

Building to High Speed

There is a fascination about writing shorthand at speed, but you have to train like an athlete to do it properly. With the accomplishment of a high speed comes a great sense of achievement.

Historically, in the seats of government, in law courts, at the United Nations and elsewhere, the shorthand writer was one of the most important people present. History depended on the accuracy of the shorthand writer. So did justice. So did the managing director in his office. Much of the administration of law, commerce and industry would have ground to a halt without shorthand. For journalists today, being able to take an accurate, fast shorthand note is still an important skill to have.

It is within the scope of most people to write at speed, and the only ceiling is the one imposed by the writer. A book or a teacher can guide and teach you but in the end it is the writer who counts. Nothing can stop you climbing the speed ladder except yourself. The more effort you put into practice, the more frequently you take dictation, the higher your speed will be.

The necessary requirements of anyone trying to write at a high speed are:

1. Perseverance and frequent practice
2. The ability to think quickly
3. Complete concentration when taking down dictation
4. Mastery of the system

Keeping it Simple:

Let's talk about Word Groupings. They should be simple – easy to read and write. It is obvious that any writer gains a huge speed advantage by using groupings such as: 'It is', 'I am', 'will be' for example. The common groups are the most useful but even they need to be well known. You will lose more time hesitating over a forgotten grouping than writing the words separately. Many high-speed writers make sparing use of groupings.

Train the Brain:

The high-speed writing of dictation is an enormously complicated process. Let's analyse it:

First comes the STIMULUS. The spoken word reaching the ear. The more clearly the word is heard, the greater the stimulus.

Next is TRANSMISSION. The ear sends the word to the brain.

Then PERCEPTION. The automatic recognition, if it is a word already known in Teeline. And if not already known

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TRANSLATION. Mentally turning the word into Teeline.

Then RECALL. Identifying the necessary blends, word beginnings, endings and shortcuts.

IMPETUS. The transmission of the brain's message to the hand, instructing it to write the outline.

Finally the RECEPTION. The hand receives the message and physically writes the outline. If the outline is unknown, then Translation and Recall are the stages, which take up the thinking time.

All these stages are going on at the same time; once a second at 60 wpm, twice at 120 wpm and three times a second at 180 wpm (the speed of TV news bulletins). There is no pause, as one word is being written the brain is sorting out the next one and a third word at that very moment is making its impact on the ear. Dictation practice is not about getting the hand to write faster, but to train the brain to react with greater speed. The hand will only move quickly when the brain triggers it.

Reading Teeline Shorthand:

Take every opportunity to read printed Teeline. Remember though that the printed Teeline you read may not be exactly as you would write it yourself. Ideally you should alter the outlines of the model you are reading so that it reflects your own choice. Read and re-read the Teeline until you can read it fluently. Doing this will help to imprint the outlines on your brain and make the recalling of them easier. Your aim should be to read back virtually every piece of dictation you write, even if you have gaps in the piece and also to actually transcribe many pieces, preferably by typing it. Reading is also useful for enlarging your vocabulary. It is also very useful to "walk the talk" by tracing over the outlines with your finger or a retracted pen, as you read them.

The Problem of Distortion:

When 'forcing' your speed, it is inevitable that distortion will occur. It happens when the hand wants to go as fast as the brain is telling it to, but it cannot quite make it. This will continue until further practice brings better co-ordination between the mental and physical processes. The same thing happens when writing longhand.

To overcome it, drop to a lower speed, take a passage and then immediately repeat it at the higher speed, then maybe attempting it a third time. Once you have got something down for everything, make a careful study of your notes, identifying your weaknesses. For example: vowel size too big, neglecting the T and D position, failing to double the length of some strokes. Make a point of revising the best way of writing the words from the dictated piece and then try the passage again.

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Discipline yourself not to think, halfway through "... I'm getting this all down", because that thought will also interfere with your concentration.

Put the date at the bottom of the page. This saves a lot of time, flicking through your notebook trying to find a particular page.

Always work right through your notebook from start to finish on one side of the page only. Then turn the whole notebook round and work back through using the reverse side of the pages. Use a rubber-band round the back of the notebook including the used pages, to enable you to open your notebook immediately to the first blank page in a fast and efficient manner.

When transcribing it is a good habit to keep a finger just below the outline being transcribed, so as not to lose the place. Get into the habit of glancing ahead of the word you're up to, therefore seeing "phrases".

It helps accurate transcription enormously if you always show the end of a sentence. Some examination bodies deduct marks if full stops are in the wrong place.

Do You Need a Dictionary or a Word List?

Teeline is such an open-ended system that a dictionary may be a waste of money. Outlines shown in them invariably give alternatives. Too frequently they encourage students to think there is a definite "right" or "wrong" way to write an outline, and some become dependent on them and fail to develop confidence in being able to work an outline out for themselves. Experimenting with your own Teeline outlines can be exhilarating and you are encouraged to do it as much as possible.

