

## Chapter 1

# Developing a Theme for Your Puzzle

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Sticking to the rules of theme development
- ▶ Looking at common theme types
- ▶ Achieving consistency in your theme
- ▶ Making your theme as entertaining as possible

**E**very occupation, I suppose, has its own most frequently-asked cocktail party question. For teachers, it's "What do you teach?" For novelists, it's "Where do you get your ideas?" And for the admittedly fringe occupation of professional crossword puzzle constructor, the #1 question — by a wide margin, I might add — is "Do you make the grid first or write the clues first?"

Well, the grid gets made before the clues, but the truth is that neither one really comes first. (I rarely give this answer, though, because it's entirely too complicated for cocktail-party chat.) The first step to making a crossword puzzle is one that most people tend to overlook entirely: creating a theme. The majority of published crossword puzzles have themes. Because editors accept many more themed puzzles than themeless puzzles, *your* first puzzle should also have a theme. (Themed puzzles are generally easier to create anyway.)

In this chapter, I take you through the process of creating a theme, from the "Eureka!" moment of the initial idea to the endless tweaking and fine-tuning required to make a seamless product.

## *What Is a Theme?*

First, a few definitions:

- ✓ A *theme* is a common thread shared by a set of crossword puzzle entries.
- ✓ *Theme entries* are usually the longest entries in the puzzle. They're also the first entries that a constructor puts into the grid and are the only entries that are considered unchangeable while filling the grid. (Back when I made puzzles using pencil and paper — how long ago it seems! — I wrote the theme entries into the grid in pen to remind myself that they were non-negotiable.)
- ✓ Grid entries not related to the theme are known as *fill*.

Most of the puzzles in this book have themes. In Puzzle 1, for instance, the theme entries are ENGLISH FOXHOUND, IRISH SETTER, and SCOTTISH TERRIER. The theme of this puzzle can be described as "dog breeds from the British Isles." Puzzle 2's theme entries are JEEPERS CREEPERS, HANKY PANKY, HURLYBURLY, and MIGHTY APHRODITE. The theme of this puzzle can be described as "movie titles that rhyme."

Novice constructors tend to rush the theme-making part of the process. They're eager to get to the grid-filling and the clue-writing, but they can't begin until they come up with a theme. So they whomp one up as quickly as possible, using the first entries that occur to them. Big mistake!



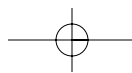
The theme of your puzzle is the one aspect that can't afford to be weak. I often spend more time brainstorming a puzzle's theme than I do creating the grid, and with good reason. A bad clue or a bad grid entry doesn't necessarily cause an editor to reject a puzzle, but a bad theme practically ensures its rejection. The puzzle's theme is the first element that editors look at, and if the theme is invalid, inconsistent, or just plain dull, they won't bother to look any further.

If your theme is *great*, most editors will go out of their way to publish your puzzle. That's not to say they'll publish your puzzle as is, but they probably won't reject it outright, either. More than likely, they'll offer you suggestions on how to improve the puzzle and ask to see a new version. If this happens to you, take heart! Editors don't prefer looking at multiple versions of the same puzzle — it's more work for them — so if they're willing to do so in your case, it means they really like your theme.

## Following the Rules

So how do you create a theme? Well, first you have to learn the ground rules. These rules apply to nearly every theme, regardless of its exact nature:

- ✓ **Have at least three theme entries.** Most editors' spec sheets don't actually say how much theme is enough, but two theme entries is definitely too few. I recommend that your theme entries comprise a minimum of 39 to 40 letters total; so, for example, four 10-letter theme entries (40 letters) is enough theme, while three 11-letter theme entries (33 letters) is rather skimpy.
- ✓ **Arrange your theme entries symmetrically within the grid.** I discuss grid symmetry at length in Chapter 2. For now, knowing that your theme entries need to pair off lengthwise is enough. That means if you have a 12-letter theme entry you want to use, you need another 12-letter theme entry to match it. One exception to this rule is that you can place a theme entry of unmatched length in the center of the grid, as long as it's an odd number of letters. (You can't place an entry of even length in the exact center of a 15x15 grid. Try it if you don't believe me!)
- ✓ **Make your theme entries the longest entries in the grid.** This rule isn't always strictly enforced, but adhering to it is a good idea nonetheless. Ideally, the solver shouldn't have any doubt about whether a given grid entry is part of the theme or not. If you have unthemed entries in your grid that are longer than the theme entries, solvers tend to get confused. For a 15x15 grid, keeping your theme entries in the 9- to 15-letter range naturally makes them the longest entries in the puzzle, without any straining on your part to make the unthemed entries shorter.
- ✓ **Make your theme entries consistent.** If three of your theme entries conform to a certain pattern, the fourth needs to conform to that pattern as well. Consider, for instance, a "seasons of the year" theme with the entries WINTER WHEAT, FALLING DOWN, SPRING BINDER, and INDIAN SUMMER. Is this set consistent? They all admittedly contain a season, but the first three entries *start* with a season (*WINTER WHEAT*, *FALLING DOWN*, *SPRING BINDER*), making INDIAN SUMMER a misfit. (*SUMMER SCHOOL* would be a suitable replacement.) More subtly, the entry FALLING DOWN can be considered a misfit because its season appears as part of a larger word (*FALLING*), which isn't true in the other three theme entries. (*FALL THROUGH* would be a suitable replacement.) I address the thorny issue of theme consistency in "Keeping Your Theme Consistent" later in this chapter.



## Can a puzzle have too much theme?

I've said that a 15x15 crossword should have a minimum of 39 to 40 letters in the theme. That naturally begs the question, is there a maximum?

Theoretically, no. You're free to put in as much theme as you want — and the more you can shove in without compromising the quality of your grid, the more an editor will like it.

In reality, though, the grid's quality gets compromised pretty quickly. Puzzle 4, "In the Drink," shows a grid with 66 letters in the theme — a very high number for a 15x15. If you examine the grid, you can see that I was straining in a few places to make it work. The puzzle contains a lot

of fill-in-the-blank partial entries (OF NO, AS IN, ME SEE, AT 'EM), a few not-so-great abbreviations (TSPS, WPM), and some uncommon usages (HAYING, READD).

The bottom line is, you probably shouldn't let optional theme entries compromise your grid's quality. If you can squeeze five theme entries into your grid without undue strain, great. But if you can make it work only by using a generous batch of lousy entries, go with four theme entries instead. Your solvers won't know that a fifth theme entry ever existed, so they'll never miss it — but they *will* appreciate the cleaner fill.



This lengthy list of rules may look daunting, but don't panic: The gist of it can be summed up very quickly. You're looking to create a set of three or more related entries, each one 9 to 15 letters in length. If you have an even number of entries, they need to pair off by length (example: 10/10, 11/11). If you have an odd number of entries, the unpaired entry must be of odd length (example: 14/14, 13). The total number of letters in all the entries should be at least 39 to 40. And your set needs to be consistent. That doesn't sound so bad now, does it?

