

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter One

## *The Plateau*

Ask virtually any teacher of stenography if there is a point where students experience a sharp decline in their progress.

The answer will be yes.

It is one of the great unassailable truths of our profession.

Many students, even those that appear to be naturals, suffer through a period where their advancement is arrested or hindered.

This is frustrating to students. They don't understand it. They start school in theory class. This is tough, but they persevere. Those who are dedicated do not experience a great deal of difficulty.

Then they move on to speed classes. This is another kettle of fish. Hard work, good instructors, and motivation do not seem to be enough. Most of them will eventually experience trouble advancing from level to level.

They give their best, just like in theory class, but the results are vastly different. To them, it appears that they have lost their way.

Day after day, week after week, they come to class with little hope of improvement. Without success, drilling becomes work and then drudgery. They lose their energy. They lose their enthusiasm.

There is more to this great horrible truth of stenography. We know when it will happen to you. Ask any teacher when this phenomenon occurs. The universal response is that it happens somewhere around the 120/140 level. Progress slows noticeably. Sometimes it flat stops. Sometimes, there is a regression of abilities.

The average person fights back when they find themselves in this situation. They increase their practice time. They redouble their efforts. A small amount catch on and begin the upward climb. A larger group barely moves forward, but even so, every step is painfully slow. The largest group stays lost. Over time, they begin to drop out. One by one, they withdraw.

Many fine schools have closed their doors for this very reason. The attrition rate is catastrophically appalling. Administrators know that the majority of enrollees will not graduate. Regular colleges and universities also have graduation rates below what you may expect, but stenography schools rank behind them no matter how you crunch the numbers.

To be fair to reporting schools, they will never match traditional schools in their graduation rate. It isn't possible. Traditional schools have multiple courses of study. If you don't like one course, you transfer to another.

In stenography, the only choice is to drop out. Nevertheless, our graduation rate is way too low. Every school has this problem. In fact, almost all stenography schools would pay a huge amount of money to learn how to raise their graduation rate a paltry five percent.

The statistics do not vary greatly from school to school or year to year. They are simply atrocious. It is the nature of the beast. It has always been this way. Even so, the schools attack this problem. I do not know of one school that tolerates it. Meeting after meeting, conference after conference, the discussion goes on. Nobody has hit on the answer yet.

No school will ever graduate 100 percent of their theory students. There will always be students who discover that stenography is not for them. Other students are forced to withdraw due to personal circumstances such as employment, family or health.

All schools must tolerate these types of withdrawals. If there was ever a school that taught sitting on a couch, watching TV, and eating pizza, there would be a certain amount of people who would eventually show up in the registrar's office saying that the course outline is too difficult or that they can't keep up with their studies at this time.

These people aren't going to graduate no matter what the schools do. They can't be helped. If they aren't happy being in stenography school, they will leave. That is normal, and it isn't going to change.

What is galling is the amount of students who leave because they do not see how they can continue to pour tuition money into an endeavor that is showing no return for their dollar. We must rise to the challenge. We must find the answer.

This dilemma is reaching crisis conditions. With CART, realtime, and captioning, our field is expanding. We need more graduates, and we need them yesterday. Ten years ago, many firms would not hire new reporters. There was a greater pool of candidates to select from at that time. Now, firms are starting to patrol the schools looking for qualified people. The jobs are out there, and they are going begging.

With all of the resources available to us, this problem cannot be allowed to continue. Everyone will gain when this situation is resolved. Students will qualify for those high-paying jobs that they want. Teachers will worry less and sleep better. Schools will absolutely crow over the success that they enjoy. It is a win/win situation.

The first step is to acknowledge our shortcomings. What we are doing is not good enough. Our low graduation rate may have been with us for a long time, but it does not have to continue. There are other fields that require the same basic skills. They do a better job at teaching than we do. This is an important point. It deserves to be repeated. Other comparable fields enjoy a much better success rate.

Some of the students who fail to progress are already accomplished artists or professionals. Some can play the piano or guitar. Others are great typists. There

are hundreds of jobs that require the same manual dexterity necessary to be a reporter. The schools that teach these skills do not report the same dropout rate.

Spend a little time in a video arcade, or watch your children playing the latest computer game. The hand movements are more complicated than what we require. More than that, every game entails learning new functions and new finger patterns for those functions. Children play these games, and they outperform stenographers. The movements are much more complex.

The hand movements that are required for stenography are not too difficult for most people. They can do them, and they have already proven it by their other musical, recreational, or employment skills. The catch is that you can take these musicians and typists and gamers and plop them down in a steno class, and they will not necessarily succeed. There is a reason.

*Next week: Identifying the one basic failing of all schools. There is only one, and it can be easily fixed.*

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*Part One of this chapter concerned the large amount of capable students who do not graduate from our schools. In general, it was stated that other types of schools do a better job. In particular, it was asserted that our schools fail in one specific and easily changed area.*

*Part Two reveals that defect in our system of teaching. At the conclusion of this chapter, you will understand the inherent flaw.*

*Chapter Two deals with how the students attempt (unsuccessfully but valiantly) to compensate. All succeeding chapters will reveal the solutions.*

*And now, the end of the beginning.*

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Students in traditional universities generally are tested in one basic pattern. They learn something, and then they are tested. If they pass, they move on. If they fail, they repeat. They know immediately where they stand.

Stenography students also are tested. If they pass, they move on. If they fail, they repeat. On the surface, it appears that our schools follow the same system as traditional schools. It appears that way, but they do not.

Traditional schools give tests that are meant to be passed by all students. By and large, a student who does not pass at a state university or community college is a student who has not cracked the books.

Some of our students, however, fail even when they put forth an extraordinary effort. There is a difference between the two types of schools and the two types of teaching.

Traditional schools monitor their students by giving them a series of small tests sprinkled over the course of the semester. These tests give necessary feedback to the pupils. If they perform below standards on these tests, they know that their

efforts are not sufficient. It quantifies their work. By analyzing their results on the daily or weekly tests, they have a good idea of how they will fare on their final.

Our students do not enjoy that luxury. Our tests are not meant to be successfully completed by all students. Only those who have achieved the speed level of their particular class have a chance to receive a satisfactory grade. In fact, those students who pass speed tests today are the same students who have failed on a considerable number of yesterdays.

Notice the difference.

At State U., failing unquestionably means that the student needs to put forth more effort. At our schools, it does not carry the same import. A court reporting student who falls short of our speed requirements on one test may be fully ready to pass the next one. On the other hand, that student may be progressing very slowly or not at all.

In short, other schools use tests to gauge the progress of their students. They use the results of each test to keep the students on track. We don't do that. Our schools use tests to validate progress that has already been made. We cannot say that those who fail tests are not improving. The difference between the two types of schools is subtle, but very important.

A better way of evaluating our students is found in the way that typing students and video game enthusiasts learn. There are other arts that we could use as examples, but these two are sufficient. They both teach finger movements, and they both train people better than we do.

We all know how typing courses are taught. The ultimate goal may be 65 words per minute, but there are many smaller goals that have to be reached first. Perhaps the first goal is 25 words per minute with five or fewer errors. When that is reached, the student moves to the next higher level. Eventually, the required speed level is achieved and the student graduates from that course.

In typing, it is always better to have fewer than the maximum number of errors -- even if it means a lower gross amount of words. Quality is valued over quantity. Any student who puts speed above accuracy is immediately admonished. Feedback is instantaneous. There are absolutely no typing courses that recommend that students learn to write fast and then clear up the strokes. It is a very inefficient way to learn. It is not advocated or even tolerated. The student is given no choice, but to learn the proper way.

Computer gamers learn the same way as typists. The people who develop games do so to make money. To be successful at that, they must create a challenging game that can eventually be mastered. They construct their games so that they are relatively easy to learn and yet difficult to completely master.

The big companies know how to create games that will keep the players interested until they gain the skills needed for the higher levels. Each game starts with simple levels. Each game ends with very difficult levels. If the game is too difficult, the player becomes discouraged and eventually gives up. If that happens, the game is given a poor rating, and it does not sell.

These companies do not survive if their games are impossible to master; so they work hard to ensure that their fans can learn the finger patterns. They teach how to do it without having a school or a class or a teacher.

Many games actually have a beginning level that teaches the moves that will be required later. This is comparable to our theory classes. For instance, a gamer may need to know how to move from side to side while firing. This is a common tactic in fighting games.

To ensure that the move is learned, the designer will create a simple situation which requires it. Sometimes, the gamer may even be reminded how to do it. Do it right, and the player will move forward. Do it wrong, and the game comes to a screeching halt. There are some moves that take hours to learn, but until they are mastered, the game does not move forward.

Each function or key combination is explored in Level One. Again, this is similar to our theory classes. Just like the computer games, we teach the basic finger patterns very well. But naturally Level One is followed by Level Two. The free ride is over. Now it is time to perform the skills. That's when the real game begins, and that is where any resemblance to our classes ends.

Level Two of any game is tougher than Level One. If the gamer fails at Level Two, he knows exactly why. Whether it be jumping a cliff, running a maze, or destroying the Evil Zog, the gamer knows precisely at what point he failed.

In the game, the deficiency and the solution is obvious. Not so, for our students. Compare Level Two of a game to our Level Two, the first speed class after theory. The student practices at home, comes to class, takes a test and fails. Why? The answer could be one of many different reasons. If we want them to improve, we must show them where they are deficient.

And that is the crux of the problem. How can we show students what areas they should work on? In a traditional school, the English teacher can say, "You have failed the test that concerned commas. Work on that area." In typing classes, the student is told that they have too many errors at a particular speed. In computer games, the player is stuck on one level until he progresses. In each case, there is an immediate and undisputable response to a substandard performance.

In court reporting, we don't have that kind of reinforcement. In speed classes, the students are not given any guidance other than oversimplification. Platitudes such as "Write clean" mean little to a student unless they are backed up with persuasive arguments. Other well-known sayings such as "Get a stroke for everything" are actually flat out wrong. Students need more than generalizations, and they certainly need more than incorrect generalizations.

Many fine conscientious students are floundering, and it does not have to be. We have a duty to continue to instruct in all of our speed classes. Almost to a school, we do not. The premise is that speed teachers "teach" speed, but in reality, they dictate for most of the class. A few random bits of information may be thrown in, but they are afterthoughts.

It's not the fault of the teachers. There is only so much that they can squeeze into each hour, and they are under orders as to how they conduct their classes.

It's not the fault of the administrators. Every school follows the same general pattern of instruction. To require theory to be taught at every speed level is economically prohibitive, and it would be a tremendous amount of overkill.

It's not the fault of the students. Our students are more dedicated than most, and by and large, they work their fingers to the bone before discouragement sets in.

No one is at fault, but the problem belongs to all of us. This is an indictment of our entire teaching system. We entirely frontload our instruction. Theory class is the only time that we give students the training that they need. It is not enough.

What is needed is a way to immediately counsel a student if bad habits are cropping up or if work is needed on particular strokes. When we reach this point, we will be able to graduate as many students as the other arts and sciences that require manual dexterity.

If skilled musicians and typists and game enthusiasts are dropping out of our schools (they are), then we have a serious problem, but it is one that can be solved.

*Next week: Chapter Two, The Counselor is Incompetent.*

*Did you know that most of your students get their advice from the wrong person? It is our fault. We sent them to this individual. Almost anyone else would have been better. Teachers must wrest control back. They will have their hands full.*

*Chapters Three through Twenty-three of this book outline the basic changes that must be made. Most of it is simple. Some of it is conceptually difficult, both for the teachers and the students. None of it is unsupported theory. All of the principles have been well-tested through the centuries. We did not originate them. We stole them from the other arts and sciences.*

*They have been doing a better job than us.*

## THE PLATEAU

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# Chapter Two

## *The Counselor is Incompetent*

Our students, by definition, are not professionals. They are still learning. They need advice and guidance. If they are to improve at an acceptable pace, they require assistance from those who understand the pitfalls of stenography.

By and large, our schools offer little help beyond theory class. More than that, theory class does not train the student to employ the strokes in the rhythmic manner needed to succeed in the speed classes.

The majority of speed classes are composed entirely of drilling. At first glance, this may appear to be proper, and it is commonly accepted as the appropriate method of training, but it falls short of the purposes of the students, the teachers, and the schools.

Students need training.

Drilling is not training. Drilling is the performance of what is already learned. Students deserve more than that, a great deal more. This point cannot be stressed enough.

There are two areas that must be taught and re-taught and re-taught. The first is reinforcement of basic theory instruction. The second concerns the techniques needed to use those strokes effectively. These techniques are generally not covered in theory, or if they are, they are not stressed and it is too easy for students to discount them.

As to the first point, reinforcement of theory, lower speed students are apt to dismiss unusual fingering patterns because their importance is not stressed. By the time the average student has moved up to the 140 class, those strokes are only a dim memory. The ability to utilize them has been lost.

Although individually, these unusual patterns do not show up frequently, taken together, they appear in almost all drills and tests. These are important techniques and stroking patterns. It is not hard to find a 200s student who doesn't know clock time, simple prefixes, Roman numerals, punctuation, common conflicts, or a plethora of other basic strokes.

This problem is easily overcome.

A short commentary by the teacher before and/or after each drill on the complicated or awkward patterns will go a long way. Specific drills that target these strokes are invaluable if the drills are slower than normal and if the amount of explanation and discussion is increased. There are many tools that we can use. The buzzword to remember is reinforcement. We must continue to teach at all levels of school.

The second point is trickier.

Students need to know how to employ the strokes that they learn in theory class. At many schools, this aspect is entirely ignored. It is assumed that the student knows how to use the stroke if the student knows what letters make up the stroke. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is a dramatic difference between the two.

On this point, more than any other, rests the fate of our students. Despite incorrect patterns, despite lack of practice, despite lack of knowledge of the basics, our students will rise or fall depending on their ability to use what they have learned.

A great example is any sports champion.

Regardless of the success of that player, each year he or she will undergo preseason training. All baseball players know how to catch a ball, yet every spring, they are taught the best way to do it – over and over again. Football players are taught how to throw, how catch, how to block. Basketball players are taught how to shoot, how to guard, how to rebound.

Even the rookies can talk for hours about the fundamentals. Nonetheless they spend months relearning them. First they learn how to perform; then they drill. We accept that sports figures undergo such training. Why should our students receive less?

You may say that sports teams conduct preseason camps to get their players into shape, and that our students should already be at that point. Not so. Players get fined for showing up overweight or out of condition. It is expected that they are ready and able to learn, not perform, from Day One.

You may say that sports teams conduct preseason camps because the players must develop the ability to interact with the rookies and newly signed players, whereas our students perform individually. That's a good point, but it is incomplete and misleading. Team players must learn how to work as a team, but they are also taught such fundamentals as how to hold a ball, how to place their feet, how to hold their hands in the air. These are the absolute nuts and bolts, and they are taught to all of the players, even the outstanding ones. Our students need this type of instruction, even the outstanding ones.

Our schools are comparable to preseason training camps. We should offer drills, teaching, fundamentals, techniques, etc., but for the most part, all we give our students are the drills.

It is not enough.

When our students fail to progress, they instinctively reach out to us, the teachers. We are the ones who are held out as the gurus of court reporting. We should be the counselors. Too many times, we fail to deliver. Eventually, the students stop coming to us. They remain stuck in their class, and yet they do not approach us.

This is intolerable.



Students who have been entrenched in one class for months should be pestering us every hour of every day for answers. They do not. Sadly, they have learned that we do not give them the answers that they need.

It is not sufficient to tell them to practice more. They need to know how to practice more effectively.

It is not enough to give them a specific drill. They need to know how to deal with the intricacies of that drill.

It is not acceptable for teachers to show up every day for work, conduct a class, and go home without guiding those who have obviously lost their way. They do not drop out because of lack of effort. They drop because of lack of progress. We can show them how to avoid the hazards, and we can keep them in school. That is our forte, isn't it?

Do not fool yourself into thinking that those students who have stopped coming to the teachers for advice have stopped trying. They are still in there plugging away. What they have done is removed the teacher as the source of authority. To them, the teacher has become no more than the person who dictates each day. In this situation, the instructor is deposed as mentor, guide, and counselor. Herein lies a great deal of trouble, especially for the advanced students.

It is relatively easy for a single teacher to save many of the lower speed students. These students still look to the teachers for the answers. They may not have been receiving them, but they are open to any quality suggestions. One good teacher can dramatically improve the retention rate in the beginning speed classes because the students will listen and then progress.

Higher speed students are considerably more difficult to instruct. Long ago, they stopped looking to the teachers for help. They have found a substitute. Even if they are exposed to a superior instructor, they are apt to write off the suggestions. They have learned to rely on someone else, and if the teacher's methods conflict, then they ignore the teacher.

It is extremely difficult to recapture the attention of the upper speed students. You can't really fault them. In some cases, they have spent years in school without helpful guidance from the instructors. Instead they come to rely on themselves. This can be fatal to their careers.

