



Play by Play

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👋 Hi friend,

In August we opened applications for our first cohort of [Puzzmo Insiders](#) — a group of creators who will be making videos of their Puzzmo plays (among their other content)! Their first few videos have been coming out, which you'll see in the new **Trending Videos Today** section on your daily page (you can customize whether you see this in your [Profile Settings](#)).

One of our new Insiders, [Matt](#), posted a [video](#) yesterday in which he solved [erik's](#) "[Seasonal Produce](#)" Cross|word. I really enjoyed watching Matt's solve and wanted to spend this newsletter talking about some of the great strategies he uses and his overall approach to the solve. But first, a little about Matt:

Who are you?

I'm an applied mathematician from New York. I enjoy creating art with self-referential and self-descriptive aspects, often writing puzzles, patterns, music, and wordplay. I've published articles and puzzles with The Journal of Wordplay, and just recently joined the Puzzmo Insider program to help make fun puzzle content. You can read more about me on my [personal site](#), or watch my videos through [YouTube](#) or [TikTok](#).



Matt + horse.

Why make videos?

A friend pointed out to me how often I talk out loud "to the puzzles" as I do them — they suggested I try recording videos. I'm not sure I would have kept up the habit — the channel didn't pop off or anything — but what did happen sometimes was a creator of a puzzle would comment or reach out, suggesting another puzzle of theirs I might like or another puzzle setter who I should try. This really drove me to make more videos, and a very attractive thing about the Puzzmo Insider program for me is the opportunity to meet more people and be more involved in the Puzzling community.

What do you like about Puzzmo?

Scroll to the bottom of any Puzzmo page and click "[Manifesto](#)," and then scroll to the bottom again. You'll read "Games are Art." The first time I read this, it made me reeeally happy. Puzzlemaking is an art to me, and puzzle-solving is a beloved pastime. I am very happy about the fact that I get to try puzzles by creators who view themselves as artists.

Onto his solve! I'll be basing my timestamps off [this YouTube video](#).

Warning: lots of spoilers for Erik's puzzle yesterday to follow!

At **1:23**, Matt says "can we do the downs here?" It's standard to start a crossword at 1-Across and tab through the across clues until you have some answers. Some solvers like to go through all the across clues before looking at any down clues. However, down answers that are partially completed because of filled-in across answers have information in them! Once you have some across answers filled in, if you're going for speed, it might be strategic to try to finish some down answers that you already have some letters for, rather than try to get more across answers with no letters already filled in.

At **1:51**, Matt says "Really, koi is a kind of **CARP**? Who knew!" I really like Matt's positive attitude towards learning a new fact from this crossword.

At **2:20**, Matt reads the 25-Across clue **Two-time WPF champion pitcher who threw a no-hitter in the 2024 championship**. At first he says, "I'll be honest, I don't even know what sports this refers to. 'No-hitter' makes me think baseball, but — oh, it's 'pitcher,' yes, okay, it's baseball. But I don't know their name." There's a lot of great stuff in Matt's approach here: first, he takes the time to read every word of a long clue, which *does* give him more information! He's able to narrow in on the type of sport because of the terms "no-hitter" and "pitcher," even though he's not familiar with the WPF. I also appreciate that he says that he doesn't know *their* name: the pitcher in question is a softball player, and I appreciate that Matt doesn't assume a gender here.

At **2:49**, Matt reads the 29-Across clue **Parts of some admissions processes** and comments, "I'm not quite sure — can we do the downs?" By solving the down clues that intersect with the answer Matt didn't know, he was able to figure out the answer to 29-Across (**TESTS**).

At **3:08**, Matt has the first four letters of 25-Across: **AUTU** _____. (He doesn't have the word separator assists turned on: if he did, he'd see it's a six-letter word followed by a five-letter word.) He then says: "This looks like the word **AUTUMN**." Making a guess about a word from its letter patterns without considering its clue is sometimes called Wheel-

of-Fortuning. We'll see Matt do this very effectively later on when he reaches a tougher part of his solve!

At **3:30**, Matt reads the 7-Down clue **Document used to pitch a movie script**, which he hasn't heard of. Right now that looks like **_ _ LATM _ N _**, which has one wrong letter (the L) that he doesn't know about yet. Even though Matt doesn't know the answer (yet), he says, "I want this to end in **ENT**, like '-ment'." We know from its clue that 7-Down is a noun, and **MENT** is a common noun ending in English, so Matt (correctly!) guessing that 7-Down ends in **MENT** based on the letters he already has is a great inference.

