Puzzle Hunt Guide

This is not a definitive or comprehensive guide on puzzle hunts, but is intended to help provide an introduction to puzzle hunts, and tips on hunt puzzle solving for all.

Contents

1) What is a Puzzle Hunt?

    ○ MIT Mystery Hunt

    ○ Singapore Puzzle Hunt (SGPH)

    ○ Typical Hunt Structure

2) What is a Hunt Puzzle?

    ○ Parts of a Hunt Puzzle

    ○ Additional Difference with Other Puzzles

3) Steps to Solving a Hunt Puzzle

4) Types of Hunt Puzzles (and approaches to solving them)

5) How to Become a Better Hunt Puzzle Solver

6) Tips to Become a Hunt Puzzle Solving Team

1) What is a Puzzle Hunt?

What is a Puzzle Hunt?

- Fun puzzle game where teams participate to solve a series of "Hunt-style" puzzles, eg.

  - MIT Mystery Hunt

  - Galactic Puzzle Hunt

  - Google Games

  - Microsoft Puzzle Hunt

  - Singapore Puzzle Hunt

MIT Mystery Hunt

- www.mit.edu/~puzzle
- Probably the oldest and largest puzzle hunt in the world
  - Started in 1981 by MIT grad student Brad Schaefer
  - Held annually at MIT over the Martin Luther King Day weekend
- About 1600 participants
  - ~50 teams, size ranging from less than 10, to 100+
- Over 100 puzzles released to teams online
  - Most teams have members collaborating remotely from overseas

Singapore Puzzle Hunt (SGPH)

- www.sgpuzzlehunt.com
- Annual on-site puzzle hunt held in Singapore
  - Organised by Puzzlesmiths
  - Modelled after the MIT Mystery Hunt
  - Held in June/July, 5-6 hours, about 13-18 puzzles
  - ~100 participants, in 25 teams of 4 members each

Typical Hunt Structure

- Each Hunt typically has an overall theme or plot, which is revealed during/after Kickoff.

    - Eg. 2016 MH – Inception; 2016 SGPH – Harry Potter

- You solve hunt puzzles that have a word or phrase as an answer.

- Puzzles are typically organised into thematic rounds. You use all the answers organised in each round to solve a metapuzzle or meta.

- There is sometimes a similar final meta-meta that uses all the round meta answers.

Typical Hunt Structure

- Teams that solve all the round metas typically get to go on a final runaround endgame to find a hidden object.

- In the MIT Mystery Hunt, the final runaround consists of puzzles that lead teams to a coin hidden on campus.

- The first team to find the coin is declared the winner and writes the following year's Mystery Hunt.

- In the Singapore Puzzle Hunt, the first team that completes the runaround will find/receive a customised thematic codex or book as a souvenir.

2) What is a Hunt Puzzle?

What is a Hunt Puzzle?

- Puzzle type found in Puzzle Hunts with certain unique characteristics and follow certain conventions, eg.
  - Puzzles do not contain instructions
  - Require one or more intuitive leaps in thinking or "ahas" to solve
- Every puzzle has an answer that is (almost always) a word or short phrase.
- How to get an answer is usually not explained and part of the puzzle.

Parts of a Hunt Puzzle

- Title

- Flavourtext

- Main Body of Puzzle

Additional Differences with Other Puzzles

- All essential elements of a puzzle are provided together in the puzzle document.

- Even hints and confirmation points are designed into a puzzle.

- The solving steps can be logically inferred from the hints in the puzzle. A good hunt puzzle would not require solvers to "try everything".

- Puzzles usually have an additional layer of content theme/topic.

- This may often require use of external supplementary resources (eg. web search or subject matter expert), if the knowledge is not possessed at hand.

- Puzzles featured in other games mostly present an extractable form to solvers already, and only require the extraction of the answer/code (marked in pink area on the next slide)

- Extraction may give a clue phrase which requires further solving for the final answer, or an instruction to submit something to Hunt HQ

