In recent years, many newspapers and other publications have presented irregularly patterned crossword puzzles with a set of somewhat ambiguously worded clues. Provided for each clue are two (or more) possible answer words, usually differing from each other in only one or two letters. The solver’s problem is to select the right answer word for each clue, inserting it into the accompanying diagram. Large cash prizes are offered and paid to those who duplicate the puzzle constructor’s sometimes erratic line of thinking about the clues, submitting completely correct solutions to the publication featuring the prize puzzles.

Multiple-choice, tricky-clue crosswords have always moved me to make two observations:

1. The crossword diagram involved is in the nature of a subterfuge. It is a tawdry device to cloak what is really a perplexing problem in logic.
2. Any logologist worth his salt should be able to devise proofs for the correctness of both or all of the answer words suggested in connection with each clue — arguments and evidence carrying such an overwhelming degree of conviction as to leave no room for any possible speculation that the alternative answer or answers might have even token merit.

With these thoughts in mind, I have selected 20 typical non-crossword clues — the "non-crossword" being a suitable designation for this type of puzzle — and have worked out the devastating logic that makes one answer the only possible correct answer. Naturally, I have worked out equally foolproof arguments for both of the possible answers to each clue, that being the test of my standing as a logologist. Read on and enjoy, enjoy!

1. The punishment inflicted by an army on a soldier who DESERTED or DESERVED it would seem to be justified.

DESERTED, not DESERVED. If the punishment inflicted was deserved, it is unequivocally justified, rather than merely seeming to be so. If, however, the soldier deserted the army, the punishment would seem to be justified, in the absence of our knowledge regarding possible mitigating circumstances, such as a prolonged visit to a dying parent, in which case there could be grounds for considering the severe punishment he received more than is justified.
DESERVED, not DESERTED. If the soldier deserted the army in mitigating circumstances, such as to visit a dying parent, there could be grounds for considering the severe punishment he received more than justified. If, however, the soldier got the punishment he deserved, then that punishment would seem to be justified.

2. A bowl that has traces of SOAP or SOUP on it is clearly one that hasn’t been properly washed.

SOAP, not SOUP. The concept of washing a bowl properly includes bringing the action of washing to an end by rinsing the bowl properly. Therefore, traces of soap on the bowl are conclusive evidence of the fact that it wasn’t washed properly. Traces of soup on the bowl may be those being deposited there by the person now eating out of the bowl, and cast no reflection on the quality of its most recent washing.

SOUP, not SOAP. Since soap is used to wash a bowl properly, the fact that there are traces of soap on it is evidence that it has been washed properly in soapy water, although it may not have been rinsed or dried properly. Traces of soup, on the other hand, clearly indicate that the bowl hasn’t been washed properly.

3. Good, sturdy DOGS or DOOR will be a help in preventing burglars from breaking into the house.

DOGS, not DOOR. If the door is left open or unlocked, it will not be a help in preventing burglars from breaking into the house, no matter how sturdy it is. Good, sturdy dogs will be helpful in deterring burglars.

DOOR, not DOGS. If the dogs are chained, or not at home, they will be of no help in preventing burglars from breaking into the house, no matter how excellent they are as watchdogs. A good, sturdy door will be helpful in deterring burglars.

4. A traitor’s verbal attacks on his own country would be DISPUTED or DESPISED by patriots.

DESPRIED, not DISPUTED. The word disputed ("disagreed with, called in question") is far too mild to describe the feelings of patriots toward traitors ("persons who betray their country") or toward the verbal attacks of those traitors. It is much more realistic to say that such attacks would be despised ("regarded as contemptible or worthless") by true patriots.

DISPUTED, not DESPISED. It is the traitor, rather than his attack, who would be despised, but it is his verbal attack that would be disputed by patriots.

5. A FIRE or MINE can so easily result in an explosion.

FIRE, not MINE. A mine is an explosive charge. Accordingly, it can itself easily explode, but will not result in the explosion (of something else) unless its contingency. A fire can reach explosive proportions.

MINE, not FIRE. When a fire can result in an explosion in land. Such is the case.

6. One would naturally prefer the best friend and a bone over the best friend and a stranger.

DIG, not DOG. The word diggers, one occurrence.

ONE, who would the best friend and a bone over the best friend and a stranger.

7. One would naturally prefer the best friend and a bone over the best friend and a stranger.

TAN, not MAN. The word tan, one occurrence.

TAN, rather than as a secret society.

8. The term "BOXER" is applied to any dog that is male and a short-haired breed of dog. The term "FOX" is applied to any dog that is male and a short-haired breed of dog. These are known as "foxes" rather than as "cable to foxes".
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else) unless it comes in contact with other explosives -- a remote con-
tingency. A fire, which tends to spread rapidly and which may well
reach explosive materials, can so easily result in an explosion.

