.

(TH Cryptic #12825 by Gridman)

Leaving out the middle can involve keywords like ‘vacant’, ‘emptied’, ‘vacated’.

*Snakes like empty pits (4) — ASPS*
A 4-lettered word for ‘snakes’ can be built with AS (synonym of ‘like’) and PS
(‘empty pits’ indicates the word ‘pits’ has none of its letters except the
outermost). Just shows that if the setter is in a good mood, he may give you the
fodder directly and save you the trouble of having to break your head over finding
a synonym for a source word to pick the designated letters from.

(By KrisKross)

The setter might also ask you to pick alternate letters of a word. When you come across
the word ‘even’ or ‘evenly’, you’ll likely have to select the 2nd, 4th, 6th... letters of the
fodder or source word; likewise, the 1st, 3rd, 5th... letters if you see the indicator ‘odd’ or
‘oddly’. So if a setter wanted you to pick the letters ICE, she might clue it as ‘even circle’
or ‘circle evenly’.

*How circle becomes ice? (6) — EVENLY*
This is a cryptic definition that plays on the fact that the even letters of the word
‘circle’ spell out ‘ice’. If you like reverse anagrams, this one’s a sort of reverse
letter-pick.

(TH Cryptic #11261 by Arden)

Here’s another way you may be asked to pick alternate letters.

*Every other occurrence of their dudgeon is kept under wraps (6) — HIDDEN*
‘Every other occurrence of their dudgeon’ can be understood as a set of letters
formed by picking every other letter of the phrase ‘their dudgeon’, as in, tHeIr
DuDgEoN, which gives you HIDDEN, which is another word for the definition, ‘Kept under wraps’.

(TH Cryptic #10530 by Buzzer)
7.

Deletions

Here, you are told which letters to remove from the potpourri of letters on offer in
the wordplay. If you’re lucky, the bits you need to delete may be mentioned in a
wholesome and clear-cut way.

*What’s caused by cold weather? I see, I see: son’s skipping lesson* (7) — ICICLES
ICICLES are ‘caused by cold weather’. ‘I see, I see’ taken phonetically gives us ICIC. To that we add LES (‘son’s skipping lesson’ means for us to remove ‘son’
from ‘lesson’). The deletion indicator is ‘skipping’, which suggests ‘not being
present’.

*(Everyman #3830)*

Else, you need to work out which bits to delete by solving mini sub-puzzles. These
mostly come in the form of abbreviations.

*Reasonable to be denied credit for eatable* (6) — EDIBLE
If ‘reasonable’ (in other words, CREDIBLE) is ‘denied credit’, it loses CR
(abbreviation for ‘credit’) and, therefore, becomes EDIBLE.

*(TH Cryptic #11147 by Afterdark)*

*Having a day off, toddler’s playing with grandpa* (7) — OLDSTER
Here, we have to remove one of the letter Ds from the word ‘toddlers’ (which is
what ‘having a day off, toddler’s’ is suggesting cryptically) and then anagram (as
indicated by ‘playing’) it. Never mind that the clue is kind of offensive to
grandparents by insinuating that they are old in some way.

*(TH Cryptic #10790 by Buzzer)*
8.

Substitutions

Think of this clueing technique as a combo of deletion and letter-insertion, a process more commonly known as substitution or replacement. For instance, TABLE can be turned into FABLE by substituting an F for the T.

When you come across indicators like ‘instead of’ or ‘in place of’ or simply ‘for’, you must knock off as many letters as the setter says, and replace them with others.

*Fine for husband initiating beating is appropriate (7) — FITTING*

In the word HITTING (synonym of ‘beating’), you replace (as indicated by ‘for’) the first letter (as indicated by ‘initiating’), or H (common abbreviation for ‘husband’), with an F (abbreviation for ‘fine’) to get another word for ‘appropriate’.

*(TH Cryptic #12947 by Hypatia)*

That was an easier one where the letters to be substituted are common abbreviations. In most cases, these letters may be wrapped up in a cryptic device of their own.

*Hesitant peacekeepers, blind, replace union leader with oriental (9) — UNCERTAIN*

The substitution indicator here, ’replace’, is simple enough. ‘Peacekeepers’ is commonly used in cryptics to refer to the UN in abbreviated form. A ‘blind’ is another word for CURTAIN. With ‘replace union leader with oriental’, we are being told to substitute U for E to get a word that means ‘hesitant’.