A common version of this approach is adding an **-S** or an **-ED** to the end of an answer whose clue is a plural noun or a past tense verb, respectively. Sometimes, this is wrong — not all plural nouns end in **S**, and not all past tense verbs end in **ED** — but it can be a helpful way to get good guesses of letters into the grid, and those letters can help you use the aforementioned Wheel-of-Fortune strategy.

At **4:05**, Matt has nearly the whole grid completed except for two squares in the south region, and the two top right across answers. About the former, he says: "So this is actually gonna be a difficult area for me because I'm not sure of the star [14-Down], the French [26-Down], or the document [7-Down], but we'll see." Then, he moves to the other area where he has blank squares in the northeast.

There are a couple of things I really like about what Matt does here: first, he moves away from a region that's stumping him. Sometimes, coming back to a tough zone later can be clarifying. Second, he's not discouraged! (Or, at least, he doesn't give off any discouraged vibes.) Maybe Matt's successfully solved enough Puzzmo puzzles that he's confident he'll get there. Maybe he knows that he has hints available if he needs or wants them. Regardless, Matt takes this tough section in stride and moves away from it for now.

The trickiest part of the puzzle for Matt is the northeast corner. Part of the reason is that he has **SPRING A LEAK** for 13-Across, which *does* match the clue, but in this case isn't the correct answer. This error results in incorrect letters in the intersecting down answers. However, when Matt gets to 9-Down at **4:47**, he knows the answer to the clue **"If**

anyone __, I'm not here" is **ASKS**. His confidence in **ASKS** shows him that he has a mistake in **SPRING A LEAK**, even though it fits the clue. When Matt realizes this, he says: "You're not spelling **SPRING A LEAK**, you're spelling something else! This [9-Down] must be **ASKS**, right?" Answers that you're very confident in can become footholds for solving tougher sections!

(A little earlier, Matt had accidentally typed a lowercase letter. In the Cross|word, lowercase letters can be used as "notes" — answers you're not sure of, but want to jot down anyway. Notes can be toggled on and off using the caps lock key. You can also enter a letter in note mode by holding shift, and you can toggle an answer into and out of a note by using shift+enter.)

At **5:53**, Matt says "We're gonna get there, we're gonna get there." Spoiler alert: we do get there! I'm always impressed with solvers who stay optimistic and confident like Matt does. I think believing that you are capable of solving the puzzle is a great and helpful mindset!

When Matt is grappling with the **Merch tent transactions** clue for 5-Down, around **6:05** he guesses it might be **MAKES** or **TAKES**, but that would mean that 13-Across would be **SPRINGK __ K _**. Matt says, about the seventh letter, "I don't know why I want this to be a K, I can't believe it would be a K." This is a really helpful inference: **SPRINGK __ K _** doesn't look quite right in the context of the English language, and it's good that Matt is checking his crosses when he's making guesses.

At **6:19**, Matt makes progress by recognizing part of the puzzle's theme. He says: "Here's what we've got. We've got **SPRING** up at the top, and this down here [25-Across] looks to me like the word **AUTUMN**. So maybe this [14-Down] is the word **GLENN** with two Ns, if I know how to spell **AUTUMN**." All Puzzmo puzzles have titles, but not all Puzzmo puzzles are themed. If you think you've spotted a theme, you can check the title to see if it gives you a hint! Erik's puzzle title was "Seasonal Produce," so the title confirms Matt's suspicion that **SPRING** and **AUTUMN** are both in the puzzle.

As Matt works with the tricky last few blank squares, he talks out some possible answers for the 8-Down clue **Where plates and forks can be found?** Based on his other filled answers he (correctly) thinks the

answer fits the pattern **_ O _ D**, so he starts brainstorming (Wheel-of-Fortuning!) words that fit that pattern. At **6:57**, he says, "They can't be found in a **POND**, they can't be found in **MOLD**" (later on, he also says "Probably not in the **WOOD**"). Then, Matt talks out the clue *independent* of the letter pattern: "Where do you find plates and forks? You find them in a drawer. But these plates and these forks are something different." Both approaches are useful! Sometimes using the letters will help you land on the answer, and sometimes ignoring the letter count will get you closer to the right idea.

One of the reasons Matt is having a difficult time in the northeast is because he made a typo, entering **AROSE** as **AROSS**. Watching him figure this out around **7:39** is awesome. The clue for 10-Down is **Meaning of jā in Latvian and dạ in Vietnamese**, and it looks to him like it's **_ S _** when it should look like **_ E _**. He says: "I'm trying to figure out a word that would even fit there [in 10-Down]. Because this [6-Across] — it's going to be difficult for this one to end in a vowel, right?" This leads him to realize his spelling error in **AROSE** and allows him to guess **YES** at 10-Down, even though he doesn't know Latvian or Vietnamese. Before landing on **YES**, he wonders if it's **HER** or **TEN** ("I'm just thinking of any words that have an E in the middle and are three letters long"), but he judges **HER** and **TEN** to be bad guesses because of the letter patterns they'd create for the intersecting across answers.