In order to write at a quick and useful speed there are several things to be considered. The first is your writing equipment. Teeline can be written equally well with an ink-pen, pencil or ballpoint. A ballpoint is recommended because it will glide over the paper much more smoothly than an ink-pen, and it offers less resistance than a pencil, which has a tendency to wear down quickly. Use a good make of ballpoint – one that has a long-lasting ink container. Although this type costs more, the point is better and the ink will neither clog nor flow too freely. In addition, this type does not crack or break when dropped and it is much more comfortable to hold.

The type of writing paper you use is a matter of personal preference. For sustained work and general neatness, a notebook cannot be beaten and there is no danger of getting the pages out of order as there is when using loose sheets. Further, an end-opening notebook is much better than a side-opening one, since it is easier to turn the pages rapidly.

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If possible, use paper with a smooth surface on which the lines are approximately 1 cm apart. If your lines are too narrow, you will probably find that your style is cramped and lower speed results, but before making a final decision, experiment a little. Much depends on the size of your notes. If you normally write a small hand, then your notes are also likely to be small, in which case narrow lines may suit you. On the other hand if your shorthand tends to sprawl when writing at your maximum speed, you may well prefer a wider ruled page.

When you have found the ideal notebook, stick to it. Always use notebooks of the same width, otherwise you could find that your speed is hampered by using a line which is longer or shorter than the one to which you are accustomed, as well as by a different width in line ruling. When choosing a notebook, make sure that when the pages are turned over they will lie flat. For this reason it is best to avoid notebooks which are held together with staples, and if selecting a notebook with a spiral binding, make certain the wire spiral allows every page to turn freely. When starting a new book, flip through the pages three or four times to loosen them and to ensure that none stick together. When notebooks are cut to size by the printers' guillotine there is often a tendency for the edges to stick together. Flipping through is an easy way to prevent any difficulty when turning a page rapidly.

These may seem minor points, but the high-speed writer will be well aware that they are in fact quite important. More than one speed test has been failed through pages sticking together or because a ballpoint suddenly dried up.

By now you will not be surprised to learn that there is even a right way and a wrong way to sit. You will find that the best way is to have your notebook in front of your writing arm (the left arm if you are left-handed and the right if you are right-handed). This means that your head is turned slightly in the direction of your book, if you put the notebook immediately in front of your chest, you will soon experience discomfort and this will not happen if you put the book in front of your writing arm.

Sit in a relaxed position. Have both feet on the floor. If you cross your legs, sooner or later you will want to change your position and this will take your concentration from the job of writing to that of making your legs more comfortable.

Your free arm should be extended so that it holds the edge of the page. The necessary concentration will not come if you use your arm for holding up your head. You have your neck for that, not your arm, and you will need that arm for turning the page so that a minimum amount of time is lost.

Get into the habit of bringing the hand from the end of one line to the beginning of the next as quickly as you can. Slow-motion studies on film of high-speed writers doing this, show that the hand can be returned to the beginning of the new line in three sixteenths of a second.

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An increase in speed comes only with regular practice and 15 minutes every day is far better than half an hour every alternate day. A few days away from your notebook and the edge is soon taken off your speed.

Do not be surprised if sometimes you seem to 'stick' at a speed. These plateau, as they are known, affect every student at some time, so do not be discouraged by them - it is exactly the time, if anything, for putting in more effort - not less.

Another thing you will find is that the higher your speed, the longer it will take to reach the next stage. Getting from 30 to 40 wpm is relatively easy, although it might not have seemed it at the time! Going from 70 to 80 takes longer, and from 110 to 120 takes longer still. Once you know this, you are less likely to become disheartened when it happens.

Repetition plays an important part, and especially repetition at an increasing speed. This helps the brain in the quick-thinking process. The words and phrases will spring to mind with greater ease and less time will be spent in thinking out the outlines.

If attempting to take dictation from the radio or from television, the speed will be variable, probably much too fast and you will only be able to "get" chunks. News bulletins are usually read at a speed of 180 wpm - that is three words every second and you are not yet ready to master that! However, some television programmes make excellent dictation practice - some dramas or even comedies are good if they contain frequent pauses for dramatic effect or laughs. Follow just one character to try and get down what they say.

It is important not to attempt taking Teeline at speed well beyond your limit, as this is not only a waste of time but can lead to frustration and giving up. Any new speed is difficult at first. The voice goes relentlessly on and you make a valiant attempt to keep up with it. Sometimes you succeed, at other times you don't; and as you progress from 60 to 70, 70 to 80, 80 to 90 you will find that more and more attempts have to be made before you achieve that additional 10 words a minute.

