

APPENDIX

A Systematic Speed Course for Advanced Writers

By CHARLES LEE SWEM

Official Reporter, Supreme Court, State of New York

"How do you go about the acquiring of speed in shorthand?" is a question that, if asked once of the speed writer, is asked a thousand times. The reply variously heard is work, practice, knowledge of system, or vocabulary, depending upon the viewpoint of the one replying. The reply may be given in all sincerity, for there is no doubt that all these factors play vital parts in the acquisition of speed, but I am convinced that this is not what is wanted when the question is asked. The student has heard all this in the classroom. If he possess but ordinary intelligence, he should know that he cannot learn to write shorthand fast without a thorough knowledge of his system, or without a vocabulary, or without practice. That is not new to him. What he wants, I feel, is a program. When a housewife asks for a recipe for a cake she does not expect to be told that she must use eggs and flour and butter; what she desires is the proportion in which these ingredients are to be mixed.

Therefore, convinced that what the ambitious student who has finished school and aspires to speed writing desires and needs, more than anything else, is the correct proportion of the necessary ingredients, I am going to attempt to lay out a shorthand course, one which, I believe, if followed conscientiously, will be productive of both speed and accuracy. It is not given in a dogmatic mood, but advanced as a suggestion, subject to modification to meet the individual needs and time of the reader.

I am starting out with the assumption that the reader has completed a shorthand course in high school or business college, which means that, in order for him to graduate, he has written at the rate of 80 to 100 words a minute. He can, perhaps, write at that speed still—it is safe to say that on the dictation common to his line of work he can do better now, but it is my experience that, while he may improve in his particular line, he will have retrograded on any other material, such as straight lit-

erary matter, a sermon, a speech, or an essay. He is not called upon to take that sort of matter, with the result that his shorthand vocabulary is sadly deficient. But since any practical employment that he may make of increased speed will necessarily be upon straight matter or testimony—the taking of a speech or the reporting of a witness on the stand—it is important that he commence to build a vocabulary and acquire his speed with this end in view.

I am assuming, too, that you, the reader, are employed during the day and that your ambition to acquire reporting speed must be accomplished during your leisure hours—at night chiefly. You may have other interests that take up a portion of your spare time, so I am going to set out a minimum program. If your time and duties permit, you may go beyond the time of this program, but if you are in earnest in your ambition, do not go below it!

To begin with, I would suggest an hour a day for five days a week, with two extra hours thrown in some time during that period—in all, seven hours a week. Not very much, is it?—but I think sufficient for the purpose. You may arrange the time as you please, taking the seven hours in five successive days

or with one or two intermissions, but do not attempt to crowd them all into one day, or into two or three. Do not at any time go longer than two days without writing shorthand. A most important factor in acquiring speed is a persistent, day-after-day hammering upon the subject. I would suggest one hour each on Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, with two-hour periods on Tuesday and Thursday—leaving Saturday and Sunday as holidays. At least one holiday a week is absolutely necessary for recuperative purposes.

You'll Need a Dictator. Perhaps your greatest problem will be to secure the necessary dictation, for shorthand speed *cannot* be acquired without proper dictation. There is nothing that will take the place of it.

If you have a radio—and who hasn't nowadays?—that may serve as your dictator later on, but for the first few months you will require a dictator more flexible and controllable than the radio. With two of you working together, you can dictate one to the other, but if you are practicing alone, it is necessary that you prevail upon somebody to spend at least a half hour a day reading to you. Almost anybody can read up to 150 words a minute. A school boy or girl might

be secured to do this much dictating. This will undoubtedly be the greatest problem you have to meet, but it is not an insurmountable one.

With that solved, let us go on with the program. Here is the way a typical hour's work can be arranged:

An Hour's Program. First, open your Manual and, commencing at the very beginning, spend fifteen minutes in reading carefully each rule and practicing as many outlines as you can during this period, eventually writing through the Manual once or twice or three times by this method. This will serve a double purpose—it will provide a review of the system and a warming-up process for the hand.

Then a piece of material—a speech, a newspaper editorial, or an article—of approximately five minutes' duration, should be chosen and dictated to you at the highest speed at which you can write.

You may not know at first what your maximum speed is, but you will soon learn. Suppose you find that the fastest you can write is 100 words a minute; then every new article that you write should be dictated the first time at that speed. As your speed increases, the first

reading of every article should be increased, likewise. Make every effort to get it down.

It will be hard at first—taking a new article and writing it at a speed at which you must exert yourself—but write it that first time as if your life depended upon it. Acquire the habit of “getting it” the first time. Never mind your notes (just so they are kept within reasonable bounds) and do not bother about phrasing or anything else. Just get it down some way or another.

Then read it. Check off every word that you have written incorrectly, and practice it in the margin or on another piece of paper. Correct every phrase and make all the necessary improvements in your notes that occur to you at the moment.

Now, with these corrections made and practiced, take this same piece of matter over again, but at a *very slow* speed—at such a speed that you can make practically perfect notes, with all your corrections observed and incorporated. You may read it over again and make new corrections if you desire, but it is not necessary that you read it this time, for you are going to write it again. As a matter of fact, you are going to practice on this piece of material for the rest of

the hour, increasing the speed each time until you have got it up to the speed at which you took it at first—but with this difference, you have much better notes than you made on the first attempt.

