

## 15. Deletions, substitutions and movements

In this tricolour section, we consider three other ways of manipulating words at the letter level: deletions, substitutions, and movements.

Every letter selection technique from the previous section has a corresponding deletion technique, indicated by a *letter deletion* indicator. Unlike selection indicators, deletion indicators can operate on synonyms (and this is the norm). Thus, we can delete first letters:

Black Mini that doesn't start (4)  
Black / Mini **that doesn't start** (4)

Ignoring the capital letters, as is customary, "mini" is DINKY, which loses its first letter ("doesn't start") to give INKY (black). Similarly, we can lose final letters, as with

Camp and almost X-rated (4)  
Camp and / **almost X-rated** (4)

in which TENT (camp, as a verb) is presented as "almost" TENTH (X-rated; think of the Roman numeral X), that is, TENTH with its last letter removed. For fairness' sake, indicators such as "short", "endless", "almost", "nearly" or "abrupt" never remove more than the last letter of a word.

Some letter deletion indicators only make sense in down clues:

Scratching bottom, girl makes drink (5)  
**Scratching bottom, girl** / makes **drink** (5)

Here LASSIE (girl) does away with its last letter ("scratches bottom"!) to make LASSI (a traditional drink from India).

Hearts can also be deleted, though it is normally only the central one (for words of odd length) or two (for words of even length) letters that are removed:

Fussy baby heartlessly offered up for dissection (8)  
**Fussy** / **baby heartlessly** / offered up / for **dissection** (8)

In this down clue, ANAL (fussy) must join SISSY (baby) after the latter is rendered **heartlessly** as SISY then reversed (offered up) as YSIS, netting ANALYSIS (dissection). If we're considering an even-length word in the wordplay, we can even delete just one of the middle two letters:

One trying half-heartedly to get stunner (5)  
**One trying half-heartedly** / to get **stunner** (5)

This clue suggests TASER (stunner) as TASTER (one trying) with only one of its middle two letters. "Half-heartedly" is the only common indicator of this type.

To delete **all** middle letters, a different kind of indicator must be used. In

Lubricant found in empty space near rear (5)  
Lubricant found in / empty space near rear (5)

"space" must be "emptied" to get SE, then joined with BUM (rear) for SEBUM (a natural lubricating skin secretion).

Outside letters can also be deleted instead of selected. For example, in

Endlessly horny following boob job (6)  
Endlessly horny following boob / job (6)

RANDY (horny) must be written "endlessly" as AND then placed after ERR (boob, a British verb meaning "to make a mistake") to get ERRAND (job). We meet another ambiguous indicator here: "endlessly" could indicate deletion of both first and last letters or just the last letter, and there is no way to tell which is meant. There is some light, however: by convention, it does not indicate deletion of just the first letter.

Regular deletion, though often equivalent to regular selection, is also possible, as this adapted Times clue demonstrates:

One who's socially inadequate stands to be regularly ignored at party (5)  
One who's socially inadequate / stands to be regularly ignored / at party (5)

Here we must delete regular letters of "stands" to get SAD and add DO (party) to get SADDO (in Britain, a socially inadequate person). Deletions involving odd and even indicators work in completely analogous ways.

Portions of words, too, are fair game, the most common being halves. For example, in

Foxy but hideous? Not half (3)  
Foxy but / hideous? Not half (3)

we must delete half of GRISLY (hideous) to get SLY (foxy), as indicated by "not half". Either half is possible, but only one works in this case. Other indicators, such as "20% off" and "quarter of", are occasionally seen and work as you would expect.

Instead of specifying positions and sections of words, we can instead specify the letter to be deleted literally or as an abbreviation, as in

Drink up, right away (4)  
Drink / up, right away (4)

where ASTIR (up, as in awake) loses R (abbreviation for "right") to become ASTI (a sparkling white wine), with deletion indicated by "away". When the setter feels particularly underhand, the abbreviation and deletion indicator will blend into a single word:

Perhaps a bit powerless (7)  
Perhaps a / bit powerless (7)

This clue instructs us to write PARTICLE (bit), as if it were "powerless", i.e. lacking P (abbreviation for "power"), to get ARTICLE (of which "a" is an example, hence the *example indicator* "perhaps"). While not universally accepted, these single-word indicators are much less controversial than the corresponding single-word letter indicators, and can be found in most crosswords.

And instead of specifying the letter as an abbreviation, we can specify it via a letter selection indicator:

Petty criminal covering swelling, having lost punch-up, ultimately (7)  
**Petty criminal / covering / swelling, having lost punch-up, ultimately (7)**

Here HOODLUM (petty criminal) is constructed as HOOD (covering, as a noun!) plus LUM, which is LUMP (swelling) **having lost** the P (the last letter or "ultimate" in "punch-up").

