Hunt Puzzle Writing Guide

This is not a definitive or comprehensive guide on hunt puzzle writing, but is intended to help provide an introduction to responsible hunt puzzle writing for enthusiasts. Check here too for a [Puzzle Hunt Guide](#)

Contents

1) 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 extract the answer is usually not explained and part of the puzzle.

Additional Differences with Other Puzzles

- All essential elements of a puzzle are provided together in the puzzle document (except for metas and exceptional cases).

- 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 beige area on slide 11)

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

2) Starting to Write a Hunt Puzzle

Why write hunt puzzles?

- Because it is fun!

- Helps you to get better at solving hunt puzzles!
  - Forces you to solve more hunt puzzles to get more experience and ideas
    - More practice with solving
    - More exposure to different puzzle types and techniques
  - Trains you to think like a puzzle constructor
    - Awareness on standard conventions used in hunt puzzles
    - Understand constraints and objectives during construction
      - Provide insights on why puzzles elements are provided/presented in certain ways

What do I need to do first?

- Solve lots of puzzles to be familiar with the:
    - Different types of hunt puzzles
    - Parts of a hunt puzzle
    - Components that go into a hunt puzzle, and
    - Standard conventions used in hunt puzzles

Types of hunt puzzles

- 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

Parts of a hunt puzzle

- Title

- Flavourtext

- Main Body of Puzzle

Components of a hunt puzzle (as solving steps)

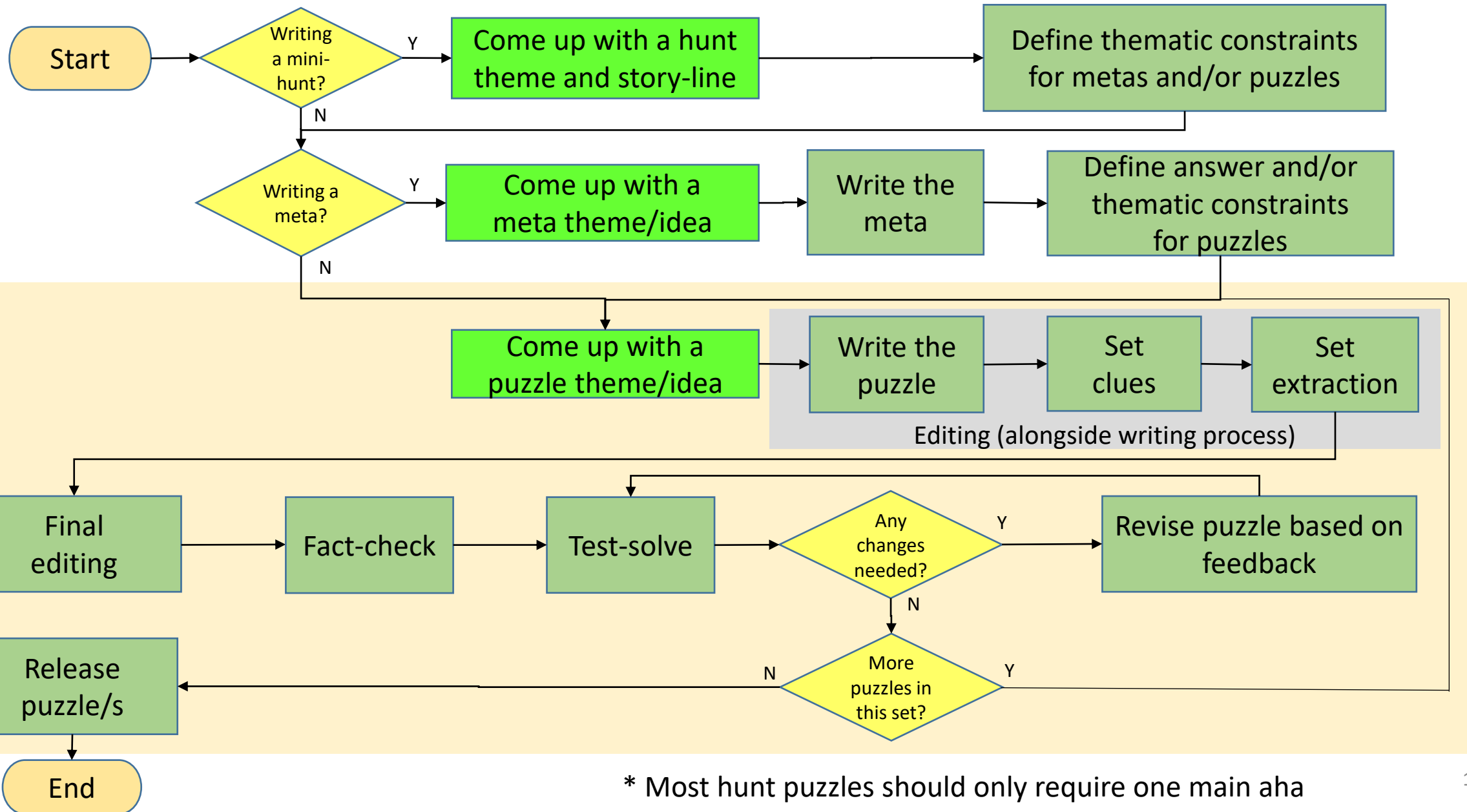* Most hunt puzzles should only require one main aha