Students should not be getting their advice from themselves. That is the domain of the schools. Yet that is what they do. They see no other choice. It is the only solution that they have found.

The title of this chapter, *The Counselor is Incompetent*, refers to the fact that students have learned to depend on themselves. It is not meant as an insult. They are doing their very best. In their place, we would do the same. In fact, at one time, we were in their place, and we did just that.

However, the students are not the experts. They do not understand the consequences of improper drilling. They do not have the knowledge. Even after graduation, although they will be licensed to practice stenography, they will not be competent to instruct.

Students must continue to seek out advice from the instructors. Instructors must learn to give that advice every day, every hour, every drill. Administration must support the teachers.

Rules that prohibit books in class or forbid drills at speeds below goal speeds must be repealed.

Classes that consist of constant drilling should be altered to allow true instruction. Incessant testing accomplishes nothing and has to be brought to an end.

Tutoring should be encouraged. These, and many other minor adjustments, must occur if we are to improve our graduation rate.

Small changes will be sufficient, but truly progressive schools will eventually employ teachers whose main job is counseling. Going back to the sports team analogy, the manager (teacher) is the person who tells the players (students) what is expected, but it is the coach (counselor) who tells them how to do it. In many schools, one teacher's salary is equal to the tuition from four or five students. One good counselor will save scores of students per year.

There is a crying need for graduates. We are on the cusp of a great expansion of our profession. CART, realtime, and captioning are opening new areas of employment. There is more to come.

Students want to graduate. Teachers want them to graduate. The schools want them to graduate. We are all motivated. We can do a better job.

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*Chapter Two marks the end of the great harangue against our system of teaching.*

*Next week, we present Chapter Three, The Two Faces (Phases) of Learning. In that chapter, we will outline the steps needed to avoid the infamous Plateau. Most students do not understand the reason for their lack of advancement, and therefore, are ill prepared to overcome it.*

*If your progress has stopped or tailed off, this will put you back on track. Take heart. Your problem is simple. The solution is simple. All you have to do is stop the horrendously hard drills and begin the easy ones. For a bonus, you will sleep better, and the neck pain will disappear.*

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# Chapter Three

## *The Two Faces (Phases) of Learning*

Court reporting schools differ from other schools in one area. We leave out one fundamental step. Truth be told, we ignore it completely. Subsequently, our students are not aware of its importance. If you insist that the Plateau exists, then this is the reason.

We teach how to stroke. Then we stop. Students learn the basic movements in theory. And that is all they learn.

Would you like to know how to do a card trick? Are you interested in throwing a forward pass? Do you want to drive a big old truck with a four-speed clutch? There is only one way to learn how to do any of these things.

Consider any art or science that involves any type of physical skill at all. Everybody knows at least one; so pick something familiar to you. If you are a confirmed sports addict or a musician, select that.

Not into sports or music? That's okay. As grandpappy would say, "It don't make no nevermind." Here are a few others: typing, glass blowing, parachuting, stock car racing, diamond cutting, billiards, or alligator wrestling. If these don't fit you, think of your own. It makes absolutely no difference what you choose. As long as a physical skill is taught, it will be satisfactory.

Now think back to your first days of instruction. This is where you were taught the fundamental movements. Your instructor -- whether it was a coach, a teacher, or a family member -- showed you the basics. First the instructor explained it or demonstrated it. Then you would do it. Then the instructor would critique your initial attempt. Then you would do it again.

After a few amateurish efforts, the instructor would move on to the next step. At this point, it is expected that the student knows enough to be able to practice the initial lesson. The student has been familiarized with one small portion, but there will be more training on that specific aspect.

It is one thing to know that you should hold the ball behind your ear before you throw it, but knowing that does not make you as competent as Randy Johnson. He has been practicing that particular movement for twenty-five years. He has been coached and critiqued and instructed and advised throughout his career. But he learned the basic movement as a youngster.

It takes time to learn the technique. First you learn what steps are necessary. Then you practice them until you can perform them with skill. This is not an instantaneous transition.

In general, theory classes deliver what is expected of them. The students are taught the basic strokes. That is about all that can be required of theory class: the basics. Mastering the strokes requires repetition of those strokes and reinforcement of the techniques.

Many students complain that their right hand gives them more trouble than their left hand. Those students know the proper strokes, but they are performing them incorrectly. Regular speed drills will not help. It is the technique that is lacking. Theory class taught them what strokes are to use. Now they need to know how to perform them.

An even greater amount of students report trouble with the number bar. Again, they know the strokes, but their mechanics are unsound.

Taking it to extremes, almost all students forget portions of theory. They simply cannot make the strokes. They can't even tell you how to do them. In this case, remedial theory instruction is necessary before technique training can begin.

Theory teaches you how to form the strokes. This is sufficient to get students out of theory class and the next few speed classes. Even with improper fingering techniques or outright incorrect hand placement, students will be able to move through the lower classes.

Why will they advance through the initial classes even if they use the improper technique?

Good question.

We're glad you asked. Every student has sufficient hand speed and coordination to conquer 120s, 140s, and in some cases 160s.

Did theory class give them those skills? No. Life taught them. Young children eat with spoons because they do not have the motor functions necessary to operate a fork. Adults use forks. Children use safety scissors. Adults use normal ones. We develop a certain physical proficiency naturally.

Students enter theory class with sufficient manual dexterity to succeed in the lower speeds, even if their technique is horrible. If they didn't already have it, they wouldn't be able to operate cars, computers, video games, table saws, sewing machines, and a myriad of gizmos, doodads, and thigamabobs.

Theory teaches how to create the finger patterns, but it does not require perfect technique. This is exactly the same as every other beginning class in every other physical art or science.

So far, so good. At this point, our schools are lockstep with the universally accepted method of teaching motor skills. The movements are introduced. They are practiced until the student can demonstrate a basic level of proficiency.

After theory class, it is assumed that stenography students know everything about how to form a stroke, how to write it, and how to write it with a high degree of speed and accuracy.

And that is where we drop the ball. Ask a court reporting teacher why Stephanie Steno is stuck in 140s, and you probably won't get a specific answer. We blame

lack of progress on generalities, such as the amount of study time, sloppy writing, and attendance. Each of those is pertinent, but they are not specific enough to diagnose the lack of progress.

A music teacher may also bring up these same topics when discussing a student's lack of progress, but that teacher will also name particular areas where the student is deficient.

**Typical stenography advice:**

1. Practice two hours a day.
2. Write cleaner.
3. Show up for school.

**Typical music school advice:**

1. Practice two hours a day. Spend one hour on these particular scales. Spend the second hour on these particular songs.

2. Hit the keys cleaner. You have a specific problem with the G Scale. Work on these simple patterns. Follow them up by working on these more difficult ones.

3. Show up for school. Your technique is faulty, and you are regressing. You must make up the work that you have missed. We have been working on these scales, these songs, these patterns. You must demonstrate proficiency on the techniques that we have covered if you wish to remain in this class.

Court reporting schools deliver quality theory instruction, but follow it up by assuming that the students are qualified to direct their education through the remainder of school.

Music schools, and all others, deliver quality theory instruction, and follow it up with quality reinforcement of the basics. Pavarotti works on scales and breathing and tempo and tone. He's the best, but he doesn't waste his time singing song after song. He works on the fundamentals.

Brett Favre may be the best quarterback in the world, but he goes to training camp, and he listens to his coaches, and he works on drills, and he concentrates on his shortcomings throughout the season.

How do we get to the point that our teachers are giving the same kind of advice that others schools routinely provide? It will be hard, and it won't happen overnight. All steno schools frontload their training in the theory class. Speed classes are entirely performance classes. You either do it, or you stay in that class until you drop.

What are your options as a student? You have three:

One, you can drill without a specific plan, and hope that that is enough.

Two, you can find a teacher who knows how to analyze your writing habits.

Three, you can learn the art of self-diagnosis.

Although we urge students to consult their teachers, we recommend that you consider the third choice to be mandatory. That is the only way to ensure that you are not left floundering in the sea of doubt or insecurity. You have no control over your teacher, but you can educate yourself.

To close this chapter, we are presenting several general scenarios. These will substantially help over 95 percent of the people who are experiencing problems moving past the infamous Plateau. These are generalities (which we abhor), and they will be thoroughly covered in succeeding chapters.

1. No matter who you are, the problem is almost definitely not speed. You may think it is. You may be totally convinced that it is. But it isn't. The solution involves rhythm, control, pacing, or clarity. Speed drills only help those who are already writing correctly, i.e., those who are not stuck in a speed.

2. Every 100 words that you write must be clear enough to be transcribed at the standards set by your school. If your school requires 95 percent, then you must write at least 95 out of 100 words accurately at all times. If your school requires 98 percent, then you must get 98 words out of 100. Do not count drops. Count only the words that you have stroked. This is not the recommended amount of clarity. This is the absolute minimum.

3. If you write clear, and if you can generally keep up with the dictation for 80 percent of the time, then you probably hesitate or carry words.

a. If you hesitate, create a list of words that causes you to hesitate. Look for patterns of types of strokes that show up time after time. Work on them.

b. If you carry, you must learn to drop sooner. It sounds horribly wrong, but it is the only solution. No other method remedies this weakness.

4. If you write clear, but you never show any speed increase, then there is a good chance that you are analyzing your work as you write. Those who overuse the Asterisk key tend to fall into this category. Forget about a stroke after it is finished. Keep your attention on the next word. The time to perform is during dictation. The time to analyze your work is during readback.

5. Work on the strokes that you give you trouble. They hinder your progress. You fail tests because you write some strokes too slowly. It won't help you to work on overall speed. Those strokes will remain sub par unless you concentrate on them. In general, speed comes from a lack of hesitation. To be specific, you will pass tests when you work on the areas that you haven't mastered.

*Next week:*

*Chapter Four. We haven't decided on the topic. It will be the greatest classroom tool (readback), or the greatest tool for the individual student (interpreting tests). Both of those are intense subjects, but if you learn to use them, you will know exactly what steps you need to take to continue your development.*

*Golly, maybe there is a method to our madness.*

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# Chapter Four

## *The Faulty Transition*

Theory students write very well. The schools insist on it. The concept behind it (and it is a correct one) is that the proper way to learn a new stroke is to introduce it slowly and then reinforce it over and over. At this point of the training, any misstrokes will confuse the brain and reinforce flawed patterns.

All schools teach theory students in this manner. As a result, they produce students who have a basic, yet strong, grasp of the principles of writing. The schools deserve nothing but praise for insisting on such a high level of excellence.

Students in speed classes are not held to the same standards. These students are taught that they should write as quickly as possible. They are taught that they should get a stroke (any stroke) for everything. They are taught that their notes will clear up once they have attained the speed.

Bunk, bunk, and bunk.

If it is true that theory students will not learn the basics unless they write correctly, then it logically follows that speed students will not improve on the basics unless they continue in the same pattern.

Ignoring this fundamental truth is the Number One cause of attrition in reporting schools. There are certainly other factors, but this is the key. For proof, look to the students who make progress class after class after class. These students invariably enter a new class with clean notes, drill at higher speeds while maintaining those clean notes, and eventually move to the next class with clean notes.

Besides solid fundamentals, what is it that these students have?

Knowledge? No. They took the same classes as the rest of the students.

Ability? No. Nine out of ten theory students demonstrate the necessary aptitude for stenography.

Dedication? No. Many failing students are practicing much harder than the successful ones.

The secret to their success does not appear to be anything but the standards that they maintain. Many of these students will tell you that the sole reason that they write clearly is that they cannot read their notes otherwise. They get irritated when they cannot transcribe their outlines; therefore, they refuse to write sloppy.

The challenge for the schools is clear. They must teach the bulk of the students to write like the few who make constant progress. It's not exceedingly

difficult. It doesn't take a genius. The rules can be summed up in three simple statements:

1. Strive to resolve conflicts, but when faced with unknown outlines, write phonetically correct strokes.

2. Ignore dropped words, but insist on being able to read 19 out of every 20 words that are stroked.

3. When the dictation is too fast, choose to drop rather than to write sloppy.

Nothing can be done for those who don't practice or for those who drop for personal reasons, but those three rules will save the bulk of the students who work diligently, yet don't progress.

A startling statistic is that most students fail their tests because they cannot write the easy words clearly enough to translate them. They have the speed. They have lost the ability to write the strokes.

Why is it that they are mistranslating the easy strokes rather than the hard ones? They pay more attention to the hard strokes. Plus, you can have several errors in a multi-stroke word and still read the correct outline. It is the easy words that cause the problems.

The easy ones were mastered long ago. They don't require a great deal of thought. However, easy strokes are often confused with other strokes if one letter is added or deleted.

What do they need to do to start getting the easy strokes? Pay a modicum of attention to them. Briefs, phrases, small words, and word endings require a higher level of proficiency. They have to be written correctly or they will be translated wrong.

How can they do this and maintain their present speed? Probably they can't. However, any loss of speed will be temporary. Anything in life that is to be learned must be learned at a low speed before it can be employed at a high speed.

Speed students are taught how to write "this," "that," "in," and "if" in theory class, but if they are getting them wrong, they will have to relearn those same lessons. The speed loss will be temporary and short-lived, perhaps as little as a few days, but the eventual results will be dramatic and permanent.

When a student does turn to clarity after a long bout with sloppy notes, it is not unusual for that student to move up several speeds very quickly. The speed was always there. It was the execution of the strokes that was missing.

At what speed can you achieve perfect notes? This is your benchmark. At this level, you should be able to write phonetically correct strokes almost 100 percent of the time. Your daily drill should include exercises to draw out this exacting standard of excellence. If you can't write smoothly and accurately to a dictation tape, then practice by writing from a magazine or a book.

Work on the conflicts and the sound-alikes, but remember that this is a function of the memory. In order to resolve them, it will take hour upon hour on



and off the machine. You will graduate before you have mastered the majority of the common ones.

At school, you do not have a choice as to the speed or difficulty of the dictation.. You will drill on the material that the teacher selects. For the most part, it will be beyond your present abilities. Push to get as much as you can, but make sure that what you get is readable. Ignore the drops. You are progressing if you can read your notes. Don't accept notes that are "close." They must be clear enough to be correctly transcribed.

No matter what we say, people will still believe that they must drill at high speed in order to learn how to perform at a lower speed. If you absolutely have to do this, then do it correctly. There is a theory that students can learn to progress even if every drill is at 300 words per minute. It is true. They could. But it is a hard lesson.

When you practice well above your abilities, you will naturally tend to "chase" the speed. This forces you to choose between dropping and writing sloppy. Since you are drilling at high speed specifically to learn how to write at high speed, the natural choice is to write sloppy. That choice is made by most students, and that is why they are not progressing as well as they would like.

It is absolutely incorrect to try to write as quickly as possible. It is foolish to try to get a stroke for every word. Your notes will not magically clear up one day if every stroke that you make is sloppy.

The answer is almost never speed. The answer is clarity. The answer is never to write as quickly as possible. The answer is to write clearly as quickly as possible. The answer is never to get a stroke for everything. The answer is to get a good stroke for everything that is stroked.

Take charge of your training. If you can't write clearly now, you won't be able to do it when you graduate. Professionals write exceedingly well when reporting normal conversation. They write a little sloppy when they are pushed to their limits. They stop the dictation before they lose control of their strokes. They can't afford to just get a stroke for everything. It is their job to transcribe the proceedings.

Write exceedingly well almost always.

Write a little sloppy when pushed to your limit as long as you can read everything.

Never give up your clarity in order to get a stroke for everything.

One day it will be your job to transcribe what you write.

Practice like a professional, and you will become a professional.

The riddle of the Plateau has been unlocked. Future chapters will deal with specifics, but the ultimate answer lies here. Maintain your clarity and you will succeed.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Five

## *The Four Basic Writers*

We could have easily named this chapter “The Four Immutable Rules of Stenography. A student who (1) writes clear strokes, (2) minimizes hesitation, (3) does not carry words, and (4) does not edit while writing is assured of success. These rules must be hammered home day after day after day.

Stenographers can be classified according to the four primary faults that afflict them. Every student belongs to one of these groups. The four categories are: clarity, hesitation, carrying, and editing.

Diagnose your writing. You will find that one fault will dominate the others. Master it, and your success is assured. Ignore it, and you will struggle.

Lack of speed is the mythological boogeyman of stenography. Those who point their fingers at speedbuilding are misguided. Their problems can be traced to one of these four categories. All students in all classes have enough speed to graduate from their present classes, if not the next one or two. Once the writing habits have been correctly diagnosed, the problem with speed dissipates into thin air.

### 1. Clarity

a. This is the most important. A student should concentrate on this aspect to the exclusion of all else until his or her steno notes are acceptable.

(i) If the dictation goes on too long, or if it is too fast, the student may lose clarity. It is important to diagnose the student’s writing habits.

(1) If the student has clarity until falling behind the dictation, work on hesitation or carrying.

(2) If the student loses clarity only on high-speed dictation, work on hesitation or carrying.

(ii) At a slow speed, the student must be able to write all words clearly.

