FIREBALL CROSSWORDS

Fireball Crosswords publishes 45 puzzles a year. Puzzles are usually 15×15, but can be 14×16, 13×17, 16×16, 17×17, etc. As long as the two numbers add up to 29 or more, I'll consider it. The puzzles have titles and full-size author bylines. Puzzles must be themed. Below are the guidelines for the puzzles. Note that virtually every rule set forth here can be broken if the theme warrants it. Check with the editor, though, before assuming that your theme warrants breaking a guideline. Blind submissions are also allowed. See below for details.

Themes
A minimum of three answers in the grid must be involved in the theme, and they should be the longest answers in the puzzle. (An exception to this rule is that if all the theme entries are across answers, then some down non-theme answers can be longer than some of the theme entries.)

The theme should be consistent throughout the puzzle. Thus, if you're doing a theme of dog breeds, and the first two theme answers, "POODLE SKIRT" and "BULLDOG EDITION," have the breed at the beginning, the third one should have the dog breed at the beginning, as in "BOXER SHORTS" not at the end, as in "SHADOW BOXER."

Avoid themes that consist of a repeated word. Also avoid themes that have been done many times before. Be original. Gimmick themes (such as two letters in a box or rebus themes) are always welcome.

The title should give a hint to the theme without using any of the words in the theme answers. Include the title in the subject of the email as well as in the body of the email.

The puzzles are difficult, so make sure the theme is tricky enough.

Contest puzzles with meta-puzzles are also welcome, but only about 10 a year are used.

There is no maximum number of words in the grid or maximum number of black squares, but 78 words and 38 black squares are good guidelines. You should never have to go over that for a regular theme with three answers, but more complicated themes may warrant breaking either number. Consult with the editor to see if your theme warrants going over these guidelines. Since I've never encountered a solver who said, "That was a great puzzle, but, you know, there were 24 three-letter words in it, so I didn't enjoy it as much as I would have had there been fewer," there is no maximum on the number of three-letter words. (But, as you'll see below, the quality of the all the words in the grid does matter.)

Words in the Grids
Things to strive for: rare letter combinations and rare letters (GQMAGAZINE, SUZIEQ, KPDUTY, KENNYG) and interesting new words, names, and phrases.

Things to avoid: Variant spellings, partial phrases, contrived word forms (UNLEAKY, PREEXCITE, REDEVOUR), unfamiliar abbreviations, obscure names, crosswordese (words such as ESNE, PROA, STOA, and ANOA fall into this category), British spellings that aren't known to Americans (COLOUR is fine, LIBELLED is not), prefixes and suffixes that aren't used with any common word, made-up phrases, anything labeled vulgar or offensive in the dictionary, obscure geography. Not many exceptions will be made for these. In case you were reading too fast, let me say again that unfamiliar abbreviations are not good. If it's an abbreviation that average Americans will not encounter in the real world, it has no place in a crossword. Spanish and French words that one might remember from first-year high school Spanish and French are fine. Italian words found on menus are acceptable. But for other foreign languages, limit yourself to the most common words, like NYET and DANKE. I can't imagine a situation where a typical American would ever encounter the German word for donkey, so don't use ESEL or anything similar. Foreign words that have entered English or are part of well-known foreign phrases are fine.

Avoid using two answers in the same puzzle that have the same form of a word (like FOREMEN and ICEMAN). It's fine to have two answers with a common word like THE (for example, INTHEBEDROOM and LORDOFTHERINGS), but don't use the three-letter entry THE in a puzzle where THE is part of a longer theme entry as well.

Cluing
Clues should be a mix of all topics of interest to a cultured person. Music, art, television, history, sports, movies, science, technology, geography, and other subjects can all live happily together in the clues.

