BILL'S HOME TECH
Home & Small Business Tech Solutions

BILL'S COMPLETE MANUALS

Wordle, Crosswords & Brain Games

NYT Games, AARP games, puzzle apps and paper puzzles — explained in plain English, one step at a time

A plain-English guide for puzzle lovers and their families

Take your time — you can't break it

Written for you by Bill — Bill's Home Tech

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For phones, tablets & computers · facts current November 2026

What's Inside

This is your guide to word games, crosswords and puzzles on a phone, tablet or computer. Read it in any order and at your own pace — there's no test. It covers the New York Times Games app (Wordle and friends), the free games at AARP and the Washington Post, Sudoku, solitaire and jigsaw apps, and how to keep the ads, surprise charges and fake apps out of your fun. Along the way you'll learn to keep a streak going on every device, share your score with the grandkids without spoiling the answer, and make the letters big enough to enjoy. If a screen looks a little different on yours, the idea is still the same.

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PART 1

Getting Started with Puzzles

A welcome, a map of where the good puzzles live, and how to choose between a phone, a tablet, a computer and good old paper.

CHAPTER 1

A Note from Bill

Hello, and welcome. Maybe a friend keeps mentioning Wordle and you'd like to know what the fuss is about. Maybe the grandkids text you little rows of green and yellow squares every morning and you'd like to send some back. Or maybe you've done the newspaper crossword for years and wonder whether the app version is worth a try. Whichever brought you here, this guide is for **you**.

I'm Bill. Helping folks feel at home with their technology is what I do every day, and I wrote this guide the way I'd explain it sitting beside you at the kitchen table: patiently, in plain English, with no jargon. If I use a word you don't know, I'll stop and explain it right then.

You truly can't break it by exploring

A puzzle app is one of the safest places to practice using a phone or tablet. Tapping the wrong letter won't hurt anything — you just tap it again. Losing a game costs nothing. The only things that deserve real care are the **ads**, the **purchases** and the **fake apps**, and this guide shows you exactly how to handle each one.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

Why this matters

A daily puzzle is a small, cheerful habit: a few quiet minutes with your coffee, something to chat about with friends, and a reason for the grandkids to text you every single day. Knowing how the apps work lets you enjoy all of that without the annoyances.

What this guide covers

- The **New York Times Games** app: Wordle, Connections, Strands, Pips, the Crossword, Spelling Bee and more — which are free and which need a subscription.
- Keeping your **streak** when you switch between a phone, tablet and computer.
- **Sharing your results** with family by text, without giving away the answer.
- Free puzzles from **AARP**, the **Washington Post** and your local paper.
- Sudoku, solitaire and jigsaw apps — and how to tame the **ads** and **in-app purchases**.
- Bigger letters, dark mode and other ways to make puzzles easier on the eyes.
- An honest word about "brain training" claims, plus fake apps and how to **cancel a subscription**.

And I'm only a phone call away

This guide will carry you a long way on your own. But if you ever get stuck — say, your streak vanished or a game keeps charging you — call me at **(330) 200-8042**. No question is too small.

So pour a cup of coffee, find your reading glasses, and let's play.

— Bill

CHAPTER 2

Where the Good Puzzles Live

There are thousands of puzzle apps and websites. Most people are happiest with a small handful of trustworthy ones. Here's a map of the places this guide covers, so you know what's out there before you download anything.

The main choices at a glance

Where	What you'll find	Cost (as of Nov. 2026)
NYT Games app or website	Wordle, Connections, Strands, Pips, the Crossword, the Mini, Spelling Bee and more.	Several daily games free; the rest need a Games subscription.
AARP games (aarp.org)	Crosswords, Sudoku, jigsaw puzzles, solitaire, word games and classic arcade games.	Many free; some extra games for AARP members.
Washington Post games	Daily and Sunday crosswords, a Mini, Sudoku and a word game called Keyword.	Free to play online.
Your local newspaper	Often a crossword, Sudoku and word jumble, in print and sometimes online.	Usually part of your subscription.
Puzzle apps in the app store	Sudoku, solitaire, jigsaw, word search, mahjong and more.	Usually free with ads; many offer a one-time or monthly fee to remove ads.
Paper	Puzzle books, the newspaper page, a jigsaw on the card table.	A few dollars.

TIP

Start with one

You don't need all of these. Pick one place, play it for a week, and see whether you enjoy it. Wordle is a great first choice: it's free, it takes five minutes, and half of America seems to be talking about it.

Apps versus websites

Most of these puzzles can be played two ways: in an **app** you download from the App Store (iPhone and iPad) or Google Play (Android), or on a **website** in your web browser. The puzzle is the same either way. Apps are a little quicker to open each day; websites need nothing installed and work on a computer.

GOOD TO KNOW

"App store" means the official store on your device

On an iPhone or iPad that's the blue **App Store** icon. On an Android phone or tablet it's **Google Play** (the colorful triangle). Getting apps only from these two stores is one of the best protections against fake and harmful apps — more on that in Chapter 21.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Knowing the trustworthy names up front means you can skip the flood of look-alike apps and land on the real thing the first time.

CHAPTER 3

Phone, Tablet, Computer or Paper?

There's no wrong answer here. Each has its strengths, and plenty of people use two — Wordle on the phone over breakfast, the big crossword on a tablet in the afternoon.

Comparing the four

	Good for	Watch for
Phone	Quick daily games like Wordle and Connections; it's always with you; easy to share results by text.	Small letters and keys. Crosswords can feel cramped.
Tablet	Crosswords, jigsaws, Sudoku and solitaire. Big screen, comfortable in a chair, larger keys.	Make sure you sign in on it too, or your streak won't follow you (Chapter 9).
Computer	Crosswords with a real keyboard; the biggest screen; easy to zoom in.	Websites may show more ads than the official apps.
Paper	No screen glare, no ads, no batteries; a pencil and eraser feel good.	No automatic checking, and you can't share a score as easily.

