

14. Bits and pieces

In practice, words rarely break up perfectly into other ones, so clues often take letters and small pieces of words instead. These are indicated by a variety of *letter selection indicators*, which specify a subcollection of letters from a word which is always provided literally. Take, for example,

Being flexible, works around issue at first (6)
Being **flexible**, / **works around** / **issue at first** (6)

Here we see PLIANT (flexible) clued as PLANT (works, as a noun!) around I (the first letter of "issue", as indicated by "at first"). As you might expect, we can also take the last letters of words:

Dirty, self-satisfied nobody finally admitting density (6)
Dirty, / **self-satisfied** / **nobody finally** / **admitting density** (6)

Here SMUG (self-satisfied) must join with Y (last letter of "nobody", as indicated by "finally"), all of which "admits" D (abbreviation for "density", as in physics), yielding SMUDGY (dirty, covered in smudges).

Some letter selection indicators only make sense in down clues, thanks to the vertical convention:

Inspect cat's bottom — yes, it's measly (6)
Inspect / **cat's bottom** — / **yes**, / **it's measly** (6)

In this down clue, we have a charade of SCAN (inspect) + T (bottom [i.e. last] letter of "cat") + Y (abbreviation for "yes") leading to SCANTY (measly, as in "meagre", not the rather foul surface sense of "afflicted by measles").

We can also select letters from the middle of words, as in

Elderly person with heart of gold to pass on (5)
Elderly person with / **heart of gold** / **to pass on** (5)

where we combine OL (the heart [i.e. centre] of "gold") with DIE (pass on, but not as on the surface!) to make OLDIE (elderly person). Though not in this particular instance, heart selection indicators like "heart of" are almost always ambiguous: "heart of darkness", for example, could indicate KN, RKNE or ARKNES and "centre of gravity" could indicate V, AVI or RAVIT. In general, the letters determined by such an indicator can and must be a contiguous block containing the middle letter (for words of odd length) or middle two letters (for words of even length) with the beginning of the block as far from the beginning of the word as the end of the block is from the end of the word. If that made absolutely no sense, don't worry! Just extrapolate from the examples above.

The "opposite" of selecting the central letters, selecting the outside letters, is also possible, albeit normally only singly:

Move towards extremely dry humour (6)

Move towards / extremely dry / humour (6)

This is a charade of COME (move towards) with DY (the first and last letters, or "extremes", of "dry"), making COMEDY (humour). The indicator "extremely" can be understood as meaning "represented by the extremes" or taken simply as convention.

Taking alternate letters from words is also possible. For example, in this clue from The Telegraph Toughie,

Regulars in hard gang few saw (5)
Regulars in hard gang few / saw (5)

we take alternate letters ("regulars") in "hArD gAnG fEw" to get ADAGE (saw, as in a proverb). The letters are taken alternately as if the words were a single block, ignoring spaces and punctuation as usual.

Regular letter selections, while sometimes used as the sole item of wordplay, are more commonly used with other wordplay elements, as in the complex clue

Pervert who's fine with cocaine and regular hits to the rear (5)
Pervert who's / fine with cocaine / and / regular hits / to the rear (5)

where we must find OK (fine) + C (abbreviation for "cocaine") + IS (alternate letters of "hits", starting with the I, as indicated by "regular"), then write it all backwards ("to the rear") to get SICKO (pervert).

Note that all of these "regular" indicators are inherently ambiguous: all they say is that some letters are to be taken at regular intervals from a word starting at some position. In practice, this almost always means "every second letter" (starting from either the first or second), but in extremely rare cases can mean "every n^{th} letter" for some value of n , starting from any letter from the first to the n^{th} , such that at least two letters are selected.

Within the class of regular indicators, there are two special subclasses which unambiguously specify which regular letters are taken (computer scientists will object at this point that we could zero-index the letters, but in cryptic crosswords we index from 1). Members of one specify the odd letters, as in this clue, again from the Telegraph Toughie:

Spiritual yet oddly pushy style (7)
Spiritual yet / oddly pushy / style (7)

Here we take the odd letters of "PuShY" and add CHIC (style) to make PSYCHIC (spiritual). Similarly, we have

Start to rule evenly matched contest (4)
Start to rule / evenly matched / contest (4)

for RACE (contest) as R (first letter, or "start", of "rule") plus the even letters of mAtChEd.

Completely ad hoc selection indicators may also be seen, as in this clue where letters are picked at precise positions:

Finish in second, then torment slowcoaches in seventh and eighth places (7)
Finish in / second, then torment / slowcoaches in seventh and eighth places (7)

This one involves finding SHELLAC (finish, as in something used to finish wood, etc.) as a charade of S (abbreviation for "second") + HELL (torment) + A C (respectively the seventh and eighth letters in "slowcoaches").

We round this section off with another cryptic crossword controversy.

Bits and pieces tangent: subtleties

Within the framework of letter selection indicators, there are a great many sneaky ways to indicate single letters. Take the letter E, for example: it could be fairly represented in a clue as "head of economics", "finally awake", "heart of steel", "capital of Egypt", "close to home" (read "close" as "end, conclusion") and a whole host of other ways. I personally call these representations *subtleties*, because the indicated letters are hiding in plain sight in the form of a well-known phrase or collocation and are easily read over.

There are, of course, many other potential representations of the letter E, such as "nerve ending", "eye opener", "sweetheart" and "egghead", but many – particularly Ximeneans – object to these for a variety of reasons. Some would say that "sweetheart" is one word and so cannot be broken up to be read "heart of sweet", but would have no objection to "sweet heart"; others would also object to "sweet heart", protesting that "sweet heart" does not ordinarily mean "heart of sweet" (Ximenes uses this very argument against "redhead" being a fair representation of the letter R), so to use it in this way is not to "say what you mean". Similar analyses apply to the others.

Whatever your viewpoint, bear in mind that as a general rule, Libertarians will use all of these, while Ximeneans will tend to stick to those which can be interpreted correctly in even the strictest sense. I myself use these potentially controversial subtleties very infrequently, and only when they greatly enhance a clue's surface.