*(TH Cryptic #12283 by Anon)*
Another rare but effective form of letter substitution is called letter exchange, which involves an instruction to ‘swap’ letters around in a different order.

*Swap sides of glass carrier (7) — TUMBREL*

Here, the fodder is ‘glass’, for which a simple definition is ‘TUMBLER’. If we swap the L and R (which are common abbreviations for sides, as in ‘left’ and ‘right’), we get TUMBREL, another word for ‘carrier’

*(TH Cryptic 12292 by Aspartame)*

Setters don’t usually ask you to substitute more than two letters. So, as long as you worked out which word is the likely definition and have cracked the source word, you have almost the entire solution in front of you but one or two letters at most!
Containers

Containers are one of the most oft-seen type of clue. When you see a word like ‘covers’ or ‘envelops’ or simply ‘in’, the setter is probably asking you to put the indicated word in between or within another phrase or word. The idea is that a word like SMILES can be broken up into components, one of which fits inside the other — SMILES can be compartmentalised as follows: [MILE inside SS], or [SS around MILE] or [M inside an anagram of ISLES].

As the name suggests, this type of clue treats the components of an answer like little Russian dolls, fitting each inside another to build a sensible word.

_Breezed through publicity about church (4) — ACED_
AD goes around CE

The containment indicator here is ‘about’. CE, a common abbreviation for ‘Church’ (as in Church of England), goes around ‘Publicity’ or AD, to produce a synonym for ‘breezed through’.

_(TH Cryptic 12729 by Gridman)_

Word to the wise. While the word ‘about’ seems a good choice for a containment indicator, it can just as obviously be applied as a reversal indicator because it suggests ‘turn’ as much as ‘around’!

You may also come across a situation where the word order syntax is wonky. As long as you recognise the containment indicator you will be able to decipher what goes into what.

_Time to plug extra covers, it’s a pledge (8) — MORTGAGE_
MORE envelops T and GAG

The containment indicator here is ‘envelops’. MORE (a synonym for ‘extra’) envelopes (as indicated by ‘covers’) T (abbreviation for ‘time’) and GAG (synonym for ‘to plug’).

*(TH Cryptic #12924 by Arden)*

*Drugs dipped in caviar for Brat Pack actor (3,4) — ROB LOWE*

BLOW goes into ROE

The containment indicator here is ‘dipped in’. BLOW (slang for cocaine) goes into ROE (plural synonym meaning fish eggs).

*(Everyman #3831)*

You won’t always get the inner and outer words peeled and ready to be eaten. It’s natural for there to be other cryptic devices at play. And you may need to do some unpacking for each component of the container charade.

*Slithering boas encircle bachelor in the grip of retired doctor in island (8) — BARBADOS*

An anagram (‘slithering’) of ‘boas’ gives us BAOS, which goes around (‘encircle’) BA (‘bachelor’), which in turn goes inside RD (‘retired doctor’ implies that we take the abbreviation for ‘doctor’ and reverse it).

*(TH Cryptic #11324 by Incognito)*
A typical way in which a setter hides an answer is by leaving it lying around in the clue surface for you to see. Like an open secret, the word you seek may be staring right at you — maybe in full, in bits, in reverse, but right there somewhere, in order, embedded in the clue. They call these simply Hidden Words or Telescopic Clues.

The letters of the hidden word may be jammed inside a single word or spread across two adjacent words in the clue. This type of clue usually comes with an indicator. So, once you get wind of the fact that this might be a hidden clue, you may want to scan along the letters in the wordplay, right to left, till you sight the culprit lurking somewhere. KrissKross considers these among “the easier ones”.

*Adventure hidden in Holmes’ cap — a deerstalker (8) — ESCAPEDE*

The Hidden Word Indicator here is rather straightforward — ‘hidden in’.

*(TH Cryptic 12850 by Bruno)*

The hidden word indicator may be as simple and plain as ‘in’ —

*Reduction in estimated rainfall (5) — DRAIN*

Hidden word indicator = ‘in’

Reduction in estimated rainfall

*(TH Cryptic 12743 by Vulcan)*

— or a little more cryptic, like ‘smuggling’, ‘intrinsic’, or ‘demonstrates’ or ‘partly’. Or ‘containing’ (which a setter could deliberately use to make you think it’s a Container clue).
The Hidden Word device often appears in conjunction with the Reversal.