Matt has two breakthrough moments that lead to a successful solve: realizing that "faux" in the 26-Down clue is pronounced "foh" not "fawks" and recognizing the French term **Faux PAS**, and getting **SALES** for 5-Down. In the latter case, I think — as the editor of Erik's puzzle — I could've made a better decision for the clue **Merch tent transactions**. When Matt's talking out his thinking at **8:51**, he says "Merch tent transactions. I go to a concert and I buy a poster and a T-shirt. But we're talking about transactions." I can see from his solve that the specification of **Merch tent** was a stumbling block for him. Specifying merch tent makes the clue evocative, but it ended up being a red herring. This is useful for me to know when editing future puzzles!

Matt entering **SALES** breaks open the northeast corner for him, allowing him to see **SPRING LEAKS** for 13-Across. This cascades to him seeing **YES** as a good possibility for 10-Down, and being able to figure out that forks and plates can both be found on a **ROAD**, because he

now has the letters _ **OAD**. Matt isn't sure what plates in a road would be — he says, at **11:34**: "A [fork in the road](#). But I don't know what a plate would be here. Can plates be found on the road? It seems like it's gotta be road" — but his confidence in "a fork in the road" being a thing allows him to accept that there might be plates in roads that he's not thinking of. (The plates in question could be either the metal plates used during construction, or license plates!)

The Y of **YES** and the R of **ROAD** allow him to see **STRAY** for **Individual hair that seems to have a mind of its own** and **TREATMENT** for 7-Down. He hadn't known what type of document is used to pitch a movie script ("I've never pitched a movie script, at least not yet!") and at one point says "I wonder if I'm going to know this word in the end." Ultimately, Matt gets the answer because he has enough letters to Wheel-of-Fortune it (he describes this process earlier in the video, saying: "I'm going less on the clues and more on the letters that I have because I don't know these clues or answers").

After solving, Matt says: "I didn't even look at the name [title], we could've maybe gotten to the **SPRING/AUTUMN** stuff earlier." Erik's theme also has another component: that **LEAKS** and **PEASE** are homophones of vegetables (leeks and peas). You can always click on a hint after you solve, and the hint for either theme clue explains the entire theme!

Watching Matt finish his solve was so exhilarating (including because of [Saman](#)'s awesome end-of-game animation), and I hope my play-by-play in this newsletter captured some of that!


We'll conclude with some of Matt's thoughts on his solve, which I asked him for when I told him I was writing this newsletter:

*Interestingly, I was able to finish the puzzle without fully understanding the theme: "Seasonal Produce." In fact, there were many clues like **Document used to pitch a movie script** and **Two-time WPF champion...** that I just didn't know and wouldn't've been able to guess in a million years if there weren't crossing answers with shared letters. That's actually part of what makes crosswords fun! They'll have hard or seemingly impossible clues — and the "puzzle" becomes figuring out something easier to fill in first, and then second (and maybe you rack your brain for common suffixes*

somewhere), but soon presto! You've learned something new! Great puzzly and punny clues, like **Where plates and forks can be found?** multiply my enjoyment.


We love to see/watch it! Tell us what you think on [Discord](#).

XOXO,
Brooke

 **Insider videos started this week!** Our Puzzmo insiders have started dropping their first videos! In addition to [matt's](#) Cross|word [video](#) discussed above, here are some others! 🥰

- [kazoo](#) ([Instagram](#)) and [michael](#) ([TikTok](#)) dropped intro videos
- [chadobear](#) posted an imo very zen Flipart solve on [YouTube](#)
- [podcastdope](#) crushed Cube Clear on [TikTok](#)

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 **We announced the date for Crossword Con 2025!** We'll be in NYC again on Friday, April 4, 2025, for the second Crossword Con. Want updates? Sign up on our Crossword Con [mailing list](#). You can also watch all of last year's talks on [YouTube](#)!

🤔 **This week's crossword clue highlight** is on a break (next week, [Madison](#)'s back with a deep dive!). If you want homework, your homework is to try one of Matt's strategies while you solve a crossword, on Puzzmo or elsewhere! See if you can:

↻ practice switching directions to solve answers with letters you've already filled in from the other direction

❄ guess what words might be based on letter patterns, not their clues

👮 infer prefixes and suffixes based in information in the clues

✎ use our notes tool to distinguish between answers you're more and less confident in, and use the ones you're confident in as footholds

☀ stay positive while you solve, even when you're stuck!

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