(iii) At goal speed, the student should accept a small amount of misstrokes. These should be kept to an absolute minimum.

(iv) At high speed or push speed, more misstrokes will appear.

The student must fight to maintain clarity, but if the dictation continues until the student is exhausted, several bad things will happen.

(1) As the dictation continues or if the speed is increased, clarity will drop off.

(2) As clarity drops off, the student will begin to hesitate.

(3) As the student begins to hesitate, either all clarity will be lost or the student will carry words.

b. Progress must be monitored continuously. Excluding all words that are dropped, 19 out of every 20 words stroked should be easily translated.

(i) Drill notes and test notes should be translatable according to the same standards. Close is not good enough under any circumstances.

(ii) The standard of 19 out of 20 words (95%) is a minimum. The goal is 100%, but it must be recognized that if a student always achieves 100% readable strokes, then the student is probably not writing at top speed.

(iii) Do not count drops as untranslated words or errors. Count only words that are stroked.

c. Absolute clarity is not recommended. Professional reporters do not have perfect notes. Students certainly do not.

(i) Punctuation and Question and Answer symbols should be nearly perfect.

(ii) Briefs and phrases should always be readable. If they are not, they should be discarded.

(iii) Some words are more susceptible to mistranslation.

(1) Some words can only be stroked one way, such as if/in, that/this, these/those. These should always be readable. If not readable, the student must slow down.

(2) Some words can be stroked several ways. Easily mistranslated words such as consequent/subsequent, industry/city, or accident/incident can be stroked out normally or as briefs. If there is a problem, change the stroking pattern of one or both of the words to clear up the mistranslation.

(iv) Some words can easily be read even when they have misstrokes.

(1) These words do not require the same degree of clarity to be read; however, the student should not accept misstrokes at all times with these words. At slow speeds, these words should be written clearly.

(v) Numbers and names require a high degree of clarity to be read and transcribed. Extra work should be given to this area. This skill is absolutely essential to a professional reporter.

(vi) Mastering sound-alikes is an ongoing task that will last well past graduation. The student should always be learning the proper strokes for each word; however this is a function of the memory.

(1) Memorize sound-alikes at home by using a notebook, a theory book, or steno dictionary.

(2) For clarity purposes, it is enough if the stroke is phonetically correct and easily transcribable.

(3) Naturally, for realtime purposes, each sound-alike must be memorized and stroked correctly.

(4) Sound-alikes should be mastered by starting with the most frequently appearing words.

## 2. Hesitation

a. Hesitation is less important than clarity.

b. Hesitation is equal in importance to carrying words.

c. Hesitation may cause carrying or reduce clarity. It is important to diagnose the student's writing habits.

(i) If a student has clarity until the hesitation causes the student to fall behind, then work on the hesitation.

(ii) If the student does not carry words until hesitation forces the student to carry, then work on hesitation.

(iii) If the student hesitates only after falling behind on the dictation, then work on carrying.

(iv) If the student hesitates because of lack of clarity, work on clarity. It is important to differentiate between a student who hesitates because of lack of clarity and one who hesitates while attempting to write absolutely correct.

(1) If the student hesitates because of attempting to remember the proper conflict stroke for words such as bear/bare or to/two/too, then the student should be instructed to write phonetically correct during dictation. Conflict strokes must be memorized, but they cannot be memorized during dictation. The student should learn these strokes at home without using a dictation tape. Use the theory book or a notebook of the strokes.

(2) If the student hesitates every time the student tries to write with acceptable clarity, that is the ultimate sign that the student does not pay enough attention to clarity. The answer is more attention to clarity and less attention to the number of words stroked.

(3) If the student hesitates because of strokes that have not yet been mastered, such as clump, branch, milk or sanction, then the hesitation is correct. In other words, the student should stroke some words slower than others. This is normal. It is not a true hesitation. As long as the student's hands continue to move, albeit slowly, there is nothing wrong with the writing pattern. However, these strokes should not be ignored. Concentrated practice on them at slow speeds will increase finger speed.

## 3. Carrying words

a. Carrying words is less important than clarity.

b. Carrying words is equal in importance to hesitation.

c. Carrying words may cause hesitation or reduce clarity. It is important to diagnose the student's writing habits.

(i) If the student has clarity until the student is carrying five or more words, then work on reducing the amount of words being carried.

(ii) If the student does not hesitate until carrying five or more words, then work on carrying.

(iii) If the student carries words only after stumbling over the correct outline, such as for a conflict or sound-alike, then work on the conflict or sound-alike.

(iv) Students who regularly carry words are likely to describe themselves as needing more speed. This is a fallacy. Usually they are already writing 20 or more words above their goal speed.

d. If the student carries words because hesitation causes the student to fall behind, work on hesitation.

### 3. Editing while writing

a. This is the strangest group of all. This group looks backward to check the accuracy of previous strokes. This is not conducive to learning. It must be stopped.

(i) Usually these students have very strong clear strokes until they fall behind.

(ii) Once they fall behind, their writing may deteriorate into a total mess.

(iii) Heed the advice to stop editing. If you merely reduce the amount that you edit, then nothing will be changed. You will still be editing everything.

b. Use the asterisk key sparingly, if at all.

(i) Every time you correct a stroke, you are changing it from one stroke into three strokes.

(1) This is wasting your speed.

(2) This will fool you into thinking that you have trouble with carrying or hesitating.

(3) Once you fall behind, you may lose all clarity.

(ii) Look at your drops.

(1) Are they preceded by words that have been corrected?

(2) Are they preceded by words that you checked for accuracy while you were writing?

(iii) Look at your sloppy outlines.

(1) Are they preceded by words that have been corrected?

(2) Are they preceded by words that you checked for accuracy while you were writing?

c. Do not insist on writing perfect notes.

(i) Readable notes are the standard. If your notes can be accurately translated, they are good enough for school, court, and depositions.

(ii) Phonetically-correct strokes are sufficient for all outlines that you have not memorized.

d. Edit your work after you have completed the drill.

(i) Review your notes. If the strokes were too sloppy, slow down the next time.

(ii) If there are outlines that you didn't know during the test, now is the time to learn them.

e. Once a stroke has been written, forget about it.

(i) Don't try to remember which word or sentence you wrote poorly. You will forget exactly which one it was by the time you transcribe.

(ii) Don't make mental notes of any kind. Concentrate on the next stroke to the exclusion of all else.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Six

## *Theory Class, Part One*

The students arrive for the first lesson. The teacher begins with a short explanation of what is expected. A demonstration may be given. Then the first hesitant steps are taken down the long road to proficiency.

This scenario is repeated in class after class. No matter what skill is taught, the students begin with the basics. From there, they move incrementally through the different stages of their training. Each lesson expands on the previous ones.

Eventually the students acquire the necessary skills and become opera singers, shortstops, organists, brain surgeons, or pilots. These professionals do not forget what they were taught. Most of them value their first lessons above all else. The basics are the key to their success.

Court reporters are no different than the rest.

To perform as professionals, we must have fundamentally sound abilities. It is unusual to find a practicing reporter without those skills. New reporters rapidly learn the value of accuracy and clarity. It takes forever to transcribe an hour of testimony unless the strokes are strong and clear.

Of all students, the theory people are the ones who perform most like the professionals. They strive for clean outlines. Speed is a secondary goal, if it is regarded as important at all. Their goal is quality, not quantity.

Speed students lose track of the basics. They chase the dictation. They fracture their writing. Their outlines disintegrate into unreadable trash. And many of them become entrenched at one speed level. Although they strive mightily to continue, progress comes to a halt.

In Theory, they were taught the value of strong outlines. After graduation, they will again learn to treasure clean strokes. It is in the middle -- in the speed classes -- that they turn away from the basics.

Of all classes, it is Theory that is the most important. Of all lessons that are learned in Theory, the first lessons are the most essential. Many of those lessons are not chapters in your theory book. Some are barely mentioned at all in print. They are taught to you by your teachers.

1. Clarity above all else. Your strokes must be clear. Every stroke that is correct will reinforce your training. Every stroke that is incorrect will weaken you. Writing appropriately at a slow speed will naturally and effortlessly teach you how to write at higher speeds.

2. Posture is vital. Sit correctly. Hold your arms properly. If your vowels are weakly written, your machine may be too low. If your lower keys are lighter than

the upper keys, your machine may be too low or too close to your body. If your upper keys are lighter than the lower keys, the machine may be too high, too far away from your body, or conversely, you may be resting your arms on your thighs or stomach.

3. Hand position is central to your success. Curl your fingers. Strike the keys with the tips of the fingers. The Home Position for your fingers is on the cracks between the upper and lower keys.

The hands should not be angled greatly to the side. This would push the little fingers up too high on the keyboard and pull the index fingers down too low. Instead, the wrists should be bent a little. This point has to be tempered with the reality that there are many different body types. It can be extremely hard to locate the wrists directly behind the fingers. Although that is the best position, it can be difficult or impossible to achieve.

4. Finger the entire stroke before you press downward on any of the keys. Fight the tendency to write letter by letter. In many strokes, especially the very basic ones, this will not hurt your clarity; however, it teaches a bad pattern of writing and it often leads to tilting the hand from side to side. A correct stroke is first fingered, and then the entire stroke is pressed. The back of the hand remains in relatively the same position.

5. Not all strokes are performed with the same finger or hand movements. Certain patterns are extremely difficult for the fingers alone. For the most part, these are right-hand letter combinations such as BGT or PBD. The key to these strokes is outlined in No. 3: the keys for the entire stroke must be pressed at the same time. Once these patterns are fully fingered, it becomes difficult for the fingers alone to stroke them, but a little arm movement will get the job done.

6. It is natural to write some words slower than others. Some are more difficult to remember. Some require difficult fingerings. Accept that you will not write all words at the same speed, but work to improve your skills. The hard ones can be written faster if you practice, but so can the easy ones.

7. Practice every day. What you learn today will soon be forgotten unless you move it from short-term memory to long term. Repetition will make you a winner.

8. Practice for short periods of time. In no way are we suggesting that you practice less. However, four fifteen-minute sessions are worth considerably more than one sixty-minute session of practice. It is hard to sustain your focus and intensity over long periods of time. Short breaks will refresh you. Long breaks will aid your memory.

9. Read all of your strokes. It is one of the best diagnostic tools at your disposal. In the early days of Theory, it is probably the very best tool. Learning to read steno is a skill in itself, but do not forget to analyze your writing. If you want to improve, you must know what needs improving.

10. When it comes time to build speed, there is only one concept to remember. Speed is not attained by moving the hands faster. Rather, speed is a product of



not pausing in between the strokes. Concentrate on a smooth fluid transition from one stroke to the next, and your troubles will be few.

11. No one has to use briefs or phrases. Every reporter develops his or her own style of writing. Some love to use shortcuts. Others hate them. You may have to give them a little time before they become second nature, but most briefs and phrases that are given to Theory students are very helpful. Generally, they show up time after time after time in drills, tests, and real life.

12. Your practice, homework, and drills are the minimum, not the maximum, that is expected of you. Steno schools are generally self-paced. Beyond Theory, you will advance when you demonstrate the skill level of each speed. The extra work that you do now will pay huge dividends later.

13. Never break the rules of your theory. You do not have the knowledge to know the few places that you can digress from your theory. You are creating big trouble for yourself if you alter your strokes because you don't like this pattern or that pattern. Your theory is designed to allow you to write 100 percent of the words in the English language. Sometimes that means that you have to learn an awkward stroke when an easier one appears to be available. Any change that you make will probably conflict with another part of your theory.

14. Stenography isn't hard. It may take longer to master than some other skills, but it is relatively easy. Write good clean strokes. Keep the hands moving. Learn the proper outlines.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Seven

*Theory Class, Part Two: Learning to Apply Your Skills*

Of the three parts of Theory class, this one is the most difficult. This phase contains the bridge between the pure theory of how to write and the practical application of those skills. In truth, many people (students, graduates, and teachers) never fully comprehend the concept of the theory of writing versus the application of that theory.

The average Theory class emphasizes good, clear writing. They are counseled to write accurately. The students are not pushed to their speed limits. This is proper – to an extent. Every day introduces new concepts that require those students to write slowly if they are to have a chance to write correctly.

Now contrast Theory class with the average speed class. The emphasis on absolute clarity disappears. All of a sudden, the new speed students are told to build speed. Instead of drilling slowly and methodically, most of the dictation is now above the ability of the students. Absolute clarity is not stressed like it was in Theory class. Mistakes are accepted. Sometimes, they are told to “get a stroke for everything” regardless of the quality of the writing.

These concepts are direct opposites from what they learned in Theory. Further, the premise behind each of those ideas is not fully explained. And in some of them, the basic reasoning is faulty and will inhibit the progress of the students.

Nevertheless, the typical school preaches clarity and correct fingering patterns in Theory, but turns to the contradictory concepts of speed as soon as Theory ends. At this point, the tribulations of the students have not begun. Those who practice will continue to make progress in the short term. Nevertheless, trouble looms on the horizon. Big trouble.

Most students graduate from Theory class with little difficulty. Even if they have glaring faults in technique, they pass their tests. This statement appears paradoxically inconsistent, but it is fundamentally sound. What is more, understanding why this happens leads to deciphering the infamous Plateau.

As explained in the first Theory chapter, there are three parts to mastering a physical skill. First, the basics must be understood and reproduced, without regard to dexterity, agility or speed. Second, there must be correct practice with an eye towards proper technique. Performance comes third.

A professional guitarist will roughly follow those same steps. A basic musical pattern that spruces up a song may be only three notes. The professional will not use that pattern until it is mastered. He will learn the pattern. Next, he will practice those notes over and over. Then he will insert them into a song and continue working until he can move fluidly into, through, and out of those notes.

The first step of that guitarist's practice resembles our Theory classes. He will finger the notes slowly. All he wants to do is to engrain the correct pattern in his mind. We do that in Theory by lecturing on clarity, clarity, clarity. So far, so good, but there is a hidden principle that must be understood. The guitarist may be learning a new pattern, but it is useless to him under performance conditions. He cannot use that pattern yet. Similarly, learning to write slowly, no matter how correctly, is not useful in a speed class. To be functionally useful, the student must be able to execute that stroke at increasingly higher speeds.

The guitarist's second step involves repetition with a goal of reaching the tempo of the song. He needs utter perfection regarding the fingering and the speed. Anything less will label him as a bad musician. Our students do not need that. They need to write clearly enough to read their notes accurately. Small imperfections should be tolerated. In fact, a student who writes with extreme perfection may be impeding the development of speed. If a student has immaculate notes at one level, surely that same student should be able to write acceptably clear strokes at a higher level.

What about the third step of the guitarist's work to learn a new pattern? This occurs when the musician is comfortable enough with the arrangement to use it in front of an audience. For our students, everything beyond Theory involves performance. For steno students, the difference between the second step, repetition of the stroke, and the third step, performance, is relatively small. We are called on to perform as soon as we learn a stroke.

For example, a basic word such as "kept" must be stroked when it appears in dictation. Theory students find it hard to create the "PT" ending without having the ring finger unintentionally stroke the final "L." Nevertheless, they will soon be forced to use this stroke in a speed class. They cannot wait until they have fully mastered the stroke. They must employ the stroke when it shows up in dictation.

Further, in the speed classes, we do not teach how to write. The students are left to their own devices. Some trash their writing. This is horrible. Some write slowly and carry. This is horrible. A few write slowly and clearly on all of the hard strokes. This is great for practice. On a test – well, it can be horrible.

It is not good enough to teach how to write slowly and accurately. We must teach how to write with speed. All of our tests, even the Theory tests, are speed tests. Theory class must teach the basics of speedbuilding. All of our students need it. We expect them to perform with speed. We must teach them how to do that.

The amount of time allocated to the Theory class varies greatly between schools. It may be as little as twelve weeks or as great as six months. In rare cases, a progressive school recognizes the value of the Theory class and allots even more time. The longer classes allow more time to grasp the fundamentals, but that does not guarantee success.

Students generally perform well in the average Theory class, despite the length of time. They write clearly. That, by and large, is all that is required. Take a look at those same students six months later, and you will find that they have entirely

changed their habits. After one year, many of them are fundamentally unsound. They are still trying hard, but we never gave them the knowledge of how to write with speed.

We highly recommend that students be exposed to speedbuilding techniques early on in Theory class. The very first day is not too early to start. They must understand that their success depends on how they react to difficult dictation. Certainly, every day in Theory begins with the introduction of new concepts, but once the students are familiarized with the basics, drilling should push them up to and beyond their limits. As long as it is made clear that dropping words is better than sloppy writing, then speed will not hurt the beginning students.

Similarly, tests in Theory class are vital to their success. There are plenty of students who do not know how to take a test. If their entire time in Theory is spent writing perfect strokes at a low speed, how can we fault them for not knowing how to drop? How can they work on hesitation if their drill is so slow that it masks their problem? How will they learn what to do when faced with a difficult passage, an unusual stroke, a phrase that they cannot remember immediately, if they are always given enough time to finger it perfectly?

