

### Order of Operations

- 1) Email a theme query or a filled, unclued themeless grid to me (Amanda)
  - a. Please include only one theme query per email with the title in the subject. Themeless titles are a word/phrase related to one of the marquee answers followed by (Freestyle).
  - b. The USAT email address is [usatcrosswords@gmail.com](mailto:usatcrosswords@gmail.com)
  - c. Please sent puzzles as files (.cfp, .puz, .ccw)
- 2) Upon theme approval, send in an unclued grid (themed puzzles only)
  - a. Please only send one grid (choose your favorite)
- 3) Upon approval of the grid, clue the grid and send it in (1600 character count max, with spaces)
- 4) Get proofs back to review
- 5) The time between receiving a proof review and the puzzle's publication tends to be around 2-3 months.
  - a. Note: weekend puzzles are only digital and are not printed in the newspaper

Payment is \$150 per puzzle

**Non-roster constructors may submit up to 2 puzzles between the 1st and 7th of every other month – January, March, May, July, September, November. Collaborations count as 1 puzzle. Any puzzles submitted outside of this window will be returned.** If you still have outstanding puzzles from the prior submission window, you may submit two more puzzles in the new window, but please prioritize finishing the older ones.

### Themes:

- Common theme types are:
  - o Hidden Word (example: "Center Ice" title with theme answers like PSYCHIC ENERGY)
    - All of the hidden words must be the same hidden word in every theme answer
  - o Bookending word (example: "Peace Out" title with theme answers like PEANUT SAUCE)
    - The bookended word must be the same word in every theme answer
  - o Category membership (the first or last word of the theme answer belongs to a category explained by the title)
  - o Words that precede/follow (example: "Model After" title with theme answers like STARRING ROLE and SLIDING SCALE [role model, scale model])
  - o Synonyms (the first or last word of each theme answer is a synonym of a word justified by the title)
  - o Letter patterns (example: "Keep it PG" title with theme answers like PINT GLASS)
  - o Locational themes (example: "High Tea" title with vertical theme answers like GREEN THUMB)
  - o Reverse clue theme (example: three theme answers all clued as "Mercury"). The words in the grid should still feel like stand-alone, in-the-language phrases and shouldn't feel like the language style of clues
  - o Story themes (example: ROCK BOTTOM [First is the worst] CREME DE LA CREME [Second is the best] DAVID HASSELHOFF [Third is the one with the hairy chest] or three theme answers clued "Hook" "Line" and "Sinker" etc.)
  - o Hidden word/anagram or bookend themes with different words hidden + a revealer
    - If there's a revealer, please don't exceed three theme answers
  - o Feel free to query other theme types that require a revealer, so long as the theme itself is fairly simple. If your puzzle uses a revealer, please limit the number of additional theme answers to 3. Puzzles with a revealer will still also need a title. **Please include your clue for the revealer in your theme pitch.**
- We do not do Schroedinger, rebus, deletion/addition, etc. themes

- Themes typically consist of 3 or 4 theme answers, with the title serving as the revealer. If the puzzle has a revealer in the grid, please limit the additional theme answers to 3.
- Theme answers are typically 7+ letters long and should be the longest entries in the direction the theme answers are going (if across, they should be the longest across answers, etc)
- Asymmetry is allowed. If the theme set is asymmetrical, please put it in the grid as symmetrically as possible (for example, with one theme answer in the middle, and the outer two on the third lines from the top and bottom respectively, with one up against the left side and one up against the right side of the grid)
- Theme answers should be stand-alone, in-the-language phrases that can be clued straightforwardly (i.e., no A FAREWELL TO MARS). No question mark clues for the theme answers.
- There is a detailed style guide that I'm happy to provide upon request

#### **Grids:**

- The USAT crossword is the same level of difficulty every day. Puzzles should be enjoyable and solvable to people of all solving abilities, from experienced solvers to people picking up a crossword for the first time. These puzzles are not intended to be deliberately tricky or difficult.
- **USAT can only support 15x15 grids**
- Our software does not support circles in squares, shaded squares, or special characters in clues
- Themeless puzzles can be high word count, but should contain around 6 sparkly/fresh, long (around 11 letters), multi-word answers

#### **Fill:**

- Grids should generally have 78 words or less, but going up to 80 words can be acceptable occasionally. Higher word count puzzles are preferred since it will make it easier for the grids to be super smooth. Long stacks, big open sections, and bonuses are not prioritized here. Most USAT puzzles are around 76 words (including themelesses)
- Err on the side of no gunk and no compromises. Basically nothing that would be considered a "ding" will typically get through.
- There are a lot of words (and types of words) that show up frequently in crosswords but not in real life. These words are probably not the best fit for this outlet.
- Watch out for prepositional phrases that can't be clued in a straightforward way without hedging (typically these come in the form of phrasal verbs or other phrases that start or end in prepositions)
- Some things that are typically avoided: archaic words, variant spellings, plural names, obscure facts (such as scientific names for plants and animals), many prepositional phrases
- Feel free to use black squares liberally, but try not to go overboard. Ideally around 40 or fewer; 45+ is probably too much. Try not to pinch off corners or close off sections of the grid
- If you're including a trickier or more niche word (say, a term from the gaming community), make sure not to cross it with other know-it-or-you-don't things
- Prioritize having lower highs and higher lows, versus high highs and low lows in your grid. Don't sacrifice cleanliness for a really sparkly bonus answer
- Solving USAT puzzles is the best way to get an idea of what we're looking for.

#### **Things to consider when evaluating your grids prior to submission:**

- Read through the list of words in your puzzle. Are all words/phrases things a person could expect to come across in real life? ("real life" meaning outside of puzzles, academia, or some other specific niche area). Would these words be familiar to non-crossword solvers?
- Check your crossings for intersecting proper nouns, know-it-or-you-don't answers or other difficult vocabulary

- Check each individual section of the puzzle for the types of words included. Try to avoid a pileup of proper nouns (names, TV shows/movies, brands, companies, etc.) or difficult words in any given area. The ideal number is 0 – 1, but definitely no more than 2.
- Try to avoid having more than oneish abbreviations in any small corner
- Make sure all entries are in-the-language phrases that can be clued straightforwardly
- Uncommon forms of words (specifically ones that begin with RE- or end with -ER, or unusual plurals) should be avoided. For example: REHOE, EYER, and UGHS.
- Be mindful of only using words and phrases that will create a positive experience for solvers
- If you're putting people in your grid, it can be helpful to Google them first (try searching the person's name + "controversy"). This goes for putting people in your clues as well.
- Prepositional phrases that are hard to pinpoint with an easy, straightforward clue are to be avoided (e.g. USE ON, LOAN TO, SIT AT, PLAN TO, GASP AT, etc.)

#### **Clues:**

- The clue character count limit is 1600 (including spaces)
- **USAT is now allowing 1-2 question mark/misdirect clues per puzzle. Please make sure there are good footholds in the crossings.**
- Err on the side of using more contemporary references vs. more dated ones
- Try to make sure your clues sound like phrases someone would actually say in real life (for instance, "Person wearing a robe" instead of "Robe wearer")
- Make sure you haven't added a bunch of references to one section in your clues. Consider the total number of proper nouns/references between both entries and clues.
- Please ensure your clues are speaking to a diverse audience
- Feel free to explore other ways to make clues fun/interesting/unique that don't involve wordplay