It is at this stage that perseverance is necessary. Many would-be capable shorthand writers give up at the 80 wpm stage because they find it takes a bit longer to bridge the gap to 90. They drop out of the race often when they have the next step within their grasp. It is just at this point that a little extra effort is needed. If you just persevere, success will inevitably come.

As each rung on the speed ladder is reached, your vocabulary is widened and you encounter new words - new, that is, to your shorthand writing, although you may already

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be familiar with the words and their meanings (if you are not, then look them up in the dictionary and so add to your armoury of words, for words are the stock-in-trade of the writer).

These 'new' words have outlines, which have to be thought of quickly, and it is this part of speed building, which causes difficulty. If you have properly mastered all the specials and groupings then you will be able to write them faster than the voice dictates and this gives you a fraction of a second more in which to work out the outline of a new word.

Some people get the wrong idea about building up speed. They assume that 'speed' depends upon the speed at which the pen moves across the paper, whereas in fact 'speed' depends upon the speed at which you think of the outline. The better you know Teeline and the more mentally alert you are, the faster will your mind work out the outlines for 'new' or 'unusual' words.

Generally a word is 'new' only because you have never written it before in Teeline, and a word is only 'hard' because it takes time to work it out mentally. Sometimes a writer will panic whenever one or two of these words are encountered in quick succession and simply give up – or rather, stop writing. Not only does this show a lack of perseverance but there is no need for this feeling of panic. Reading a passage in a book or newspaper or magazine and mentally 'writing' the outline for each word as you read can overcome it. Spend two or three minutes every day on this exercise and you will soon realise that, thanks to the ingenious Teeline blends, some quite long words have relatively short outlines. Do not try this exercise for more than two or three minutes at first because it can become mentally tiring, but after a while it will be found that this form of 'think-writing' can be kept up for longer periods. It is an exercise which quickly cultivates the very necessary mental alertness, so it should be done every day - if you wish two or three times a day, but only for a few minutes at a time.

When you find yourself picturing an outline the very instant you hear someone say the word or when you see it in print, then you will know that you are really getting somewhere and that this exercise in mental alertness is beginning to pay off.

Like everything else, you have to put in a bit of effort if you are going to get anywhere. No matter how well you may have learned the theory of Teeline, your knowledge will not get you far unless you put in the effort to write it quickly. To do this it is necessary to plan a training programme in the same way as athletes do. The footballer, the golfer, the swimmer, the runner, all do a period of training at least two or three times a week and often daily. Physically your training will not be so strenuous but mentally it will be more exacting and for the Teeline writer, it should be done every day. As your speed improves it is usually found that more time is voluntarily spent on speed training because it can become quite exhilarating. Reaching up to the next rung on the speed ladder presents itself as a challenge and there is a great feeling of achievement when it is reached.

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At each stage pause deliberately for some consolidation work. It has been known for a writer at 80 wpm suddenly to successfully take a passage at 100 wpm without ever succeeding in passing 90 wpm. Then there may be a period when 100 is not obtained again until after the 90 has been reached. The 100 was just a flash in the pan and the writer is discouraged because this success cannot be immediately repeated.

This is the time consolidation work is needed. If 80 wpm has been reached, then make a point of regularly taking a difficult piece at 60 in order to get used to meeting up with unusual words. Such dictation should be really difficult - extracts from Dickens (himself a Parliamentary shorthand writer in his early days) are ideal, or even a technical report. As you progress, ensure you take difficult passages at 20 wpm below your normal speed. Awkward or unusual words will then be taken in your stride instead of causing a temporary panic and possibly the loss of words. In this way your speed will steadily increase until you are writing at 120 wpm or even higher.

In all speed training, being able to read what you have written is just as important as getting it all down. Transcribing your notes is the acid test of your ability to write at a given speed. That is why, in a speed examination, you have to transcribe a passage within a set time as well as get it down; and if you exceed the number of errors allowed, then you fail. Transcribing Teeline is relatively easy. It only becomes difficult to those who skimp the work, or who are content to take down dictation without getting it back.

In the early stages everything taken down should either be read back or transcribed. When reading back, try to do it as quickly as possible and cultivate the habit of keeping the eye a little ahead of the outline being read. This is especially helpful if a word gives rise to uncertainty. Suppose the phrase being read is '*It is quite possible that the...*' and then comes a word beginning with R which makes you pause because the outline has been slightly distorted. A glance at the following words shows that they are '*amount of money*'. Look again at the distorted outline and by this time, armed with the knowledge that the following words are '*amount of money*', your commonsense will come to the rescue and tell you whether the distorted outline is 'required', 'requested' or 'requisite', as the case may be.