MINE, not FIRE. If there is nothing of an explosive nature around,
then a fire can't result in an explosion. A mine, in the only applicable
sense, is an explosive charge floated or anchored in the water or buried
in land. Such a mine can so easily result in an explosion.

6. One would naturally prefer a DOG or DIG that is friendly.

DIG, not DOG. If one wants the animal as a watchdog to keep out Intru-
ders, one certainly wouldn't want it to be a friendly dog. One would
naturally prefer a dig ("a verbal thrust") to be friendly rather than
malicious.

DOG, not DIG. An unfriendly dog does not fit the picture of being man's
best friend and might, upon slight provocation, attack even its owner.
One would, therefore, naturally prefer a friendly one. A dig is a cut-
ting remark and is inherently always unfriendly, even if made by some-
one whom we otherwise regard as a friend.

7. Usually, the TAN or MAN that a girl picks up on a holiday doesn't
stay with her for long.

TAN, not MAN. For all the clue says, the girl on a holiday may be a
tot with her parents, so there would be no possibility of her picking up
any man or of his staying with her for any time at all. Usually, the
tan that a girl, regardless of her age, picks up (acquires) on a holiday
doesn't stay with her for long.

MAN, not TAN. A tan is, by its very nature, a temporary acq
isition and cannot stay for very long (except in tropical climates, not mentioned
by the clue). Since the clue speaks of a girl picking up a man on a hol-
day, we know that she is old enough to do so. It is a reasonable state-
ment that holiday romances seldom become permanent.

8. The term "dog" is applicable to BOXER or FOXES.

BOXER, not FOXES. The term "dog" can be applied to foxes only if
they are males. If, as the case may be, the foxes are females, then
the term "vixen" (and not "dog") is applicable to them.

FOXES, not BOXER. A boxer is a pugilist; a derby hat; a mem-
er of a secret society in China; a worker who collects sap from trees; one
who makes boxes; one who puts things in boxes; a railroad freight car;
and a short-haired dog. The term "dog" applies only to the last of
these, not to boxers in general. Since the males of all species of foxes
are known as "dogs", and female foxes are referred to as "vixens"
rather than as "foxes", it is true to say that the term "dog" is appli-
cable to foxes (male animals).
9. A hole in SIX or SOX may make one feel ashamed.

SOX, not SIX. A hole in six may make one feel proud rather than ashamed -- if other, more expert players have done worse on that particular hole, or if one is a beginner with a usual average of eight strokes per hole. A hole in one's sox (that is, in the pair one is wearing) may make one feel ashamed, especially if it is in a visible area. A pair of sox may have only one hole; there doesn't have to be a hole in each sock.

SIX, not SOX. One can have a hole in a sock, or holes in sox (plural), but one cannot have a singular hole in plural sox. A hole in six at golf may, if it is an easy hole and one is a par player, make one feel ashamed of such a bad score on that easy hole.

10. Because he wants to BET or GET there, a racegoer may promise the taxi driver an extra large tip if he arrives at the track before the first race.

BET, not GET. The taxi driver will eventually get the racegoer to the track no matter how slowly he drives. The fact that the racegoer is willing to pay extra money to get there before the first race indicates hope of financial advantage accruing to him from his presence there, which can only come through betting on the races. The term "racegoer" is normally applied to a spectator/bettor, not to a track official, jockey, owner, trainer, or someone else with special reasons for wanting to be present at the start of the first race.

GET, not BET. The inclusive answer is get. Moreover, with bet as the answer, the clue's first six words are superfluous, because a racegoer obviously wants to bet there.

11. It is surprising what enjoyment some children get from PUZZLES or PUDDLES.

PUDDLES, not PUZZLES. It is not surprising that a child gets enjoyment from puzzles, since this is what they are intended to give. It is surprising what attraction puddles have for some children and that they get enjoyment in splashing about in them and getting themselves all wet and dirty.

PUZZLES, not PUDDLES. At some time during their development, virtually all children delight in splashing about in puddles. This universally observed fact cannot surprise anyone. What is genuinely astonishing is that children derive enjoyment from puzzles, many of which are too difficult for children to solve, and which require an attention span greater than that possessed by the average child.

12. Idle WORDS or WORKS can cause a great deal of suffering.

WORKS, not WORDS. It is a great overstatement to say that idle words can cause a great deal of suffering. In the only applicable sense, idle words need be no part of any employment.
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WORDS, not WORKS. Idle words can cause a great deal of suffering, when they hurt acutely the feelings of the individual to whom they are addressed. Naturally, there are many situations in which they do not have such an effect. Idle works or factories, implying widespread unemployment with all its attendant miseries, do inevitably cause a great deal of suffering.

13. A Dimple or Wimple is easily seen by a careful observer.

Wimple, not Dimple. Because a dimple may be on a part of the body never exposed to view when a person is clothed, that word is not an acceptable answer to the positively worded clue. A wimple is a cloth covering for the neck and sides of the face that is pinned to the hair, a band, or a hat, and worn especially by nuns, and such a covering obviously is something that is easily seen by a careful observer.