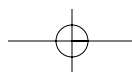
## Breaking the Rules

If you're wondering whether the rules I presented in the previous section can ever be broken, the answer is yes. I've made crossword puzzles with fewer than 39 to 40 letters in the theme. I've also made crossword puzzles with nonsymmetrically placed theme entries. And if you've solved Puzzle 22, "Brand Id-N-tity," you may have noticed that it contains unthemed entries that are longer than the shortest theme entries. So what gives? Is disregarding the rules okay?

Not necessarily. The rules I present are good general advice, and 99 percent of the time you want to follow them. But once in a blue moon you'll think of a theme that won't work unless you disobey a rule or two. At that point, you have to decide whether your theme is clever enough to make an editor overlook the fact that you're breaking the rules. (In general, a theme needs to be *exceedingly* clever before an editor will overlook broken rules.)

Knowing why a rule was invented in the first place can help you gauge its importance. The rule that theme entries should be the longest entries in the puzzle, for instance, was meant to help solvers identify the theme entries. In Puzzle 22, however, all the theme entries' clues contain a recognizable element (like "dom-S-ticated" and "fam-L-y"). Solvers should be able to identify the theme entries in *that* puzzle by examining the clues, so I don't feel too bad about ignoring the longest-entry rule.

Will an editor buy this argument? Well, maybe and maybe not. That's the risk you take when you break the rules.



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### *Must Puzzles Have Themes?*

You might be thinking to yourself: “I’ve seen puzzles without themes before. Why don’t I make one of *those* for my first puzzle, and then I won’t have to worry about all these nitpicky rules regarding themes?”

Well, unthemed puzzles — or *themeless*, as they’re generally known — do exist. But if you’ve never made a puzzle before, I strongly advise you to start with a themed puzzle for a number of reasons:

- ✓ **Having a theme gives you a logical starting point when filling the grid.** If this is your first time creating a puzzle, the unrestricted freedom of a blank themeless grid is more likely to be daunting than exhilarating. Arranging a set of theme entries within a 15x15 grid creates a framework that you can build on.
- ✓ **Themeless puzzles have more stringent grid requirements.** Editors generally require themeless puzzles to be more open, with fewer black squares and fewer, longer grid entries. These provisions make the grid-filling process more difficult — and if you’ve never done it before, this task is tough enough already.
- ✓ **Themeless puzzles are supposed to be for connoisseurs.** You know how *The New York Times* crossword puzzle is fairly easy on Monday but gets tougher and tougher as the week progresses? Well, you’ll only see themeless puzzles on Fridays and Saturdays. They’re meant to be as tough as nails, with clues that are tricky yet fair. If you’ve never written clues before, a themeless puzzle is *not* a good place to start! Easier clues are easier to write, generally.

If you’re still determined to start with a themeless puzzle, you can find a discussion of them in Chapter 2. But don’t say I didn’t warn you!

### *Exploring Different Types of Themes*

Crossword puzzle themes vary so widely that trying to categorize them can be a frustrating task. Every time you think you’ve developed a precise classification system, along comes another platypus. I *do* believe dividing themes into types is worthwhile, as a means of getting a toehold on the subject. However, keep in mind that the dividing lines between types aren’t always clear-cut. Some themes may borrow freely from two or more types; some themes may not fit any of the types. It’s the nature of the business, I’m afraid!

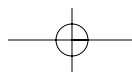
#### *Quotes and quips*

In a *quote puzzle*, the theme entries form a famous quote when read in order. This type of theme is among the easiest to make because the author of the quote does most of your work for you. Puzzle 3 shows a typical quote puzzle: The theme entries I HAD A MONUMENTAL / IDEA THIS MORNING / BUT I DIDN’T LIKE IT form a quote by Samuel Goldwyn.

In general, choose funny quotes for your puzzles. Inspirational or profound quotes can seem a little high-flown in this venue. Crossword puzzles are meant to be entertainment, first and foremost, and the best way to entertain your solvers is to make them laugh.

#### *Them’s the breaks*

If every funny quote in the world could be made into a quote puzzle, the crossword market would be inundated with them. As it turns out, however, only a small percentage of quotes



are usable. Consider the Kenneth Tynan quote, “A critic is a man who knows the way but can’t drive the car.” This quote contains 45 letters, just like the Samuel Goldwyn quote above — but unlike the Goldwyn quote, it doesn’t break neatly into three 15-letter entries:

```
A CRITIC IS A MAN WH
O KNOWS THE WAY BUT
CAN'T DRIVE THE CAR
```



Theme entries in quote puzzles can never contain partial words; the breaks must always occur between words. In the previous example, breaking the word WHO between two entries is a definite no-no. Quote puzzles have an additional restriction: The theme entries must all be Across entries that are arranged in the grid to read in order from left to right and from top to bottom, revealing the quote. This arrangement makes the quote more readable for solvers, but it also makes the task of finding a usable quote harder. Now the quote not only has to break into matching pieces, but it has to do so *in order*.

So how do you determine whether a given quote is usable? First, count the number of letters in the quote. For a 15x15 puzzle, you want a total of roughly 40 to 60 letters. Next, follow these instructions:

1. **Take a word or series of words (up to 15 letters) from the start of the quote and try removing the same number of letters from the end of the quote (as shown in the example that follows).** If the end piece doesn’t contain any partial words, you’ve successfully paired off two theme entries. Cross these two entries out and continue. If you weren’t able to find a matched set, the quote is unusable.
2. **If the remaining number of letters in the quote is even, you must break the entire quote into evenly matched pairs.** If you’ve crossed out the entire quote, it’s usable. Otherwise, repeat step 1 using the remainder of the quote.
3. **If the remaining number of letters in the quote is odd, the letters that don’t get paired off will form the grid’s central Across entry.** Count the letters that aren’t crossed out; if the total is 3 to 15 letters, the quote is usable. Otherwise, repeat step 1 using the remainder of the quote.