*Retracing, some we serrate and stitch again (5) — RESEW*

Here, we’re looking for another word for ‘stitch again’. We find this word hidden in reverse order in ‘…we serrate…’

*(TH Cryptic 11578 by Arden)*

If you see a weird, long, or clunky word in the clue, it’s likely concealing a hidden word, if not an anagram. To differentiate, you just have to look at all the words and evaluate if they sound like an anagrind or hidden word indicator. Of course, the clue could be as compact as

*Inside lapel there is skin (4) — PELT*
Reversals

This is when the answer or part of it needs to be taken back-to-front (in an Across clue) or upside-down (if it’s a Down clue). For example, ON reversed is NO, MAY reversed is YAM, TUBA reversed is ABUT, and ABBA reversed is ABBA.

In Anagrams, the letters to be reshuffled are already given in the clue. When a Reversal is involved, the word to be reversed is usually not a given. It has to be guessed first, and then played backwards. The setter will obligingly leave a Reversal indicator somewhere in the clue’s wordplay.

*Wordplay — wicked reversal to bring cheer (5,2) — LIVEN UP*

Here, the word ‘reversal’ is literally the Reversal indicator. First you think of a synonym for ‘wordplay’, which is PUN, and one for ‘wicked’, which could be EVIL, and then reverse them to get LIVENUP. The enumeration (5,2) then tells you how to split that sequence of letters to get a phrase that means ‘bring cheer’.

‘Back’, ‘around’, ‘returning’, ‘in retrospect’ can all be Reversal indicators in an Across clue, as can a more cryptic-sounding ‘heading west’, ‘to the left’ (this may not Urdu cryptics). In a Down clue, you may see ‘heading North’ or ‘northwards’ used often to denote that the letters in question are to run from bottom to top. Other Reversal indicators in a Down clue include ‘elevating’, ‘rising’, ‘taken up’ and other equivalents. Just keep your mind alert for words that sound like they are indicating the direction of flow.

*Sack backward cricketer of Cambridge (6) — CANTAB*
The Reversal indicator is ‘backward’. Here, CANTAB is an adjective meaning ‘of Cambridge’. ‘Sack’ can be synonymised as CAN (as in ‘fire from employment’), before you reverse BAT (or ‘cricketer”).

*(TH Cryptic #11706 by Gridman)*

**As one ... yet free? Requires reversal of heart (6) — UNITED**

Here too the indicator is plain. But it involves a Letter-pick device, which asks you to pick the middle letters (as indicated by ‘heart’) of a synonym for ‘free’ (which could be UNTIED), which gives you UNITED.

*(TH Cryptic #12629 by Bruno)*
Another popular way of hiding a word is within a word that sounds like it but is spelt differently. Think of another word that has a similar ring and it might just be the homophone you’re looking for.

Indicators of the homophone clue aka soundalike are generally words that have to do with sound, speech or hearing. So, if you come across ‘reportedly’, ‘by the sound of it’, ‘I hear’, ‘audibly’, ‘on the phone’, ‘on the radio’, ‘it is said’, or even ‘say’, your ears should perk up for a homophone clue. Once you find the indicator, look at the adjacent word to either side of it, think of a synonym for it, and then misspell it deliberately because the setter said so.

Your homophone indicator can be plain and simple:

*About to hear, see and describe (6) — RECITE*

Here, the definition is ‘describe’. Once you abbreviate ‘about’ as RE (as in, what you may see on an email’s subject line) and realise that a homophone (as indicated by ‘to hear’) of sight (a synonym of ‘see’) is CITE, you can RECITE your answer loud and clear.

*(TH Cryptic #10230 by Buzzer)*

*Tide over bay window pronouncedly creates a regular column (9) — EDITORIAL*

The word ‘pronouncedly’ is a dead ringer for a homophone indicator. The clue expects you to reverse (as indicated by ‘over’) the word ‘tide’ into EDIT, then think of a word for a sort of ‘bay window’ (which could be an oriel) and then spell...
it differently (as indicated by ‘pronouncedly’) as ORIAL. In harmony, these two parts produce a word for ‘a regular column’.