A tablet is the puzzle-lover's sweet spot

If you're thinking about a new device mostly for puzzles and reading, a tablet is often the most comfortable choice. The bigger screen means bigger letters and bigger squares to tap, and the official game apps all run on iPads and Android tablets.

Using a computer

1. Open your web browser (Chrome, Edge, Safari or Firefox).
2. Type the address of the puzzle site — for example **nytimes.com/games** or **aarp.org/games** — and press **Enter**.
3. Choose the puzzle. On a computer you type letters on the keyboard instead of tapping.
4. To make everything bigger, hold the **Ctrl** key (on a Mac, **Command**) and press the **+** key. Press **Ctrl** and **0** (zero) to go back to normal size.

TIP

Bookmark your favorites

Once the puzzle page is open, add it to your browser's bookmarks or favorites (look for the star near the address bar). Tomorrow you'll get there in one click.

FROM BILL

Paper still counts

Some people tell me they feel they "should" switch to the app. You don't have to. If you love the newspaper crossword with a pencil, keep doing it. The app is simply another option — handy when you travel or want to play along with family far away. Chapter 14 has more on paper puzzles.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Matching the puzzle to the device — quick games on the phone, big ones on a tablet or paper — keeps it fun instead of fiddly.

PART 2

The New York Times Games

Wordle and its companions: what each game is, which ones are free, how to play, and whether the subscription is worth it for you.

CHAPTER 4

The NYT Games App: What's Free and What Isn't

The New York Times publishes a family of daily puzzles. You can play them in the free **NYT Games** app on a phone or tablet, or on a computer at **nytimes.com/games**. A few are free for everyone; the rest need a paid **Games subscription**.

Getting the app

1. Open the **App Store** (iPhone or iPad) or **Google Play** (Android).
2. Search for **NYT Games**.
3. Check the name under the app: it should say it's from **The New York Times**. Skip look-alikes with other company names (Chapter 21 explains why).
4. Tap **Get** or **Install**. The download itself is free.
5. Open it. You'll see a list of games; tap one to play.

Free and subscriber games

The Times has moved games between free and paid over the years, so this is how things stood in November 2026. The surest guide is the app itself: anything that needs a subscription shows a subscribe button or a lock when you tap it.

Game	What it is	Free?
Wordle	Guess a five-letter word in six tries.	Yes
Connections	Sort 16 words into four groups of four.	Yes
Strands	Find themed words hidden in a grid of letters.	Yes
Pips	Place dominoes so they meet the conditions on the board (added August 2025).	Daily puzzles free to play
Spelling Bee	Make words from seven letters; every word must use the center letter.	A limited free taste; full game for subscribers
The Mini	A small, quick crossword.	Subscribers (since August 2025)
The Crossword	The famous daily crossword; easiest on Monday, hardest on Saturday.	Subscribers
Letter Boxed, **Tiles**	A letter-chain puzzle and a pattern-matching game.	Subscribers

Game	What it is	Free?
The archive	Past puzzles from earlier days.	Subscribers

GOOD TO KNOW

The Mini used to be free

If you remember playing The Mini crossword for free, you're right — it was free for over a decade. The Times moved it into the Games subscription in late August 2025. It isn't something wrong with your app.

TIP

Sudoku and other extras

The app also offers Sudoku and occasional special games. Whether a particular one is free has changed from time to time, so simply tap it — the app will tell you if it needs a subscription. Nothing is charged without you confirming a purchase.

Do I need an account?

You can play the free games without signing in. But creating a **free New York Times account** (an email address and a password) is what lets your stats and streaks follow you from your phone to your tablet or computer. Chapter 9 walks you through it.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Knowing which games are free means you can enjoy Wordle, Connections and Strands every day for nothing, and decide calmly — not in the middle of a pop-up — whether the rest are worth paying for.

CHAPTER 5

Play Wordle

Wordle is the game that started the craze: one five-letter word a day, the same word for everyone, and six tries to find it. It takes most people five to ten minutes.

How to play, step by step

1. Open the **NYT Games** app and tap **Wordle** (or go to **nytimes.com/games/wordle** on a computer).
2. Tap **Play**. You'll see six empty rows of five boxes and a keyboard below.
3. Type any real five-letter word, such as a word with common letters (many people start with a word like STARE or CRANE).
4. Tap **Enter**. The boxes change color to give you clues.
5. Use the clues to choose your next word, and keep going until you find it or use all six rows.

What the colors mean

Color	Meaning
Green	Right letter, right spot.
Yellow	The letter is in the word, but in a different spot.
Gray	The letter isn't in the word at all.

The keyboard at the bottom changes color too, so you can see at a glance which letters you've already ruled out.

TIP

If a word won't go in

Wordle only accepts real words. If nothing happens when you tap Enter, the word isn't in its list — or you haven't filled all five boxes. Use the delete key (the arrow-and-X key) to change a letter.

A few friendly strategies

- Start with a word that has several common letters — E, A, R, S, T, O, I, N, L.
- Remember letters can repeat. The answer might have two E's.
- Don't feel you must use your yellow letters right away; a word that tests new letters can be smarter.
- Take a break if you're stuck. The puzzle waits for you all day, and coming back later often helps.

When does the new puzzle arrive?

A new Wordle appears every day at midnight, your local time. You can play today's puzzle any time before then.

GOOD TO KNOW

The settings gear

Look for the gear-shaped **Settings** icon in Wordle. That's where you'll find options such as **Hard Mode** (any clue you find must be used in later guesses), a **dark theme**, and a **high-contrast** color choice that's easier for people who have trouble telling green from yellow.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Five quiet minutes with a little puzzle, and something to talk about with everyone else who solved the very same word today.

CHAPTER 6

Connections, Strands & Pips

Once you're comfortable with Wordle, these three free games are natural next steps. Each takes a few minutes and exercises a different kind of thinking.

