

## Basic Rules of Crossword Construction

American-style crosswords meet exacting standards for symmetry and composition. These basic rules were compiled from documents prepared by Will Shortz, editor of The New York Times crossword puzzle, considered one of the premier puzzles in the U.S.

1. **Symmetry.** The pattern of black-and-white squares must be symmetrical. Generally this means that if you turn the grid upside-down, the pattern will look the same as it does right-side-up.
2. **Balance.** Black squares should occupy no more than about 16% of a grid. Squares that do not affect the number of words, but are added to make constructing easier, should be kept to a minimum, and large clumps of black squares are discouraged.
3. **Words.** The minimum word length is three letters. There should be no more than 78 words in a 15x15 grid, and 140 in a 21x21. Words may not be repeated within a grid.
4. **Interlock.** Every letter has to appear in both an Across and a Down word. Also, the grid must have all-over interlock. In other words, the black squares may not cut the grid into separate pieces. A solver, theoretically, should be able to proceed from any section of the grid to any other without having to stop and start over.
5. **Theme Placement.** Long theme entries must be symmetrically placed. If there is a major theme entry three rows down from the top of the grid, for instance, then there must be another theme entry in the same position three rows up from the bottom. As a general rule, no non-theme entry should be longer than any theme entry.
6. **Language.** Every answer must have a reference or else be in common use in everyday speech or writing. Constructors should emphasize lively words and names and fresh phrases (including phrases from everyday writing and speech, whether or not they are in the dictionary). For variety, try some of the lesser-used letters of the alphabet: J, Q, X, Z, K, W. Brand-names are acceptable if they're well-known nationally and used in moderation. Overall, the puzzle should be intelligent, literate, entertaining and well-crafted.
7. **Clues.** Clues should provide a well-balanced test of vocabulary and knowledge, ranging from classical subjects like literature, art, classical music, mythology, history, geography, etc., to modern subjects like movies, TV, popular music, sports and names in the news. Clues should be accurate, colorful and imaginative. Puns and humor are welcome. Two obscure words should never cross.

**Difficulty.** A puzzle may be made easier or more difficult to solve based on words and clues that are used. For example, a puzzle containing the word STYLUS will be more difficult than one with words like EBAY and HONEST. A puzzle can also be made more difficult based on the clues that are used. A puzzle with the word HONEST clued as "Like Abe" will be easier to solve than a puzzle where the same word is clued simply as "Frank."

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