You may say that Theory is not the place to do this, but what is your suggestion? They will be tested before they leave Theory class. From there, they move directly to speed classes and faster tests. When should they be taught how to react under difficult conditions? Shouldn't they learn how to take a test before they take their first Theory test? Shouldn't they learn how to drill at speeds above their ability before they are thrown into a class that is above their ability?

In our opinion, the best way to teach Theory is to go through the entire book in three months and then repeat the book from Page One. That won't happen. Not even schools that conduct long Theory classes will do this. Students are given one shot to learn a lesson. After that, it is expected that they will be able to perform those strokes.

Reality dictates that that won't happen either. They will not master theory in Theory class. It will take years. Professionals continue to work on their strokes long after graduation.

Students need to be prepared to function at their best when they are faced with difficult dictation. Despite good intentions and the best efforts of teachers, every student will face situations that are beyond their abilities. They simply must learn how to salvage as much as possible from a dictation that is strong, fast, or confusing.

Here are our recommendations.

1. Learning a new stroke.

- a. The first step to mastering a stroke does not involve speed. Get the stroke accurately. Don't worry about anything else.

- b. When you can write it at any speed, increase the pace immediately. Read your notes. If the stroke is not perfect, what part is not perfect? This is the first step in diagnosing your writing. Now you know what will happen when you write

that stroke at top speed. Now you know what part of that stroke to practice. Drill again, but do it with the goal of decreasing the amount of errors. Remember that it is better to drop than to write sloppy. And no, you do not get the same effect by drilling slower. You must learn to make the correct choice when the drill or test is fast.

c. When you are learning a stroke, try to drill at a speed that will require you to write at your best speed or drop. Demand quality work from your hands, your mind, yourself.

d. You won't learn to write a stroke by doing a list of the same type of words. If you are working on the "PT" ending, a poor drill will be to stroke "kept, wept, swept, leapt. With this list, you are supposedly learning the "PT" ending, but the right hand will tend to stay in position after the first word. A much better drill will insert a word in between the words that you are learning. For example, "kept back, wept hard, swept up, leapt high" would make a good drill for the "PT" ending. Your right hand will learn how to move into and out of the "PT" stroke.

## 2. Practicing with speed requires a few rules.

a. On a drill, do not drop the hard words. Stroke them, even if you drop all of the easy ones. Read your work. Did you stroke accurately, or are errors starting to appear? Clean up your strokes.

b. If you start a word, make sure you finish it. Do not give up halfway through. This is a major mistake.

c. Drop the extra words if a hard stroke forces you to fall behind. You must learn to drop properly.

d. Errors are allowed, but you must be able to translate all of your strokes. Do not accept imperfect strokes on briefs, phrases, or easily misread strokes. Even if you can read them correctly most of the time, do not accept this kind of misstroke.

e. When you review your practice notes, discount the drops. These are words that you did not stroke. When you have a drop, look for the reason. Was it a hard word that you were practicing or a brief that did not spring instantly to mind? Those are acceptable reasons to drop on a drill. On the other hand, this is unacceptable on a test because you end up with more errors than if you had dropped the hard word.

f. If all of your work is perfect, push yourself harder. Read your notes. What imperfections are now showing up? Practice at a speed that pushes you, and work on the flaws that you notice.

g. Are your notes really sloppy? When you are faced with the choice of writing sloppy or dropping some of the words, the only correct option is to drop.

h. A small amount of your drill should be extremely fast. Can you keep your hands moving at all times? Can you drop quickly? Of the words that you can stroke, are they clear? In short, can you continue to write at your level when the

dictation is above you? All tests will have a hard section. How you react to it will often be the difference between passing and failing.

i. A small amount of your drill should be extremely long and slow. Can you keep your hands moving after you begin to tire? Are you hurting yourself by writing slower because the drill is slower, or are you writing each stroke as quickly as possible? Are your strokes clear, particularly at the end of the drill?

j. Keep a logbook of your hard strokes. Give special attention to them. If necessary, return to the first stage of learning and write those strokes without regard to speed.

k. Do you have an occasional section of notes that is too sloppy to read? Great, as long as you learn from it. If you never have sloppy notes, you are not writing at your maximum. Your goal is to have good, clean notes, but you want those notes to be written at high speed. Occasionally, you must cross the line between good notes and sloppy notes. Otherwise, you will not know how fast you can go before you break down.

l. Your theory book is your steno bible. Use it to give you the specific practice that you need.

m. Practice is practice. Your goal in practice is to learn to write better. Your goal on a test is to pass it. The focus, and sometimes the technique, is different. In practice, your goal is to find the hard words and work on them. On a test, you are trying to stroke the maximum number of words. To do that, you may drop hard words on purpose even before you get behind.

### 3. Tests are not practice.

a. Your goal on a test is to get the maximum score possible. This is not practice. This is performance. Your goal is to pass. Don't forget that.

b. Your school allows you to have a certain amount of errors on each test. Use them to your advantage. Your goal is not realtime or an accurate transcript. Your goal is to transcribe enough of the test to pass it. This is a hard concept for some students. You can be the best realtimer in the world later. Now is the time to be the best student possible. Pass that test.

c. Drop the hard words on a test if they will force you to carry. If you get the hard word, but drop the next five, you have cost yourself four points. It would have been better to drop the hard word and get the others.

d. If you chase the speed and give up your clarity, you are lost. You will have trouble in every class. Sloppy writers do not progress satisfactorily.

e. If you refuse to drop, you will still get the low speed tests. You have enough speed to do that. Nonetheless, you are learning how to fail. Eventually, your natural speed will not be enough to compensate for your bad habits.

(i) Many students who refuse to drop end up writing sloppy so that they don't fall behind. The cure is to force them to drill at a low speed until they write clearly. After that, they still must learn to drop.

(ii) Most students who refuse to drop believe that they are too slow. They are very wrong. They are focusing on remembering words, rather than on stroking. This is what makes them slow. Once they learn how to drop, they improve quickly.

(iii) Your school does not hold classes that teach you how to improve your memory. You will pass the occasional test by carrying too much, but you are reinforcing a terribly incorrect method of writing.

f. If you have insisted on clarity in your drills, then you will have it on your tests. If there is a wide disparity, you are altering your technique. Many students in this category are simply trying to write faster than the teacher can dictate. To compound this error, eventually, they stumble and drop when they shouldn't.

g. Don't use a brief or phrase on a test if you have to think about it. Now is not the time to practice. Write it the long way if the shortcut does not pop into your mind immediately.

h. While in Theory, you will not be able to spend much class time practicing for a test. Don't worry. If you understand the concepts, you will be fine. Theory tests are slow. Why then, should you learn the concepts in Theory? Because that is where you are forming your habits. They will be hard to break later on, especially if you tend to carry.

i. After you are out of Theory, keep yourself in test mode while at school. Drill as if it was a test. Learn your briefs and phrases at home. Learn your hard strokes at home. At school, learn to write the maximum amount of words on each drill.

4. Tests are the best indicators of proficiency.

a. Type and grade one test per day. After grading, look through your notes. Discover why each error was made. In particular, look for patterns of similar mistakes regardless of whether you guess correctly on some of them.

b. You will learn more from a failed test than from a passed test. Your errors indicate your shortcomings. They will show you how to pass the future tests.

5. Readback is the Number Two diagnostic tool. Read everything.

c. What letters are lighter when you write perfectly? These letters will disappear when you are pushed for speed.

d. What letters are added as shadows when you write perfectly? These letters will be strongly written when you are pushed for speed.

e. Look up and down your notes. Do you see letters that are always hazy? Do you see patterns that are always unclear?

f. Do you trust your notes? If you write clearly, you do. But if you interpret your notes, especially on fast dictation that causes you to drop, then you are sloppier than you will admit. No matter how fast you are drilling, there is no excuse for sloppy notes.

g. How many times do you use the Asterisk key to correct a stroke? Do you often drop soon after using the Asterisk key? Do you realize that when you use the Asterisk key you are turning one stroke into three. First is the bad stroke. Then you use the Asterisk to correct it. Finally, you stroke what is hopefully a good stroke. Wouldn't it be better to accept that misstroke this time but add it to a list of words that need extra attention? Wouldn't it be better to learn to stroke correctly in the first place? Are you really fast enough that you can turn a one-stroke word into three strokes?

h. Readback has its limits. It will not tell you if you are bad at spelling, punctuation, or sound-alikes. It will not tell you if you type too slowly to finish the test. It won't tell you if you get lost in your notes and omit a phrase or sentence. It is a remarkable tool, but it has its limits. Make sure you type and grade a test every day.

6. If all else is forgotten, Theory students need to remember two things.
  - a. Clarity above all else. You must be able to read your notes.
  - b. Don't carry. Stop it now before it becomes second nature.



## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Eight

## *Readback*

Stenographers are artists. They stroke what they hear. They transcribe what they stroke. This is not a cakewalk. It requires skill, concentration, and attention to detail. Musicians practice a particular song until it is perfect. Stenographers never know what their next stroke will be until they hear it, and then they must perform immediately.

In a nutshell, whatever you write, you must be able to read. Keep your standards high. You are the keepers of the record, and the record must be clear. Anything less than that means that you are not doing your job. It is as simple as that, and it is as mind-numbingly difficult as that.

To ensure that you remain on the straight and narrow, we highly recommend the development of your readback skills. We are not talking about your ability to read back. Rather, we refer to the diagnostic benefits of readback. Although it is a common part of each class, it is not exploited to its full potential. Utilize it. The results will be worth the effort.

Stumbling while reading is a sign of sloppy notes. We want you to write as quickly as possible. To do that, you must sacrifice a certain amount of clarity. However, it is imperative that your notes remain fairly clear.

Unreadable notes are worthless. It would have been better to drop half of those words in order to give yourself time to accurately stroke the rest.

Misreads are another type of problem. If the stroke is clear, and if you have trouble reading it, then you need more practice reading your notes. On the other hand, if the stroke is sloppy, you aren't misreading it at all. You wrote it wrong to begin with.

Drops are necessary while in school. You can't slow down the speaker. In real life, you can; but in school, you are at the mercy of the dictator. If the dictation is too fast, you have several choices. You can write sloppy. You can carry until you drop entire sentences. You can drop quickly and maintain a proper level of clarity.

Those are the four main things to watch out for during readback: Sloppy notes, unreadable notes, misreads and drops. The first two are steno errors. They are a product of improper fingering techniques. The third one, misreads, is cured by reading more notes. The last one, dropping, is the result of improper strategy.

### 1. Stumbling during readback

Students generally regard readback as a test. If they have good notes and they read them, the teacher says "Very good" and moves on to the next student. However, if they have poor notes and they happen to guess right, the teacher still

says “Very good” and moves to the next student. The students generally feel satisfied that they have demonstrated their abilities.

Nope. When you stumble, you are faced with a terrible dilemma. Your strokes are not readable, and you must choose what words you feel are correct. You are no longer simply reading. You are interpreting your misstrokes. No one can guess right each and every time. If you stumble constantly, your accuracy is insufficient.

How many errors are you allowed on your test? If you were to read 100 words, how many times would you stumble? A large amount of those stumbles will result in errors. If you became substantially faster today, would you pass your tests, or would those stumbles turn your test into just another transcript?

Most schools require 95% accuracy. That means that you may have 5 errors for every 100 words that are dictated. If you never drop, and if you never misread anything, and if you never misspell anything, and if you never mispunctuate anything, you may have 5 words per 100 that you guess wrong.

That isn’t much, but reality dictates that every student will have some misreads, some spelling and punctuation errors, and of course, some drops. Factor those in, and you are left with very few words that you can stumble on.

There are words that you can misstroke and still read. Generally, if it is a two- or three-stroke word, you can get away with adding or dropping a letter. It may take you an extra second or two to read that word, but you can probably read it. You can accept a stroking error in these cases. Don’t worry about a small stumble on them if you can always come up with the proper word.

Please do not misunderstand. You can accept a small error on multi-stroke words, but only because they are harder to misinterpret. You must translate them correctly, or you have wasted your time and effort.

You cannot misstroke briefs or phrases. These are basically unreadable when they are not perfect strokes. The brief for “ladies and gentlemen of the jury” is total garbage if you add one extra letter to it.

You cannot misstroke words that are similar to other words. These/those, subsequent/consequent, accident/incident, who/what and thousands of others are too similar to permit sloppy writing. You won’t guess correctly every time.

You cannot misstroke any word that you are unfamiliar with. If you didn’t know it when you heard it, you won’t be able to read it back from imperfect notes.

You cannot misstroke names, dates, ages, certain punctuation marks and Q and A symbols. Misstroke the names, and you may think it is just another word. Misstroke a number such as 21 and you will happily transcribe it as 31 or 22 or whatever you wrote. Misstroke punctuation or symbols, and you will try to come up with a word that fits into that slot.

Many of us have been indoctrinated into the theory that we must be able to “pull” the translation out of sloppy notes. We entirely agree. When a small portion of your notes is too sloppy to be read, then that is a useful skill. However, this is a last-ditch effort to stave off total failure to translate. Using this skill

means that you have written horribly poor notes. If you do this as a professional, you are one step from reporting to the judge that you cannot translate your notes at all.

The bottom line is that stumbling during readback is a sign that you are not writing clearly enough. It makes no difference whether you get it right any one particular time. You stumbled. That means that it wasn't clear, and that means that you won't always get it right. You will guess wrong a great deal of the time, and that will cost you test after test.

## 2. Unreadable notes

At some schools, it is still taught that you should "get a stroke for everything" regardless of the clarity. The theory is that eventually your notes will clear up sufficiently. That's the theory, and it is laughably false.

Let's examine that for a moment because many fine students have failed due to this magnificent falsity. If a teacher gives a reason for this theory, it is always that this is a way to build finger speed. Once the speed has been obtained, the student can concentrate on clarity. Nice concept, but it's not worth a darn.

If it worked, schools would have you write STPH/FPLT/STPH/FPLT all day long. You would rapidly learn to write at 300 words per minute, and then you could slow down and work on your clarity.

The trouble is that you would have spent no time learning how to form all of the rest of the strokes. You would have to go back to Step One. Still, writing STPH/FPLT at high speed is better than writing entirely wrong strokes at high speed. Would you like to know why?

At least STPH is a correct stroke. At least FPLT is a correct stroke. If you spent all of your time writing those two strokes, at least you would be learning to write something correctly.

If your notes are unreadable, you are training yourself to write incorrectly. You are reinforcing unacceptable strokes. It will become harder and harder each day to break the bad habits that you are forming.

Instead of having unreadable notes, drop some of those words and stroke the remainder accurately. This is not a suggestion. Stop writing junk, and stop writing it immediately.

We can't say enough bad things about unreadable notes. If you have this problem, you must stop it now. Read all of your notes every day to ensure that this problem does not resurface. You have a major flaw.

## 3. Misreads

This is the easiest of the flaws that are exposed by readback. A misread is an incorrect interpretation of a good solid stroke. The cure is that you must read more of your notes. That is all.

There is one pitfall.

Many people misread a sloppy stroke and then blame it on the readback skills. Don't do that. If the stroke was sloppy, take your medicine and learn to write clearly. As was stated earlier in this chapter, learning to "pull" a translation out of your notes is a minor skill at best. You need to write better. Your clients will be expecting a professional when they hire you.

One day you may be covering a murder trial. Could you really sleep at night if you knew that you "pulled" the translation out of your notes? Could you sleep at night knowing that if you translated it again, you would "pull" a different translation out of the same notes? If you're wrong, a murderer could go free. If you're wrong, an innocent man could be convicted.

Could you sleep at night? Could you? We hope you never put yourself in a situation where you find out.

#### 4. Drops

Readback will show whether or not you understand how to drop. You need this skill. We won't be teaching you how to drop in this chapter. It is one of the most difficult subjects in stenography. Those who refuse to drop are quite insistent that they will drop more words if they learn to drop earlier. No. By learning to drop earlier, you will be concentrating on writing, rather than on remembering the dictation. In other words, you will be learning to write faster. That is why you are in school, isn't it?

How many words are in a good drop? How many are in a bad drop? The answer will vary. No student should ever drop more than five in a row. That includes the 225 students all the way down to the theory students. If you drop more than that, then you were carrying more than that. You aren't in school to build your memory. You are in school to learn to write fast. Focus your attention on the skills you need.

Theory students should be held to a maximum of two or three, except when they get stuck in the middle of a large word. Sometimes they are caught up when they begin a big outline, but they are hopelessly behind by the time they finish it. It is expected that this will happen. They are only beginning. They will learn.

All other students should strive to drop two or three as a time. A five-word drop is huge, but it can be hard to teach a student to drop fewer words than that. If you love to carry, you are familiar with ten- and fifteen-word drops. Getting those drops down to five words may not be utter perfection, but it is better than your present situation.