(TH Cryptic 10230 by Buzzer)

Your homophone indicator could be slightly off-key:

*Parasite strain caught (5) — LEECH*

The word ‘caught’ works as a homophone indicator because it is derived from how, if you didn’t quite hear something clearly, you may go, “I couldn’t quite catch that!”.

(The Hindu Crossword Corner special puzzle by Abhay)
Crosswording is all about finding mirth in mistakes. Amusement in bemusement. Fun in feints... Basically, it’s a safe place where you can chill out knowing that human error is the very lifeblood of the activity. And there’s no better proof of this than one of cryptic crosswords’ most quirky clue types that finds the whimsy in fallibility.

Spoonerisms are basically creatively swapped syllables. And they can conjure up really ticklishly quaint images in your head. For example, a spoonerism turns a blushing crow into a crushing blow. Of course, crossword setters have so many other tricks up their sleeve that spoonerisms are generally resorted to quite sparingly.

Here’s a clue that defines and typifies what a spoonerism is:

*Word-botching and the like (11) — SPOONERISMS*

‘Word-botching’ is literally what a SPOONERISM is all about. ‘And the like’ tells you it needs to be in plural, so you add an S. Also, maybe there is an added layer of meta-referencing in the clue where the setter has used ‘Word-botching’ as a spoonerism of ‘bird-watching’!

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1 noun

— the transposition of initial or other sounds of words, usually by accident, as in a blushing crow for a crushing blow. (dictionary.com)

Synonyms: solecism, mistake, misspeaking, slip of the tongue

Etymology: 1895–1900; after W.A. Spooner (1844–1930), English clergyman noted for such slips of the tongue.
So, once upon a time (well, actually, in the 1800s), there lived a Reverend William A. Spooner who was Don at the Oxford University. He was a flaky sort and supposedly tended to get his words mixed up in comical ways. So, if he meant to say ‘swap letters’, he might end up blurting out ‘lop sweaters’ instead. Or he might cite sources when outlining site courses. Or he’d refer to himself as a dear Queen rather than a queer dean.
Solving puzzles is all about taking a tangle and untangling it. The simplest example of a tangle in word puzzles is the Anagram — a word or phrase is literally jumbled up and you have to apply your wits to rearrange the letters and prise out an answer that makes sense. For example, OVERCROWIDING is an anagram of COVID WRONGER, as Spinner has shown. TESTING is an anagram of SETTING. KNOW COLD is an anagram of LOCKDOWN. Easy enough.

Only, at some point in the evolution of cryptic crosswords, setters and solvers seem to have got bored of such rudimentary challenges, and invented a twisted variant. And thus, a symbiotic mutation of the simple anagram was born — the Reverse Anagram!

**Grunts, thoroughly exhausted (6,3) — STRUNG OUT**

We’re looking for another way of saying ‘thoroughly exhausted’. ‘Grunts’ can be a reverse anagram of ‘strung out’, where ‘out’ is the anagram indicator or anagrind.

*(TH Cryptic #12913 by Hypatia)*

The Reverse Anagram is a rather unstraightforward type of clue that, you might say, depending on how much it has frustrated you, borders on unfair. Basically, it gives you the solver, the opportunity to don the setter’s shoes for a bit, no matter how poorly they might fit you. It does this by expecting you take a certain word in the clue and formulate an answer based on how a setter might clue that word as an anagram.

Some setters — Dr. X, for instance — prefer to deploy the RA “sparingly”, while others, like Afterdark, consider it their favourite type of clue.
Curiously, there don’t seem to be very many established means of subsidiary indication for the RA. Quite often, the indicator is altogether foregone. So, it’s up to you as the solver to be on the alert, and keep your anagrin vocabulary up to date!
Sometimes, the setter has a magic moment and comes up with a clue that leads to the answer via both routes — the cryptic as well as surface reading. Not that this makes it any easier to crack, but it does make for a stronger frisson when you see it.

‘&lit’ is a not-so-cryptic way of saying “and literally so”. You’d have to work one of these out just as you would any other cryptic clue — cracking the synonyms, reshuffling the anagrams, ferreting out the hidden letters, the works. Except that the entire clue is also the definition in and of itself that’s pointing to the answer with its surface.