Connections: find the four groups

You see 16 words. Your job is to sort them into four groups of four that share something in common — say, four kinds of fish or four words that come before "ball."

1. Tap four words you think belong together. They darken to show they're selected.
2. Tap **Submit**. If you're right, the group lifts to the top with its theme.
3. If you're wrong, you lose one of your allowed mistakes. Tap **Deselect All** to start fresh.
4. Tap **Shuffle** to mix up the words — seeing them in a new order often sparks an idea.

> TIP
> **Watch for the red herrings**
> Connections loves words that seem to fit two groups. If a group looks too obvious, there's probably a trap. The groups are color-coded from yellow (most straightforward) to purple (trickiest).

Strands: a word search with a theme

Strands shows a grid of letters and a hint about the day's theme. You find the theme words by dragging your finger across neighboring letters — up, down, sideways or diagonally. One special word, the **spangram**, stretches from one side of the board to the other and names the theme. Every letter on the board gets used exactly once.

> TIP
> **Earn a hint**
> Finding ordinary words that aren't part of the theme still helps: enough of them earn you a hint, which highlights the letters of one theme word.

Pips: a domino logic puzzle

Pips is the newest of the free games, added in August 2025. You place dominoes on a board so the dots (the "pips") meet the conditions printed on colored areas — for example, "these add up to 8" or "these are all equal." There are three puzzles each day, from easy to hard.

FROM BILL

Try easy first

If you're new to logic puzzles, start with the easy Pips puzzle. It teaches the rules gently, and the harder ones make a lot more sense afterward.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Three different free games mean variety: words one day, patterns the next, numbers when you're in the mood. Variety keeps a daily habit fresh.

CHAPTER 7

The Crossword, the Mini & Spelling Bee

These are the classic subscriber games. If you've done the newspaper crossword for years, the app version will feel familiar — with a few helpful extras.

Working a crossword on a screen

1. Tap a square. The clue for that word appears above the keyboard, and the whole answer is highlighted.
2. Tap the same square again to switch between **Across** and **Down**.
3. Type your answer. The cursor moves to the next square by itself.
4. Tap the clue bar or the arrows beside it to move to the next or previous clue.
5. Look for a menu (often a light bulb or similar icon) with options to **check** or **reveal** a square, a word or the whole puzzle when you're stuck.

> TIP
> **Using "check" isn't cheating**
> It's your puzzle — use the helpers as much or as little as you like. Using them may mean that day doesn't count toward a "solved without help" streak, but that's entirely up to you.

The days of the week

The Times crossword is famously easiest on Monday and gets harder through the week, with Saturday the toughest. The Sunday puzzle is larger but about as hard as a Thursday. If you're new, start with Monday and Tuesday puzzles from the archive.

Spelling Bee

You get seven letters arranged in a honeycomb. Make as many words as you can, at least four letters long, and every word must use the center letter. Letters can be reused. Your rank climbs as you find more words, and a word that uses all seven letters — a **pangram** — earns a bonus.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

A crossword on a tablet means no smudged ink, no hunting for a pencil, and you can make the squares as big as you like. And the archive gives you years of puzzles to enjoy at your own pace.

HEADS UP

One account, many devices

If you subscribe, sign in with the same New York Times account on every device. Otherwise your phone may think you're a subscriber and your tablet may not.

CHAPTER 8

Should You Pay for NYT Games?

Plenty of people play the free games for years and never pay a cent. Others find the Crossword alone worth the subscription. Here's how to decide.

What the subscription adds

- The daily **Crossword** and **The Mini**.
- The full **Spelling Bee**, **Letter Boxed** and **Tiles**.
- The **archive** of past puzzles.

The kinds of plans

- A **Games** subscription on its own, billed monthly or yearly. Yearly costs less per month.
- A **family** Games plan, introduced in September 2025, so others in the household can each have their own sign-in, stats and streaks.
- **All Access**, the Times' larger bundle with news, Cooking and more, which includes Games.

About the price

The Times sets prices that vary with special offers, and they change from time to time, so I'm not printing a number here. The regular Games price is a few dollars a month, less per month if you pay for a year. The exact price for you is always shown in the app before you confirm.

HEADS UP

Introductory prices go up

Offers like "first year for a dollar a month" are common. After the introductory period the subscription **renews automatically at the regular price**. Before you accept an offer, read the small print for the after-price, and put a reminder on your calendar a week before it renews.

Questions to ask yourself

1. Do I play a subscriber game (usually the Crossword) at least a few times a week?
2. Would I enjoy the archive of older puzzles?
3. Does anyone else in the house play? If so, a family plan may make more sense than two separate ones.
4. Am I already paying for a Times subscription that might include Games?

TIP

Where to subscribe

If you subscribe inside the app on an iPhone or Android phone, the charge comes through Apple or Google, and you cancel there (Chapter 22). If you subscribe on the website, you manage it in your New York Times account online. Write down which way you did it on the cheat-sheet in Chapter 24.

FROM BILL

Try the free games first

My honest advice: play Wordle, Connections and Strands for a month. If you find yourself wishing for the Crossword every morning, that's your answer. If not, you've lost nothing.

PART 3

Streaks, Stats & Sharing

Keep your streak going on every device, understand your numbers, and share your score with family without spoiling the answer.

CHAPTER 9

Keep My Streak on Every Device

A **streak** is the number of days in a row you've played (or won). Folks get attached to them — a 200-day Wordle streak is something to be proud of. The most common heartbreak is a streak that seems to vanish when you play on a different device. Here's why it happens and how to prevent it.

Why streaks disappear

If you play without signing in, your stats are stored only on that one device — even only in that one web browser. Play on your tablet the next day, and the tablet has no idea about the streak on your phone. Clearing your browser's history or data, or getting a new phone, can wipe them too.

