

CROSSWORD CONSTRUCTING TIPS

by Nancy Salomon

A few things to avoid:

1) Theme problems.

* Strained theming. Your theme entries have to be familiar. If you're punning, the phrases on which the theme entries are based must be *very* familiar.

* Theming inconsistency. If you have three singular entries and one plural, you've probably got a problem. If three of your entries begin with verbs ending in ING and the fourth doesn't, again there's a problem. This is a tough subject to discuss in the abstract, but I hope I've given some idea of the kind of thing I'm talking about.

* Theme looseness. You need a unifying factor to tie all your theme entries together--the tighter the better. A group of puns that have no relation to one another usually won't fly, for example.

* Repeated word themes. These are frowned upon by many editors. Also, the longer the repeated word, the less your chances of selling the puzzle. There are some kinds of container themes where repeated words are fine, but for starters, it's probably better to stay away from them.

* Overdone themes. If you're not a frequent solver, it's a good idea to check with someone to see if your theme idea has been done to death.

If you're seeking mentoring, you'll be doing both yourself and your mentor a big favor if you run your theme ideas by the mentor *before* tackling a grid. Grid and cluing problems can be corrected, but if a theme is unacceptable, the puzzle has to be junked.

2) Overambitiousness.

Next to theme problems, the most frequent problem encountered with rookies is the "mission impossible" syndrome. New constructors often try to cram an unrealistic number of theme entries into a puzzle or to create grids with very low word counts. Solvers don't give a darn how many theme squares you have. Editors, for that reason, aren't overly impressed either. A good solid theme with a lively, colorful fill will get you sales. A marginal fill in a puzzle loaded with theme squares or with a low word count will get you rejections. Assuming that you're beginning with 15x15 themed puzzles, I recommend a word count of 76 or 78. As for theme squares, if you've got three 15-letter entries or four 10-letter entries, that's plenty.

3) Bad fill.

Bad fill entries fall into 3 categories: boring, strained, and obscure. After your theme entries, the first thing that editors will check out are your longer non-theme entries. You're not going to be able to avoid crosswordese and overused words in your shorter fill entries, but you should try to make your longer entries as colorful as possible.

Here are some examples:

Good entries: GET A LIFE, JUMP BAIL, BIG SHOTS, OVER EASY, etc. Boring entries: RECEIVED, RESTORES, ASSAILED, etc. Strained entries: REWATERS, NOT MOODY, UNSTOLEN, etc.

You may not be able to make all your long entries colorful, but some should be. Boring won't get you in trouble with all editors, but strained and obscure long entries will.

For the shorter entries in your puzzle, some crosswordese is usually unavoidable, but if your grid is filled with STOAS and ANOAS, and ORONO, etc., you'll probably have a hard time selling it. Even worse are very obscure entries with which most solvers will be unfamiliar. Also, foreign words should be reasonably common. You can't expect solvers to know the Portugese word for "tablecloth."

4) Overcleverness.

You have to play fair with the solver in both your theming and your cluing. Often rookies have the noble goal of coming up with new and exciting ways of cluing oft repeated crossword entries. That's great if you succeed, but if the result is a clue that doesn't give the solver a fighting chance, you're better off sticking with some of the tried and true clues. Put yourself in the solvers' shoes as often as possible when cluing. That way you may be able to avoid not only clues that are too clever or cute, but also clues that are too vague or too esoteric.

5) ...and more

Technical lingo known only to workers in a specific field should be avoided. Similarly, you should stay away from local place names that aren't nationally known. Ditto local stores and regional brand names.

Along these same lines, be careful about entries that relate to your specific hobbies and interests. The fact that you're an opera buff or a jazz buff, or a computer expert, or whatever, can blind you to the obscurity of some of your entries. If you're fluent in a foreign language, don't assume the solver is also.