*He farms at sea with one net primarily (9) — FISHERMAN*

Surface — FISHERMAN is someone who may well farm at sea with one net primarily

Cryptic — FSHERMA is an anagram (as indicated by ‘at sea’) of ‘he farms’, and when you add to it I (roman number alphabet for ‘one’) and N (‘net primarily’ is the first letter of ‘net’)

*(TH Cryptic #11822 by Lightning)*

*Primarily: lounge or lie lazily (4) — LOLл*

Surface — If you primarily lounge or lie lazily, you LOLл about.

Cryptic — Primarily is the acrostic indicator here, and the acrostic is made taking the first letters of Lounge Or Lie Lazily

*(Everyman #3780)*
Now, really this is not a cluing device that you need to learn in order to solve cryptic clues. In an &lit clue, the setter still has to construct the wordplay in a way that you can unravel it using all indicators and fodders. The &lit is more of a flourish, a non-essential but nonetheless impressive feat, by the setter — the equivalent of a Swiggy delivery person getting your food to you on time, exactly as per your order, steaming hot, fresh, and everything, albeit on a unicycle.

And that is thrilling not just for the setter, but for the solver too. After all, cryptic crosswords are about the numinous, rare, special event where a word or phrase is in superposition, so to speak, camouflaged so well that it appears hidden, but is right there waiting to be revealed by dint of your mental effort. The &lit does just that and is a deal-maker for both parties.
Remember the definitive equation that describes the structure of any valid cryptic clue?

Definition + Wordplay + Nothing else = Eureka Moment

Well, small confession. That isn’t entirely true, technically speaking. You will have noticed throughout this e-book that the clue examples have contained little words — tiny prepositions, like ‘of’, ‘and’, ‘in’, ‘by’, and the like — that you might have felt were neither part of the definition nor were performing the function of fodder or indicator within the wordplay segment.

These are called Link Words — like tendons connect muscle to bone, Link Words connect the wordplay to the definition. Traditionally and strictly, the cryptic clue does not require any word that is neither part of the definition nor the wordplay. But setters are empowered to insert certain words that help them construct a sensible surface reading, with the proviso that these link words must behave like a cryptic indication that meaningfully links the definition and wordplay by hinting at which part of the clue is the definition and which the wordplay.

*Margin between sides shown in record (6) — LEDGER*

‘Margin’ or EDGE ‘between’ L and R (abbreviations for ‘sides’) gives us LEDGER, another word for ‘record’. The link words ‘shown in’ imply that the wordplay is displayed or ‘shown’ in the definition.

*(TH Cryptic 12264 by Afterdark)*
Dr. X feels that “in an ideal world, there would be no link words”. But, he maintains, they help setters “avoid stilted surfaces”. Hence, he says, “link words’ are certainly not to be considered as ‘redundant words’. [I]n every case, the link words used MUST appropriately lead the solver to the solution.”

Here’s a handy list of bona fide link words that you may find in cryptics —

Definition ➔ Wordplay

Is
In
From

Given/Produced/Made by
And
Or
With
When
Where
By
Of
To

Wordplay ➔ Definition

Is
Cryptic clues come with an implicit idea — the solution is comprised by its components. If you internalise this property, you are able to determine whether a link word is valid or not, based on whether it complies with that implicit principle.

*Not detained, turn for coast (9) — **FREEWHEEL***

We must solve FREE (‘not detained’) + WHEEL (‘turn’) ‘for’ the answer, which is the definition of the verb ‘coast’.

*(Everyman #3733)*

So, when you think about it, “the litmus test of fairness,” as cryptics blogger Shuchismita Upadhyay puts it, “is the role played by ‘link words’: do they logically fit into the clue’s cryptic meaning and lead the solver to the answer? If these words must be ignored to make sense of the clue’s cryptic meaning, then they are not fair.”
The first step for a solver is to sift out the definition from the wordplay. And as a rule of thumb, the definition can be expected to be at the start or end of the clue. How do you go about parsing a clue successfully? The major task when you encounter a cryptic clue is to identify which type it is, or which cryptic devices have been employed in its construction. Here’s what Dr. X says, generously revealing the key to unlock his crypts:

Identifying the different type of indicators is the key to solving clues. As also identifying what type of clue it is. The key point of course is that the definition can be at the start or the end. You have to consider both possibilities and then start to break it down into the component parts after working out the indicators. Practice is of course the key to becoming a great solver.