The Kenneth Tynan quote serves as an example. Here are all the possible first entries, along with matching-length entries taken from the end of the quote:

```
A CRITIC           E THE CAR
A CRITIC IS       IVE THE CAR
A CRITIC IS A     RIVE THE CAR
A CRITIC IS A MAN N'T DRIVE THE CAR
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Because all the end pieces contain partial words, this quote is unusable.

### ***Author, author!***

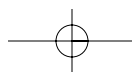


One final way to salvage a seemingly unusable quote is to put the quote’s author into the puzzle as a theme entry to see whether that helps the quote break evenly. The author’s name should be the *final* theme entry because that’s how quotes are always presented in print media: quote first, author last. Puzzle 5, “Taking an Oath,” shows a quote that wouldn’t have been usable if the author’s name hadn’t been included.

Can the Kenneth Tynan quote be salvaged using this method? “Kenneth Tynan” would need to be the puzzle’s final theme entry, so a matching-length entry would need to be taken from the front of the quote:

```
A CRITIC IS A MA      KENNETH TYNAN
```

Because the matching entry contains a partial word, this quote can’t be salvaged. (Of course, by now you’re probably sick to death of that Kenneth Tynan quote and secretly glad that it couldn’t be salvaged. I won’t bring it up again, I promise.)



***Finding usable quotes***

So you want to make a quote puzzle, but you don't have a usable quote. Should you grab a copy of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* and earmark every quote that breaks evenly?

I suppose you could, but I don't recommend it. That ground has already been tromped flat by too many other constructors — and anyway, your main criterion for picking a quote should be its entertainment value, not its ability to break into matching pieces. If you really want to go hunting for quotes to use, try to find sources that most people wouldn't be familiar with or sources that present recent quotes by today's celebs.



The best approach, however, is simply to take quotes as you find them. I rarely go looking for quotes, but if I'm reading a book or a magazine and I spot a quote I like, I automatically break it down in my head to see whether it's usable. (Okay, so it's a strange habit. What can I say?)

***A quick word on quips***

*Quip puzzles* are similar in structure to quote puzzles. The only difference is that the puzzle's creator is also the author of the "quote" (usually a joke or a riddle). Puzzle 6, "Future Shock," and Puzzle 7, "More of the Same," are examples of quip puzzles.

Authoring your own quip has an obvious advantage — you can subtly manipulate the wording so the quip breaks evenly. The key word here, though, is subtly. Don't resort to bizarre word choices or unnatural sentence structures to make a quip work. A good rule of thumb is, if you wouldn't phrase the joke that way when telling it to your friends, don't phrase it that way in a puzzle either.

Editors are usually less enthusiastic about quip puzzles than they are about quote puzzles, if only because celebrated wits and pundits generally write better material than John Q. Puzzlemaker. Don't let this discourage you if you have a genuinely good one to tell. But if the best thing that can be said about your joke is that it fits neatly into a crossword grid, you probably ought to give it a miss.

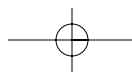
***Categories***

When I was a kid, our family used to play a game called "Categories" on long road trips. (I also played it as a drinking game in college — but enough of this pointless reminiscing.) Someone in the group would name a category, and then we'd take turns naming objects that fit the category. If you couldn't think of one, you were out of the game. Play continued until only one player remained — or until everyone got sick of playing it (or got sick from playing it), whichever came first.

The basic idea of Categories has found its way into crossword puzzle themes in a variety of ways. The Categories-style theme is probably the most prevalent type of theme, primarily because it's so flexible. Its variations can *seem* very different, even when the underlying structure is mostly the same. You may be surprised to find out how many seemingly far-out themes are really just Categories themes livened up by clever theme clues. (I talk more about writing clever theme clues in "Giving Your Theme a Bit of Oomph" later in this chapter.)

***Channeling Family Feud***

In the most basic Categories-style theme, you think of a category and then brainstorm a set of items that fit the category. These items become your theme entries. It's kind of like playing *Family Feud* by yourself: You're trying to come up with the top three or more answers to a question that reads "Name something that such-and-such." (Of course, you're also obliged to come up with the question — so now you're both a contestant *and* a writer on *Family Feud*.)



Consider the question “Name a mammal.” Is that a good question? No, for two reasons. First, the question is overly broad — too many possible answers exist, and with the exception of “man,” none of them really stand out. Second, the question is very dull. A good Categories question invites the listener to think up examples; that particular question sounds like a tiresome exercise from a third-grade science class.

Another aspect of *Family Feud* that’s worth noting: People are naturally drawn to the *best* answers. If you compile a list and leave off the #1 answer, everyone’s going to wonder why it’s not there. Likewise, if you put a dubious or obscure answer on your list, everyone’s going to wonder why you included *that* (especially if a more obvious answer is *not* included).



So, to recap: You’re looking for a category that’s inherently interesting and has relatively few good answers — most of which are included in your puzzle. In the ideal situation, the theme entries in your puzzle represent the *only* good answers — but this situation doesn’t happen often.

Puzzle 8, “Car Carriers,” is a very pure example of the *Family Feud*-style puzzle. The category is “Items found in a glove box,” and all the theme entries are clued simply as {Glove box item}. You only rarely want to use this approach — if the theme clues are customized to fit their entries, the puzzle’s more fair to the solver (and usually more entertaining, too).

A better example of this style is Puzzle 9, “Trek-nology.” The category here is “Futuristic devices from the original *Star Trek*,” a more interesting category (at least to me) than “Items in a glove box.” Each device is clued by a matter-of-fact description of its function.

What really elevates the “Trek-nology” puzzle is that it includes nearly every major *Star Trek* gizmo you can think of. (The only gizmo I can think of that *isn’t* included is the COMMUNICATOR, which was the *Star Trek* equivalent to the flip-phone.) In part, this means I chose my category well: The question had relatively few good answers. I also was exceedingly lucky because the good answers that *did* exist matched up lengthwise, so I could fit them all in a puzzle.

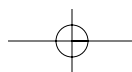
What would I have done if they *hadn’t* matched up? I wouldn’t have made the puzzle at all. You have to be prepared for that: The answer lengths aren’t always going to cooperate. When they don’t, the proper approach is *not* to pad out your puzzle with obscure answers. Discard that category and find a new one.

### ***The sum of the parts***

In most Categories-style puzzles, the items that fit the category are not themselves the theme entries. Each one merely forms *part* of a theme entry. In Puzzle 10, for instance, each theme entry begins with a waterfowl (GOOSE PIMPLES, DUCK AND COVER, SWAN DIVES, BOOBY TRAP).