The fix: one free account, signed in everywhere

The New York Times lets you save your Wordle stats and streaks to a **free New York Times account**. Once you're signed in to the same account on every device, your streak follows you.

1. On the device that has your **longest streak**, open the NYT Games app (or the Wordle page).
2. Look for **Log In** or **Create a free account** — often in the menu or on the screen after you finish a puzzle.
3. Sign in, or create an account with your email address and a password you'll remember. Write them on the cheat-sheet in Chapter 24.
4. When asked, agree to save or connect your stats to the account.
5. Now sign in with **the same email and password** on your other phone, tablet and computer.
6. Play the next puzzle on any of them. Your streak should carry on.

HEADS UP

Start from the device with the best streak

Connecting stats to an account is a one-way step. Sign in first on the device whose streak you want to keep, so that's the one that's saved. If you're unsure which account holds your stats, don't sign out or clear your browser data until you've checked.

If your streak already disappeared

1. Make sure you're signed in on this device — look for your account in the app's menu or settings.
2. Check it's the **same** account (the same email) you use on your other devices. Two accounts with two different emails is a common mix-up.
3. Close the app completely and open it again so it refreshes your stats.
4. On a computer, try the same web browser you normally use. Each browser keeps its own records.

If you genuinely missed a day, the streak resets — the account can't bring back a day you didn't play. That's simply part of the game.

FROM BILL

Don't let a streak become a chore

Streaks are fun, but if you notice yourself worrying about one while you're traveling or unwell, it's perfectly fine to let it go. Your enjoyment matters more than the number.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Play on whatever device is handy — the phone in the doctor's waiting room, the tablet in your chair — and your streak keeps counting.

CHAPTER 10

Your Stats and What They Mean

After each puzzle, the games show a statistics screen. You can also open it any time — in Wordle, look for the small bar-chart icon near the top.

Wordle's numbers

Stat	What it means
Played	How many Wordles you've finished.
Win %	The share you solved within six guesses.
Current Streak	Wins in a row up to today.
Max Streak	Your longest winning streak ever.
Guess Distribution	A little bar chart of how many guesses your wins took — how often you solved it in 3, in 4, and so on.

Other games

Connections, Strands, Spelling Bee and the Crossword keep their own stats, such as solve times, puzzles completed and streaks. The details differ from game to game; tap around the stats screen — you can't change or erase anything just by looking.

TIP

Times aren't a race

Crossword stats may show how long you took. Ignore that if it makes you feel rushed. A puzzle finished slowly with a cup of tea is a puzzle finished.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

The stats screen is a gentle record of a pleasant habit — and a fun thing to compare with the family over Sunday dinner.

CHAPTER 11

Share My Results with the Grandkids (No Spoilers)

One of the nicest things about Wordle is the morning text exchange. When you finish, the game can make a little picture of your colored squares — with no letters — so family can see how you did without learning the answer.

What a shared result looks like

It's a short text: the puzzle's number, how many guesses you took out of six (for example **4/6**), and rows of green, yellow and gray squares that match your board. Because the letters aren't included, nobody's puzzle gets spoiled.

Sending it by text message

1. Finish today's Wordle. The results screen appears (if not, tap the bar-chart stats icon).
2. Tap **Share**.
3. A list of ways to share slides up. Tap **Messages** (iPhone) or your texting app (Android).
4. Choose the family member or the family group chat, and tap send.
5. If you only see a note that the result was **copied**, open your texting app, start a message, press and hold in the typing box, and tap **Paste**.

TIP

Share in a group chat

A family group text is perfect for this. Everyone posts their squares, and the cousins can see who got it in three. Connections and Strands have a Share button too, with their own colorful patterns.

Spoiler manners

- Share the squares, never the word, until everyone's had a chance — usually the next day.
- Don't type hints like "it's a fruit!" in the family chat unless everyone agrees.
- If someone asks for a hint, send it privately.

GOOD TO KNOW

Hearing the squares read aloud

If a family member uses a screen reader, rows of emoji squares are read aloud one by one, which can be tedious. For them, a simple "Got it in 4!" is kinder.

STAY SAFE

Share results, not personal details

Posting scores publicly on Facebook is harmless, but keep it to the squares. Puzzle-themed quizzes that ask for your first car, your pet's name or your birth year are a classic way crooks collect answers to security questions.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

A little hello from the grandkids every day, with no long message needed — and an easy reason for you to send one back.

PART 4

Free Puzzles Beyond the Times

AARP's free games, the Washington Post's daily puzzles, your local paper, and why paper puzzles still deserve a place at the table.

CHAPTER 12

Free AARP Games

AARP runs a large, free games website with puzzles chosen with adults in mind: crosswords, Sudoku, jigsaws, solitaire, word games and even classic arcade games. You play them in a web browser on a computer, tablet or phone.

What you'll find

- **Daily crosswords**, including a quick **2 Minute Mini Crossword**.
- **The Daily Sudoku** and other Sudoku puzzles at different difficulty levels.
- **Jigsaw puzzles** you assemble on the screen — no lost pieces under the couch.
- **Solitaire** in several varieties.
- Word games such as **Today's Hurdle**, and classic Atari games.

Getting there

1. Open your web browser.
2. Type **aarp.org/games** and press **Enter** (or Go).
3. Browse the categories — puzzles, word games, card games and so on — and tap or click a game.
4. If an ad appears before the game loads, wait for it to finish, then play. Don't click on the ad itself.

Do I have to be an AARP member?

No. A large share of the games are free for everyone. AARP also offers some games exclusively for members, marked as such on the site. If you'd like your scores saved, you may be asked to create a free account on aarp.org — that's a sign-in, not a paid membership.

HEADS UP

Use the real address

Type **aarp.org** yourself rather than clicking "AARP games" links in emails or social-media ads. Look-alike sites use AARP's name to show you pop-ups and collect your information. The real site ends in **aarp.org**.