11
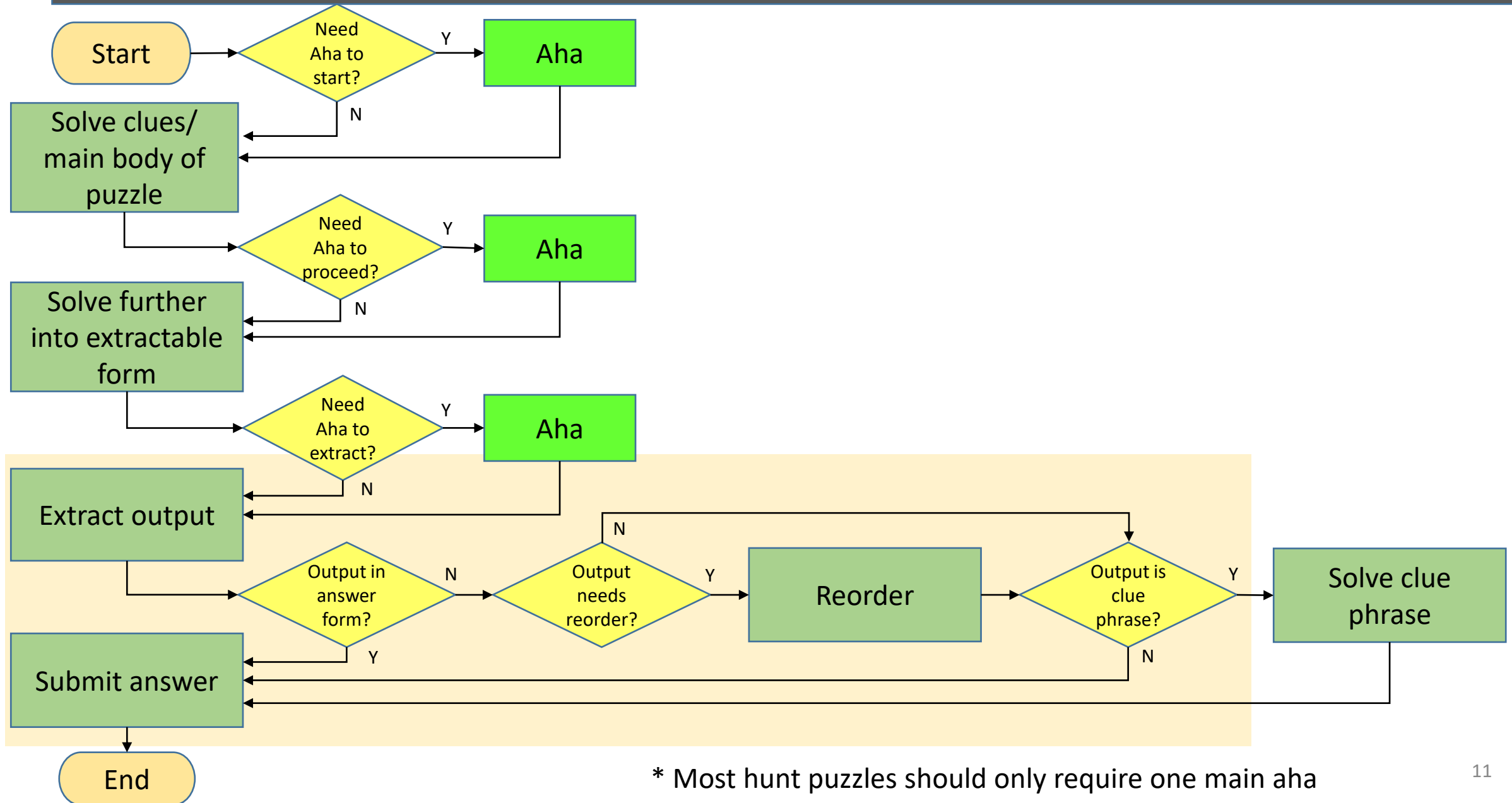
Standard Conventions Used in Hunt Puzzles
(to be used to make solving steps intuitive and logical)