That’s all very well. But how do you determine which end of the clue contains the definition? It seems to come down to developing an instinct or feel for cryptics honed by familiarity and practice. If you ask popular cryptics blogger Shuchismita Upadhyay, she will encouragingly assure you that “the most effective exercise is regular solving. With experience, solvers develop a knack for discarding the surface meaning and cutting right through to the cryptic sense of the clue.”

Of course, the important thing to remember, any cryptics aficionado will tell you, is to make use of all the help the grid gives you. For instance, all the already-filled-in letters (called crossing letters) can give you very helpful nudges in the right direction when you’re trying to figure out which part of the clue is the definition.

Shuchi breaks this down with a lovely example:

Let’s say you’re attempting this clue and the initial checked letter is C:
Winter jolly cold: Apr/May T-shirts out? (9,5)
You know that

(1) "out" can be an anagrind
(2) cold = C, which matches the initial checked letter
(3) C + (Apr/May T-shirts) is 14 letters, which matches the answer length

The three deductions together suggest that the answer is C + (APR MAY T SHIRTS)*
and the definition is "winter jolly".

Of course, you could be wrong about all those deductions in a really clever clue. The clue's definition might not be at the start or the end of the clue and what looks like an anagrind might not be so. If the clue doesn’t add up with one line of reasoning, abandon and try another. In the end, each part of the clue should fit the answer.

(You should be able to work that one out by yourself. If not, best hope that someone gifts you the answer at a CHRISTMAS PARTY.)

And it’s important to keep the mind free and unencumbered. It’s a mental game after all. And we have to do whatever it takes to keep our confidence levels high and robust.

“Firstly,” continues Afterdark, “see it as a whole puzzle and not a single clue. This allows you to ignore a clue and revisit [it] later. You don’t get bogged down on a single clue which is a detriment to solving further clues that would be easier to solve.”

Afterdark assures you that the rule about the definition being at the end or start of the clue is forthright: “It then becomes a binary choice that is logically arrived at by grammar or link words. As one cracks more and more clues, it becomes a part of your intuition.”

With that said, happy solving!
Across

8. Incorporating many things exotic, diverse area overlooking South East (6)
   An anagram (as indicated by ‘exotic’) of ‘diverse area’ without (as indicated by ‘overlooking’) the letters SE (abbreviation for ‘South East’) spells out a 6-letter word that means ‘Incorporating many things’. — VARIED

9. Nomenclature of multiple beliefs and Gods in place (around 51) (8)
   Another word for ‘place’ is REGION, which encompasses (as indicated by ‘around’) LI (which is the roman number for ‘51’) produces an 8-letter synonym for ‘Nomenclature of multiple beliefs and Gods’. ‘In’ is a link word connecting the wordplay and definition. — RELIGION

10. Dr. No is oddly disrupting power at this late hour (8)
    The odd letters (as indicated by ‘oddly’) of ‘Dr. No is’ are D, N and I, and they are placed in between (as indicated by ‘disrupting’) the letters of MIGHT (a synonym for ‘power’) to give us an 8-letter word for ‘this late hour’. The word ‘at’ is a link word connecting definition and wordplay. — MIDNIGHT

11. Initially, all executive committee members on a plane (6)
    The first letter (as indicated by ‘initially’) of ‘all’ is A, and a synonym for ‘executive committee members’ is BOARD. Put the two together and you get a 6-letter word that means ‘on a plane’. — ABOARD

12. Apparently large warren or mouse burrow (8)
    An 8-letter word for ‘Apparently large’ is ENORMOUS, and the letters are found hidden (as indicated by ‘burrow’ in the sense that it is a hiding place for burrowing animals) in the phrase ‘...warrEN OUR MOUSe...’ Can you see the big capital letters spelling out the answer? — ENORMOUS
13. Sluggishness of a desi husband, say? (6)

A 6-letter word for ‘Sluggishness’ is APATHY. And the clue spells it out as a charade by giving you the letter A (given in the wordplay as the indefinite article ‘a’) and then PATHY, which is a homophone (as indicated by ‘say?’) of ‘desi husband’ (meaning the desi or Hindi word for ‘husband’). — APATHY