The brainstorming process for such a puzzle is fairly obvious. First you think up a category. Then you come up with a list of words that fit the category — preferably short words (say, in the three- to nine-letter range). For each word on this list, you think up some phrases that start with, end with, or otherwise contain that word. A computer dictionary or a Franklin Crossword Puzzle Solver can be a big help with this part of the search. Finally, you choose a subset of these phrases that are interesting and, when taken as a group, consistent. (Theme consistency is a major issue when choosing entries for these sorts of puzzles. I address this issue in-depth in “Keeping Your Theme Consistent” later in the chapter.) As always, the entries you choose must match up lengthwise.

Puzzle 10 follows all of these rules — but if you were to argue that it’s still a pretty dull puzzle, I wouldn’t disagree. A more interesting approach is shown by Puzzle 11, “Under Where?” Each theme entry ends with a word that means “underwear” (LEGAL BRIEFS, SHADOWBOXERS, LATE BLOOMERS, DESK DRAWERS), though none of the resulting entries



have anything to do with underwear. The theme clues, however, redefine the entries as if they *do* refer to underwear — so, for instance, DESK DRAWERS becomes {Underwear worn at the office?}.



This trick is relatively common when cluing theme entries: The actual definition is ignored in favor of a jokey definition. Solvers of Puzzle 11 are never actually given a proper definition of DESK DRAWERS, but the hints in the jokey definition, combined with the familiarity of the phrase, are enough to steer them toward the answer. (The question mark at the end of the clue is an additional hint — it indicates that the definition being offered shouldn't be taken too seriously.)

For this trick to work, the theme entries' real meanings must be unrelated to the subject being joked about. COTTON BRIEFS, for instance, would be a lousy entry for Puzzle 11 because it *already* refers to underwear — so how can it be redefined? Also, because the solver never gets accurate definitions of the theme entries, they need to be *very* familiar phrases. If you even have to ask whether a given phrase is familiar enough to use, it probably isn't.

### ***Punny business***

Who doesn't love a good pun? Well, actually some people absolutely despise them. But I'm not going to worry about those people right now because punning has a long tradition in crossword puzzles.

If you *like* puns, you may be dismayed to hear that you can't just write three brilliant but unrelated puns and make them your theme entries. "Puns" isn't a theme — at least not by itself. You have to tie your puns together with a common thread — which brings us back to Categories.

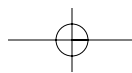
Nearly all punny crossword puzzles are, in fact, Categories puzzles. To make one, you simply pick a category, think up a bunch of words that fit the category, and then try to make puns out of them. The target words must become the funny parts of your puns — that is, the parts acting as sound-alikes of other words. THE EYEFUL TOWER is a fine pun if your target word is EYEFUL, because that's where the sound-alike is (eyeful/Eiffel). However, if your target word is TOWER, THE EYEFUL TOWER doesn't work. You need something such as OUR DARKEST TOWER.

Puzzle 12, "The Puns Who Came to Dinner," is an example of a punny crossword. The category here is "dinner," so each pun hinges on the name of a food eaten for dinner (TACO, PIZZA, FONDUE, POTPIE). The puns in this puzzle are rather freewheeling because the resulting entries (such as I FONDUE BE ALONE) don't necessarily make sense. They *sound* like familiar phrases but look like gibberish. When cluing entries of this type, define them as the phrases they sound like, but also incorporate a reference to the category to underline the pun. In Puzzle 12, for example, I FONDUE BE ALONE is clued as {Greta Garbo's dinner speech?} (As always, the question mark alerts the solver that some funny business is going on.)

When the resulting entries aren't required to make sense, you can come up with some pretty amazing sound-alikes. That said, entries that read like gibberish are always vaguely dissatisfying. An alternate approach is to think up puns that *don't* read like gibberish and clue them as what they appear to mean. In Puzzle 13, "Bauble-headed," the entry PRACTICAL CHOKER is clued at face value: {Necklace that serves a purpose?} No reference to the original meaning of "practical joker" is evident.



A word of warning: You can clue puns by their old meanings or by their apparent "new" meanings, but you can't do both in the same puzzle. If some of your puns are newly interpretable and some aren't, clue them all as if they aren't.



### More Categories variations

Did I mention that Categories-style themes are exceedingly flexible? The following list describes more ways to produce viable themes using categories.

- ✔ **Use “words that commonly precede \_\_\_” as a category.** Puzzle 14, “All Washed Up,” shows how this sort of puzzle works: The first words in the theme entries (*PIPE DREAMS*, *VACUUM TUBE*, *STREET NAME*, *DRY-ROASTED*) all commonly precede the keyword *CLEANER*. (Notice that *CLEANER* also appears in the grid, clued as {Theme of this puzzle}. Including the keyword in the grid is a good idea, preferably at a high-profile spot such as the central entry or the last Across entry.) I don’t care much for these sorts of puzzles — they’re too easy to make and not particularly fun to solve — but they do crop up fairly often. A more interesting version of the same idea is demonstrated by Puzzle 15, “Wood Finish.” Here, *both* of the words in each theme entry (*BED/SPRING*, *BACK/DRAFT*, *SCORE/CARD*, *CHESS/GAME*) commonly precede the keyword *BOARD*. Obviously you have to choose a very flexible keyword to make this work, but the results are a bit more satisfying.
- ✔ **Pick entries that have something else in common besides your category.** Categories are often too broad anyway, so limiting your pool of choices is a good idea. Don’t just make a puzzle of phrases containing birds — limit yourself to movie titles containing birds or sports team names containing birds. Narrower themes are always more elegant. Puzzle 16, “Staying in Shape,” demonstrates this technique. The theme entries (*ANTARCTIC CIRCLE*, *BERMUDA TRIANGLE*, *TIANANMEN SQUARE*) are unified in two ways: They’re all place names, and they all end in geometric shapes. This technique works for punny crossword puzzles as well. The theme entries in Puzzle 17, “Name of the Game,” involve puns based on card games — but I’ve limited myself to sound-alikes of famous names (*BOB EUCHRE*, *MONTE HALL*, *JAMES K. POKER*, *FARO FAWCETT*). The uniformity of the theme entries allows for uniform theme clues as well: *BOB EUCHRE* becomes a {Card-playing sportscaster?}, and *MONTE HALL* is a {Card-playing game show host?}
- ✔ **Use two categories at once.** This trick is rather difficult to pull off, but the results can be quite interesting. Generate *two* lists based on categories and try to form common phrases by taking a word from each list and combining them. Puzzle 18, “Colorful Personalities,” shows an example of this type. The theme entries combine colors and body parts (with *-ED* added on the ends of the body parts): *BLUEBLOODED*, *BLACKHEARTED*, *WHITE-LIVERED*, *GRAYBEARDED*, *GREEN-EYED*, *RED-HANDED*. I’ve interpreted “body parts” very loosely here, but the tightness of the rest of the theme affords me some latitude.

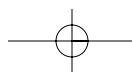
### Pattern matching

One of the puzzles in this book (Puzzle 19, “Five by Five,” if you must know) has the words *OUTREACHES*, *PLAINTIFFS*, *GLOSSARIES*, and *DETERGENTS* as its theme entries. If you haven’t solved the puzzle, this list may seem a little mystifying. What the heck do those four entries have in common?

The answer is that each one splits neatly into two five-letter words: *OUTREACHES*, *PLAINTIFFS*, *GLOSSARIES*, *DETERGENTS*. This is an example of *pattern matching* — spotting connections between seemingly unrelated words and phrases.



