

ACPT Rookie FAQ

What to know before you go:

How to train for the tournament:

1. Do puzzles **on paper with a pencil**. Solving on paper is definitely different than solving online or on your phone. You need to get used to not having a computer program tell you if your puzzle is 100% correct, as well as the layout of the clues vis-à-vis the grid, all kinds of nuances that are different between the digital and analog versions.
 2. Read the puzzle's title (if it has one). It is a clue to the puzzle's theme and getting the theme can increase your solving speed.
 3. Practice using prior-year tournament puzzles! They can be ordered [here](#).
- **Pro Tip:** Once the constructors have been announced, you can go to <https://www.xwordinfo.com/> and find a list of all of the puzzles each constructor has had published in the NY Times, then go to the archives on the NY Times Crossword page and see them and practice on them.

What's the deal with pencils? Are they provided or do you bring your own? Are mechanical pencils permitted? What about pencil sharpeners???

The answer is that you are the master of your own pencils, so play around in advance of the tournament to see what you like. Also, bring SPARES. You don't have time mid-puzzle to sharpen a wooden pencil or refill a mechanical one.

- **Pro tip:** Most champion solvers prefer thicker leads (0.7 or 0.9) as they are less prone to breaking during rapid solving.

Should I register for everything?

Yes! The Friday night games and reception are a fun intro to the tournament and a chance to get to meet people. And you do NOT want to miss the closing championship playoff.

- **Pro tip: Cru Dinner** – Longtime attendee Mike Alpern arranges & hosts a "Cru Dinner" at the hotel on Friday night. It's a casual, buffet-style dinner at the hotel restaurant. Mike posts the details on the tournament website a few weeks in advance of the tournament and then it's first-come, first-served to register as the restaurant only holds about 80 people. According to Mike 30-35% of the attendees are first-timers and so it can be a great place to meet some of the veterans in a pre-tournament, relaxed setting.

Culture of the Tournament

TL/DR: People are friendly!

Ok, granted, some of us are introverted types, but still. Most folks are there to do puzzles, talk about doing puzzles, and have a good time. Like any large party where lots of folks already know each other, you may need to introduce yourself as the "new kid," but go for it.

At the tournament

As the tournament has gotten larger, there are actually 2 conference rooms being used: the large ballroom upstairs (where Will Shortz will be) and a smaller conference room on the lower level.

Pros of being upstairs: You're in the big room and get the true feel of how large the tournament is (and you get to see Will Shortz live and in-person).

Pros of being downstairs: It's a little cozier and less intimidating. Plus, there are sometimes free snacks.

Hotel Conference Room Realities:

- Hotel conference rooms tend to be chilly, so wear layers.
- The lighting is dimmer in some spots than others. If this is a concern, you may want to stake out your spot early to be sure you are sitting someplace well-lit.
- The tables are covered in tablecloths. You can use your Official Tournament Folder to write on, but if you're used to solving on a hard surface, you may want to bring a clipboard.
- Avoid wearing strong perfumes or other fragrances as some folks have sensitivities to that.

The Puzzles – a quick overview

As you hopefully know if you've read the program details (<https://www.crosswordtournament.com/info/brochure.htm>), puzzles are scored by a combination of speed and accuracy.

Each puzzle is handed out, facedown.

- **Pro tip:** If you are left-handed, when puzzles are being handed out, you can request a 2nd reference copy. That way, you can see the clues without having to lift your hand from the paper. This is a great accommodation for us southpaws, but you definitely need to train that way, at least on a few puzzles, to get your eyes accustomed to looking in a different direction for the clues.

The clock is set for the time limit for that puzzle. Time limits range from 15 to 45 minutes, depending upon size & difficulty. At the signal, solving begins. When you finish your puzzle, turn it facedown & raise your hand. A proctor will come collect it and note the number of full minutes remaining on the clock. Once you've handed in your puzzle, you can leave the conference room (which is what most people do), so if you are a slower solver, don't let that faze you (and maybe don't sit near the doors or at the end of a row). Some folks also like to bring earplugs so as not to be distracted by folks leaving. That said, as one veteran put it, "Don't worry when the fast solvers finish the puzzle before you have even solved one corner. Think of it like participating in the New York Marathon. Just do your best. It's really you vs. the puzzle, not the fast solvers. Take time to enjoy the themes when you have figured them out. Plus, you will meet MANY new friends who may well be your friends for decades to come." And, as another veteran added, "Just *going* to the tournament will impress the hell out of people who don't do crosswords. They will think you're a genius rock star."

Generally, puzzles 1, 4, and 6 are the easiest. Puzzle 5 is the hardest puzzle of the tournament. Songs have been written about it. Literally. Puzzle 7 is the largest puzzle of the tournament & so generally the one with the longest amount of time on the clock. Puzzles 2 and 3 are somewhere in the middle, difficulty-wise.

- **Pro tip:** READ THE TITLE AND BLURB at the of the puzzle. Figuring out the theme can help you solve faster. (On the flip side, if the theme doesn't come to you, don't dwell on it. Just start solving.)
- **Pro tip:** Bring a (quiet) snack. Nothing that has a crinkly wrapper or is super-crunchy, but at least one solver has reported that snacking helps stave off panic during the struggle to break into Puzzle 5.

(There are no variety puzzles: cryptic, acrostic, etc. For those, you need to participate in the pre-tournament fun & games on Friday night!)

The Final Playoff

Scores are posted throughout the tournament. The 3 top scorers in Divisions C, B, and A solve Puzzle 8 in the main ballroom, onstage, in front of the audience. Puzzle 8 is the same grid and fill for all 3 divisions, but there are 3 sets of clues: Division C's are easiest and Division A's are hardest. During the Division C playoff, the audience generally solves along. During Divisions B and A, there is color commentary.

The whole events ends around 2pm.

Additional Resources:

Watch:

- **Wordplay** – A documentary on the tournament, released in 2006. Gives you great feel for what it's actually like and who some of the big-name constructors and champions are. *Available on Netflix.*
- **Will Shortz & the Puzzling Sport of Crosswords (Full Segment) | Real Sports w/ Bryant Gumbel | HBO** *Available on YouTube:*
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GcKFU8BPJnc>

Read:

- *Cruciverbalism* by Stanley Newman – It's out of print, but you can find used copies. Stan is a champion solver AND is the editor of the *Newsday Crossword* (including the nefarious *Saturday Stumpers*).
- *Crossworld* by Marc Romano – A great chronicle of the history of crosswords and the tournament as well as one man's experience actually competing.

Join:

- Facebook group - American Crossword Puzzle Tournament Attendees - ***Special thanks to the folks here who contributed to this FAQ.***