14. It’s sweet gospel music performed without mischievous imps (7)

An anagram (as indicated by ‘performed’) of ‘gospel music’ sans (as indicated by ‘without’) the anagrammed letters (as indicated by ‘mischievous’) of ‘imps’ gives us a 7-letter word for that thing (as indicated by ’It’) which is ‘sweet’. Write down the letters yourself and try it out. GOSPELMUSIC - IMPS = GOS E L U C = GLUCOSE. — GLUCOSE

17. Netas, essentially encroaching, bust law (7)

The central letter (as indicated by ‘essentially’) of ‘Netas’ is T, and it is inserted into (as indicated by ‘encroaching’) STATUE, which is a synonym for ‘bust’, as in a sculpture of the head, shoulders and chest of a famous person. — STATUTE

20. Dancing wild — a cherished Indian celebration? (6)

An anagram (as indicated by ‘dancing’) of ‘wild a’ might be DWALI, which envelops (as indicated by ‘cherished’ in the sense of “embraced out of love”) the letter I (an abbreviation of ‘Indian’) to get DIWALI, which is a 6-letter word that is an example of a ‘celebration’. — DIWALI

22. Emperor’s China jar, a hammer displayed in retrospective (8)

An 8-letter word for ‘Emperor’ is MAHARAJA. It can be found hidden in plain sight (as indicated by ‘displayed’) and spelt backwards (as indicated by ‘in retrospective’) in the clue’s phrase ‘… ChinA JAR, A HAMmer…’ — MAHARAJA

25. “Permit car,” shouted Spooner in travel fatigue (3,3)

Here we need a two-word phrase of three letters each that means ‘travel fatigue’. A literal synonymous phrase for ‘Permit car’ could be LET (as in ‘permit’) JAG (a
short form of Jaguar, a type of ‘car’). If the tongue-twisted Spooner were to shout those two words, he might interchange the first letter of each and blurt out “JET LAG”. The word ‘in’ is a link word. — JET LAG

26. End of the world feeling returns around dead, for instance (8)

Another word for ‘feeling’ could be MOOD. Read in reverse (as indicated by ‘returns’), it would spell out DOOM. Then, we get SAY (another way of saying ‘for instance’), which is wrapped around (as indicated by ‘around’) D (abbreviation for ‘dead’). Altogether, that gives us the answer DOOMSDAY, which is the 8-letter word meaning ‘End of the world’. — DOOMSDAY

27. Novel began describing a princess in playful talk (8)

An anagram (as indicated by ‘novel’) of ‘began’ is BNAGE, and it contains (as indicated by ‘describing’) the letters A (literally the article ‘a’ from the clue), and DI (a common abbreviation for the famous Princess Diana) to spell out BADINAGE, which is an 8-letter word for ‘playful talk’. — BADINAGE

28. Dilliwala, say in retirement, backing local clubs (6)

DIA is the reversed spelling (as indicated by ‘in retirement’) of AID (synonym for ‘backing’ in the sense of “support”). It is enveloped (as indicated by ‘clubs’) by INN (another word for ‘local’) to give us a 6-letter example (as indicated by ‘say’) of a ‘Dilliwala’, who is an INDIAN citizen. — INDIAN

Down

1. Exchanging rupee for primary needs is reasonable, countrywide (8)

An 8-letter word for ‘countrywide’ is NATIONAL. The wordplay helps us build it by asking us to remove the R (abbreviation for ‘rupee’ as we know from “INR”) from the word RATIONAL (synonym for ‘reasonable’) and replace it (as indicated by ‘exchanging… for’) with an N (which is the first letter, as indicated by ‘primary’, of ‘needs’). — NATIONAL
2. No loser changed to new model in this season (6)

WINTER is an example (as indicated by ‘this’) of a ‘season’. And in that word, the letter T (popular crosswording abbreviation used to refer to the early 20th-Century car ‘model’ T manufactured by Henry Ford) is replaced by (as indicated by ‘changed to’) N (abbreviation for ‘new’). This gives us WINNER, a 6-letter word that means ‘no loser’. — **WINNER**

3. Commercial silver outlets to increase online, slowly (6)

An AD is an abbreviated synonym for a ‘commercial’. AG is an abbreviation, derived from its atomic symbol, of the periodic table element ‘Silver’. And finally, you get the letters I and O from the starting letters (as indicated by ‘outlets’) of ‘increase’ and ‘online’, to altogether spell out ADAGIO, which is the instruction for ‘slowly’ in the notational system of western classical music. — **ADAGIO**