TIP

Make it a bookmark

Once you're on the games page, bookmark it or, on a phone or tablet, add it to your home screen (iPhone: the **Share** button, then **Add to Home Screen**; Android: the three-dot menu, then **Add to Home screen**). It then opens like an app.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

A whole arcade of familiar puzzles, free, with nothing to install — easy to set up for a parent who loves solitaire and crosswords.

CHAPTER 13

Washington Post & Newspaper Puzzles

Many newspapers put their puzzles online. Here's what's confirmed for the Washington Post, and how to check your own paper.

Washington Post games

The Post's games site, **games.washingtonpost.com**, offers daily puzzles that are free to play online, including:

- The **Daily Crossword**, a **Mini Crossword** and the **Sunday Crossword**.
- **The Daily Sudoku**.
- **Keyword**, the Post's own daily word game: guess a six-letter keyword whose letters complete six horizontal words. A new one arrives every day.

Your local newspaper

If you subscribe to a local paper, its website or app may include the puzzles you know from the print edition — the crossword, Sudoku, a word jumble or a cryptogram. Each paper does this differently.

1. Open the paper's website or app and sign in with your subscription.
2. Look in the menu for a section named **Games**, **Puzzles** or **Comics & Puzzles**.
3. If you can't find it, call the paper's customer service number printed in the paper or on its website and ask whether your subscription includes online puzzles.

TIP

The e-edition is the paper on a screen

Many papers offer an **e-edition** or **replica edition** — an exact copy of the printed pages. If online puzzles aren't offered separately, the puzzle page is often in there; some people print it out to solve with a pencil.

HEADS UP

"Free puzzle" pop-ups

Searching the web for "free crossword" turns up many sites stuffed with ads and pop-ups. Stick to names you know: the Times, AARP, the Post, your own paper.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Your favorite newspaper puzzles keep coming when you travel, when the paper is late, or if you've switched to reading the news on a tablet.

CHAPTER 14

Puzzles on Paper Still Count

Screens are convenient, but paper puzzles have real advantages, and nobody needs to give them up.

Paper's advantages

- **No ads, no charges, no batteries**, and nothing to update.
- **No screen glare** — easier on tired eyes in the evening.
- **Large-print puzzle books** are widely sold, often bigger than you can comfortably get on a phone.
- You can work at the kitchen table with a friend, passing the pencil back and forth.

Where apps do better

- Checking an answer you aren't sure of, without peeking at the back of the book.
- Playing along with family far away, and sharing your score.
- Making the squares as big as you need.
- A fresh puzzle every day without a trip to the store.

The best of both

Plenty of people do Wordle on the phone in the morning and a paper crossword in the afternoon. Some print an online puzzle to solve with a pencil. Mix and match however suits you.

TIP

Big jigsaws on a screen

If arthritis makes small jigsaw pieces hard to handle, a jigsaw app on a tablet lets you drag pieces with one finger. Chapter 15 covers how to choose one without drowning in ads.

FROM BILL

Do what you enjoy

There's no prize for doing puzzles the modern way. If paper makes you happy, that's the right way.

PART 5

Puzzle Apps & the Ad Problem

Sudoku, solitaire and jigsaw apps are wonderful — once you know how to handle the ads, the fake close buttons and the in-app purchases.

CHAPTER 15

Sudoku, Solitaire & Jigsaw Apps

Search the app store for "Sudoku" or "solitaire" and you'll get hundreds of results. Most are free to download and paid for by advertising. A few minutes of checking before you tap Install saves a lot of frustration.

How to choose a good one

1. Open the **App Store** or **Google Play** and search for the kind of game you want.
2. Tap an app to open its page. Don't install yet.
3. Look at the **developer** name under the title. A well-known name, or a company with many puzzle apps and a long history, is a good sign.
4. Check the **rating** and the **number of reviews**. Thousands of reviews with a high average is more trustworthy than a handful.
5. Read a few of the **recent** reviews, especially the low ones. Complaints like "ad every 30 seconds" or "charged me without asking" tell you what you need to know.
6. Look for **In-App Purchases** (Apple) or **Contains ads** / **In-app purchases** (Google Play) near the Get or Install button. Most free games have both.
7. Scroll to the list of in-app purchases if shown. A single "Remove Ads" option is simpler than a long list of coin packs and weekly subscriptions.

TIP

Familiar names

Your computer may already have a solitaire game. On Windows, **Microsoft Solitaire Collection** comes from Microsoft itself and is also available for phones and tablets. Apps from big, familiar companies aren't ad-free, but they're less likely to play tricks.

What "free" usually means

Model	What it's like
Free with ads	You play for free, and ads appear between games or along the bottom.
Free with a remove-ads purchase	A one-time payment turns the ads off for good. Often the best deal.
Free with a subscription	A weekly, monthly or yearly fee removes ads or unlocks puzzles. Adds up quickly.
Paid up front	You pay once to download, and there are usually no ads at all.

HEADS UP

Weekly subscriptions

Be wary of a puzzle app that offers a **weekly** subscription, especially after a "free trial." A few dollars a week becomes well over a hundred dollars a year. Chapter 21 explains this trap.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Five minutes of checking means you end up with a pleasant puzzle app instead of a frustrating ad machine.

CHAPTER 16

Too Many Ads: Fake Close Buttons & Pop-Ups

Ads pay for free games, and a few are reasonable. The trouble is that some ads are designed to trick you into tapping them. Once you know the tricks, they lose their power.

The common tricks

- **The fake close button.** A small X that's actually part of the ad picture. Tapping it opens the ad instead of closing it.
- **The countdown.** The real X doesn't appear until a timer finishes — five, 15 or 30 seconds.
- **The tiny real X.** The genuine close button is faint, very small, and tucked in a corner — sometimes the top left instead of the top right.
- **The surprise App Store trip.** Tapping anywhere on the ad jumps you to the App Store or Google Play page for some other game.
- **The scary warning.** An ad claiming your phone has a virus or your battery is damaged. It's an ad — your phone is fine.