Avoid clues that reference other clues. So if 7-Down is APPLE and 19-Across is GRANNYSMITH, do not clue 19-Across as "Type of 7-Down." It's annoying for a solver to have to jump all over the clues and grid to figure out what the clue is. And if the answer to 7-Down isn't yet filled in, then it's really annoying. There are two exceptions to this rule. The first is that theme entries can refer to each other. The second is when you have two words that form a phrase, such as SAN and DIEGO. If 1-Across is SAN and 10-Down is DIEGO, clue 10-Down as "See 1-Across" and 1-Across as "With 10-Down, a city in California." So except for theme clues, when a clue refers to another clue, that clue must always refer back to the original clue.

Don't use a word in a clue that appears elsewhere in an answer unless it's a very common word.

Don't be afraid to use ": Abbr." at the end of a clue. It's nothing to be ashamed of. And it's preferable to artificially abbreviating a word that isn't normally abbreviated to

indicate an abbreviation. For words that are as well known by their abbreviations as they are by the full name (such as ATM, MIT, ASAP, etc.) don't indicate the abbreviation at all.

I have all the standard reference books, so don't bother citing references unless they come from an obscure source.

Submission
Puzzles should be submitted by email to Peter Gordon at xwords@optonline.net. Submissions will almost always be answered within a week (unless I'm on vacation, which isn't often and usually is when schools are on vacation). If I take longer than that, feel free to send another email asking what's taking so long. Puzzles should be submitted in parts: first the theme, then the grid, then the clued puzzle.

For the theme, submit the title and the theme entries and clues. If the puzzle needs to run on a particular date, indicate that, too, and make sure you give plenty of lead time (four months at least, but a year is better). You can submit extra theme entries if you want me to pick my favorites. Important: Put the answers in all capital letters with no spaces (with nothing in bold, italics, or underlined), just like it will appear in the answer grid. Do not explain what the theme is. I want to figure it out just like a solver will. Answers go on the left, followed by a space, an equals sign, a space, and then the clue. Like so:

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Title: Dogging It
POODLESKIRT = Sock hop wear
BULLDOGEDITION = Earliest version of a newspaper
BOXERSHORTS = Alternatives to tighty-whities
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Once the theme is approved, submit the grid, preferably in Crossword Compiler for Windows format. If you don't have CCW, send an Across Lite file or just type the grid as text in the body of the email. If you can't finish an area, you can always ask for my help (but there's no guarantee that I'll be able to finish it either, and also no quick response promised). Once I approve the grid (or make changes to it), then write the clues and email it back. Fun Facts are included with the puzzle. Put them in [brackets] at the end of the clue. And if you want an About the Author, put that in {braces} at the start of 1-Across.

Each puzzle should be sent in a separate email. In order to keep my response time quick, if I have a theme submission from you, don't send another theme submission until I respond to the first one. Ditto for grid submissions. In other words, you should never have more than one theme submission and one grid submission pending with me at any one time. And limit yourself to one theme submission every seven days.

Payment of $451 (regardless of the size of the puzzle) is made on publication after signing a contract giving up all rights and warranting that the puzzle is original and has never been published before in any form. The edited clues will be emailed back to the author before publication.

Blind Submission
To allow writers in underrepresented groups to have their puzzles looked at with an unbiased eye, I am now accepting blind submissions. Blind submissions are an option, not a requirement. To submit blindly, create an email account that doesn't identify who you are, and use that to send in your proposal. Do not sign your name to the email. For the theme, include the title in the subject of the email and put "[blind submission]" at the end so I know it's a blind submission. In the body, put the title again, and the theme answers and clues, as shown above. Use a common monospace font like Courier or (less preferable) a common font like Arial. Do not explain the theme. If it's a metapuzzle, include the answer after spoiler space that says "spoiler space" on each line for 50 lines. If a grid is needed to understand the theme, include an Across Lite file with whatever needs to be included. It does not need to be a complete grid. You can fill in X's everywhere other than the theme answers. Make sure the Across Lite file has no byline! Crossword Compiler is also acceptable, but not as preferred since Across Lite carries less identifying details with it. (For example, the font in Crossword Compiler could give away who you are if you are the only person who uses green letters in the grid.) Once the theme is approved, you then send a grid that isn't clued for approval. Once the grid is finalized, then you clue it up and reveal who you are.