- A clean hunt puzzle has no extraneous information, in particular if they could 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 or clue answers 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 or clue answers are not in alphabetical order
- Word forms, tenses and plurality of clues should be consistent with those of the required clue answers
- Puzzles should not be overly menial or tedious; or require too much detailed niche knowledge
- 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; but should not be critical to solving the puzzle
- Cryptic clues follow standard conventions in their structure

3) Steps to Writing a Hunt Puzzle

Steps to writing a hunt puzzle

```
Start  →  <Writing a mini-hunt?>  --Y-->  [Come up with a hunt theme and story-line]  →  [Define thematic constraints for metas and/or puzzles]
                  |
                  N
                  ↓
          <Writing a meta?>  --Y-->  [Come up with a meta theme/idea]  →  [Write the meta]  →  [Define answer and/or thematic constraints for puzzles]
                  |
                  N
                  ↓
          [Come up with a puzzle theme/idea]  →  [Write the puzzle]  →  [Set clues]  →  [Set extraction]
                                                  Editing (alongside writing process)

[Final editing]  →  [Fact-check]  →  [Test-solve]  →  <Any changes needed?>  --Y-->  [Revise puzzle based on feedback]
                                                              |
                                                              N
                                                              ↓
                                                      <More puzzles in this set?>  --Y-->
                                                              |
                                                              N
                                                              ↓
[Release puzzle/s]
      ↓
    End
```

* Most hunt puzzles should only require one main aha

14

Editing

- In a typical hunt, all puzzles are scrubbed by experienced editors/writers all along the writing process to:
  - Assess if entire idea (from concept, clues and extraction) is workable and/or thematic. Writers often have "good" puzzle ideas which are difficult or infeasible to execute elegantly, and editors need to recognize these early to adjust or drop them.
  - Suggest potential refinements to puzzle in terms of improvements in any area, eg. concept, wording, clues, or puzzle elegance
  - Check if puzzle is solvable; could act as a preliminary fact-checker or test-solver to gate-keep as they tend to be in limited supply
    - Writers must also exercise due dilligence to double-check their puzzles first
  - Ensure writers keep to schedule
- Many initial puzzle ideas and drafts never make it to writing or test-solving as they are unworkable in practice until revisions are made
  - In a hunt, editors play the necessarily autocratic role of deciding when to drop entire puzzles or ideas if they are unsalvageable or behind time
- For non-hunt puzzle writing, helpful to the writing experience too if an editor is available

Fact-checking

- Fact-checking involves providing the draft puzzle and solution to tester/s to solve <u>all</u> clues to verify the clue answers are the intended ones derived (eg. from available and trusted online sources), that enumerations, blanks and grids are sized correctly, and that there are no red herrings

- Use at least 2 fact-checkers, ideally more as the fact-checking work is tedious

- The intent of fact-checking is to eliminate clear factual errors in puzzle drafts which would affect test-solvers. By ensuring that test-solvers receive clean puzzle drafts, they can tend better simulate how a real solver would experience the puzzle.

- Test-solvers can then also have the freedom to skip over clues if possible. This will cut down on the time and effort needed from test-solvers, allowing them to test-solve more puzzles.