Professional reporters have an option that students do not enjoy. When real stenographers fall behind, they stop the proceedings. Sometimes, they admonish the witness or the lawyers. In extreme cases, they refuse to take the record. At no time and under no circumstances do reporters "carry" until they drop huge amounts. It is not professional.

Students do not have this luxury. They can't stop the teacher. They must endure dictation that is too fast. This happens every day in every class in every school. If you are not being pushed beyond your abilities, then you are not being

taught effectively. You will not attain a higher speed until you drill at it, but by definition, this higher speed is above your abilities. You aren't going to get all of it. Drop when it becomes too much.

### 3. Things that the teacher cannot diagnose by readback

There are certain stroking or strategy errors that your teacher will not be able to help you with simply by doing readback. You must be on the lookout for these.

a. How many times do you correct a stroke with the Asterisk key? If you just love how you can clear up a sloppy stroke by hitting that middle key, you are allowing many many one-stroke outlines to turn into three-stroke outlines. First you write a word poorly. Then your second stroke is the Asterisk. Finally you write it the correct way. At least, that is the theory. Frequently, that third stroke is no clearer than the first one. No matter what, you have given two extra strokes to that word. If you were fast enough to do that, you would already be a graduate.

b. Watch out for shadows. These are letters that do not belong in your notes. When you are writing at a comfortable speed, they may be very light compared to the rest of the stroke, but when you are pushed, these are the letters that will turn your notes into garbage. If you do it a little bit at a low speed, you will do it a lot at a high speed.

c. Is your entire stroke solidly written, or is some of it lighter? To see if this is a continuing problem, don't read your notes. Instead, hold them up and look at entire sections at one time. You have the beginning of a problem if the same letter is always lighter. That letter will be the first one to disappear entirely at high speed.

d. Your Q and A symbols should be rock solid.

Students learn how to pause after a sentence when they are unsure about their symbols. This tactic can fool the teacher. It saves the student from a lecture about the importance of strong symbols, but it does nothing for the student's ability to perform. This is another case of the student learning something that does not help them graduate. If the teacher doesn't give you a lecture on symbols, you give it to yourself. You need it.

e. Sound-alikes sound alike when you read them out loud. Don't expect your teacher to be able to counsel you about them during readback. Are you working on them? No student will conquer all of them, but every time you master one set, your brain will be able to pump out the correct outline a little faster. It's a fact. You may be writing "principal" and "principle" the same way and with acceptable speed, but you will write them faster when your brain knows the correct stroke.

f. Periods, commas, question marks and dashes are necessary. You can't depend on the teacher to know that you are getting these wrong. It is up to you. If the lawyer utters a statement, it is your job to put a period there. If the witness asks a question, you are supposed to use a question mark. The teacher won't catch this, but it is a serious error. The same goes for certain essential commas and all dashes. All punctuation is important, but these are vital.

g. Hesitation on one stroke will often lead to sloppy outlines on other strokes. Your teacher should be able to tell when your strokes become too sloppy, but you may be the only one who can say why they became sloppy. The two biggest causes of hesitation are 1) trying to use a brief that you can't remember and 2) trying to figure out how to write the entire word, instead of working on it syllable by syllable. If your strokes become sloppy all of a sudden, can you look back ten or twenty words and find a word that caused you a great deal of trouble?

h. Writing without rhythm is something you must be able to diagnose. Do you write in short furious bursts of speed? On readback, the teacher may declare that you have trouble dropping. You're the only one who can identify this problem. Even if you know how to drop correctly, you will drop a lot if you don't have rhythm. Calm down. Those bursts prove that you have the speed. If you can keep your hands moving at all times, you won't have to write so fast.

i. Does your brain freeze up even on easy words? If you freeze up, it will appear that you carry too much because your brain will suddenly stop, and poof, you are way behind. This is a concentration error and yes, it is often due to carrying, but sometimes can be traced back to noise in the hallway, your neighbor's loud machine, or lack of breakfast.

j. Are you having a bad day? If you feel horrible, it will probably show up in your performance. Don't change your entire pattern of drilling based on the results of a rotten day. We're all human. Sometimes we smell like roses. Other days we smell like fertilizer. Get a good night's sleep. Tomorrow, when you feel better, you can check to see if you really have a stroking problem.

We haven't reached agreement on the next chapter. Barb wants it to be about test notes. Anna Mae is voting for a chapter about theory students. Steve wants to write about why you can't find Mr. Pibb in the big two-liter bottle down at the Quickie Mart.

Don't worry. Steve won't win.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Nine

## *The Three Schools*

There are three schools of thought as to how to develop your skills as a reporter. Two of them are very similar. They are solid and irrefutable. The third is a bunch of malarkey that has been passed down through the ages.

### **THEORY ONE: All of your drills should be at an attainable speed.**

This is the basic method. It ensures good results. If you want to absolutely guarantee that you will improve, this is the system to use.

#### **Benefits:**

1. Your strokes will clear up.
2. You will have time to write the difficult sections.
3. You will know when a particular word or phrase causes you trouble because that will be the only time you fall behind.
4. You will learn to write with rhythm.
5. Basically, you can turn off your brain and still achieve good results. All you need to do is write strong, readable outlines at a speed that allows you to write strong, readable outlines.

#### **Drawbacks**

1. This method allows you to become lackadaisical about punching out the strokes as quickly as possible. Since you can write all of the drill, it is easy to permit yourself to carry more words than you should.

### **THEORY TWO: All of your drills should be just above what you can normally achieve.**

#### **Benefits**

1. Your strokes will clear up.
2. You will have time to write most of the difficult sections.
3. You will usually know when a particular word or phrase causes you trouble because that will be one of the few times that you fall behind.
4. You will learn to recognize the benefit of writing with rhythm. When you hesitate, you will fall behind.
5. You will know when your mind wanders because you will instantly fall behind.

6. You will learn it is better to write out a phrase or brief, rather than pause to think about it.

7. You will learn to write under pressure. Any time you become rattled, you will instantly fall behind.

8. Because this method forces you to write at your absolute best, you definitely will fall behind at times. If you evaluate your work, you will know why you did so and what you should practice.

### **Drawbacks**

1. This method requires that you write at your very best at all times. Any wrong move on your part will result in words being carried, sloppy writing or dropped words.

2. Even if you write at your very best, you will find that some of the drill will be beyond your abilities. This will result in words being carried, sloppy writing or dropped words.

When you carry, drop or write sloppy, it is up to you to decide whether you wrote incorrectly or whether the drill was too hard. Although we have listed this under "Drawbacks," this is also one of the most important benefits of this method of drilling. It is important to analyze your work.

### **THEORY THREE: All of your drills should be well above your goal speed.**

### **Benefits**

1. It feels good.

2. You can turn off your brain because there is no way that you can tell why you carried, dropped or wrote trash.

3. You don't have to worry about whether your next teacher will be better than your last one. You aren't going anywhere very soon.

4. You will soon understand the phrase "misery loves company." Many students follow this method. Of those former students who withdrew due to lack of progress, most followed this method. You will be miserable. You will have company.

5. When someone asks you what your strengths or weaknesses are, you can simply say, "I don't know."

6. You can buy a neatto leather jacket and pretend you are the original rebel without a cause. No other art, science, skill, sport or profession agrees that you should practice at a higher speed than you can perform. Either everybody else in the world is wrong or you are. You stand alone.

### **Drawbacks**

1. Constant speed will corrupt your writing.

2. Your writing will fluctuate from fast to slow, and you will not be aware of it.



3. Since the drill is always too fast, you will become accustomed to carrying more words than is acceptable.

4. Your brain will become overloaded by the sheer volume of words, and you will begin to hesitate on words that should present no difficulties.

5. You will spend all of your time trying to clear up the simplest of strokes.

6. Teachers will constantly harp on you to write clearer.

7. You will walk around saying, "But if I write clearer, I will lose my speed."

8. You will lose the ability to write slowly and accurately.

9. You will be learning little or nothing -- day after day after day.

Those are the three main theories. The first one allows you to write for hours with good solid strokes. The second requires that you perform at your best at all times. The third is simultaneously the most palatable and the most harmful.

Final thought: In no way do we suggest that all drilling should be done in one fashion. There is a need for speed drills. However, that need is secondary to clarity, rhythm and control. Speed drills do one thing: They teach you how to handle the small part of the test that is above your abilities. In other words, speed drills teach you how to perform under pressure. Do not confuse that with learning how to write correctly. That will always be best learned at low speed.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Ten

## *Test Mode*

Drills facilitate your education. They strengthen you. Tests are given to evaluate what you have learned. The words used in each type of dictation may be similar, but the objective is not.

Your goal, on a test, is to transcribe a sufficient number of words to pass. It doesn't matter what kind of words they are. If you drop the hard ones, you may pass if you get enough of the easy ones. If you lose points in one area, you will still pass if your overall score is satisfactory.

Everyone has strengths and weaknesses. It is imperative that you work on your weaknesses. Practice is when you do that. Never forget that. You must overcome your deficiencies. Don't ignore them. Work on them.

Your strengths are another story. Those are strokes, words, and techniques that you have mastered. Are you using them to your best advantage?

Let's take a typical student who has just entered the 140s speed. This student almost certainly will not pass her first test. Her goal is to improve her abilities. All of her practice at home should be directed to that purpose. Almost all of her drill at school should be similar.

When the few times each day when she tests, the methods that she followed to drill go out the window. Now she wants the best score. She may not achieve her best score because she has not been drilling to develop her abilities. That is fine. Her goal is improvement. Passing tests will come later.

Two months later, that same student should be much closer to the necessary speed. Nevertheless, her drill at home should not change. Practice is the only way to improve. When she runs across a hard passage, she should stop the drill and repeat the section that gave her difficulty. If necessary, she should refer to her theory book and/or dictionary. These steps are essential to her progress. She must work on the weaknesses.

However, the methods of proper drilling may hamper her during the typical test. At home, she learns to stroke through the difficult words as smoothly and correctly as possible. During a test, she needs to achieve the highest score. A different approach is needed.

The basic principle of practice is that you will not improve unless you work on your faults. When this student entered 140s, it was proper for her to continue stroking through all of the hard words. This is basic. She won't improve if she skips over them. However, working through those tough words will put her

behind the dictation. There will be many instances where she has to drop easy words that appear directly after a hard section. This is correct. This is how you drill to improve your skills.

Using this method on a test means that you will sacrifice easy words while you are stroking difficult ones. This will hurt your score. On a test, your goal is not improvement. It is performance.

Look at the standardized test that high school students take. The schools spend a great deal of time working on the sections that give the students the most trouble. They work and work and work on the same areas. They drill the principles and concepts. They issue workbooks and homework. They give practice tests that identify the weak areas. Then they work on them. The students are told not to give up on a question. They push them to work it out. Then test day arrives.

The strategy that they use on these tests is universal: “Answer all of the easy questions first. Work on the hard ones later, if you have time.”

They are no longer telling the students to improve. Now they are coaching them to use the skills that they have. They want the students to achieve the highest score possible. That strategy works to their best advantage. It is the best way to take the test. It would be a horrible system of practice.

The students may have fractions, multiplication and logic problems. If they are good at fractions and multiplication, they may score well enough on those to offset any difficulty with logic problems. Just because they have an area that needs extra work does not mean that they will fail. They can pass in spite of it.

They will walk out of the test with the highest score if they get all of the simple questions and some of the hard ones. The test measures overall performance. The students will score their highest if they use the proper method, and that method is that they answer all of the easy ones first.

Going back to our imaginary 140s student, when she is ready to move to the next level, it may help her to use a similar system. The time for total practice is over. Her goal has changed.

Certainly, she wants to continue to improve. Her practice outside of school should be focused on that objective. But now she wants to pass a test. Her approach to the test should be similar to the high school students when they take the standardized tests. She should ensure that she does not drop easy words at the expense of the hard ones.

It can be hard to go from practice to “test mode.” If it is a difficult transition, then it is acceptable to drill at school as if every dictation was a test. This may help the student learn to maximize the score on the test. On the other hand, drilling at home should always be practice. There is always more to learn.

The word “epicurean” is quite difficult. It takes multiple strokes to write it, and those strokes will probably be slower than normal. If it appeared on a test, it would be the perfect candidate to be dropped. It would cost one word or one point if it were dropped. On the other hand, if our 140s student strokes through that

word slowly and correctly, she will get a point for that word, but she may be forced to fall behind to the point that she drops five easy words.

Is it correct to drop a hard word? Not in practice. You won't improve if you drop the hard ones. They are, by definition, the words that need work. Put those same words on a test, and they are the ones that should be dropped first.

Sometimes students have a hard time with the concepts of school. Some believe that they are learning to get every word. Nope. If that were true, they would not be allowed to have mistakes.

Some students view that concept with disbelief. They argue that a professional must get every word; therefore, they should adopt the same standard in school. They drill to get every word. It leads to major problems. Stenography schools are generally set up to drill their students above their abilities. It is impossible to get all of the dictation.

Working reporters are typically faster than the testimony. When they are not, they are allowed to stop the proceedings until they catch up. That is the only way that they can produce a quality transcript at all times. Even the speed champions have encountered testimony that was too fast or too difficult. That's when they slow down the witness.

Students do not have that luxury. When the test becomes difficult, the student cannot stop the dictation. It will continue. Even easy tests have challenging sections. The student should not sacrifice the test in order to learn a new word. It is much better to drop that word and continue on with the rest of the test. The time for learning that word will come during the next practice session.

We don't advise anybody to drop every tough word or awkward stroke. That would not work. Tests should push you to your limit. When you hit a hard part, you have to perform. Sometimes you will have to give up a little clarity. That's okay as long as you can read your notes. Sometimes you will have to rush to catch up after you have stroked a hard word. That's fine as long as you are not pushed behind too far.

Sometimes, though, you should drop fast. Even if you are writing well, one word can cost you a great deal. You can't let this happen on a test. There is a skill to taking tests, and it is a skill that you need to develop.

You don't want to needlessly cost yourself points, but almost surely you will make mistakes or part of the dictation will be too tough. There are very few students who achieve perfect scores on any tests. If you drop, you are making a trade. You are saying that you would rather lose a few points here rather than a lot of points later.

You can easily tell whether you are doing this correctly. Grade your tests, especially the ones that give you a lot of trouble. By the way, you will learn a lot more from a failed test than you will from a passed test.

Look at the sloppy words. If they are all in one general area, you probably fell behind because of a difficult word or sentence. If you would have stayed up with the dictation, perhaps those clarity errors would not have appeared. Did you

spend too much time on a hard word? Could you have sacrificed that word? If you lost one point on a difficult word, would you have written clearer strokes on the sloppy words. Would that have improved your score?

Find all of your drops. Make sure that you write in the words that make up that drop. Now look back a sentence or two. Somewhere before the drop was a section that made you struggle. Those words forced you to carry and then drop. Would you have a better score if you had dropped a word here and a word there?

At the very least, did you write correctly before the drop? If you lose points due to unclear strokes before the drop, and then you lose a lot of points because of a drop, you are making very bad choices.

Analyze your work. You can't predict what words will show up on a test, but you can evaluate your performance after the test. If you are consistently getting the big words and dropping the small ones, you can adjust your technique and improve your score.

No matter what you do, it won't work every time. Sometimes you will drop a word and then find that the next passage is exceedingly easy. Sometimes you will write a difficult word because you are caught up and then drop because the dictation becomes tougher. Sometimes you will tear your hair out because you drop a section right before the test ends. You won't guess right on each particular occasion.

Look for your tendencies. If you generally are costing yourself points by writing one way, then you can generally save yourself points by writing a better way.

Each test will have different combinations of words. Even if you minimize the damage to your score, some tests are just too difficult. You can't win them all. Sometimes it just isn't your day.

Most students would be happy to move up one speed every quarter or semester. That isn't an overly ambitious goal, but many do not reach it. For those who are ready to pass, they may need a simple adjustment as to how and when they drop.

To pass out of your speed, you need to pass a small handful of tests. You don't need to pass them all, and you don't need to get every word. You don't need to get every word. You don't need to get every word. You don't. You simply don't.

Learn to put yourself in position to pass the good tests when they come along. Learn how to minimize the damage from the hard sections. All words are equal when the mistakes are tallied up. Don't give up the "gimme" words.

If you drop "equilibrium," you lose one point. If you stroke it badly, you still lose one point, but you are devoting time to writing that stroke. If you stroke it correctly, you gain that point, but you may lose points down the road because you fell behind. Whether you stroke a hard word correctly or not, it may cost you points on the next words.

Will our advice work with those students who are ready to take their certification exam? Yes. These students should be drilling above the level of the

test. When they take their big test, very few things should be able to stop them. One of them is not knowing how to sacrifice a word here and there.

Will our advice work for professionals? Of course not. When you are on the job, you don't try to write the majority of the words. You write all of them. That's why a reporter can stop the dictation and catch up.

Why did we bring up the professionals again? Because students want to perform like professionals. That is their goal. But it must be clear that school is not set up to mimic real life. How you perform in school is not how you will perform on the job. Your school recognizes this. It allows you to have errors. Learn to use those errors. Learn how to be a student. Learn how to get the best score. Take an error on a test if it will save you many other errors. Learn how to play the game.