Puzzle 20, “Possessed,” shows another example of pattern matching. Each of the five theme entries has a *DEMON* inside it — that is, the letters *D-E-M-O-N* in that order. In making the puzzle, I avoided entries such as *DEMONOLOGY* and *SPEED DEMON* because it isn’t surprising that *those* entries contain *DEMON*. I was more interested in entries that contained unexpected *DEMONS*, such as *CLAUDE MONET* and *MADE MONEY*. (*PANDEMONIUM* is an exception — it’s actually no coincidence that *that* word contains *DEMON*. But I couldn’t



resist including a word for “hell” among the theme entries, so I made it the *last* theme entry — a high-impact spot. If one of your theme entries is unusually clever or appropriate, consider saving it for last.)

So how do you come up with a pattern-matching theme? Unfortunately, there’s no tried-and-true method. For the “Possessed” puzzle, I happened to notice that CLAUDE MONET contained DEMON — which conjured up the idea of possession (okay, so maybe I’ve seen *The Exorcist* one too many times). For Puzzle 21, “From Point A to Point B,” I started with the title: I noticed that a phrase that started with A and ended with B (like ADAM’S RIB) could be said to go “from point A to point B.” So I brainstormed a list of A . . . B phrases and made a puzzle out of them.

Sometimes I spot two or more words or phrases that fit a certain pattern, which immediately sets me to wondering whether any *other* words or phrases fit my pattern. Puzzle 22, “Brand Id-N-tity,” is one such example: After seeing RICE-A-RONI and MALT-O-MEAL in quick succession at the grocery store, I began wondering how many other products had an isolated single letter in the middle of their names. Luckily, I was able to find quite a few such products; and even more luckily, they matched up lengthwise.



Am I just peculiarly lucky that all these theme ideas occur to me in idle moments? Actually, I spend my idle moments looking for material — and you should do the same. Stuck in a waiting room? Flip through the magazines. Standing in line at the movies? Check out the film titles. For each word or phrase you see, ask yourself: Can it be a theme entry in a puzzle? If so, what might the other theme entries be? Strange as it may sound, that’s how I get most of my ideas.

## Backward thinking

One of the more unusual ways to generate a theme is to write the theme *clues* first, and then think up entries for them. Puzzle 23, “Hit List,” and Puzzle 24, “Shades of Meaning,” show two very simple examples of this type, each involving one-word theme clues. In “Hit List,” the same clue (PUNCH) is used repeatedly; in “Shades of Meaning,” the five clues (RED, YELLOW, GREEN, BLUE, PURPLE) form a cohesive set. Notice that the theme clues are presented in all-caps text in both puzzles. For these sorts of puzzles, tradition mandates that one-word clues be written in all-caps.

## Staying in fashion

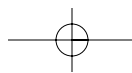
Puzzle 20, “Possessed,” is actually a new spin on a very old type of theme, in which all the theme entries share a word in common. A sample puzzle of this type may contain the entries BLUEGRASS, CRABGRASS, GRASS SKIRT, and GRASS-ROOTS.

If you haven’t seen too many puzzles of this type in *The New York Times* recently, there’s a reason: They’re outdated. The world of puzzles, like the world of fashion, is subject to trends. Uniting theme entries by a common word probably seemed like a good idea when themes were first being invented (which was some time *after* crossword puzzles were invented — the earliest puzzles had no themes). But now that themes have gotten more sophisticated, the repeated-word style is *passé*. Nowadays, most editors’ spec sheets specifically warn

you *against* using repeated words in your theme, unless they’re small words like IS or AND.

Another type of puzzle that’s losing ground is the “topic” puzzle, in which the theme entries loosely relate to a given topic — like HAIL TO THE CHIEF, EXECUTIVE ORDER, and THE OVAL OFFICE in a puzzle about the presidency. This type of puzzle was once exceedingly common but now is mostly used for puzzles run on holidays, with the holiday acting as the topic.

The point of all this is that you need to stay in fashion. If you want to know what sorts of puzzles contemporary editors are looking for, study contemporary puzzles — not some old crossword book from the ’70s. (Trust me, those ’70s crossword fashions are *not* coming back.)



If Puzzles 23 and 24 seem pretty dull, the reason is that using one-word theme clues is severely limiting. A more interesting example is Puzzle 25, “Business Directory.” The theme clues here are common two-word phrases ending in “business,” and the corresponding entries are businesses that jokingly fit the clues, like BOOK STORE for {Volume business?} and HAIR SALON for {Do business?}. To make the puzzle, I merely compiled a long list of two-word phrases ending in “business” and then tried to match a suitable business to each one.

You may have noticed that {Book store?} could just as easily be a theme clue for the entry VOLUME BUSINESS. So why didn’t I construct the puzzle that way? Because then all of the theme entries would end in BUSINESS, and using lengthy repeated words in theme entries is a no-no. The backward approach was necessary to make this theme work.

Backward thinking also created Puzzle 26, “Truth in Advertising.” This puzzle is obviously a rather outré example of the genre, but the basic idea is unchanged: I began by thinking up a bunch of claims regularly heard in infomercials, which became my clues. Then I thought up humorous endings for them, which became my theme entries. To show that the theme entries were meant to *finish* the statements made in the clues, I ended each clue with an ellipsis (...).



Note that one of the entries in “Truth in Advertising” is broken across two slots. Breaking theme entries isn’t a trick you want to use too often, but it comes in handy every once in a while. I talk more about abnormal theme entry placement in Chapter 2.

## Word manipulation

There are two types of car owners: The ones who would just as soon never look under the hood, and the ones who can’t be restrained from poking around under there. If you’re one of the latter types, you’ll probably enjoy the next section, which is all about tinkering around with words.

Puzzle 27, “On/Off Switch,” shows a simple example of such tinkering (which I’ll hereafter refer to as *word manipulation*, to make it sound more lofty and refined). Each theme entry contains the letter sequences O-N and O-F-F, which have had their positions switched within the grid. Thus, the answer COFFEE SPOON appears as CONEESPOOFF, while COFFIN BONES appears as CONINBOFFES.

I wouldn’t call “On/Off Switch” a particularly *good* example of word manipulation, simply because the resulting entries look like alphabet soup. In general, word manipulation is more effective if your alterations produce new words and phrases, not unreadable gibberish.

### Types of transformations

The following list shows several ways to transform words into new words. This list isn’t complete by any means, but it’ll help get you started.

- ✓ *Anagrams* are words formed by rearranging the letters of other words. TRIFLE and FILTER are anagrams. So are DECAGRAM and CARD GAME.
- ✓ *Reversals* are words that become new words when read backward. LOOTER and RETOOL are reversals. So are WONTON and NOT NOW.
- ✓ *Additions* are formed by adding one or more letters to the beginning, middle, or end of a word to create a new word. Adding F to UTILITY, for instance, produces FUTILITY, and placing TP inside SHOUT produces SHOTPUT. The process also works in reverse: You can turn LOCUST into LOCUS by removing the T.

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- ✓ *Homophones* are words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings. PEDAL and PEDDLE are homophones. So are CITE, SITE, and SIGHT.
- ✓ *Spoonerisms* are phrases that transpose the initial sounds of two words. TAX YEAR and YAK'S TEAR are spoonerisms. So are BLUE CRABS and CREW BLABS.

Puzzles 28 through 31 feature a variety of word-manipulation themes based on the transformations shown above.