4. English baron wearing Indian shirt (7)

BRITISH is the 7-letter synonym for ‘English’. It is constructed from the wordplay as follows. First, you get B as an abbreviation for ‘baron’. To this you add RITISH, which is made from the anagrammed (‘wearing’ works as an anagram indicator as it suggests some sort of movement) letters of I (abbreviation for ‘Indian’) and ‘shirt’. — **BRITISH**

5. Delightful worker in farm bordering lake (8)

PEASANT is a synonym for ‘worker in farm’ and its letters go around (as indicated by ‘bordering’) the letter L (abbreviation for ‘lake’) to give us an 8-letter word for ‘delightful’. — **PLEASANT**

6. Ascending soldier met soldier below — neither partner was unacquainted (8)

IG is the reverse (‘ascending’ in a Down clue indicates reversal) of GI, which is an abbreviation for an American ‘soldier’ (GI Joe, for example). Another type of ‘soldier’ could be an ANT, since you’d find an army of ants underground, which is placed ‘below’ NOR (‘neither partner’ suggests the second-half of the common pairing “neither-nor”). Put it all together and you get IG + NOR + ANT, which is an 8-letter word for ‘unacquainted’. — **IGNORANT**
7. Yelled out to one in quarters (6)

A homophone (as indicated by ‘yelled’) of FORTH (synonym for the adverb ‘out’) is a FOURTH, which is the 6-letter word that means ‘one in quarters’. — FOURTH

15. Silent comedian captivates a minister (8)

Charlie CHAPLIN was a ‘silent comedian’, and the letters of his surname envelop (as indicated by ‘captivates’) the letter A to form an 8-letter word for ‘minister’. — CHAPLAIN

16. Part of wandering stream moved below fish (8)

‘Wandering’ is another way of saying STRAYING. Because RAY is a ‘part of’ it that is also a synonym for ‘stream’ (as in, you need to imagine a ray as being a stream of light photons or waves), it needs to be lifted out and shifted towards the end (as indicated by ‘moved below’) so that ST[RAY]ING is rejigged as STING[RAY], which is an 8-letter word for a type of ‘fish’. — STINGRAY

18. Excited jam at hall closing before memorial (3,5)

We need a two-word phrase of three and five letters each that means ‘memorial’. An anagram (as indicated by ‘excited’) of ‘jam at’, or TAJMA, is followed by HAL, which is the word ‘hall’ without its last letter (as indicated by ‘closing before’, suggesting that the word ends early). And the answer is the famous monumental tomb built by the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan. — TAJ MAHAL

19. Counter name say, fades a little bit (7)

N is an abbreviation for ‘name’. ‘Say’ is another way of saying “for example”, which can be abbreviated as EG. And another word for ‘fades’ is DIMS. So far, we have the letter N + EG + DIMS. Now, the word ‘counter’ is an instruction to reverse the whole set of letters, so that we get SMIDGEN, a 7-letter word that means ‘a little bit’. — SMIDGEN

21. It melts from peaks of intensely cold environs, chiefly at poles (3,3)
Here, we have an acrostic, requiring us to pick the first letters of (as indicated by ‘peaks of’) ‘Intensely Cold Environs, Chiefly At Poles’ that gives us a two-word phrase of three letters each that means something (or ‘it’) that ‘melts from peaks of intensely cold environs, chiefly at poles’. And we find that the entire wordplay is literally the definition of ICE CAP too. This is called an Acrostic &lit. — ICE CAP

23. Asked question about Islamic festival for clothing covering head (6)

An example of a ‘question’ is WHO, a homophone (as indicated by ‘asked’) of which is HOO. An example of an ‘Islamic festival’ is EID, which when reversed (as indicated by ‘about’) becomes DIE. The two components HOO and DIE, joined together, give us a 6-letter word that means ‘clothing covering head’. — HOODIE

24. Live tour entertains best, essentially (6)

Here, even though on the surface it sounds like the word ‘live’ is an adjective meaning “happening in reality currently”, the setter intends it cryptically as the verb RESIDE, which is the 6-letter answer constructed by putting RIDE (synonym for ‘tour’) around (as indicated by ‘entertains’, in the sense of “accommodates”) E and S, which are the middle letters (as indicated by ‘essentially’) of ‘best’. — RESIDE