Dimple, not Wimple. In the absence of qualifying information to the contrary, it is assumed that the dimple in question is on a cheek or on the chin. Because it is only a slight indentation, a careful observer is required to see it, particularly if the dimpled person is some distance from the observer. A wimple, on the other hand, covers part of the head, and is a very distinctive garment. It is conspicuous to anyone at a distance, requiring no careful observation easily to be seen.

14. A severe drought will Kill or Wilt plants through lack of water.

Wilt, not Kill. The severe drought may not kill the plants -- the rains may come in time to save them. However, because of the severe drought, the lack of water will wilt those plants.

Kill, not Wilt. Any drought ("long period of dry weather") will be sufficient to wilt plants. A severe drought will do more than that; it will kill the plants for lack of water. What more than a severe drought could it take to kill them?

15. If she left ten candles in the box and there are now nine or none left, mother knows that someone has been helping himself.

Nine, not None. If there are none left, then 10 candles have been taken and these could have been taken, not by one person, but by a number of different persons helping themselves. The clue words "someone" and "himself" point to the answer "nine" as better fitting the case of one candy having been taken by someone helping himself.

None, not Nine. The clue words "has been helping himself" describes a continuing action, and cannot apply to the taking of a single
piece of candy, as would be the case if nine pieces remained. It follows that more than one piece has already been taken, making "none" the only possible answer. The simplest assumption is that one snacker rather than a number has been eating the candy, accounting for use of the singular word "himself" in the clue.

16. A person may well get HIT or HOT in the course of a fierce argument.

HOT, not HIT. Relatively few arguments end in a physical attack, so that the clue phrase "may well" overstates the case for "hit". In such an argument, a person may well get hot (heated or angry).

HIT, not HOT. Since the argument is fierce ("raging, savage, violent"), the person involved in it is certain, rather than merely likely, to get hot (angry or heated) during its course, and "hot" does not fit the wording of the clue. Apt is the answer word "hit", since so savage an argument may well lead to an exchange of blows.

17. A show that has COST or LOST too much money causes its backers to become anxious.

LOST, not COST. Although the show has cost too much money, it may be very obvious that it is going to be a great success and make a good profit, so there is no cause for anxiety. If, however, it has lost too much money, it will cause its backers anxiety.

COST, not LOST. A show that has lost too much money has evidently been losing money for some time, and must have caused its backers considerable anxiety long before this. Apt to the wording of the clue is the answer word "cost". If the show has cost too much money -- money out of proportion to the profits that can be expected -- it will certainly cause its backers to become anxious, for they will realize that their chances of recouping the outlay are slim.

18. Membership in a GOLF or GOOD club would appeal to one who wanted to take up the game.

GOLF, not GOOD. A good club may not be a place at which any game can be played: it may be only a night club or afford other social amenities. To the one who wants to take up the game what would appeal is a golf club where that game can be played.

GOOD, not GOLF. Membership in a golf club could not appeal to someone wanting to take up the game of tennis, or water polo, or chess. Membership in a good club would appeal to such an individual, and the first requisite of a good club is that it devote itself to the game the prospective member wants to take up.

19. If he sees a guest SPILL or SPOIL his drink, the gracious host will quickly pour him another glassful.

SPOIL, not SPILL. It depends on how much of the drink the host sees
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his guest spill whether or not another glassful would be poured. If only a drop or two has been spilled, a gracious host may well ignore the incident so as not to risk embarrassing his guest. It is when he sees a guest spoil his drink so that it is all ruined that the host would quickly pour another glassful.

SPILL, not SPOIL. The clue wording, "spill his drink", implies that all or almost all of the drink was spilled, and spilling is normally accidental. Hence, the gracious host would immediately volunteer to replace the spilled drink. The action of spoiling the drink, on the other hand, implies deliberate intent on the part of the spoiler. So as not to risk embarrassing his guest, the host will carefully overlook his action.

20. A comfortable home to live in is one that the housewife has made NEAT or NEST.

NEST, not NEAT. A neat home that continually requires attention to keep it spick and span can be an uncomfortable place to live in, but one that has been made into a nest (snug abode) is a comfortable place to live in.

NEAT, not NEST. A neat home is one that is free of clutter and disorder, making it convenient and comfortable to live in. The wording of the clue indicates that the housewife has made the home neat primarily for the benefit of others who live in it, and who are not concerned with the work entailed in keeping the home neat. A nest, as like as not, could be a resort for persons of like character or purpose regarded as bad or hostile. Such a nest could be most uncomfortable to live in.

If you have followed my reasoning carefully, you now know that both of the suggested answer words are equally wrong. Indeed, they are. The correct answer word is a third word, painstakingly concealed from you up to this point. The problem of finding the correct answer words to all 20 clues, buttressing them with appropriate arguments, is left to you, dear reader.