And instead of specifying a letter, we can specify an entire word to delete; it is normally given literally, but may be given as synonym if the word from which the letters are to be deleted is given literally, or if the word to be deleted is short and the solver is likely to jump readily from the synonym to the required letters (e.g. "home" for IN or "sailor" for TAR, both of which are standard fare). Much like the concept of "trivial" in mathematics, this is down to the judgement of the setter, and in any event the boundary between abbreviations and synonyms for short words is quite considerably blurred. For example,

Stop Democrat writer losing say (6)  
**Stop / Democrat / writer losing say (6)**

clues DESIST (stop) as a charade of D (abbreviation for "Democrat") plus ESIST, which is ESSAYIST (writer) with SAY removed (indicated by "losing"). A fair alternative with the same wordplay would be

Stop Democrat essayist losing voice (6)

with ESSAYIST provided literally but SAY via a synonym, whereas

Stop Democrat writer losing voice (6)

would be considered much too difficult on account of the solver having to find both ESSAYIST and SAY amongst a sea of other potential words.

We now depart briefly for another mini-controversy.

#### Deletions tangent: three forms of deletion

When deleting more than one letter from a word, the letters normally appear as a block within the word, as in the above example; this is the gold standard for deletion, and is uncontroversial.

The second form, deleting letters which *mostly* appear as a block and appear in the same relative order within the word (e.g. taking CHASE from CHASTISE to leave STI or TIS), is

frowned upon by Ximeneans but used by some Libertarians, sometimes with either the word or letters not given literally. This form of deletion is always acceptable with anagram fodder (see below).

The third form of deletion, where the letters to be deleted are highly discontinuous and/or are not in the same order within the word, is generally only acceptable when both the word and the letters are provided literally. This form is commonly seen with anagram fodder which must have letters deleted prior to being rearranged. For example, in

Maiden voyage is completely disorganized, having neglected to include any form of entertainment (5,4)

Maiden voyage is completely disorganized, having neglected to include any / form of entertainment (5,4)

VIDEO GAME (form of entertainment) is clued as an anagram of MAIDEN VOYAGE with ANY first removed (it "neglects to include" ANY, then becomes "completely disorganized").

#### Deletions, substitutions and movements (continued)

One alternative to deletions is substitutions, in which one letter or word is swapped for another:

Dim servant left for good (4)  
Dim / servant left for good (4)

Here G (abbreviation for "good") must be replaced with L (abbreviation for "left") in PAGE (servant) to get PALE (dim, said e.g. of the moon). Less commonly, the letters to be substituted may be indicated by letter selection indicators, or may be entire words; in this latter case, the words to be swapped will, in most instances, be provided literally or via "obvious synonyms" (see discussion in the deletions section with home/IN and sailor/TAR).

Substitutions can also be performed by position, where *Spoonerisms* (in which initial letters or syllables of two words are swapped) rule the roost:

Spooner's sleazy police flick is a treat for cinemagoers (7)  
Spooner's sleazy police flick / is a treat for cinemagoers (7)

A "sleazy police flick" is a COP PORN, which is then Spoonerized into POPCORN (a treat for cinemagoers), as indicated by the *Spoonerism indicator* "Spooner's". Similarly, in this down clue,

One too old to swap tops normally (2,7)  
One too old to swap tops / normally (2,7)

AN (one) and OVERAGE (too old) "swap tops" to get ON AVERAGE (normally). The equivalent for across clues is something like "swapping sides", as with

Cheesemaker swapping sides for £10 (6)  
Cheesemaker swapping sides / for £10 (6)

in which RENNET (cheesemaker, interpreted literally as "something used to make cheese") interchanges its first and last letters (swaps sides) to become TENNER (British colloquialism for a ten pound note).

Caveat solutor! "Changing sides" and "swapping sides" more commonly indicate that L (left) must become R (right) and R must become L, as in this related clue from Enigmatist in The Guardian:

Thief changing sides for 5 cents (6)  
**Thief changing sides** / for 5 cents (6)

Here we change L to R and R to L in NICKER (thief, someone who nicks) to get NICKEL (5 cents).

The last technique in this section involves moving existing letters around within words. For example, in this Daily Telegraph clue,

The world needs courage, start to finish (5)  
**The world** needs / **courage, start to finish** (5)

the first letter of HEART (courage) must move to the end to get EARTH (the world), as indicated by "start to finish". Some movement indicators merely specify that a letter is to be moved – possibly in a certain direction – but not do not say precisely where:

Despite common sense, stomach gets caught in zip — it's hard to move! (14)  
**Despite** / **common sense, stomach gets caught in zip — it's hard to move!** (14)

This devilishly complex clue tells us to place WIT (common sense) and STAND (stomach, as a verb) inside NOTHING (zip) to get NOTWITSTANDING, and then to move the H (abbreviation for "hard") to get NOTWITHSTANDING (despite). It is wholly necessary to move the H because WITSTAND is included in NOTHING as a single unit; an alternative to this movement would be to use an indicator like "separately", which would indicate two separate inclusions of WIT and STAND both into NOTHING, each at a different place.

We conclude by noting that, as with the other devices in this section, it is also possible to move words, and to indicate the letters to be moved with letter selection indicators instead of abbreviations.