Test-solving

- Test-solving is not a glamourous or easy task
  - Initial drafts may have flow errors or might not be intuitively solvable
  - Test-solvers need to have objectivity and put aside whether they solved and enjoyed the puzzle, versus whether an actual solver could have solved or enjoyed the puzzle
- Use at least 3 test-solvers, ideally more as multiple test-solving iterations could be required with fresh test-solvers. If there are limited test-solvers, the fact-checking task could potentially be combined, although it is not ideal unless writers take the due dilligence to fact-check their puzzles well too.
- To have a better gauge of puzzle difficulty, ideal for test-solvers to have:
  - Similar profile as actual solvers in terms of puzzle hunt experience, knowledge areas, and team size
- Give ample time for test-solvers to solve and give feedback, and to revise puzzles for further test-solving iterations

4) Things to Note When Writing a Hunt Puzzle

Unspoken Hunt Contract

- Solvers are going to spend time and effort attempting the puzzles you write, so there are certain puzzle writing principles that a responsible constructor abides by:
  - Write with the solver in mind; puzzles are not about the writer
    - Strive for puzzles which are elegant, and fun to solve
      - Elegant puzzles tend to be tightly constraint or clean
      - Fun is more subjective and requires test-solver feedback; fun to write is not always fun to solve
  - Ensure puzzle follows hunt puzzle conventions, eg:
    - Has no errors or extraneous information which may result in ambiguity or red herrings (plausible solving approaches which would take solvers quite long for to try and dismiss)
    - Only important things should be included; all information included in the puzzle is used
  - Puzzles are only complete if they have gone through sufficient editing, fact-checking and test-solving
    - **Do not ever release an incomplete puzzle otherwise.** If there is a hunt timeline to meet, the hunt editors should instead drop the puzzle and replace with a backup puzzle that yields a task instruction, so that solvers can then be given the necessary answer that fits the meta.

Metapuzzles

- A metapuzzle (or meta) is an overarching puzzle that uses the answers from other puzzles in a hunt round or set of puzzles

- Pure metas and shell metas

    - Pure metas: Uses only answer words from the puzzles (and maybe some auxiliary information, like their ordering or titles)

        - Frequently uses letter- or word-play

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

- The meta should generally link to the overall plot or theme of the hunt or puzzles

Things to note when writing metas

- Come up with a good meta idea and puzzle first, before writing the puzzles that fit the required answer and/or thematic constraints (or trying to see which of your existing puzzles could fit)
  - Avoid writing a meta to fit existing puzzles; save your great puzzle idea for a more thematic meta next time!
  - It is easier to manage writing puzzles within meta constraints (than the reverse), given there are much more possibilities to work from to accommodate the meta requirements
- For more elegance, avoid writing a meta that places too few constraints on the puzzle answers, eg.
  - Not using all the puzzle answers
  - Using only 1 letter per puzzle answer
  - Using puzzle answers just as a collection of letters (requires random indexing/extraction)
  - No thematic constraint on the puzzle answers

Things to note when writing puzzles

- Use a general topic which is not too niche

  - What is fun for you to write is not always fun for others to solve

  - Eg. A particular game or movie could be niche interest unless it is quite popular or well-known. But it is still okay if the puzzle only requires content knowledge which can be found online quite easily.

  - Lesser known facts within general topics are fair game (eg. Wilhelm screams in movies), and people do tend to enjoy learning new facts while solving a puzzle

- Learn and draw inspiration from other good hunt puzzles

  - It is okay to borrow ideas but do so only if you credit the source and also improve on the idea

- Make sure puzzle aha is truly intuitive! (get test-solvers' feedback)

- Make sure there is a sufficiently puzzly step. Eg. Identification or web research might not be enough.

- Include confirmation points along the solving process to help let solvers know they are on the right track

  - Eg. First few extracted letters spell a clear word, enumeration of clue phrase answers

- It is not necessary to have a thematic link for a round/set of puzzles, but it is nicer than having solvers experience a random smorgasbord of puzzles

  - If the number of puzzles are manageable, try having a thematic link between them

Things to note when setting clues in a puzzle

- Provide a few easier entry-points in clues for solvers to discover the aha
  - Include a reasonable number of clues which have easy or unambiguous answers to provide entry-points or confirmation points for the aha
- Balance the number and difficulty of clues used
  - Avoid tedium or excessive menial grunt work which is not fun
  - Clues should be unambiguous, unless the aha or answer enumeration is intended to help to disambiguate these
- Fact check and verify your sources
  - Wikipedia is not a definitive source
- Clear your search history cache and verify all search results again