After you have written it two or three times, you will probably be able to take it even above the speed of the first attempt. And then the hour will in all likelihood be up.

I would count upon writing the take at least four times, including the first attempt—the first time, as stated, at your top speed, then a drop down to an easy speed, then a climbing-up process after you have corrected the errors of the first attempt.

This should be your program for one hour, five nights a week.

An Extra Two Hours' Work. The two extra hours that you are going to crowd in some time during the week should each be divided in this manner: One half hour given to practicing new phrases and expedients from books like "Gregg Reporting Shortcuts" and "The Stenographic Expert"; the other half hour spent in taking dictation on new matter and reading it back.

In this half hour you will do no repetition work; you will write each take but once, reading it back with the necessary corrections, of

course. During this period of thirty minutes, you will probably be able to write and read back two or three takes of new material, taking them at the highest speed at which you can make readable notes—not necessarily perfect notes, but notes that can be read fairly readily.

Precision Practice. Another item: Always reserve five minutes at the end of each period for precision practice. This consists of taking a plate of perfect notes, such as found in the *Gregg Writer* or in the books containing stories written in shorthand, and carefully re-writing the notes just above the shorthand outlines themselves. The object should be to duplicate as nearly as possible the printed outline. This is an invaluable method of inculcating the habit of writing shorthand accurately and in good proportion—a habit which you will find carries over even in speed work.

After Your Speed Is 125 Words a Minute. Your program should be carried out diligently until you are able to write 125 words a minute on your first attempt with not more than 18 (5 per cent) errors. Then you should vary your program to the following extent:

You have probably by this time written through the Manual once or twice, and, therefore, you can

cut off ten minutes from your Manual practice and devote fifty minutes of the hour to dictation, practicing much as you have been doing, with this exception—always write the take the first time at your top speed, but instead of dropping down to a very slow speed after you have corrected the outlines in reading back, take it now at only a slightly lesser speed—just sufficiently slow to make sure that you get it with good notes. You can also begin to cut down on the number of times that you rewrite the article, for the repetition work recommended at the beginning was for the purpose of teaching you ready application of the principles. By this time you must be fairly proficient in this respect and do not need so much repetition.

Your growing need now is for a vocabulary and coordination. This will be accomplished by a predominance given to new practice, repetition practice being shifted to the background. During this time do not forget the five minutes of precision practice at the end of every writing period. This practice will be valuable now, not only as a means of acquiring good writing habits, but will also counteract any tendency of speed to shatter your notes.

The goal toward which you are striving is to reach the point where you can take new matter at your top speed and write it as well as you would after taking it two or three times. Of course, no matter how much skill you may eventually acquire, you will occasionally "flunk" an outline or a phrase. In reading it back you will correct it, but the fact that you wrote it incorrectly the first time should be no cause for worry. It is done by everybody. Your aim should be simply to bring these errors down to a minimum.

At the 150-Word Stage. When you have reached the speed of 150 words a minute, then, I think, you can quit repetition practice altogether and commence to write everything but once only, and that at your best speed. No matter how fast you learn to write, do not fail, in reading back, to correct any error in outline or phrase that you have made. This advice cannot be repeated too often. And always end your practice period with a five-minute precision session for perfect notes.

With this stage reached, you can now try your hand on the radio, the preacher, or the lecturer. Your sole object will be to secure practice on a wide variety of subjects, and you will find that your speed

will increase in direct ratio to the size and readiness of your vocabulary. It is understood, of course, that whatever you take in shorthand you will read back, or at least a great portion of it.

Pushing Past 150. After you have reached 150 words a minute, you will find that at times, no matter how much effort you put forth, you cannot raise your speed by so much as a single word. This is the point at which most writers become discouraged and quit, but be consoled by the thought that this is a very natural condition and not one characteristic of you alone.

Everybody meets this obstacle. It has been called by various names, but I prefer to think of it as a rut that we get into by doing a thing over and over again. It is a habit that we have acquired of exerting ourselves so much and no more, and one that must be broken. To correct it, you should take a piece of material and practice it over and over again, increasing the speed each time, but go much further in this respect than in your regular practice. Push the speed up to twice as fast as you can actually write it, and make an heroic effort to get something down for every

word. It will not be good shorthand that you write, but it will serve to jar your hand out of its habit of sluggishness.

Do not make a practice of this kind of writing, and do not attempt it before you reach 140 words a minute. After that, once a month or so it will not do your style any harm, but will stimulate both your hand and your writing faculties. But always end a session of this sort with a goodly amount of precision practice to offset the shattering tendencies of forced speed.

I believe that a high degree of speed in shorthand can be acquired by any normal student who is willing to spend the time and the effort in carrying out a consistent program. It may be monotonous work sometimes—the constant writing over and over again of similar matter—but the effort is not to be compared with the advantages to be derived.

Speed in shorthand opens the way to many opportunities that will never come to the average writer, and, besides, there is immense satisfaction in the knowledge that you are making the best of your implements and your opportunities.