What to do when an ad appears

1. **Wait.** Don't tap anything for a few seconds. Let any countdown finish.
2. Look carefully at all four corners for the real close button — usually an **X** or the word **Close** or **Skip**.
3. Tap it once, precisely. If you have trouble hitting small targets, zoom your screen or use the tip below.
4. If you land in the App Store or Google Play by mistake, **don't tap Get or Install**. Just go back to your game (swipe up from the bottom edge, or tap the back arrow on Android, and reopen the game).
5. If a web page took over with a warning, close that browser tab. Nothing was installed.

SCAM ALERT

Fake virus warnings in ads

No legitimate ad can see inside your phone. Any ad or pop-up claiming your device is infected, hacked or damaged — and offering a cleaner, a booster or a phone number to call — is a trick. Close it and carry on. Never call a number shown in a pop-up.

Fewer ads without paying

- **Turn on airplane mode** while you play a game that doesn't need the internet. Many offline games can't load ads without a connection. (Turn it back off afterward so calls and texts come through.)
- Close the app completely between sessions, so it doesn't pile up ads in the background.
- Delete an app that shows an ad after every single game, and choose a calmer one.

TIP

Airplane mode is quick

On an iPhone or iPad, open **Control Center** (swipe down from the top-right corner) and tap the airplane. On Android, swipe down from the top of the screen and tap **Airplane mode**. Remember: no calls come through while it's on.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

No more accidental trips to the app store, no more panic over fake warnings — just the puzzle.

CHAPTER 17

In-App Purchases & Paying to Remove Ads

An **in-app purchase** is anything you buy from inside an app after you've downloaded it: removing ads, extra puzzle packs, hints, coins or a subscription. Some are good value; some are designed to nibble at your wallet.

Good buys and poor ones

Type	Examples
Usually worth it	A one-time **Remove Ads** purchase in a game you play every day. A paid puzzle pack you'll actually work through.
Think twice	Coins, gems, hints or "lives" — they run out and the game nudges you to buy more.
Usually avoid	Weekly subscriptions, and "free trials" that turn into a charge in a few days.

Make every purchase ask for your password

The Federal Trade Commission suggests using your device's settings to turn off in-app purchases, or to require a password for every purchase. That one step stops accidental taps — and grandchildren playing on your tablet — from spending money.

- **iPhone or iPad:** purchases are approved with Face ID, Touch ID or your Apple Account password, so a payment never happens without that confirmation. To turn in-app purchases off entirely, use **Screen Time** in Settings and its **Content & Privacy Restrictions**.
- **Android:** in the **Google Play** app, tap your profile picture, then **Settings**, and look for **Authentication** or **Require authentication for purchases**. Choose **For all purchases**.

HEADS UP

Grandkids and your tablet

Children don't always realize the gems in a game cost real money. If they borrow your device, check that purchases require your password, and look over your receipts afterward.

Paying to remove the ads

1. Open the game's menu or settings (often a gear icon) and look for **Remove Ads**, **Go Ad-Free** or **Premium**.
2. Read carefully: is it a **one-time** price or a **subscription** that renews? The screen should say "per week," "per month" or "per year" if it renews.
3. If it's a fair one-time price for a game you love, tap it and confirm with your password, face or fingerprint.
4. If you change phones later, look for **Restore Purchases** in the same menu to get your ad-free version back without paying again.

TIP

Check your receipts now and then

Apple and Google email a receipt for every purchase. A quick look at those emails once a month catches anything unexpected early. Bill's **Subscriptions** guide covers finding every recurring charge in detail.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Spend a few dollars once, on purpose, for a calm ad-free game — and never be surprised by a charge.

PART 6

Easier on the Eyes, Better with Family

Bigger letters, dark mode and comfortable screens — then how to turn puzzles into a game you play with the people you love.

CHAPTER 18

Bigger Text, Dark Mode & Easier Screens

Squinting takes the fun out of a puzzle. There are three places to make things easier: the game's own settings, your device's settings, and simply choosing a bigger screen.

1. Look in the game's own settings first

Most puzzle apps have a gear-shaped **Settings** icon. Inside, look for options such as **dark theme** or **dark mode**, **high contrast**, **large numbers** or **font size**, and sounds. Wordle, for example, offers a dark theme and a high-contrast color choice (Chapter 5).

2. Make text bigger on an iPhone or iPad

1. Open **Settings**.
2. Tap **Accessibility**, then **Display & Text Size**.
3. Tap **Larger Text** and drag the slider to the right until the sample text is comfortable.
4. Back on the Display & Text Size screen, turn on **Bold Text** if letters look thin.

Apps that follow Apple's text-size setting will grow to match. Some games draw their own letters and won't change — for those, use the game's settings, Zoom below, or a tablet.

3. Make text bigger on Android

1. Open **Settings**.
2. Tap the search box at the top and type **Font size**. Tap the result.
3. Drag the slider to the right until the sample is comfortable.
4. Search Settings for **Display size** (sometimes called **Screen zoom**) to make buttons and squares bigger too.

Dark mode: light letters on a dark background

- **iPhone or iPad: Settings** > **Display & Brightness**, then tap **Dark**.
- **Android:** open **Settings**, search for **Dark theme** or **Dark mode**, and turn it on.
- Many puzzle apps follow your device's choice automatically; others have their own switch.

TIP

Dark or light — try both

Some people find dark mode gentler in the evening; others find dark letters on white easier to read. There's no right answer. Try each for a day.

Zoom in on anything

Both iPhone and Android have a built-in magnifier for the whole screen, called **Zoom** on iPhone (in **Settings** > **Accessibility**) and **Magnification** on Android (search Settings for it). They're handy for a crossword clue in tiny print. They take a little practice, so try them when you're not in the middle of a puzzle.