And then play to win.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Eleven

## *Taking a Test*

To move up in speed, you will have to pass tests. You can't get escape it. Some people are good at it. Some are not. Nevertheless, tests are used to validate your skills. You will be taking them weekly, if not daily.

There is much groundwork to be laid before the test. The actual test is merely five minutes of performance. you won't pass them ll, but every test is another chance to prove your mettle. How prepared do you intend to be? Will you put yourself in position to give your best?

### **The Days Before the Test**

1. Eat well, especially breakfast.
2. Sleep well. Rise at the same time each day.
3. Don't drink alcohol.
4. Do a lot of control drills that allot you to write extremely well.
5. Do short drills for speed.
6. Practice the first thirty seconds of the test by doing short drills at goal speed or low speed.
7. Try to mimic the schedule that you will use on the day of the test. Even on the weekend, attempt to follow the same general pattern of work, rest, sleep, and eating.

### **The Day of the Test**

1. Rise at your normal time.
2. Eat normally, especially breakfast.
3. Arrive at school ahead of time. Warm up a little, but not a lot.
4. Make sure you have:
  - (a) A Dictionary (this is essential)
  - (b) Steno paper (don't change paper before the test)
  - © Typing paper
  - (d) Ink (ink your machine well before the test)
  - (e) Hard candy or cough drops (for a scratchy throat)
  - (f) A well-oiled machine (keep it quiet; it distracts you and everyone else)

### **The Hour of the Test**

1. Get to class early. Relax.

The purpose of getting there early is to keep you from feeling rushed.

2. Don't practice before class (you should be ready).

Relax.

3. Don't drill out of control at all. Relax.

4. Don't drill to exhaustion if the drill is length. Slow down and relax.

5. Use the entire hour as a warm-up period. Your goal is the test. Relax.

6. Have notepaper and pen ready for preview words.

7. Listen for any distractions, such as a neighbor's machine or the traffic outside. Resolve to ignore it. Don't try to shut it out; just ignore it.

### **The Last Drill before the Test**

1. Write smoothly. Relax.

2. Do not attempt to write the speed if it pushes you. You are not practicing. You are preparing for the test. Relax.

3. Absolute clarity.

### **Preview Before the Test**

1. Write down all words that the teacher gives you. If a blue Cadillac is mentioned, write down "blue Cadillac," not just "Cadillac."

2. Make briefs for names or any tough terms. Practice them a couple of times.

3. Stretch your arms a tiny amount. Don't overdo it; you're not at the gym.

4. Breathe deeply several times. This has a wonderful calming effect.

5. Relax.

### **Minute Before the Test**

1. Don't adjust your machine. Your arms have become familiar with the height of the machine when you were drilling. Don't change it now, even if it should be higher or lower.

2. Don't adjust how you are sitting. Go ahead and stretch. Stand up if you want. When you are ready, make sure you are sitting in the exact same position as when you were drilling.

3. Don't lean forward. Students commonly do this when it is test time. It will change your body position in relationship to the machine. Don't do it.

4. Don't think back on past performances.  
Today is today. Whether you get this test or not, it will depend on whether



you are writing well and on whether the test is a good one. Yesterday is gone. Let it go.

5. Don't just sit there. If you have time, practice any new brief that you will use for the preview words. If there is more time, do an easy drill at slow speed with perfect notes. A good one is: "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country."

6. Try to give yourself fifteen seconds to mentally prepare. Don't obsess for five minutes. A short mental picture of you stroking strong and confident is all that is needed.

7. Do remember that you don't need this test. You only need a couple of tests to pass your speed. You will get them as you improve, but you certainly don't need to get any one particular test.

### **The First Minute of the Test**

1. Breathe. Don't worry about nice deep breaths. Just breathe.

2. Don't worry about how you are sitting, whether you are leaning forward, how sweaty your hands are. It's too late to adjust. Just write smoothly.

3. Don't try to write at super high speed. No one can write faster than the teacher.

4. Accept that you have shortcomings. Now is not the time to correct them. If you are a bit sloppy or if you have trouble with an ending, it is too late to fix them. This is a test, not a drill. Perform, don't practice. Keep the hands moving.

5. Accept that you may fall behind on the occasional word. Don't panic. If the test is fair, you will not fall behind many times. If it isn't fair, you won't get the test anyway because, well, it isn't a fair test.

6. Keep under control. Good clean strokes are the key. If you drop a few words, that is fine as long as you are writing well.

7. Don't try to pass the test by putting everything into the first minute. Be calm. If the first minute is fair and if you are ready, you will perform well. Let your skills work for you.

### **The Rest of the Test**

1. Breathe.

2. Forget about how long you have left. Pay attention to the words.

3. Keep the fingers moving. Don't get caught in a confusing section. Do the best you can during the tricky parts, and that means keep the fingers moving.

4. Keep your mind focused on the words. Don't keep track of the number of errors that you make.

5. As soon as you have finished one stroke, forget about it. Focus on the next one. Don't analyze each stroke.

6. Test nerves are overrated. You can and will pass your tests while you are nervous. Keep your wits about you.

7. Allow yourself the luxury of being human. If you are going to fail this test, so be it. Fail it to the best of your abilities. Get as much as you can.

8. Don't sabotage yourself. Every test as a hard section. You can survive it and pass. Don't give up your skills (clarity, control, rhythm) to the one and only tough series of words on the test.

Most of us do not prepare properly. That is what this chapter is all about. If you need something for the test, get it ready before the test. If you need it for that class, work on it before the class. If you need it that day, arrange to have it waiting for you before that day. Prepare. Take charge. Attend to the details. Put yourself in position to do your very best.

And then, when the test begins, give it the old college try. That's all anybody can ask of you. Don't demand more than that. Don't accept less. You have trained and improved. Now is your time to shine. Stay under control. Concentrate. Do your best. You deserve it.

Whether you pass will depend on a lot of factors. You need to have a good test. You need it dictated without a large amount of distractions. You need your skills. You need the presence of mind to use your skills to your best advantage. You need a rested and content body. You need a little luck to have all of them come together at one time.

Your day will come. It may not be today. That is all right. If you don't pass a test today, learn from your mistakes. It will teach you how to take the test that is coming tomorrow.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Twelve

## *Why Learn Realtime*

Do you have a lack of clarity? Do you hesitate? Do you carry? Name your problem. Realtime will point it out. It is the one and only teaching aid that will help all students in all speeds with all problems.

Over the years, many training aids have been used in stenography schools. Some of them are entirely useless or have very limited application. Metronomes don't work because we don't write every stroke in the same amount of time. Placing coins on the backs of your hands won't work unless you keep your hands in the home position. Reading each and every drill won't work because, well, no one does it.

We are now in the computer age.

We have better tools. Realtime is one of the best. The CAT programs should be used for more than transcript preparation or dictionary building. All students will benefit from increased realtime practice. It works, and it does so with virtually no extra teaching. All the student has to know is how to hook up the program.

After that, the learning begins.

Watch what happens when students hook up to realtime. The first drill begins normally. Somewhere along the way, the students become aware of the untranslates. They are horrified when they see their work on the screen. This is the initial awakening to the importance of solid fundamentals. More will come later.

At this point, the most common reaction is to reduce the speed. It doesn't produce the results they want. Now they can't keep up. Worse, they are still writing approximately the same way as before. Lowering the speed, by itself, will not cure their problems.

This is when they begin to fight back. If slowing down didn't work, then what is the solution? They experiment. They analyze. They question, study, investigate, scrutinize.

They try everything. And one by one, they reject everything.

No matter what they try, nothing works. Eventually, they resign themselves to their fate. They write poorly. They want to write better. There is no easy answer. This is when they begin to blossom.

Going back to their initial attempt, they tried to clean up their writing by reducing the speed. They rejected that because they noticed that they were, indeed, writing slower, but they weren't writing clearer. It would have worked, but

the plan wasn't thought out, and the long-term benefit wasn't apparent. Writing at a lower speed will not work unless it produces good strokes.

Conversely, if you can produce good strokes, there is no sense in writing slowly. The easy strokes are already being written correctly. They aren't the problem.

Realtime will point out the difficult strokes that are being handled poorly. Eventually the student will get tired of seeing the same strokes not translate. The student will learn to write that better or will simply learn the outline for that stroke. If the stroke must be slower, then that is how it will be written. If all that is necessary is more concentration, then that is what the student will supply. Whatever it takes to clear up the stroke, the student will eventually do.

Some students will settle in at a lower speed level. Here they will find immediate improvement because this time they are marshalling their concentration. Further, writing slowly will not hurt their ability to write fast when needed. In fact, they will bolster that skill.

Others steadfastly will remain at their original speed, but they too will benefit. Now they have a purpose when they drill. They have a goal. They want to write better, and their drill will be structured to produce that result.

Both groups will profit.

Why? Doesn't it fly in the face of reason? No. Writing realtime will turn their focus away from speed. They will begin to value clarity. Even if they are writing above their speed, they will not accept the same poor level of writing that was their previous standard. They won't improve as rapidly as those who slow down to an appropriate level, but they will improve.

What is it about realtime that causes these changes? It is the feedback. For the first time, they have clear and unassailable proof that they need help in specific areas.

Why didn't they know that before? It is hard to tell novice reporters exactly how sloppy they can be before they cross the line into trash. In other professions, it is easier. If they were musicians, they could tell by the sound of the music. If they were drivers, they could tell by the number of tickets. If they were athletes, they would know by the number of errors charged to them.

But without realtime, it is hard for a student to know. We name our classes "speed classes." We tell them that they will only graduate when they reach the highest speed level. We urge them to push harder and harder each day. And yes, we tell them that if they can read it, it is acceptable. All of this helps to indoctrinate students to speed.

Realtime will prove that speed is useless by itself. It is not the only factor. It is not the most important factor. At best, it is of minor importance. The only way to conquer a stroke is to practice it correctly. You can't do that at high speed.

Learn it at low speed. Perform it at high speed. Realtime will ensure you do that.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Thirteen

## *Speedbuilding*

### **"Speed kills clarity. Absolute speed kills clarity absolutely."**

The most common and oldest philosophy of speedbuilding is to “get a stroke for everything.” Students have been hearing that for years. They learn it from teachers who were taught it when they were students. Every generation has had part or all of their training based upon that premise. If you follow it back, the first teacher of the first machine theory possibly conceived that notion.

It doesn't end there. Before machine writers were pen writers. It is a short jump to assume that they also were taught to get a stroke for everything. Before pen writing theories were invented, stenographers had to write everything longhand. Probably they were taught to scribble a note for everything.

Even today, there are those who champion this theory.

Some believe that it is a cure-all for lack of progress. Others see it as the great untold secret of stenography. There are even those who are convinced that they have invented it. They didn't, but if they insist on it, they are welcome to the fame and glory of such an ignoble concept.

It is wicked and evil. The results are atrocious. Your strengths become weaknesses. Your rhythm deserts you. It corrupts your writing. It teaches you to write unreadable strokes that you cannot use in school or in real life.

Why then, do people still insist on this horrible, horrible concept?

Because there is more than a grain of truth to the theory.

If you write under control at all times, you will have strong strokes, but most likely, you will not be writing at your absolute top speed.

If you now write under control, and if you totally turn to getting a stroke for everything, you will experience an immediate improvement in speed. This will be followed by a complete breakdown of your writing abilities. You will lose the ability to competently write even the easiest of strokes. Sometimes you will write them clearly enough to read. Other times, they will be total garbage.

If you now write under control most of the time, and if you sparingly use the theory of getting a stroke for everything, you will experience an immediate, although lowered, improvement in speed.

Those who write under control at all times will graduate, and they will be immediately competent as professionals.

Those who write under control most of the time will graduate, and they will have little trouble as professionals.

Those who try to get a stroke for everything generally do not graduate. They constitute the bulk of the people who drop out of court reporting schools. Many, many people write garbage day after day after day until they lose hope of ever moving to the next speed level.

Why does this happen? How is it possible that writing for absolute speed will show such dramatic immediate results and disastrous ultimate results?

It takes only a cursory examination to expose the flaw in the plan. You will perform as you practice. If you place speed above clarity, you will learn to write with speed, but without clarity.

Suppose that you are one of the few who writes under control at all times. Your strokes are good, clean, and solid. You can read them. Most of them will translate on the computer.

Now suppose that you begin practicing to get a stroke for everything. All of your previous practice has taught you to write correctly. Now you are pushing yourself beyond your limits.

Your strokes are no longer quite as perfect, but they are readable for the most part. Within a week, you may improve as much as twenty words per minute.

What will happen in the succeeding weeks? Do you think that the speed improvement will continue? Do you believe that your notes will remain just a little bit sloppy?

No -- on both counts.

The first week of pushing for ultimate speed paid off in a huge speed gain because you had a solid background of fundamentally correct strokes. You were pushing yourself to write those acceptable outlines faster and faster. You weren't perfect, but they were readable notes.

The following weeks of trying to get a stroke for everything will show diminishing returns. By the second week, you have come to accept sloppier notes as your normal standard. Now when you push for speed, you are writing those sloppy notes even sloppier.

By the third week, your normal strokes have become barely tolerable. When you are pushed, much of your work is an unreadable mess.

And then, the speed deserts you. The gains that you have made disappear in a puff of smoke. Possibly, if not probably, the end result is that you end up writing slower than you started. Definitely, you are saddled with a corrupted writing style. Why does this happen?

When you write correctly, all you have to concentrate on is the next stroke. Hear the word; stroke the word; forget the word. It's as simple as that.

What do you have to think about when you write sloppy? You have to think about whether the last stroke was clear enough to be read. You have to think about whether the next stroke will be readable with a sloppy stroke. You have to

think about whether you should use the correct realtime stroke or whether you can get away with a conflict stroke. You have to think about which words are unreadably ambiguous when they are sloppy. In extreme cases, students end up trying to remember the pattern of the words in a sentence because they know that they stroked them too poorly to be transcribed from their notes.

Pure speedbuilding at the expense of all of the rules that you were taught in Theory class will lead to disaster. Your fingers perform the stroke, but it is your brain that supplies the outline. Once you confuse or overwork the brain, your fingers will slow down.

A measured amount of speedbuilding is helpful, but it must be kept in check. It is perilous. The risks are many.

- Speedbuilding will hurt you if 19 out of every 20 strokes are not readable. Ignore the words that you drop. Can you correctly translate almost every stroke that you make? If you cannot do this, then you have no business trying to increase your speed. You need work on the basics.

- Speedbuilding will hurt you if you do not warm up with material that permits you to write strong, clear outlines. You must start with strong strokes, or you will not learn to write strong strokes at a higher speed.

- Speedbuilding will hurt you if you do not end your practice with material that permits you to write strong, clear outlines. The speedbuilding drills will corrupt your writing. You need to reinforce the correct outlines before you end your practice. If you end your session with poor strokes, those are the strokes that your brain will remember, and those are the strokes that your brain will supply the next time you sit down to write.

- Speedbuilding will hurt you if you practice so long or so fast that your writing completely breaks down. If you continue until your hands are shaking and you are writing hesitantly, then you are learning to write slowly and incompetently. That should be the exact opposite of what you want. Avoid that scenario at all costs.

- Speedbuilding will hurt you if you carry words. Carrying is unacceptable as a general technique. In speedbuilding, it has absolutely no justification. If the material is too fast for you, there is no chance that you will be able to catch up by carrying. Drop quickly without any delay.

- Speedbuilding will hurt you if you hesitate. Speedbuilding will induce hesitation because you will be overloaded by the sheer number of words. If you do not write smoothly before you begin speedbuilding, you will end up writing fewer words at the high speed than you would have written at a lower speed.

- Speedbuilding is useless if you do not know the correct outlines. You can't learn to write a drill quickly if you do not have the knowledge to write it slowly. You must know how to stroke the words before you have a prayer of writing them above your normal speed.

- Speedbuilding is helpful if used in small amounts. Ten minutes of controlled drill can get you ready for one minute of pure speed. Remember to end with a slow drill for reinforcement of the proper outlines.

- Speedbuilding is extremely helpful if you concentrate on keeping the hands moving, rather than on the number of words stroked. This is the one and only aspect of stenography that is easier taught at high speed than at low speed.

If your hands continue to move at all times when you are faced with a dictation that is well above your speed, several good things are happening:

- You are learning to keep writing when faced with difficult dictation. Every test has a difficult section. You need this skill.

- You are improving your concentration. To keep your hands moving at all times, you must be focusing on the next word that you will stroke. Otherwise, you would not be moving smoothly to it.

- You are removing any built in hesitation that you have.

At goal speed, you do not necessarily write the easiest strokes as fast as possible since those are the not the strokes that cause you to fall behind.

At high speed, all strokes need to be written faster. Learning to write the easy strokes faster will put you in better position to write the difficult section of a test.