3) Steps to Solving a Hunt Puzzle

General Solving Steps for a Hunt Puzzle
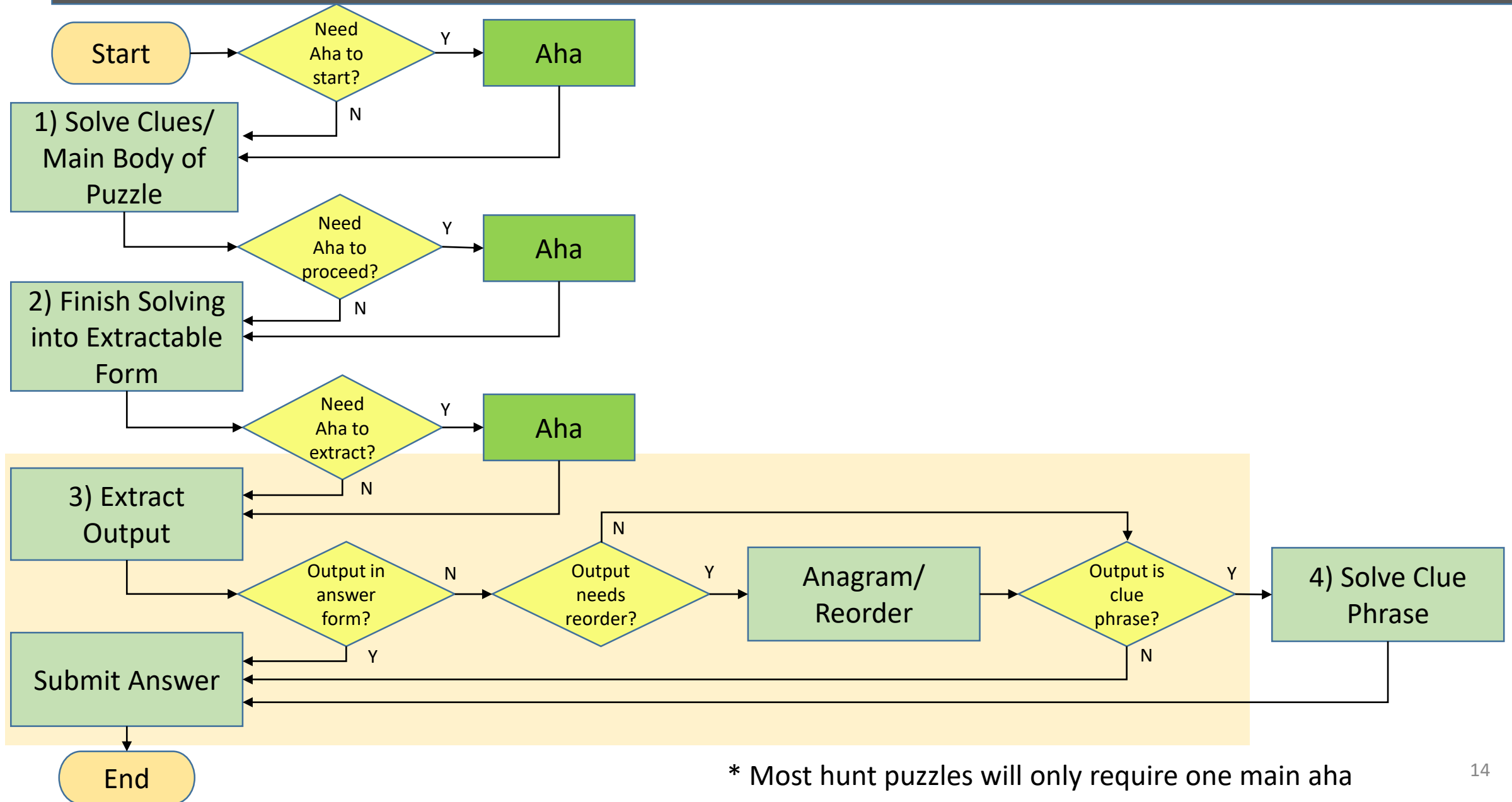
* Most hunt puzzles will only require one main aha

14

Standard Conventions Used in Hunt Puzzles (to help with solving the puzzle logically)

- A clean hunt puzzle has no extraneous information that might become red herrings (ie. <u>plausible</u> solving approaches which would <u>take solvers quite long to try and dismiss</u>).

  - Collorary - Key information provided should all be used in some part of the solving process.

- Clues should be in alphabetical order if the given order is unimportant (eg. if the clue answers are meant to be reordered)

  - Collorary - Given order is important if clues are not in alphabetical order

- Word forms, tenses and plurality of clues should be consistent with those of the required clue answers

- Numbers in parenthesis behind clues indicate the length of required clue answers, or sometimes the indexing used to extract a letter

- Blanks or boxes indicate the number of letters and spacing of required clue or puzzle answers.

  - Shaded/highlighted parts indicate extraction or changed letters

- Puzzle titles and any flavourtext usually include references to the answer, aha or theme

- Cryptic clues follow standard conventions in their structure

General Solving Strategies (Steps 1 and 2)

- Look for clues in the title, flavourtext and main body of the puzzle. Notice any words that are unusual or look out of place – they are either hints to the theme or necessary parts of the puzzle

- Read the first letters of clues for a possible intermediate instruction

- Look for given key information in a puzzle that you have not used yet, or things that didn't need to be there

- Where there is a list of clues to be solved, there would be some clues which are more specific, to serve as easier entry points. Focus on those first.
  - You may need to identify the commonality or pattern first, in order to solve some of the ambiguous clues

