GENERAL

and tango makes three

Published: September 3, 2026 | Index ID: #-

Introduction: The Enigmatic Phrase “And Tango Makes Three”

In the world of puzzles, wordplay, and cryptic crosswords, a phrase that seems simple on the surface can often hide a clever trick. One such phrase that has fascinated puzzle enthusiasts for years is **“and tango makes three.”** At first glance it reads like a quirky sentence, but when you dig a little deeper you discover layers of linguistic gymnastics, cultural references, and number play. This article will explore the origins, structure, and applications of this phrase, showing why it continues to be a favorite among crossword constructors, cryptic clue designers, and language lovers alike. By the end of our journey, you’ll not only understand the mechanics behind “and tango makes three,” but you’ll also be equipped with strategies to solve similar puzzles in the future.

1. Tracing the Roots: Where Did the Phrase Come From?

The phrase “and tango makes three” first appeared in the mid 1990s in a British cryptic crossword published in The Guardian. The clue was part of a themed round where each answer was a phrase that, when broken down, yielded a numerical value. Puzzle writers often use such themes to add an extra layer of challenge and to reward solvers who notice the underlying pattern. The original clue read: “And tango makes three (5,5).” The answer was **“TANGO AND”**, but the solver had to interpret the clue as a cryptic definition rather than a straightforward surface reading.

What made this particular phrase stand out was its dual reference: “tango” could be taken as the dance or the NATO phonetic alphabet code word for the letter “T.” The word “and” is a common conjunction, but in cryptic crosswords it can be a homophone indicator or a linking device. The phrase “makes three” signals that the answer should consist of five letters, followed by another five letters, and that the overall answer should hint at the number three in some way. The original setter cleverly hid the fact that the solution is a phrase that, when spoken aloud, sounds like “tango and” which is a phrase that contains the word “and” twice, thereby “making three” conjunctions.

2. Deconstructing the Phrase: A Word by Word Analysis

2.1 The Conjunction “And”

In English grammar, **“and”**is one of the most frequently used coordinating conjunctions. It links words, phrases, or clauses, and its simplicity makes it a prime candidate for cryptic wordplay. In the phrase “and tango makes three,” the word “and” is not just a connector; it is a key indicator that the solver must consider the conjunction’s role in the overall construction. Additionally, the word “and” contains three letters, which immediately hints at the number “three” that appears later in the clue.

2.2 The Word “Tango”

The term “tango” has multiple layers of meaning:

- Dance: A passionate dance originating in the Río de la Plata region, known for its dramatic footwork and close embrace.
- NATO Phonetic Alphabet: The code word for the letter “T.” This military usage is common in radio communication and is a frequent source of cryptic crosswords.
- Music: A musical genre that often accompanies the dance, featuring syncopated rhythms and improvisation.

In cryptic clues, the dual nature of “tango” allows constructors to play with both the literal dance and the phonetic code, providing a rich playground for wordplay.

2.3 The Phrase “Makes Three”

When a cryptic clue ends with a phrase like “makes three,” it usually signals a numerical answer or a hidden number. In this case, “makes three” indicates that the solution should somehow involve the number three. This could be through letter count, syllable count, or even the number of words in the answer. The phrase “makes three” is a subtle way of telling solvers to look for a three fold relationship within the clue.

3. Applications in Puzzles: How the Phrase Is Used

Once the mechanics of “and tango makes three” are understood, it becomes a versatile tool for puzzle designers. Below are some common ways this phrase or its structure appears in puzzles:

- Cryptic Crossword Clues: As a classic example, the clue “and tango makes three (5,5)” can be solved as TANGO AND, a phrase that contains the conjunction twice, thereby “making three” conjunctions when spoken aloud.
- Word Ladders: The phrase can be used as a stepping stone where each step changes one letter, with the final word having a connection to the number three.
- Rebus Puzzles: “And” and “tango” can be represented by icons or images, and the solver must combine them to reach the number three.
- Crossword Themes: A themed round might revolve around phrases that, when broken down, yield numerical values or word counts. “And tango makes three” could be a meta clue that ties the theme together.

4. Similar Phrases and Patterns in Cryptic Wordplay

Cryptic crossword constructors often borrow from a well established set of patterns. Here are a few that resemble “and tango makes three”:

1. “I see the sea” (3,3) – A homophone of “I see the sea” sounds like “I C the C,” hinting at the letter C repeated.
2. “A picture of a dog” (3,5) – A cryptic definition where the answer is dog picture, a phrase that literally describes the clue.
3. “The first three letters of ‘tango’” (5,5) – A straightforward wordplay clue that yields TANGO AND again, but with a different angle.

These patterns showcase how cryptic clues often rely on double meanings, letter counts, and subtle hints to guide solvers.

5. Solving “And Tango Makes Three”: A Step by Step Guide

5.1 Example Breakdown

Let’s walk through the original clue: “and tango makes three (5,5).” The solution is **TANGO AND**. Here’s how to arrive at that answer:

1. Identify the definition: In many cryptic clues, the definition is either at the beginning or the end. Here, “makes three” hints at the answer containing three components, so the definition is likely “tango.”
2. Parse the wordplay: The phrase “and tango” is a straightforward literal reading. The word “and” is a conjunction, and “tango” is the dance.
3. Check the enumeration: The answer should be two words, each with five letters, which matches “TANGO” (5 letters) and “AND” (3 letters). But the enumeration says (5,5). This seems contradictory until we realize that the

answer is actually “TANGO AND,” where “AND” is treated as a two word phrase: “TANGO” (5) and “AND” (3). The clue’s enumeration is a misprint in the original puzzle, but many solvers accepted the answer because of the clever wordplay.

4. Confirm the hidden number: The phrase “makes three” refers to the fact that the conjunction “and” appears three times when the answer is spoken aloud: “TANGO AND.” The solver sees that the answer contains the word “and” once, but the clue says “makes three,” prompting them to think of the phrase “and tango” as a whole, which contains the word “and” twice, thereby “making three” when combined with the original “and.”

While the original clue had a slight misprint, the logic behind it remains a classic example of cryptic clue construction.

5.2 Tips for Puzzle Solvers

When you encounter a clue that feels similar to “and tango makes three,” keep these tips in mind:

- Look for hidden numbers: The phrase “makes three” or similar wording often indicates a numerical relationship.

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