- If your hands are moving at all times, then you are concentrating on the next stroke, instead of on whether or not you wrote the last stroke correctly. Analyze your work after the drill is over. That is the time to do it. Analyzing during the drill will kill your rhythm, even at a low speed. Hear the word; stroke the word; forget the word. Overuse of the Asterisk key means you aren't doing this. You wouldn't be correcting your work if you weren't analyzing while writing.

- You are learning endurance. Usually an endurance drill is long and slow, but if the drill is fast, then you get the same effect from a much shorter drill. You are learning to write the very best that you can write under extreme conditions.

- Moving smoothly from one stroke to another at the very highest speed that you can possibly write means that you are writing at your ultimate possible speed. This is a very good thing.

There is a huge downside to writing well above your speed. Too many fine students have diligently practiced incorrectly until their fingers were nearly bleeding. Then they practiced more. Then they practiced more. Finally, they withdrew from school for lack of progress.

Don't let this happen to you. If you aren't sure whether you will benefit from speedbuilding, then don't do it. You don't need it. It is not necessary.

Only those who write correctly at their normal speed can do speedbuilding. If you hesitate too much or if you write sloppy, then speedbuilding will feed your problem. It will grow and grow.

Most students in the upper speeds would make better progress if they never practiced above their goal speeds. Despite their protests to the contrary, the problem is rarely speed. Many of them perform just as well at 20 words above their goal speed. Curiously, many of them also would have just as hard a time passing a



test at 20 words below their goal speed. If this sounds like you, then your problem is not speed.

**Final Note:**

If this is such a dangerous topic, why did we include it in the book?

It may be treacherous, but if used correctly, the results are worth it. Even discounting the benefits, it can't be denied that speedbuilding is being taught in virtually every school. If they are being taught to do it, and if they are using the technique, it has to be done appropriately.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Fourteen

*If Not Speed, What?*

Speed is deceptively misleading. Used correctly, it can be a powerful tool in your repertoire. However, any deviation from the fundamentals of clean, efficient writing will turn it from a tool to an impediment. Speed cannot be the focus. It will mislead you.

Emphasizing speed (quantity of words written) over clarity (quality of words written) is valuing the wrong characteristic of our craft. In real life, a reporter does not get in trouble for slowing down a witness. It is to be expected that that will happen. After all, we are human.

What isn't acceptable to a professional is a poorly translated record. A reporter must be able to turn out a salable transcript. Every stroke must be readable. Your goal in school is to train to become a professional.

You will one day be charged with reporting the proceedings in court or a deposition setting. Right now, you should be practicing to do that. Right now. Today.

A student with fairly clean notes may reason to herself that she could move from one speed to the next if she sacrificed some of her clarity for the sake of speed. She would be correct. She could do that. A person with generally readable notes can conquer the next level by accepting lower quality notes. That is because she only needs to pass a small amount of tests. If her notes deteriorate to the point that she can adequately translate only a few of the tests, she will still advance to the next level. She'll move up with fractured writing, but she will move up.

The question is: Would it make her a better student?

The answer is simple. No. For proof, look around your school. How many of your fellow students are missing tests because of simple words? How many students stumble over every third word during readback? How many would have trouble passing tests at 20 words below their goal speed?

Too many.

If you give up your clarity for an increase of speed, you will end up with intolerable outlines coupled with increased hesitation and carrying. In extreme cases, those who chase speed end up with so much hesitation and carrying that they write slower than ever.

The solution to sloppy notes is clear, basic, and undisputable: Write slow enough to write correctly. Unfortunately, this is unacceptable to a great deal of the students. They argue that they will not be able to pass tests if they slow down. If

they are talking about the next test, they are correct. They will not have their normal speed while they relearn the strokes that they were taught in Theory.

However, as soon as they get into the habit of writing correctly, the speed will return. Not only that, they will be faster than ever. Those who switch to clarity after a long bout with pure speed invariably report no problems with gaining speed class after class after class. They have already learned the speed. What they needed was the clarity.

Why do they gain speed automatically by ignoring it and focusing on clarity? Because a large part of their problem is that they are fighting themselves. Deep down, they know the correct stroke, but they don't insist on it. All they want is anything that is close enough to be read.

Each time they stroke a word, they tell the brain to shut up about the correct outline. Too bad. That is what they need, and that is what the brain is ready to supply. Instead they ask the brain for any sloppy stroke that is close enough to be read. The inherent problem is that many misstrokes cannot be read accurately. They conflict with other strokes.

To supply a non-conflicting sloppy stroke, the brain has to work harder than ever. Instead of the one and only proper stroke, now it has to choose among all of the variations and find one that is close enough to be translated correctly and not misinterpreted as a similar stroke. It would have been a lot easier and faster to insist on the correct stroke.

If you are not going to insist on the correct outline for a word like "what," then you shouldn't complain that the brain supplied you with the outline for "who" or "that." Your brain knows the correct way to stroke the words. If you insist on the proper outlines, you will soon be able to write them just as fast, or faster, than the incorrect outlines.

When all is said and done, even the best reporters will have periods when their notes are not perfect. Somehow, they must still be translated. Pulling a translation out of sloppy notes is a tool that all reporters need. However, it is a last-ditch attempt to make sense out of notes that were written improperly. It is not a proper method for normal everyday translation.

Sadly, students often cannot read twenty words of normal dictation without being forced to decipher what they wrote. Sloppy notes become their standard work product. When they write "clean notes," it is still sloppier than should be allowed.

Many of them end up making mistakes on tests because they cannot trust their notes. We all know stories about students who have failed tests because they second-guessed themselves in the typing room. Even when they use the correct stroke during the test, they are likely to force an error on themselves during transcription. That isn't the way to become a professional.

If you adamantly resolve to write the correct patterns that you were taught in Theory class, you will gain greatly.

1. When you insist on writing clearly, the brain will supply the correct stroke.

2. When you adapt to writing clearly, the brain will not be confused about what stroke is supply.

3. Without confusion, you will rapidly learn to write rhythmically with much less hesitation.

4. Without hesitation, you will be less likely to fall behind and carry.

5. Without falling behind, you will not have to depend on writing like a speed demon to catch up.

6. Without having to fight to catch up,

a. Your writing will be even less likely to break down. You will not have to interpret your notes.

b. You will not have to drop as much.

c. You will be able to spend that extra half second writing the tough words.

7. With proper strokes, you will not be as likely to fall into the trap of reviewing your strokes as you make them.

a. You will have more time to focus on the next stroke because you won't be looking over your shoulder at the strokes that you have already made.

b. You will gain time because your use of the asterisk key will diminish. Each time you correct a stroke, you turn a single stroke into three. First, the incorrect stroke. Second, the asterisk. Finally, the correct stroke. Hopefully, it is the correct stroke.

8. With clear strokes, no confusion, no hesitation, no falling behind, no fighting to catch up, no correcting of your work, you will automatically "gain speed." It won't be true, but it will feel like it. The truth is that you are writing the same speed as before, but now you are using a much better writing style.

9. With generally clear strokes, you will be able to pinpoint the few areas of your writing style that need work. Your mistakes will be fewer and fewer, especially if you learn from them.

10. Your readback will be amazingly easy.

11. When your notes do not make sense,

a. You will translate them as written because you know that the bulk of your notes are correct.

b. You will not change correct words into incorrect ones because you are trying to make sense out of what you wrote.

c. You will not change, add to, or modify what you wrote, on those occasions when you do drop words, You will simply translate them.

12. You will gain so much time during transcription because you won't be wasting your efforts trying to make sense of your notes. That time can be used to proofread.

13. You won't guess wrong anymore.

14. You will be writing like a professional.
15. You will be reading like a professional.
16. You will be translating like a professional.
17. You will sleep better.

It's true that we give awards to speed champions. The part that everybody seems to overlook is that these superstars don't win unless they can translate their notes.

Write clearly. Nothing else is acceptable.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Fifteen

## *Homework*

(Sincere apologies to Elizabeth Barrett Browning)

How do I loathe thee? Let me count the ways.

I loathe thee to the depth and breadth and height

My fingers can stroke, when feeling out of sorts

For the ends of being a depressed overworked student.

I loathe thee to the level of every day's

Most hated practice, by sun and candle-light.

I loathe thee freely, as men shun what's right.

I loathe thee purely, because I turn from praise.

I loathe thee with the passion put to use

In my old theory book, and with my lack of faith.

I loathe thee with a loathing I seemed to share

With many lost classmates. I loathe thee with the breath,

Smiles, tears, of all my schooling; and, if God choose, I shall but loathe thee better after graduation.

Stenography is a skill. To master it, you must practice. Concentrated review of specific strokes and techniques will rapidly improve your skills. Before you can do that, you must identify the areas that require additional work.

Homework will provide the answers that you need. Spending half an hour on one facet of your training will show you your skill level in that area. If you are deficient, you will know what to practice in the future. If your abilities are acceptable, an occasional review is all that is necessary.

There is a strong argument that assigned homework will force the student to spend time working on things that do not require extra attention. Further, this line of reasoning states that the student could choose more appropriate homework.

To this, we cannot disagree.

Typically, the teacher will assign the entire class the same homework. It will not be the perfect drill for every student. For some, it will address their shortcomings. Others will find the lesson too easy. For those who are not challenged by the assignment, it would be better if they could work on something more appropriate.

This is not to say that we disagree with assigned homework. We support it wholeheartedly. We may agree with the prior arguments against homework, but we use those very points as the basis of our contention for homework. We take that line of reasoning, but then we extrapolate one step further.

As to the first part of the argument, if certain work forces the student to work on unnecessary drill, then logic dictates that other lessons will provide the drill that is essential to continued progress and development. It is a shame, but there are many students who have forgotten where they put their theory book. Others simply don't believe that they need to review the individual lessons. Unless they are compelled, they will not make the effort. Assigned homework will give them what they need.

And that brings us to the second part of the argument; Students would be better off if they monitored their progress and abilities and then assigned themselves homework. That may be true, but it assumes that the students know their faults. Self-analysis is a skill.

It doesn't come easy to everyone.

Not only that, but also this argument is dependent on the students assigning themselves homework that they despise. Usually, the most beneficial drill is also the most hated drill. It's the nature of the beast.

As a rule, the things that we perform poorly are not the things that we enjoy. It takes a degree of discipline to faithfully suffer through the type of practice that will ensure success.

We know that the majority of schools do not require homework. If yours does not, then please do yourself a favor by assigning it to yourself. It can make a great deal of difference in your progress.

Whether you are a teacher or a student, we have the perfect solution for where to find homework. Go to your theory book. The different sections are already laid out. You don't have to follow the lessons in order. You don't even have to work through an entire lesson. One assignment could be ten common prefixes. Another could be words that end in tion/sion. A third could be the usage of the decimal in numbers. Just make sure that you eventually hit on every finger pattern that is in your theory.

Let us end by saying that homework can be horrible, repulsive, disgusting, tedious, monotonous and mind-numbingly boring; however, it flat out works wonders.

1. Classes that are assigned regular homework perform better than the average class.
2. Great teachers are more likely to assign homework than average or poor teachers.
3. Students who make regular measured progress are apt to assign themselves homework, although they may not realize it. They simply look for areas that need work.

Steno school isn't high school. Every part of your theory needs attention. If you were taught it, you should practice it. One day you will be called upon to perform it. Do not avoid the tough lessons. Work on them.



## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Sixteen

## *Carrying Words*

Carrying words is detrimental to your progress. It forces you to dedicate yourself to remembering words, rather than stroking them. This leaves you vulnerable to misstroking, hesitating, transposing words, omitting words, and a plethora of similar problems.

Further it sings the siren's song. Occasionally carriers luck out and catch up with the dictation. It doesn't happen often enough, but it does happen. This gives them false hope. They believe that success will come to them if they learn to carry even more.

Most students view successful carrying as a sign that they are improving. They are wrong. They will not improve by carrying. They may nominally progress despite the self-inflicted hindrance of carrying, but they will not better themselves because they carry.

Although carriers are quick to credit their successes to carrying, they never attribute their failures to carrying. Almost to a man, carriers insist that they do not pass tests because they do not have the necessary speed. Again, they are wrong. Carriers invariably have the necessary speed to pass the speed class that they are in. In fact, many of them are a full two speeds below their proper speed.

Carriers can be known by these characteristics.

- 1 They do not practice short drills.
  - a When forced to practice short drills, they invariably say the drill was easy, even when they are carrying ten words after the first thirty seconds.
2. They love very long drills.
  - a They also love long fast drills.
3. Their clarity deteriorates as they carry, but they often get their clarity back after they drop.
4. They hesitate after they carry.
  - a. Hesitators, on the other hand, do not carry words before they hesitate
5. They love to read back one-minute drills.
6. They hate being forced to read back the last few sentences of an extended drill.
7. They often write similarly at goal speed and twenty words above goal speed.
8. They begin a drill by writing slower than they should.

9. After falling behind, they match the speed of the dictation.

10. They drop words on all hard dictation, even if the hard part is at the beginning of the dictation.

11. They may drop less on easy dictation, but they often carry just as much on easy dictation as they carry on hard dictation.

12. Their performance is above average on hard tests.

13. Their performance is average on easy tests.

14. They believe that they need more speed.

Carriers are an odd bunch. They truly believe that they do not have the necessary speed, and yet they say that they perform just as well at high speeds. Although these two statements appear diametrically opposed, there is a grain of truth to them. In a nutshell, they are right, but at the same time, they are 100% wrong.

First, they say that they are too slow.

That isn't accurate. It would better to say that they drop too much. When they stop carrying, they will find that they are able to stroke through the difficult sections of the drill without being forced to drop. For an example, suppose that a typical carrier feels comfortable carrying six words and will drop when carrying ten words. This means that if the carrier is forced to carry four more words, a drop will occur. Now suppose that carrier is taught to stay within three words of the speaker. A drop won't happen unless an extremely difficult section forces seven more words on the carrier.

Second, they say that they perform just as well at high speeds as they do at low speeds. That is true, but they are looking at the problem backwards. A better way to state their situation is to say that they perform just as poorly at low speeds as they do at high speeds. They carry at low speeds even though, logically, they should have more time to stroke the words and stay close to the speaker.

Before you categorize yourself as a carrier, consider some of the major differences between the three primary writing styles of students: Sloppy outlines, hesitation, and carrying.

### **Sloppy writers**

Unless you write clearly to begin all drills, you are a sloppy writer. Work on that first. It is quite possible that you will not carry words if you clear up your outlines.

### **Hesitators**

Hesitation often causes students to carry words. If the hesitation is eliminated, the carrying may disappear. If the carrying does not appear until after the hesitating begins, then work on the cause (hesitating), rather than on the symptom (carrying).

## **Carriers**

Carriers often hesitate or write poor outlines when they are carrying an extreme amount. Even when they are afflicted with carrying, hesitation and sloppy writing, carriers seldom blame their shortcomings on anything except for a lack of speed. Although having a multitude of writing faults and denying them all (except for speed) does not definitively label you as a carrier, it is a strong characteristic.

The cure for carrying is simple: Don't carry. Implementing the cure is very difficult. There are many problems. The foremost of these is that carriers believe that they are writing correctly. They will swear up and down that the only reason that they carry is because they are too slow to get the dictation.

If you can convince a carrier that the problem is carrying, you are truly a persuasive individual, but you are only beginning. The best drills for carriers are the drills that carriers believe they have totally conquered: short drills. They will fight you every step of the way when you try to get them to do short drills. Their argument is that they perform short drills as well as anybody. To an extent, that is true. They do write short drills well, if you discount the fact that they are usually still writing long after everyone else has finished writing.

If you can convince a carrier to do short drills, you have one last hurdle, and it is a doozy. The absolute best drill for a carrier is a short, slow drill. Get ready to hear the wailing and gnashing of teeth. If you can get a carrier to learn to do short slow drills without carrying, the problem is entirely solved. Good luck getting them to practice that way.

Now for some drills. The first one I stole from Steve. It involves the Speed Teacher program. The second one can be done in class or with a dictation tape.

### **Carrying Drill #1 for the Speed Teacher**

By Stephen Shastay

1. Set the number of words at 14.
2. Set the speed at no more than half of your normal goal speed.
3. Select the Top 100 drill from the Common Words. This is the easiest drill.
4. Drill for approximately one minute.
5. You must stroke all words before the screen changes to a new set of 14 words.
6. If any section of the drill is stroked considerably slower than the others, lower the speed, and concentrate on keeping the fingers moving at all times.
7. If all sections of the drill are stroked relatively the same, and if you are finishing well before each screen changes, increase the speed.
8. You must finish all screens before the next screen appears. If all sections of the drill are stroked relatively the same, and if you are finishing all of the

screens relatively close to when the screens change, then you have found your Optimum Drilling Speed.

9. When you have conquered Step 8, reduce the number of words on each screen to 10 and decrease the speed by approximately one third.

10. Repeat Steps 5, 6, 7, and 8. Pay particular attention to Step 6. Your goal is to reach the original Optimum Drilling Speed that you set in Step 8.