- If you run into contradictions with traditional rules of the puzzle form, consider alternate rules possibly clued by the puzzle, such as filling in cells with multiple letters, leaving out certain letters etc

General Extraction Tips (Step 3)

- Final extraction is generally performed on derived information like clue answers or identified names, rather than given information

- Look for given key information in a puzzle that you have not used yet, or things that didn't need to be there

- Look for common methods used to encode letters (usually hinted by the theme, flavortext or visual cues), eg.
  - Braille (possibly clued by words like blindness or feeling)
  - Morse Code (possibly clued by tapping, dots, or dashes)
  - #1-26, line tracing of letters, binary, ASCII, flag semaphore, resistor codes
  - Helpful resource -
    - www.mit.edu/~puzzle/resources/haveyoutried.pdf

General Clue Phrase Translation Hints (Step 4)

- Identify the form of the clue phrase, eg.

  - Cryptic clue – Solve the cryptic

  - Non-cryptic clue – Solve directly as crossword clue (eg. synonyms)

  - Follows the form of clues in main body of puzzle – Solve again recursively using the same approach as for clues in the main body of puzzle

  - Instruction – Follow the instruction. This may involve manipulating the physical form of the puzzle, or simply submitting a completed task to Hunt HQ

  - Helpful resource - www.mit.edu/~puzzle/resources/haveyoutried.pdf

4) Types of Hunt Puzzles
(and approaches to solve them)

Types of Hunt Puzzles
(and approaches to solve them)

- Puzzles come in a few broad genres, and often combine multiple elements:

    ○ Language/Word puzzles

    ○ Logic puzzles

    ○ Identification puzzles (ISIS)

    ○ Physical puzzles

    ○ Mini-Runarounds

    ○ Events

    ○ Meta puzzle

Language/Word Puzzles

- Examples:
  - (Cryptic) Crossword
  - Letter or Word-play
  - Anagrams, common letters, associations
  - Bigrams, Trigrams
  - Cryptograms/Ciphers
  - Homonyms, Synonyms

- Look for commonalities in the clues or clue answers in the puzzle

- Make use of online anagrammers and other word tools

  - Helpful resources – www.nutrimatic.org, www.the-crossword-solver.com

Logic Puzzles

- Examples:
  - ○ Nikoli Puzzles (eg. Sudoku, Kakuro, Masyu)
  - ○ Paint by Numbers/Nonograms
  - ○ Logic statement constraint problems
  - ○ Recreate game history or states

- Use deduction and inference based on the puzzle rules to solve

Identification Puzzles (ISIS)

- Pictures, audio, video, text

- ISIS:

  - Identify
  - Sort
  - Index
  - Solve

- Start by identifying easier and more tightly constraint clues to figure out the aha first. Some clues may require the aha before the right identification is clear.

Physical Puzzles

- Examples:
  - Origami, Katakami
  - Jigsaw puzzle
  - Forming 3D models
  - Knitting, Crochet
  - Use given object/s

- Instructions are not given, so you have to figure out the rules to follow, eg. match numbered sides

Mini-Runarounds

- You need to physically go around the hunt location to gather clues or answers.

- May or may not be obvious that it is a runaround.

Events

- Your team sends members to a certain location at a certain time.

- Usually involves interaction between teams.
  - Often involves inter-team cooperation!

- Interactivity and puzzle content vary
  - Sometimes "participate, get an answer"
  - Sometimes requires mild solving

- The event schedule is usually announced at the start of Hunt.

What is a Metapuzzle?

- A metapuzzle is a puzzle that uses the answers to other puzzles (in a round)

  - Depending on the Hunt structure, there might be meta-metas that take in metapuzzle answers or puzzles that contribute to more than one meta

- Metapuzzle answers generally contribute to the overall plot/theme of the Hunt

  - Eg. MH 2013 (Bank Heist):

    - Each round's theme is a character

    - Metapuzzle answers tell you how to convince the character to help you with the heist

- You almost never need all puzzle answers to solve the metapuzzle.

  - Frequently, 2/3 to 3/4 of them are enough

Types of Metapuzzles

- Pure metas: All you need are the answer words from the round puzzles (and maybe some auxiliary information, like their ordering or titles)

  - Frequently uses thematic letter- or word-play, and/or the meaning of the answers

- Shell metas: There is additional metapuzzle information provided (eg. grid to fill), which you use along with the puzzle answers

5) How to Become a Better Hunt Puzzle Solver

Important Note on Hunt Puzzle Solving

- The most important point in taking part in a puzzle hunt and solving hunt puzzles is to have fun!