Things to note when setting answer extraction

- Avoid making extraction too difficult, as solvers would have already done the bulk of the work and ideally should not get stuck here

- Extraction step should be simple or thematic

  - Could be a recursive step using the same approach/aha for solving the clues

  - Do not introduce a new aha at the extraction step

- Use an ordering for extracted letters, should not require random anagramming to form the answer

- If the answer is short, or could be guessed prematurely from extracted letters, consider using an intermediate clue phrase which is unambiguous

List of common rookie writer mistakes to avoid

- Rushing into puzzle writing without sufficient solving experience

  - With the proliferation of online puzzle hunts (many with sub-standard quality control of puzzles), rookies get lulled into this perception of "I can already write a 'puzzle' like that too".

  - Without sufficient practice and experience solving hunt puzzles intuitively, some tend to solve puzzles via brute-force, and carry these practices into their rookie puzzle writing.

  - Writing a hunt is <u>not</u> the right/best way to learn or get better at puzzle writing. Solvers are not your guinea pigs. You should ideally practice at a smaller scale in a 'safer' setting. like writing regular standalone puzzles instead. Having an experienced editor or test-solvers to help guide and provide feedback would be ideal.

  - Common for rookie writers to focus on the self-gratification of having a large number of people solve their puzzle, versus the responsibilities of being prepared enough to writ a good puzzle. It doesn't help that feedback is generally positive/encouraging as long as the puzzle is solvable.

List of common rookie writer mistakes to avoid

- Trying to come up with a puzzle idea without making use of the required answer or hunt/round/puzzle theme

  - Use the puzzle answer and/or theme constraints as a helpful brainstorming start point for any puzzle writing. This keeps your puzzle topic idea thematic and is much easier than trying to come up with a puzzle idea from nowhere.

  - Without these constraints to help ringfence your potential puzzle ideas, you will likely take longer and end up with an unrelated puzzle idea (which could still be used in future instead).

- Having unintuitive ahas, puzzle flow/presentation or approach

  - Without a good understanding of hunt puzzle conventions by the writer, the puzzle will often instead trigger in solvers a lot of related questions which are frustrating. Eg. Why did the writer choose this rather than that, why is the puzzle described or presented in this particular manner, what is the intuitive/logical next step that I am expected to do next?

List of common rookie writer mistakes to avoid

- Being too hung up on a pet topic or puzzle idea
  - Many people are drawn to puzzle writing because they solved a cool puzzle or are a fan of a topic and want to <u>write their own puzzle</u> based on that idea.
  - Others may not share the same keen interest in this topic, and enjoy solving it as much as you enjoyed writing it.
  - It is easier for a rookie to write a non-topical puzzle (eg. Wordplay, logic), than one with the added layer of a referenced topic
  - It is more elegant to write a new thematic puzzle for the required answer, than to force your non-thematic puzzle idea to churn out the required answer
    - Save your great puzzle idea for a more thematic answer next time!

- Not finding test-solvers to test your own puzzles before release
  - Early feedback helps you become a better writer, and post-hunt feedback is too late to save a bad puzzle and the anguish it has caused to solvers

List of common rookie writer mistakes to avoid

- Making the puzzle too complicated, difficult or long
  - Puzzles are only fun to a solver if they are solved
    - A trivial puzzle that was solved will still be more loved by a solver than a clever puzzle which the solver did not manage to solve. Always aim to ensure that the puzzle is solvable, erring on the side of caution
  - Try to limit to one aha per puzzle, and make sure they are intuitive/well-clued
  - Shorter puzzles are generally cleaner – they have less variables, potential for solvers to become stuck and require less fact-checking and test-solving
  - Longer puzzles are generally more tedious, especially if they involve manual work or repeated steps
  - Tightly constraint puzzles are more elegant, but redundancy is sometimes necessary to make the puzzle more easily solvable
- Using unthematic or unintuitive extractions methods
  - Extraction should be intuitive and ideally thematic, rather than say, using a particular method just because the format looks like it (eg. Morse, Braille).

The End