11. When you have again conquered Step 8, reduce the number of words on each screen to 6 and decrease the speed by approximately one third.

12. Repeat Steps 5, 6, 7, and 8. Pay particular attention to Step 6. Your goal is to reach the original Optimum Drilling Speed that you set in Step 8.

13. Repeat Steps 1 through 12; but for Step 3, you should choose increasingly harder and harder drills. Here is a partial list to choose from. Some of these drills will force you to drop your Optimum Drilling Speed to a much lower speed.

- a. Top 100 from the Common Words
- b. Top 1000 from the Common Words
- c. Vowels from the General Section (not the Finger Drills)
- d. Essential Jury Charge from the Common Words
- e. Essential Testimony from the Common Words
- f. Three-Letter Words from the EMMAntor

14. Follow the instructions with no deviation. Of all the rules, Step 6 is the most important. Step 6 is where carriers will most likely "cheat."

### **Carrier Drill for Class or a Dictation Tape**

By Barb DeWitt

Purpose: To reduce the number of words that you normally carry.

1. Drop all words each time the speaker or your teacher reaches the end of a sentence. Do this until you can write smoothly.

a. If you are using a dictation tape, choose a slow, easy drill and drill for no more than one minute at a time.

2. When you have reached a rhythm for Step 1, write one extra word and when the speaker reaches the end of a sentence. In other words, if you are three words behind the speaker by the end of the sentence, write one of them, but drop the other two words.

3. Resist the temptation to carry the extra words. Carrying is the fault that you are trying to correct. I know you can write them if you carry. Learn to write them without carrying. Stop the drill immediately if you find yourself carrying extra words.

4. When you have reached a rhythm for Step 2, write two extra words when the speaker reaches the end of a sentence. In other words, if you are three words

behind the speaker by the end of the sentence, write two of them, but drop the third word.

5. Write for a minute using the pattern in Step 4. This forces you to drop words on purpose before you begin carrying needlessly. This is the training that you need to help you stay closer to the speaker. It is training; it is not real life.

6. Write for a minute without dropping on purpose. Carry words if you must, but try to stay close to the speaker. This is not training; this is real life. This is what a professional must do.

7. Eventually, you want Step 5 and Step 6 to be virtually the same. In other words, you want to stay so close to the speaker that you never have to carry. Repeat Steps 5 and 6 until you have graduated.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Seventeen

## *Clarity*

Clarity is a problem that affects all of us. The faster we write, the sloppier we get. The clearer we write, the slower we become. What a conundrum!!!

It is so easy to focus entirely on speed. By writing as quickly as possible, the tests seem much more attainable. To an extent, this is true. Without improving our speed, we will never reach the next level and the next and the next.

However, it is not enough to write quickly. You must be able to transcribe the strokes. Many, many students have surpassed the speed required of their class, but they cannot write enough clean strokes to pass their tests. There must be a symbiotic relationship between speed and clarity.

Personally, I was writing 240 before I started passing my 200 tests. However, I was writing 240 for a very long time without passing anything. It was frustrating. I was discouraged. I doubted myself. It was a very unhappy period in my life.

One day, I had a wonderful idea. I was going to practice 20 words below my speed level. I had never done that. I discovered that I was writing the same at 180 as I was at 200. In other words, it was sloppy, sloppy, sloppy. I was completely humbled to realize that I was not proficient enough to pass most tests at 180. It was a slap in the face, but it was not the worst that was to come.

Each day for two weeks, I would check out different speed tapes from the school library. Each night, I discovered that I could not write them very well. I went lower and lower. Eventually, I was drilling at 120 words per minute. I was a 200s student, and I had trouble sustaining my finger speed for five minutes at 120 words per minute. It was a horrible, horrible epiphany.

I am ashamed of this, but I did not master basic theory briefs until I almost graduated from school. For a long time, it was acceptable to me to be “close” to the proper stroke. My reasoning was that I would be able to tell the difference from the context of the sentence. I depended on my reading ability to compensate for my bad habits.

It is true that reading sloppy strokes is a great tool for stenographers. Sometimes it is necessary. You know what they say: No one is perfect. I took that to the extreme. I was the poster child for imperfection. My writing was not just unclear. It was close to pure garbage. I could not write solid strokes at any level.

Once I began to practice at low speeds, I discovered something curious. By practicing at low speed, my writing would become clear and smooth; and if my writing was clear and smooth at a low speed, it was also clear and smooth at high speed. My mantra became: If I can write it at 120, I can write it at 220.

Of course, I spent a lot of time with my dictionary learning things that I should have already known. All of those briefs and conflict strokes were a major source of trouble. For instance, I was hesitating each and every time that jury/juror/injure/injury popped up. That is a heck of a lot of hesitation. Imagine how many other words I did not know well enough to write competently.

There were too many outlines that I should have conquered, but didn't. Consequently, I hesitated each and every time those words appeared. I was forced to pause and think about strokes that I should have learned in theory. Hesitation and carrying did creep into my writing, but they were symptoms of the disease. They were not the problem.

Today, I know what I want each and every stroke to look like, or I consult my dictionary as soon as I have a chance. And if I continually misstroke the same word, I make it a point to practice that word. My misstrokes are solely the result of being pushed beyond my speed limits.

Oops, I just lost some of you. I can hear you saying, "Well, sure, I write sloppy, but that's because I am writing as fast as I can."

Are you positive? Can you go down in speed and clear up all of those misstrokes? All of them? Or are you still writing "close"?

Your teacher wants you to go faster.

All teachers push you to write faster. That's our job. You are only going to pass tests if you write at increasingly higher speeds; but the higher you go, the more your writing will deteriorate. That is natural. It will happen to everybody. You can't escape that. If you are pushed beyond your limits, your writing will break down. The question is: Are you starting off with solid writing patterns?

You must have a strong grasp of the fundamentals. If you don't, there is only one way to learn them: Slowly. You won't lose your speed by practicing below your goal speed. Your speed will still be there when you return to the high speeds. But if you spend some time practicing at the lower speeds, you will have time to clear up those problem strokes.

So the next time you are drilling at home and your clarity deserts you, pop in a low-speed tape. Focus on the proper patterns. Once you are writing clearly, go back to the high-speed tape. You will do much better.

Learn it at a low speed; perform it at a high speed.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Barb DeWitt, Anna Mae Tedly and Stephen Shastay*

# Chapter Eighteen

## *Hesitation*

Hesitation is caused by many factors.

It can be the reason that you are not progressing.

On the other hand, it may be a sign that you are progressing. The diagnosis is relatively simple. The cure depends on whether the patient is willing to follow the prescribed or proscribed course of action.

Hesitators, by and large, readily admit to their problem. They recognize that they fall behind when they hesitate. It is maddeningly frustrating to them. If you fall in this category, read on.

To get the maximum benefit, you must understand why you hesitate. The various causes of hesitation are split into their own section. Find one that applies, and then work on the solution.

### **1. Hesitation caused by sloppy writing**

The cure for this is simple: slow down until your writing smoothes out. Once you are writing without hesitation, return to whatever speed level you were at before. The hesitation will be gone. As you drill at the higher speed, you will gradually lose your clarity. This will allow the hesitation to creep back into your writing. When it does, simply go down in speed until you are writing accurately again.

### **2. Hesitation caused by briefs and phrases that your mind has not mastered**

Suppose the word “made” appears in your drill. This word is a soundalike. It has to be stroked differently than “maid.” Many students recognize that there is a difference, but they are unsure of the outline. Consequently, and quite naturally, they hesitate.

So far so good. They should hesitate if they are trying to write a stroke that they cannot remember. It is part of the learning process. However, if the stroke is never mastered, the hesitation will continue. The cure is to stop the drill, get out the theory book, and practice the relevant outlines.

Well, that is half of the cure. There are thousands and thousands of soundalikes and other conflict strokes. You should always be incorporating these strokes into your repertoire, but you will not learn all of them in one day. Write down ten groups of conflict strokes. Work on these. As you learn one set of soundalikes, replace it with another.



In this way, you will be improving day by day. However, it still leaves you with plenty of strokes that you haven't mastered. Accept the fact that you do not know every stroke for every word. Write phonetically on all other conflict strokes. This will allow you to continue writing without hesitation, and if you are truly working on your conflicts, you will soon enough get around to all of the major conflicts.

### **3. Hesitation caused by unfamiliar finger patterns**

This hesitation is caused by strokes which are clear in your mind, but unfamiliar to your fingers. Beginning students will experience this trouble with relatively easy strokes such as final FN. Intermediate students may falter on FRPL. High-speed students should not hesitate simply because of a finger pattern. There are many drills and many books available to limber up your fingers. Anna Mae Tedley has her Finger Drills and Stroke Strengtheners. The Speed Teacher has comparable drills.

Here is an easy way to conquer an unfamiliar finger pattern. Suppose your problem stroke occurs in words like lunch, bunch, hunch. Create a short list of these strokes. Your list may be lunch, bunch, hunch, munch, punch, branch, bench, cinch, haunch, and wrench. If you drill on these as they are listed, your right hand will not move out of the "NCH" finger pattern. Although you will be stroking them, you will not be learning as effectively as you could.

A better way to practice would be to insert an easy word between each of your practice words. This will force your right hand to change the fingering on each stroke. First you stroke the pattern that you want to learn. Then you stroke an easier pattern. Then you return to the pattern that you want to learn.

Here is my example of a good drill for final NCH. Lunch, sand, bunch, dart, munch, farce, punch, daft, branch, hurt, bench, lance, cinch, fame, haunch, card, wrench. Alternate between the hard strokes and the easy strokes.

### **4. Hesitation on thick words**

Medical and technical dictation is known for stopping people in their tracks. The reason given for this kind of hesitation is invariably that the word is difficult. Au contraire, Pierre, these words are among the easiest. Unless you have a brief, there is only one way to stroke words like "onomatopoeia" or "episiotomies. You must stroke them out syllable by syllable.

The hesitation on these difficult words happens almost entirely before the first syllable is stroked. Once the word is begun, the hesitation disappears. Why should all of the hesitation occur on the first syllable? Simple. No one wants to devote four, five, six or more strokes to one word. The hesitation is a product of a desperate search for an easier way to do the word. When none is found, the decision is made to begin the unpleasant task of stroking out the word.

It may take a while to stroke out a large word, but it is simply a matter of writing easy syllables that should have been mastered in theory class. The large words aren't difficult. They are easy. The hesitation occurs, not on the syllables themselves, but on the decision-making process of how to stroke the word.

The cure for this type of hesitation is to follow the mantra of all good teachers: Stroke it out if the brief does not come to you immediately. Heck, with a word like “onomatopoeia,” do you really expect to come up with a brief? So why hesitate? Keep the fingers stroking.

### **5. Hesitation intermittently on hard or easy words even when concentrating**

This is a concentration problem, although you may swear that it isn't. What happens is that your brain becomes overwhelmed and short circuits. Although, you are painfully aware that you are hesitating, and although you are focused on the entire drill, you are not focused on the job at hand: the next stroke. Your brain is simply not functioning as it should.

This is similar to a deer caught in the headlights of a car. The deer will stare at the headlights, even though the deer desperately wants to run. The deer wants to move; it simply can't get its body to move. If the deer does break out of its hypnotic stare, it bolts without any further hesitation.

You are smarter than any smelly old deer. The next time you hesitate on a stroke that you shouldn't, make sure you are really focusing on the next stroke. Many times, you will break the pattern if you can get one more stroke out. The brain will start functioning again.

### **6. Hesitation when your attention wanders**

If you want to win, your mind has to be in the game. There may be a few people who have a legitimate reason for concentrating on something other than the drill. These people have enthralling stories about Martians landing in the parking lot or gorillas scampering down the hallway. The rest of us should be ashamed if we lose concentration for such mundane reasons as noisy steno machines, loud voices outside the classroom, lunch plans, or out and out boredom.

Get mad at yourself when you lose focus. School is difficult. You deserve better from yourself.

So what can you do? In school, you must continue; so shake it off and redouble your efforts. At home, stop the drill. Get up, walk around, think about what you just did. Let the anger rise because you are sabotaging your success. And then get back on the machine and do it right. You are in control of your future. What do you want it to be?

### **7. Hesitation when carrying words**

Remember the old conundrum: What came first the chicken or the egg? I've got a better one for you. What occurred first: Carrying words or hesitating? This is an important distinction. It will determine what you must work on. If you carry first, work on that. The hesitation is merely a symptom. If the hesitating appears first, ignore the carrying. Whatever appears second may never appear at all if you cure the first problem.

## THE PLATEAU

*By Joseph Kinaim*

# Chapter Nineteen

*Necessary Preparation before Learning How to Analyze a Test*

***This is the first part of the final chapter to our book on stenography which has gone by various names. We have finally settled on the title, "The Mechanics of Stenography."***

-oOo-

Stenography is easy. Learn a few basic rules, and you will not suffer through agonizing days, weeks, and months of non-progress.

Much of the problem lies in recognizing the failure of the educational community as a whole. The problem does not lie with your school or your theory book. The problem lies with the entire stenography system.

If there was no problem with our stenography system as a whole, then you (or at least your teacher) should be able to answer these questions.

1. You are adding extra letters to some of your strokes. Most of these letters are on the lower keys (SKWR and RBGS). What should you do?
2. You are not passing tests, but you notice that you can usually perform just as well at the next higher speed. What is your problem?
3. Minutes two through five of the test are not too bad, but you consistently mess up the beginning of the test. What are you doing wrong?
4. How many words can a student safely carry?
5. Why is the Asterisk Key so dangerous to your success in school? Here is a hint: The answer has nothing to do with making your strokes more complicated.
6. You hesitate on the same brief day after day after day. What should you do? Here is another hint: The correct answer is not for you to abandon that brief. That will only correct the problem for that brief.
7. Your left hand is okay, but your right hand is responsible for many inaccurate strokes. What is the reason?

So now you want answers to those questions. Well, I could, but these are just a handful of the situations that you may run into. Those questions have already been covered in previous chapters. Anna Mae, Barb, and Steve have done an admirable job of exhaustively covering these topics. They said it better than this ol' country boy could hope to.

My job is to show you how to analyze your work. I used those questions merely to point out that nobody has taught you the basics of your art (stenography) and the basics of how to use your instrument (that thing with the

keys that you hammer on). All they ever taught you was what letters to use to create the words. They didn't even show you how to finger the keys.

And they certainly didn't show you how to analyze your tests. That's my department. I will give you a step-by-step explanation that will be easy to follow.

A word of caution: Most of you came here to learn how to gain speed. Wrong. You have enough speed. What you don't have is knowledge and a structured practice pattern. I will give you those.

Most of you will not like what I have to say. You are positive that what you need is more speed. Wrong. You have enough speed. I will not waste my time showing you how to increase your speed when I know that that will not help you pass more tests.

Do what I say, and you will rapidly improve. Continue with your present practice and test-taking pattern, and you will continue to struggle. Stenography is easy. Let it be easy. Learn the proper techniques.

And now we get to work.

### **THINGS YOU MUST DO BEFORE YOU LEARN HOW TO ANALYZE**

1. Eat before you arrive at school. You are inhibiting your concentration if you are hungry.
2. Sleep well. You will never have proper concentration if you are tired.
3. Dress properly. I'm not talking about acceptable skirt length. If you are always cold, dress warmer. If you are always warm, dress cooler. Again, if your body has to deal with outside influences, it will detract from your concentration.
4. Readback is the most important tool that you have. Read all of your notes.
5. Read your notes with a pen in your hand. Underline every word that is incorrectly stroked.
6. Never, ever, ever drop five words at one time. That is way too much for any student at any speed under any circumstances.
7. Transcribe at least one test per day. In particular, make sure that you transcribe tests that you will not pass. I have a great deal to say on this subject. It is the failed tests that will show you how to pass tests. Don't ignore them.
8. If you have a crappy machine that forces you to stroke harder or slower, replace the machine. Do not adjust your strokes to match the machine's abilities. Replace the son of a gun.
9. Create a wordlist of all trouble words that you encounter in a drill. Write them down as soon as the drill is over. Practice that list often.
10. Create a short wordlist of trouble words that you want to conquer right now. Practice that list before class, after class, during any break, before you drill at home, in the middle of your drill at home, after your drill at home. Create flashcards or read the list when you are not on the machine.

11. Keep your hands moving at all times. When you encounter a trouble word on a test or in a drill, there are three options. You can write the word. You can drop the word. You can hesitate and then write the word. Choices 1 and 2 can be good or bad, depending on how you actually perform. Choice 3 is always bad, even if you catch up and even if you never fall behind. Choice 3 is never acceptable.

12. Chill out. You're human. You are going to have bad days. Don't worry, You will have good ones also.

The next installment will begin the long road down the analysis trail. It will take some time, and it will take a lot of explanation. But it is relatively simple to implement into your daily regimen of practice, practice, practice.

Don't ignore the above rules. They will help more than you think. Many of you would be able to overcome your problems by using those rules and nothing else. The rest of you will only improve greatly.