- Improving the ability to solve hunt puzzles will certainly help you to derive more enjoyment and satisfaction from the puzzles

- Nonetheless, it is just a means to an end, and the number of hunt puzzles solved should not define the fun of the hunt experience

- There are many other fun aspects in a puzzle hunt to be enjoyed, such as the camaraderie from solving with group of fellow puzzle lovers (especially onsite), and the non-puzzle interactions with Hunt HQ and fellow solvers from other teams (for onsite hunts).

Practise, Practise, Practise

- Honestly, this is the only way to become a better solver
- The more puzzles you solve, the more familiar you become with hunt puzzles and the more likely that you can anticipate what needs to be done when you see a similar hunt puzzle

- Archive of MH Puzzles by year: www.mit.edu/~puzzle/huntsbyyear.html
- Archive of SGPH Puzzles by year: www.sgpuzzlehunt.com/archive.html

- Form a team with other friends and enthusiasts to take part in 5-6 puzzle hunts throughout the year.
- Like our Singapore Puzzlehunt FB Page - www.facebook.com/sgpuzzlehunt
- Join the SG Puzzlers FB Group - goo.gl/JR4hqn

Google – Use often, use well

- Google anything and everything in the puzzle that you are unfamiliar with to find its reference, especially titles and key phrases/words in the flavortext

- Use quotes for phrases/words that belong together, to obtain more relevant search results

- Google a few clue answers together to find a potential common reference

- Add "crossword" keyword to search for common clue phrase answers

- Use image search function to identify pictures, add keywords if necessary to obtain more relevant search results

Use Good Online Tools

- Word Builder – www.nutrimatic.org

- Crossword Solver – www.the-crossword-solver.com

- Anagrammer – www.iread.it/anagrams.php

Read, and Read the Puzzle

- Even if the first step looks straightforward

- Read the title, flavourtext, scan through clues.

- You could save time on solving the clues if you see the common reference/aha early.

- Observe what key puzzle information given/remains that needs to be used

Familiarise with Hunt Puzzle Conventions

- Practise solving hunt puzzles so that the hunt puzzle conventions (slide 15) become second-nature. This helps with an intuitive and logical approach to figuring out the necessary next step to solving a hunt puzzle.

  - Caveat – Constructing a good clean hunt puzzle requires considerable time and effort from a responsible team of writer/s, editor/s, fact-checker/s and test-solvers. Some hunts achieve this much better than others. So it is not always that every puzzle in a hunt is good/clean and adheres to the hunt puzzle conventions.

Know When to Dismiss Your Own Theories

- Stop clinging on to your theory if there are already at least 2 clear contradictions and no possible way forward.

    - Collorary - Don't overthink. If there is or remains a way forward on a logical approach, try it out first. Your initial doubts could be resolved later on. Don't dismiss a theory too hastily just because the first few extractions don't really make sense. It might be due to a working/spreadsheet error, or a need to reo

- And just because you had a theory that did not work out does not make what you thought you saw a red herring in the puzzle. The fact that you could not make progress in your theory just means that you saw something that could not be reasonably interpretable as a clue in the puzzle. Remember, red herrings are <u>plausible</u> solving approaches which would <u>take solvers quite long to try and dismiss</u>

Solve with Different Teams Sometimes

- While helpful for a team to solve hunts often together to improve teamwork and know each other's strengths and weaknesses, you should also make an effort to solving with different teams sometimes to learn from the experiences and solving practices of others.

- This is especially valuable for solvers new to puzzle hunts, as they would benefit most from learning while solving together with other more experienced solvers.

6) Tips to Become a Better Hunt Puzzle Solving Team

Solve with/as a Team

- Learn from watching others

- More eyes are better than 2

- More heads are better than 1

- Leverage on individual strengths

- Individuals who are still less experienced at spotting ahas can also help contribute to working together on the grunt work of a puzzle that the team has already found the aha

Maximise Solving Efficiency

- Always triage puzzles and spot initial ahas together as a team first if possible

- Choose a puzzle where you think you know roughly what to do next first

- Switch to another puzzle if you run out of theories and are still stuck after 15min

- Give fresh eyes to another puzzle, and get fresh eyes on this puzzle.

Use a Shared Spreadsheet

- Set up a main Google spreadsheet to track overall hunt puzzle solve progress by the team, and individual spreadsheets for working on each puzzle

- Replicate the puzzle information like clues and grids on the spreadsheet so that the whole team can work on them together

- Tabulate information given and derived, so that they match up, and can be conveniently sorted in different orderings as required

- Provide header information and comments so that others can follow

- Eliminates messy handwriting and alignment, which account for many unnoticed errors and hence stuck puzzles

Pen Down Observations & Theories

- Write down all observations and theories on the puzzle spreadsheet for others to consider, and to serve as reminder on important things which are unused yet.

- Write down "failed" theories too. It lets others know what has been tried.

- Mark uncertain clue answers with a "?" at the end, so that others can help to verify and comment

End