### *How a transformation becomes a theme*

Suppose you're sitting around watching *Ren and Stimpy*, and you notice that "Ren" is a homophone for the word "wren." This leads, naturally, to the idea of a TV show called WREN AND STIMPY about a stupid cat whose best friend is a songbird. So now you want to make a puzzle featuring WREN AND STIMPY — but what will the other theme entries be?

Most word-manipulation themes begin this way: not with the exact transformation, but with a single entry that you'd like to use. Now the task is to back-calculate what the transformation *should* be and come up with more entries to fit it.

You may be thinking that because you began with a homophone, your theme is "phrases containing homophones." But that's an extremely broad theme, and most editors aren't going to be comfortable with it. You need to narrow your focus.

One way to do that is to impose a category on your transformation. WREN AND STIMPY is an alteration of a TV show title, so you could limit yourself to "TV show titles altered by a homophone." Or, if you're really feeling brave, you could try "cartoon show titles altered by a homophone." (Remember: The narrower your theme is, the more editors will like it.)

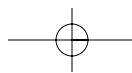
Alternately, you could mimic your one entry's transformation as closely as possible when creating the other entries. Forgetting about homophones for the moment, you may decide that your theme is "phrases that take on new meanings when you stick a W in front." That's suitably narrow and still accommodates WREN AND STIMPY. Find a few more phrases that work (how about WELDER HOSTEL?), and you'll be ready to roll.

Then again, you may decide that "words starting with R that have homophones starting with WR" is the basis of your theme. In that case, you'd begin by compiling a list of R-words that fit the bill (RACK/WRACK, RING/WRING, and so on). Then you'd find common phrases containing the R-words, substitute in the WR-words, and see whether the resulting phrases were still readable. This approach is the exact one that I used when making Puzzle 31, "Wrong Spelling." The theme looks tight from the front — you'd never guess by looking at it that I was merely floundering around for a way to use WREN AND STIMPY.

## *Gimmicks*

If you're a regular solver of *The New York Times* puzzle, you may have noticed that the really bizarre puzzles appear on Thursdays. That's not to say that *all* Thursday puzzles are bizarre — indeed, they're often perfectly normal. But experienced solvers know to be vigilant on Thursday, because the puzzle just may have a gimmick.

*Gimmick puzzles* are creatively eccentric. They bend the rules of puzzlemaking in some way, requiring solvers to deduce *which* rules have been broken and *how*. Perhaps some entries read in unusual directions. Or some squares contain numbers instead of letters. Or some entries hop over a black square and continue on the other side.



## The British Invasion

If you're intrigued by anagrams, homophones, and other types of wordplay, you really ought to try some British-style crossword puzzles, also known as *cryptics*. They're chock-full of that stuff. You don't have to go across the

pond to find them, either: They appear in mainstream magazines such as *The Atlantic* and *Harper's*, in puzzle magazines such as *Games* and *Dell Champion Puzzles*, and even (occasionally) in Sunday's *The New York Times*.

Of course, the above-mentioned gimmicks have all been used many times in many different ways. Just because a gimmick has been used before doesn't mean you can't reuse it; gimmicks get reused all the time. With so many constructors laboring to think up gimmicks, it'd be surprising if they didn't. Still, the best gimmicks are always the ones that *haven't* become familiar yet — the ones waiting to be discovered, you might say.

Puzzle 32, "Who's Minding the Store," and Puzzle 33, "Dead Ringers," are examples of *rebus puzzles*. In this familiar gimmick, certain squares contain a sequence of letters (known as the *rebus*) rather than just one. Many editors set a three-letter limit on rebuses, so solvers won't have to write in teeny-tiny letters. Using longer rebuses is okay if they're drawable — like BELL in the "Dead Ringers" puzzle. When rebus puzzles require the solver to draw pictures, however, the image needs to be both easy to draw and easy to recognize. Most people can't draw a DEER and wouldn't necessarily recognize a tiny drawing of a STICK as a stick, so neither of those would make good rebuses.

Rebus puzzles ignore a lot of standard puzzle rules besides the obvious one-letter-per-square rule. The theme entries aren't always the puzzle's longest entries; they're not always symmetrically placed; and they frequently contain repeated words (as with MOM AND POP and MR. MOM in Puzzle 32, "Who's Minding The Store?"). Editors overlook these flaws because creating a rebus puzzle that doesn't have them is often impossible.



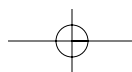
Many people think that rebuses are the be-all and end-all of constructor cleverness, but that's not really true. A rebus can be enjoyable in the same way that a clever camera trick in a movie can be enjoyable; but like any trick, rebuses get tedious with overuse. Don't expect an editor to swoon over your puzzle just because it's a rebus puzzle. Editors see plenty of rebus puzzles. What they're *hoping* to see are well-constructed puzzles — of any genre.

Puzzle 34, "Full Names," is another example of a gimmick puzzle. Each theme clue asks for a full name, but the theme entries appear to be last names only — until you realize that the shaded spaces in each entry are spelling out the first names. Editors usually don't mind incorporating odd elements such as shaded squares into a puzzle to accommodate a gimmick — assuming, of course, that they like the gimmick. If you're using shaded squares to spell HI MOM in an otherwise normal grid, don't expect any editor to support you.

Puzzle 35, "Vowel Lines," is surely the oddest gimmick puzzle in this book. The grid is divided into five horizontal sections, each of which uses a different vowel exclusively. Where are the theme entries? Well, maybe they're *all* theme entries. It's kind of hard to say.

## Keeping Your Theme Consistent

A common IQ test question is to present a group of objects and ask which one doesn't fit with the others. Those questions always bedeviled me as a kid: I'd come up with a logical answer, but it was never the one the testmaker had in mind. I always thought you could come up with a logical argument for *each* object, if you thought about it long enough.



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This kind of ambiguity is one of the reasons that theme consistency can be a thorny topic. Puzzle editors themselves aren't particularly consistent when deciding what's consistent and what isn't. Editors will sometimes let minor inconsistencies go if a theme is particularly elegant or clever.

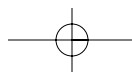


A further complication is that the *appearance* of inconsistency is usually what matters, not the actuality. Editors don't want solvers noticing an "odd man out" among the theme entries. In puzzles with four or more theme entries, having some inconsistency is okay as long as you avoid the odd man out. Puzzle 17, "Name of the Game," for instance, includes two puns on first names (FARO FAWCETT, MONTE HALL) and two on last names (JAMES K. POKER, BOB EUCHRE). By having at least two examples of each type, this theme avoids the appearance of inconsistency.

A theme can be inconsistent in so many ways that listing them all is nearly impossible. But Table 1-1 shows a good variety of examples. To compile the table, I've borrowed themes from the puzzles in this book, replacing one entry in each theme with an inconsistent entry (denoted by italics). The rightmost column explains why the italicized entry is a misfit.

**Table 1-1 Inconsistent Themes Based on Puzzles in This Book**

<i>Puzzle</i>	<i>Theme Entries</i>	<i>Why the Theme Is Inconsistent</i>