On a computer

In any web browser, hold **Ctrl** (or **Command** on a Mac) and press **+** to enlarge the page; **Ctrl** and **0** returns to normal. Most browser puzzles grow nicely this way.

FROM BILL

A tablet can solve it all at once

If you're fighting tiny squares every day, the simplest fix may be a bigger screen. An iPad or Android tablet shows a full crossword at a comfortable size. If you'd like help choosing one or setting the text just right, that's exactly the kind of thing I do.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Clear, comfortable letters let you focus on the puzzle instead of on your eyes — and you can play longer without a headache.

CHAPTER 19

Playing with Family: Words With Friends & More

Puzzles become even more fun when they're shared. Some games let you play against family members turn by turn, even when you live in different states.

Words With Friends

Words With Friends is a word game very much like Scrabble: you take turns placing letter tiles on a board to build words and score points. The difference is that you can play with someone far away, one move at a time — make your move in the morning, and your grandson makes his after school.

1. Both of you install **Words With Friends** from the App Store or Google Play. Check that it's from **Zynga**, the company that makes it.
2. Create an account or sign in, as the app asks.
3. Start a new game and choose to play with a friend. You can usually find them by their username, or by connecting to your phone's contacts if you choose to.
4. Take your turn whenever you like. The app lets you know when it's your move.

> HEADS UP
> **It's free with ads**
> Words With Friends is free to play and supported by ads, with optional purchases. The ad advice in Chapter 16 and the purchase advice in Chapter 17 apply here too.

Other ways to play together

- **The family Wordle chat.** Everyone plays the same puzzle and posts their squares (Chapter 11).
- **Connections and Strands** work the same way — same puzzle for everyone, so it's fun to compare.
- **Side by side.** Hand the tablet back and forth on a crossword, or work a jigsaw app together on the couch.
- **Video call puzzles.** On a FaceTime or video call, share the clue aloud and solve it together.

STAY SAFE

Play with people you know

Most word games let you play strangers too. That's usually harmless, but treat in-game chat like any message from someone you don't know: no personal details, no money, no moving the conversation to another app. Romance scammers sometimes start with friendly game chat.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

A turn-by-turn game gives a grandchild a quick, easy reason to connect with you every day — no phone call needed, and it's fun for both of you.

PART 7

Honest Talk & Staying Safe

What "brain training" really promises, the fake apps and subscription traps to avoid, and how to cancel a game subscription on iPhone and Android.

CHAPTER 20

An Honest Word on "Brain Training"

You'll see ads promising that a particular game will "keep your mind sharp," "boost memory" or "fight aging." It's worth knowing what's behind claims like that before you pay for one.

The Lumosity case

In January 2016, the Federal Trade Commission settled with the makers of **Lumosity**, a popular "brain training" program. The FTC said the company's ads claimed, without the science to back them up, that the games could improve performance at work and school and could reduce or delay memory problems related to aging and other conditions. The company agreed to pay 2 million dollars (a 50 million dollar judgment was suspended), to notify its subscribers and make it easy for them to cancel, and to have solid scientific evidence before making such claims again.

What that means for you

- Be skeptical of any game that promises medical or health benefits, especially one asking you to pay a subscription for them.
- Getting better at a particular puzzle mostly means you've gotten better at that puzzle.
- If you have questions about memory or thinking, talk with your doctor. A game is not a test or a treatment.

FROM BILL

Enjoy them for what they are

I'm not going to tell you a crossword will do anything for your health — that's a question for your doctor, not a tech guide. What I can tell you is that puzzles are fun, they give the morning a pleasant rhythm, and sharing them is a lovely way to stay in touch with friends and family. That's plenty of reason to play.

HEADS UP

"Clinically proven" in an ad

Phrases like "clinically proven," "doctor recommended" or "reverses memory loss" in a game ad are a cue to slow down. Real medical advice comes from your own doctor, not an app store listing.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

You can enjoy any game you like without paying extra for promises it can't keep.

CHAPTER 21

Fake Puzzle Apps & Subscription Traps

Wordle's popularity brought a wave of copycats. Some are harmless knock-offs; others exist mainly to sign you up for an expensive subscription. Here's how to spot them.

Signs of a copycat or trap app

- The name looks right — "Wordle" plus an extra word — but the company under the title isn't **The New York Times**.
- Right after opening, it asks you to start a "free trial" before you can play.
- The price is **weekly**, or the cancel-anytime small print is hard to find.
- Lots of recent reviews mention unexpected charges.
- It promises "unlimited Wordle" or "brain training" health benefits.

How the subscription trap works

1. The app shows a bright screen offering a free trial — three or seven days.
2. The close button is tiny or hidden, so many people tap the big button just to get past it.
3. You confirm with your face, fingerprint or password, often without noticing the after-price.
4. When the trial ends, the charge starts and keeps renewing — sometimes every week.
5. Deleting the app does **not** stop the charges. You must cancel the subscription (Chapter 22).

SCAM ALERT

Deleting the app doesn't cancel it

This is the single most important thing to know: removing a game from your phone does not end a subscription you started inside it. The charge continues until you cancel in your Apple or Google account.

Before you tap "Start Free Trial"

1. Stop and read the small print under the button. Look for the price and how often it renews.
2. If you don't want it, look for an **X**, **Not now**, **Skip** or **Continue with ads**, often small or faint.
3. If you do try it, set a calendar reminder for a day before the trial ends.

4. Or start the trial and cancel it right away. With many subscriptions you can keep using the trial until it ends; the cancel screen tells you when access stops.

SCAM ALERT

Fake support for puzzle apps

If you search the web for help with a game charge, be careful of sites and phone numbers claiming to be "Wordle support" or "App Store support." Real refunds go through Apple or Google's own websites. No real company asks for gift cards or remote access to your computer to fix a game subscription.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Spotting a copycat in seconds keeps your money where it belongs and gets you the real, free Wordle.

