As a cryptic crossword constructor and solver, I see a lot of letter deletions: words that become other words when a single letter is deleted. Examples are SALUTED to SALTED, or MUFFING to MUFFIN.

In the August 1990 issue of Word Ways, Darryl Francis presented the challenge of finding a list of words for each word length that will provide a letter deletion for each successive position. His five-letter example was Stale, sTale, thRee, barGe, spanK (the letter deleted is capitalized). I decided to take this further by making the deleted letters spell a word. For example, in the five-letter case, the word EPOXY is provided by the list Erode, sPlit, flOat, twiXt, earlY.

Are there any five-letter words that cannot be represented this way? The easiest way to find out is to see if there is a letter deletion for every letter in every position. I prefer to use common words, although I will use a less-than-common word when no common one will work. Most of the few unfamiliar words in this article appear in Webster's Third New International Dictionary, although I did resort to Chambers English Dictionary for a couple of tough spots. If I can avoid an unfamiliar word by using a familiar proper noun, I do so.

The words in each deletion pair should have meanings that are etymologically unrelated. For example, while DEADLINES is a neat deletion, both words come from dead, which detracts from the wordplay. Compare the deletion of HURTLESS to HURTLES: that seems more exciting! Finding essentially different pairs is not always possible, especially in longer words, and some of the deletions given below are not ideal. But better something than nothing.

In preparing a list of five-letter positional letter deletions, I found the letters J and Q to be particularly recalcitrant, but one expects that from letters like J and Q. Surprisingly, X and Z were manageable and even provided choice in some positions. At first I was surprised to find D and F causing problems in position 2, but after a bit of thought I realized that this made sense. I don’t know of any five-letter words that end in V, let alone deletions, so there’s a blank there, and for V in position 2.

A Aides tARot BeAst SprAy ParkA
B Bread aBide BiBle LimBo BlurB
C Cache aCrId dECal MiNe ANtIC
Anyone complaining that FJORD and FORD are too close etymologically is quite right, and is encouraged to find a better word for that spot. And, although X-RAYS and RAYS seem related, RAYS can also be fish, which is etymologically unrelated to RAYS that are beams.

Six-letter words provide few problems. I am still missing some spots in my six-letter chart, but few words require these positions anyway. Here’s what I have:

A Ablest pAlace piAzza forAge annuAL CrímeA
B Blouse aBides AlBert triBAl plumBs
C Clever sCales biCker plaCid inSeCT parseC
D Downer aDvert deDuce powDer boarDs suiteD
E Ethane bEacon crEate appEal planEt karatE
F Flower aFlare reFuse stiFle bereFt belieF
G Grouse aGnise roGues finGer resiGN basinG
H Height tHrash aChing latHer writHe heartH
I Irises sImile maInly bluIsh heroIn scampI
J Jargon fjords injure praJna rakiJa
K Knight sKewer biKers monkey sparKs debarK
L Lawful flight golFer anGler castle driveL
M Manger aMbler caMper salMon storMy condomM
N Neaten sNooty wiNdwow prinCes asseNt asterN
O Oinked bOring quOits undOer bathOs dinerO
P Pimply sPoils poPlar tamPer skimPs scrimP
Q Quinta sQuint
R Radios dRolly caRnal stuBdy ensuRe latheB
S Sexist aSides coSmic tenSOr cubiSt theseS
T Trough sTeamy haTred morTal guesTs molesT
Even the seven-letter table isn’t bad. Most of the positions can be filled with common distinct. Here’s my list:

A  Aitches  palates  reActor  belAted  reveals  overLaY  tempeR
B  Bassist  aBiding  unBlock  garBage  sickBed  reverBs  proverB
C  Climber  stCandiaL  exCited  quaCked  radiCaL  parseCs  nucleiC
D  Drugged  adDiverse  deDuces  finDing  breadTh  remaInDs  severeD
E  Eastern  fEather  duEllEd  appEals  gallEon  candiEd  diversE
F  Fattest  riFling  graFted  scarFed  belieFs  ourselfS
G  Gratify  aGround  reGally  ridGing  finaGle  resinGs  raisinG
H  Harmful  shingle  asHtray  bathing  abasEd  hearChs  haggisH
I  Isomers  blasing  delCide  conDier  applies  reverie  martini
J  Jocular  fJorded  injuned  conjure
K  Kinkier  sKept  liKable  booKing  slicker  squawks  outranK
L  Leasing  sLender  saLvage  inkling  drawler  groveS  chancel
M  Marcher  aMbling  arMrest  creMatE  unkeMpt  balsams  misterN
N  Noodles  aNguish  fINance  garNish  chroNes  violetN  patterN
O  Opinion  fOamily  sTorIng  corOner  lassOes  carToon  pamperO
P  Plumber  sPeller  dePrive  insPect  steeply  forcePs  mantraP
Q  Quintas
R  Regress  prickie  baRking  outRage  excePt  statuRe  harrieR
S  Sextant  aScetic  buStler  proSper  thirSty  closeSt  possesS
T  Theater  stinger  unTruly  morTals  grisTly  diverTs  sleighT
U  Upraise  auCtion  boUlder  popuLar  statuEs  residue
V  Vending  deVices  carVing  starves  resolvE
W  Weighty  sWerved  coWshed  froWsty  screWed  casheWs
X  maXimed  MaRxiAn  indeXed  tripleX
Y  Yawning  cYanine  spYring  canYons  phoneYs  gravelY
Z  Zincite  czarina  booZing  WaltZer

After seven letters, there are fewer words for each position, so instead of a chart, I provide some long words for which I have found letter deletion acrostics. I have stacked the deletion words one on top of the other so that the acrostic word reads diagonally. For the eight-letter case, I present the acrostic words EXACTING, MAJORITY, and YESHIVAS. I have two nine-letter examples, TANGERINE and FLOWCHART, and two ten-letter examples, CHAMPAGNES and PERMITTEES.
GRAND ALLUSIONS

When I saw the above title, I groaned inwardly. Not another book on allusions! But when I examined Elizabeth Webber and Mike Feinsilber's paperback in more detail (Farragut Publishing Company 1990; $12.95), I realized that it complemented my three other books on this subject. In fact, it concentrates on more than 500 fairly contemporary terms (not predominantly numerical or classical-Biblical-literary). Each term has an extended discussion (a half-page or more) and a recent citation or two accompanying it. Perhaps the best way to get a feeling for the scope of the book is to list a few entries; here are ones starting with L.

Last Hurrah, Lazarus, Lebensraum, Leitmotiv, Lèse-majesté, Let a Hundred Flowers Bloom, L'Etat C'est Moi, Level Playing Field, Leveraged Buyout, Libido, ...

It's all reminiscent of Hirsch's recent best-selling book on cultural illiteracy.