10	GOOSE PIMPLES, DUCK AND COVER, BOOBY TRAP, <i>SWANKIEST</i>	SWANKIEST may start with SWAN, but the two words aren't related; the spelling is just a coincidence. In the other three entries, the bird's name is distinct.
13	PRACTICAL CHOKER, THAT'S MORE LOCKET, TIEPIN POOLS, <i>STUD MUFFINS</i>	The word STUD fits the jewelry theme, but it doesn't form a pun in the phrase STUD MUFFINS. It merely stands in for itself.
14	PIPE DREAMS, VACUUM TUBE, DRY-ROASTED, <i>EASY STREET</i>	The word that precedes CLEANER is at the front of the first three entries but at the end of the last entry.
19	OUTREACHES, PLAINTIFFS, GLOSSARIES, <i>SHOPSOILED</i>	SHOPS + OILED isn't as interesting a division as the first three, because SHOPS and SHOPSOILED are related words.
27	CONEESSPOOFF, CONINBOFFES, LIAISOFFONICERS, <i>PERSOFFONASHION</i>	PERSOFFONASHION (the altered version of PERSON OF FASHION) has an extra ON at the end that hasn't been "switched."
29	HELLO HATH NO FURY, SEVEN DAYS IN MAYO, LEGO WARMER, <i>CELLO PHONE</i>	In the first three entries, the words with the added O's sound roughly like their O-less counterparts minus the final sound. CELL and CELLO, however, sound noticeably different. Also, with CELLO PHONE added, three of the entries begin with the added-O word — making SEVEN DAYS IN MAYO seem out of place.
31	WRESTING PLACE, WREN AND STIMPY, BUM WRAP, NAPKIN WRING, <i>HUMAN WRITES</i>	In the first four entries, a word starting with R becomes a new word by the simple addition of a W. The transition from HUMAN RIGHTS to HUMAN WRITES is more complicated.



## Giving Your Theme a Bit of Oomph

Nearly all crossword clues are straight definitions. Even when a clue is written to be deliberately misleading, like {Head case?} for HELMET, the clue still contains a workable definition of the target word.

Theme clues are the exception to this rule. Quite often they contain *no* reference to the target-entry's dictionary definition. That's not to say that they can be completely nonsensical; they should provide some hint as to what the entry is. But the nature of that hint is up to you.

Of course, you *can* use straightforward definitions for your theme clues — but you'll be wasting a rare opportunity. As you've probably noticed by now, you have to follow a lot of nitpicky rules when making crossword puzzles. Comparatively speaking, the rules governing theme clues are fewer and more lenient, and offer you a chance to turn your creativity loose.

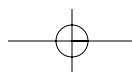
Puzzle 36, "Comparatively Famous," shows an example. The theme entries are all famous people whose last names are comparatives: ANNE ARCHER, BEN STILLER, MORLEY SAFER, BILLY WILDER. These entries can be clued normally, but because I *can* call attention to the comparatives, why not do so? Thus I clued ANNE ARCHER as {More roguish actress?}, and MORLEY SAFER as {More cautious newsman?}. As theme clues go, these clues are actually rather tame, but they do transcend the normal definitions. {More roguish actress?} would not ordinarily be a valid clue for ANNE ARCHER. The clue is valid here because it's a theme clue and because the other theme clues follow the same pattern.

The theme clues in Puzzle 37, "Products of the Tabloids," are even more lively. The theme itself, "product names that start with MR.," is rather dry; the theme clues, however, assume that the various Misters are real people and go on to embroil them in tabloid-style scandals. Each clue takes the form of a tabloid story, complete with a kicker, a headline, and a quote from a shocked eyewitness. The theme entries represent missing parts of the headlines, indicated by blanks in the clues. Notice how the scandals tie in neatly with the products themselves — MR. BUBBLE has been caught in a tub with a naked lady, while MR. CLEAN is a victim of domestic abuse because a housewife "mops the floor" with him. Imagine how much duller this puzzle would be if the theme clues were straightforward definitions, like {Children's bath product} for MR. BUBBLE.



Incidentally, the lively clues for "Products of the Tabloids" were not an afterthought. Trying to write lively theme clues after the entries have already been chosen is a losing proposition — it *can* work but usually doesn't. A better recipe for success is to figure out how to clue your theme entries before you're done picking them; that way, you have a better idea of which ones to pick. When I'm done choosing my puzzle's theme entries, I usually write the clues for them at that moment. I have to write them sometime, and I've already turned my brain toward the problem — so why not?

Puzzle 38, "Costumeless Party," demonstrates another creative application of theme clues: storytelling. With the exception of the first entry, the puzzle's theme is a simple "Categories" theme based on common Halloween costumes (DEMON, PIRATE, BUM, CAT). The theme *clues*, however, tell the story of a costume party hostess whose guests keep arriving costumeless. In storytelling puzzles, the first theme entry is often used to set the scene (and thus may not fit the pattern of the other entries), whereas the last theme entry usually provides a punch line to the story. As in quote puzzles, the theme entries must all be Across entries that are arranged in order within the grid. This format is tricky to use successfully, but the results can be delightfully different from the average cookie-cutter theme.



## A Sample Brainstorming Session

The idea for Puzzle 39, “Predictions for the Celebrity Party,” came to me, fittingly, at a party. The phone rang, and someone asked the hostess whether she needed to get it. “No, Bob’ll get it,” she replied, continuing her conversation; but I was left musing about *Bob’ll*. Having been in the puzzle business for a while, I sometimes feel as if I’ve heard every homophone the English language has to offer, but *Bob’ll* and *bobble* were new ones on me. I found myself wondering: Do other first names become homophones when *’ll* is attached? And if so, can a puzzle be made out of this?

Obviously, it could. But if you’re wondering how I got from *Bob’ll* to the finished product, the following section describes the process.

### Researching the idea

The first concern was how to turn *Bob’ll* into a theme entry. By itself, BOB’LL was too short to be a theme entry and seemed incomplete. Bob will what? The quickest way to make *Bob’ll* make sense was to put a verb after it — and not just any verb, but an infinitive. “Bob’ll work” makes sense; “Bob’ll works” and “Bob’ll worked” don’t.

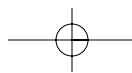
Obviously, though, I couldn’t just put *any* verb after Bob’ll. What made *Bob’ll* interesting was that it sounded like *bobble*; that concept needed to be incorporated somehow. My first thought was to put the two together: BOB’LL BOBBLE. That worked neatly for *Bob’ll*, but only because *bobble* was an infinitive verb. If other name-and-’ll combinations sounded like other parts of speech, I wouldn’t be able to use them. Also, I wasn’t crazy about the repetitive nature of BOB’LL BOBBLE.

The theme entry would be better, I realized, if I could find a common word or phrase that started with *bobble* and ended with a verb. If *bobble work* were a common phrase, for instance, then BOB’LL WORK would be a funny entry. Unfortunately, I found no common phrases that began with *bobble*. Still, the idea could work with other names. Just because I’d started with *Bob’ll* didn’t mean that I was required to use it.

Now that I had a few ways to convert name-and-’ll combinations into theme entries, the next step was to think up a big long list of them. When you’re ready to start brainstorming, an existing print or Web reference can often help you, and this case was no exception. I needed a list of common first names — so how about a baby name book or some sort of who’s-who reference? The book I actually ended up using was *Random House’s Famous Name Finder* (which I happen to own a copy of — what a coincidence!). I made my way through the first names, mentally attaching *’ll* and listening to the result. Whenever the result was a homophone, I added it to my list:

```
Abe'll (able)
Audie'll (audial)
Barry'll (burial)
Bat'll (battle)
Bob'll (bobble)
Buck'll (buckle)
...
```

When I was done, my list had about 30 pairs of homophones on it — more than I could ever possibly use. But my experience with *Bob’ll* indicated that not all of them would produce usable theme entries, so I was glad to have a long list. Now I just needed to convert my list into theme entries.



## Possibilities, possibilities

Many of the homophones on my list were verbs, so I knew that the BOB'LL BOBBLE approach would work if I chose to go that route. But I wanted to explore the other approach first. As before, I used a reference that could help me with my research: the dictionary. I merely looked up each homophone on the list, looking for words and phrases that started with that homophone and ended with a verb (or with a word that *could* be a verb, if read correctly). I wrote the usable verbs after each list entry:

```
Barry'll (burial) - vault
Bat'll (battle) - cry, fatigue, flag, plan
Cat'll (cattle) - call, drive, prod
Chuck'll (chuckle) - head
...
```

I crossed out some possibilities right away. CHUCK'LL HEAD, for instance, sounded unnatural because the verb *head* is never used by itself. You can head a company or head for the hills, but you never just *head*. Even with these duds gone, I had more than enough entries to populate a 15x15 puzzle. So how was I going to choose between them?

## Ironing it all out

Figuring out how to clue your theme entries can often help you decide which entries are worth keeping. I wasn't sure whether I'd use BARRY'LL VAULT in my puzzle — but if I did, how would I clue it? I'd need to mention a famous BARRY and then say that he WILL VAULT, without using any of those exact words. So one possible clue would be {Baseball player Bonds is going to jump?}. All of my theme clues would probably end up imitating that same format: {A famous person is going to do such-and-such}. Sounds a little like a gossip column prediction, doesn't it?

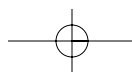
Bingo. What if I pretended that my theme entries were gossip-column predictions? Maybe a celebrity party was coming up, and a snarky gossip columnist was predicting how the stars were going to behave. That would unify the theme entries nicely.

To make this idea work, I needed to choose entries with verbs that a scandal-mongering gossip columnist would use. Many of my entries — among them BARRY'LL VAULT — weren't going to fit this new interpretation. But I had more entries than I could use anyway, so I wasn't losing anything by trying it. If this approach didn't work, I could always back up and take another tack.

As Puzzle 39 shows, I managed to find five theme entries that fit my gossip column idea while still matching up lengthwise. To make sure that solvers got the idea early, I put my strongest entry, MORT'LL SIN, near the top of the grid.



Notice that at two points in the process, I had enough usable theme entries to make the puzzle. So why didn't I? Because considering several options before choosing is always a good idea. Deciding on the exact nature of your theme is kind of like buying a car: If you don't look at more than one car, you're not making a well-informed choice. Even if you end up going with your first choice, you get a better idea of its worth by looking at others as well.



## Titling Your Puzzle — Or Not

Not all 15x15 crossword puzzles have titles. *The New York Times* puzzle, for instance, is untitled. So the first question to consider when titling your puzzle is, “Where am I planning to submit it?” If you’re submitting it to a venue that doesn’t use titles, you may as well save yourself the effort.



On the other hand, some puzzles actually *require* titles. Two examples from this book are “On/Off Switch” and “From Point A to Point B”; if you take away these puzzles’ titles, the theme entries don’t make much sense. If your puzzle requires a title, you need to send it to a venue that uses titles. Don’t expect that editors who *don’t* use titles will make an exception for your puzzle; I can tell you right now, they won’t.

If you decide to title your puzzle, don’t reuse any words from your theme entries in the title, unless they’re inconsequential words like THE. You also don’t want to be too direct; your title should playfully hint at the puzzle’s theme, not give the whole game away.

But these rules merely tell you what *not* to do. The following list offers some more positive suggestions, based on the titles that I chose for the puzzles in this book.

- ✓ **Use a common phrase.** Using a common phrase is the safest approach when writing a title. An unfamiliar title has to justify itself; a familiar phrase is its own justification. To find a suitable phrase, simply pick a word loosely related to your theme, then run through a list of phrases containing this word. Puzzle 10, for instance, has a theme based on water birds. I chose *water* for my initial word and ran through the list until I came upon “Water Wings.” Puzzle 23, “Hit List,” and Puzzle 24, “Shades of Meaning” are two more examples.
- ✓ **Use a pun.** If you’re having trouble finding a suitable common phrase for your target word, try using a pun instead. For instance, I wanted the title of Puzzle 11 to refer to underwear in some way but couldn’t find a good common phrase. So I made a pun on the word itself: “Under Where?” Ironically, the title ended up shaping the way I clued the theme entries. Punny titles are also appropriate for puzzles with punny themes, such as Puzzle 13, “Bauble-headed.”
- ✓ **Explain the nature of your theme.** In Puzzle 15, the title “Wood Finish” is meant to be taken literally: Each word in the theme entries can be “finished” by the word BOARD. The solvers shouldn’t be able to deduce the puzzle’s theme solely by the title, of course — if they can, you’ve probably given away too much. But they should ideally feel, in retrospect, as if they *could* have deduced the theme. Other examples of this approach are Puzzle 19, “Five by Five,” and Puzzle 37, “Products of the Tabloids.”
- ✓ **Let the structure of your title reflect the structure of your theme entries.** This approach is best used for very complex themes when solvers may need a little help figuring out what’s going on. In Puzzle 40, for instance, each theme entry is made up of four syllables in a one-two-two-one structure, like SHOGUN GUN SHOW and GERMANE MANGER. Trying to find a suitable title, I fiddled around with the words *syllable*, *sound*, *trade*, and *swap* without success. The resulting titles didn’t sound good and didn’t explain what was going on. In desperation, I considered calling the puzzle “One Two Two One” — it was a dull title, but at least it got the point across. Then I realized that I could reinterpret my dull title phonetically, and I was delighted when the resulting phrase made sense: “Won Two-to-One.” This title is now my favorite in the book.