CHAPTER 22

Cancel a Game Subscription

If you subscribed inside an app — NYT Games, a Sudoku app, anything — the subscription is usually billed by Apple or Google, and that's where you cancel it.

On an iPhone or iPad

1. Open **Settings**.
2. Tap **your name** at the top.
3. Tap **Subscriptions**.
4. Tap the subscription you want to stop.
5. Tap **Cancel Subscription**. You may need to scroll down to see it.
6. Confirm. You'll usually keep access until the end of the period you've paid for.

> **TIP**
> **No Cancel button?**
> If there's no Cancel button, or a red message shows an expiration date, it's already canceled. If the subscription isn't listed at all, it may be billed by another company or under a different Apple Account — search your email for "receipt from Apple" to see which account was charged. A family member's subscription must be canceled by that family member.

On an Android phone or tablet

1. Open the **Google Play** app.
2. Tap your profile picture in the top-right corner.
3. Tap **Payments & subscriptions**, then **Subscriptions**.
4. Tap the subscription you want to stop.
5. Tap **Cancel subscription** and follow the instructions on the screen.

You keep what you've already paid for until the period ends, and the subscription won't renew. Past payments generally aren't refunded, with some exceptions in Google Play's refund policies. Uninstalling the app doesn't cancel it.

Subscribed on a website instead?

If you signed up for NYT Games (or anything else) on a website with a credit card, it isn't billed by Apple or Google. Sign in to that company's website, open your **account** settings, and look for your subscription. Your credit card statement shows which company is charging you.

HEADS UP

Was it a mistake? Ask for a refund

If you were charged for something you didn't mean to buy, Apple and Google each have an official way to request a refund from your purchase history. Act quickly — sooner is better. Bill's **Subscriptions** guide walks through it in detail.

WHAT THIS DOES FOR YOU

What this does for you

Two minutes in Settings ends a charge for good, and you'll know exactly where to look next time.

PART 8

When to Call Bill & Your Cheat-Sheet

An honest word about when a hand is worth it, and a one-page summary of the whole guide.

CHAPTER 23

When to Call Bill

I've written this guide so you can enjoy puzzles on your own. But part of being helpful is being honest about when a hand saves you time and worry. Here's my straight advice, with no pressure.

Times it's well worth a call

- **Setting up a new tablet for puzzles** — the right apps installed, text sized comfortably, accounts signed in on every device so streaks follow you.
- **A streak or subscription that went missing** after a new phone, and you're not sure which account it lives in.
- **Charges you don't recognize** from a game or app, and you'd like help tracking them down, canceling and asking for a refund.
- **A pop-up or warning that won't go away**, or you're worried you installed something you shouldn't have.
- **Setting up a parent's device** with a few safe, ad-light puzzle games and purchases locked down.
- **A device training session** — an hour together learning the phone or tablet, with puzzles as the friendly practice ground.
- **You'd simply rather have a patient person show you.** That's always reason enough.

What working with me is like

I work at your pace — no rushing, no talking down and no jargon. I explain what I'm doing in plain words, and I'll always tell you honestly when a subscription or a purchase isn't worth your money. I bring 30+ years of professional experience to every visit, and Bill's Home Tech serves Portage County, Ohio. I can often help over a remote session, or come to your home.

FROM BILL

How to reach me

Call or text **(330) 200-8042**, or book a time at **billshometech.com/book**. My help is **$49 remote · $99 in your home**. This guide is free to keep and share.

GOOD TO KNOW

You may meet Sophie first

When you call or visit billshometech.com, you may be greeted by **Sophie**, my AI receptionist. She can answer quick questions and help you book a time with me. A real person — me — does the actual help.

Thank you for spending this time with me. Enjoy your puzzles — and send the grandkids your squares tomorrow morning.

— Bill

CHAPTER 24

Your Puzzle Cheat-Sheet

Keep this summary handy. The whole guide, boiled down.

The essentials

To do this	Do this
Free daily games	Wordle, Connections, Strands and Pips in the **NYT Games** app; many games at **aarp.org/games**; crosswords and Sudoku at **games.washingtonpost.com**.
Wordle colors	Green = right spot. Yellow = in the word, wrong spot. Gray = not in the word.
Keep your streak	Free New York Times account, signed in with the same email on every device.
Share without spoilers	Finish the puzzle > **Share** > Messages > pick family.
An ad pops up	Wait, find the real X, tap once. Never tap Get or Install by accident.
Stop accidental buys	Require your password for every purchase (Chapter 17).
Cancel on iPhone	**Settings** > your name > **Subscriptions** > the subscription > **Cancel Subscription**.
Cancel on Android	**Google Play** > profile picture > **Payments & subscriptions** > **Subscriptions** > **Cancel subscription**.
Bigger text, iPhone	**Settings** > **Accessibility** > **Display & Text Size** > **Larger Text**.
Bigger text, Android	**Settings** > search **Font size**.

Write it down once

Keep handy	
New York Times account email	_____
NYT Games: free or subscribed?	_____
Subscribed through (Apple, Google or website)	_____
Subscription renews on	_____
AARP / other puzzle site sign-in	_____
Family Wordle group chat name	_____
Puzzle apps I paid to remove ads	_____

When something's wrong, in order

1. Close the game completely and open it again.
2. Check you're signed in to the right account (for streaks and subscriptions).
3. Check your internet connection (and that airplane mode is off).
4. Restart the phone or tablet.
5. Call Bill at (330) 200-8042 — that's what I'm here for.

Money-smart and safe habits

- Get apps only from the App Store or Google Play, and check the company name under the title.
- Read the after-price before any "free trial."
- Remember: deleting an app does **not** cancel its subscription.
- Ignore any ad or pop-up that says your device has a virus.
- Be skeptical of games promising health or memory benefits — play for fun.
- Never pay anyone for "app support" with gift cards.