

13. Containers and contents

We've had words beside other words for quite some time now, but what about words inside other words? In *container and contents* clues, a word or item of wordplay, the *contents*, must be placed inside another word or item of wordplay, the *container*. The wordplay can be anything except a hidden answer or (normally) a double definition. Indicators which specify the container are *container indicators*, while indicators which specify the contents are *contents indicators*. For example, in Rufus's

Buy tea in a bag (8)
Buy / tea in a bag (8)

we put CHA (tea) inside PURSE (a bag) to obtain PURCHASE (buy), as indicated by "in". The "a" here is not a literal letter A, but an indefinite article attached to "bag", and may be freely ignored.

The opposite designation – namely that something must be placed outside something else – is also possible:

Routine rap about heroin (6)
Routine / rap about heroin (6)

Here we must place STICK (rap, both meaning "criticism") outside H (abbreviation for "heroin") to get SHTICK (routine, as a noun!), as indicated by "about" (as in "surrounding, on all sides of").

Many indicators require quite a bit of imagination on the part of the solver (and poetic licence on the part of the setter). In this example,

Dessert plum that's eaten cold (4,3)
Dessert / plum that's eaten cold (4,3)

CHOICE (plum, as an adjective as in "a plum job") must "eat" C (abbreviation for "cold", as seen e.g. on taps) to make CHOC ICE (a dessert, essentially the British equivalent of a Klondike bar). While "eat" may not immediately seem to be a fair indicator of containment, consider that eating something causes it end up "inside" us. The indicator, "that's eaten", is also to be read as "that has eaten", not "that is eaten" as it appears on the surface. Similarly, letters can "drink" other letters:

In camp area drinking beer? On the contrary (6)
In camp / area drinking beer? On the contrary (6)

This is a standard container and contents, with a twist: the wordplay – placing LAGER (beer) inside A (abbreviation for "area", as in mathematics), as indicated by "drinking" – is reversed, thanks to the *wordplay inversion indicator* "on the contrary". We thus instead place A inside LAGER to create LAAGER (a type of camp also called a wagon fort). In most instances, wordplay inversion indicators reverse the roles of container and contents and invert relative orders indicated by juxtaposition indicators in charade clues.

In cryptic crosswords, items of wordplay do not merely "eat" and "drink" other ones, but

interact in a cornucopia of traditionally human ways. For instance, in

A month abroad is embraced by grandma (5)
A month abroad / is embraced by grandma (5)

NAN (grandma) must "embrace" IS to get NISAN (a month of the Hebrew calendar). This use of the word "embrace", while much less common than the usual ones, is wholly supported by major dictionaries: Chambers 21st gives "to include", while Collins gives "to encircle or enclose".

Wordplay "wearing" wordplay is also on the cards, as in

Extreme carelessness shown by repulsive knight caught wearing women's clothing (5,10)
Extreme carelessness shown by / repulsive / knight caught wearing women's clothing (5,10)

where we have a complex charade of GROSS (repulsive) plus N (abbreviation for "knight", as in chess) C (abbreviation for "caught", as in cricket) "wearing" NEGLIGEE (women's clothing), which leads to GROSS NEGLIGENCE (extreme carelessness).

This clue is also a good illustration of some of the difficulties which arise when attempting to parse cryptic clues in general. There are any number of possible alternative interpretations to the one above: why shouldn't "clothing" or "women's clothing" be the answer? Why couldn't "shown by" be a juxtaposition indicator instead of a link word, with "extreme carelessness" being part of the wordplay? Why is it "knight caught" inside "women's clothing"? Could it not be "caught", or perhaps all of "repulsive knight caught", inside "women's clothing" – or even just "women's"? Moreover, there appears to be no clear way to decide which one is correct. This is where I plug Part 2, where we will discuss numerous techniques for disambiguating situations just like these.

Complex clues make frequent use of containers and contents. Here's an example of a charade, reversal, anagram and container all rolled into one:

Light film about backward gentleman with mutated DNA who hates about half the human race (10)
Light film about / backward gentleman / with / mutated DNA / who hates about half the human race (10)

At this point, the slash method breaks down a little bit because of all the nested wordplay, but at least the colours are pretty! What we have is RIS ("backward gentleman", i.e. SIR reversed) combined with AND ("mutated DNA", i.e. an anagram of DNA) to make ANDRIS (remember that "with" can indicate either order!), around which MIST (light film) goes to give MISANDRIST (a man-hater).