Make a habit of looking forward in this way whenever a word gives rise to hesitation. More often than not your knowledge of what the outline looks like, plus your commonsense, will provide the answer.

Reading back or transcribing is quite straightforward but always keep the sense of the passage in your mind. The basic method of word-by-word transcription without looking ahead can lead to a lot of errors, whereas if you keep in mind the sense of the passage, mistakes can be avoided. In this way you are not likely to write a lot of nonsense. It was obviously a word-by-word transcriber who made '*it looks as if it has turned sour*' into '*it looks as if it has made swear*', and '*they were unable to seek shelter in a sudden storm*' became '*they were unable to safely shelter for a sandy stream*'.

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The end of a sentence must always be shown. It is not sufficient to indicate a fullstop by leaving more space after an outline or by starting a new line for each sentence, because this often leads to error. One candidate in an examination lost marks for transcribing '*...has prevented telephones being installed. Now, as I learn...*' as '*...has prevented telephones being installed now. I learn...*' Another example of a wrongly placed fullstop was '*...hardly anybody lived there. Apart from a lighthouse...*', which became '*...hardly anybody lived there apart from a lighthouse...*'. More than once a candidate has failed an examination through a fullstop being put in the wrong place. In addition, of course, an omitted or misplaced fullstop can alter the sense of a passage.

It is essential to listen carefully for the end of a sentence by noting the drop in the voice and the slightly longer pause. Writing the fullstop as the speaker starts to say the new sentence is a good habit to cultivate.

When the transcription has been completed, firstly read it through. Then if time allows, check it against the shorthand notes. It can sometimes happen that identical outlines occur in two consecutive lines and during transcription the eye jumps from one to the other, causing the omission of a number of words.

Use only one side of a sheet of paper and make any transcription corrections distinctly. It is better to cross out a word or a figure than to write over it. If for instance, a figure 5 is altered to a 3, it may not be clear to the marker which was intended, and he or she may not be allowed by the marking rules to give the benefit of the doubt; but there would be no danger of losing marks if the figure or word was crossed out and the correct one written above it. All insertions, whether a single word or an entire phrase, should be indicated clearly so that there can be no mistaking where they come. Failure to do so could well result in a loss of marks.

As your speed increases, so the necessity for a lot of transcribing diminishes, but even at 150 wpm at least one passage in three should be transcribed and the other two read through, even outside the class. Mark every error, no matter how small. At first there will probably be many mistakes. With each one, refer to your Teeline note, asking yourself 'Now where did I go wrong? Which outline did I misread?' and make a note of it so that the error is not repeated. By doing this you will become familiar with your own way of writing Teeline.

In any shorthand system, outlines written at the maximum speed do not have the same appearance as when they are written slowly. In the early stages of speed training some students write 'you' and 'we' so much alike - because they have not fully developed their pen control - that they misread them when transcribing. But they soon benefit from their mistake and learn to make 'you' deep and narrow so there can be no confusion with the shallow, broader curve of 'we'. By transcribing you learn rapidly from any such mistakes and come to recognise your own writing idiosyncrasies.

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Students sometimes ask: 'How large should my outlines be?' The only true answer to this question is: 'Write your outlines the size that comes naturally to you.' Some people write a large style of longhand; others write small letters or with a backward slope (in which case the Teeline will also tend to slope backwards. But that doesn't matter because there will be a consistency in all the outlines). As you build up speed, you will naturally adjust your Teeline to the size most suited to your hand. In the formative lessons the outlines may have a clumsy appearance. When 80 wpm is reached, they will begin to take on a style and size of their own without any conscious effort on your part and by the time 120 is within reach, your shorthand will be so distinctive that colleagues will recognize it readily, just as one person can recognize the longhand of another. Regardless of what you may be told, once you begin to write at speed do not deliberately try to control your style of writing. To do so will only hamper your speed. You will not write more quickly by trying to write smaller than you naturally do, although it is true to say that the neater your writing has been when working through the earlier chapters, the neater it will be at speed. Do remember to show the differences in the length of strokes and if necessary exaggerate those differences – make a 'T' short and a 'TR' very long, so there is no danger of misreading.

From time to time there have been suggestions that left-handed writers cannot get up to a good shorthand speed. This is rubbish. There have been many official shorthand writers in the law courts and elsewhere who have been left-handed. It is the thinking part of the operation that counts and it does not matter whether you write with the right hand or the left. Left-handers can write just as fast as anyone else.

Building up speed requires a certain amount of discipline on the part of the student, even if you have a natural aptitude for it, but reaching the goal you have set yourself, makes it very worthwhile and gives a sense of achievement rarely equalled in other spheres. Anyone can write Teeline, but it is the determined ones who reach their targets and become the cream of Teeliners. If you follow this advice, **you** can be one of them.