WHERE IS THE SHORT IN SHORTHAND – AND IS IT SHORT ENOUGH?

“To brief or not to brief?” That’s a question that’s undoubtedly been debated from the early days of machine shorthand. Students can understandably find it rather confusing to open the Journal and on one page read an article with compelling arguments against overuse of briefs and on another page an extensive list of new briefs recommended for use.

Are briefs a necessity for writing at verbatim speeds? Or are they merely a convenience so our fingers can be a little lazy? We all know that a simple one-stroke brief for a word or group of words that occurs repeatedly and is particularly stroke intensive or awkward to stroke out can be a great convenience in getting through some tricky spots. But how much do briefs actually contribute to overall writing speed?

“The established fact is that high verbatim speed is within reach of the average writer without radical stroke surgery.” [Arnold Cohen, CSR, RPR; Keep It Simple, NSR/July 1982]

Is Mr. Cohen’s statement still correct? Is today’s machine shorthand short enough that the average writer can write at verbatim speeds “without radical stroke surgery”?

When discussing speed, we first have to have a consistent way to measure speed. We’re so accustomed to talking about speed in terms of “words per minute” that we tend to lose sight of the fact that the speed at which we speak is actually dependent upon the number of syllables verbalized rather than the number of words. A speaker whose normal rate of speech is 250 syllables per minute will continue to speak at 250 syllables per minute regardless of how many words those syllables comprise – which could vary anywhere from 125 words, or even less, to a maximum of 250 words. (A more realistic range would be for 250 syllables to comprise anywhere between 140 and 180 words.) For there to be any consistency, and therefore any real meaning, when talking about the speed at which someone is speaking – or writing steno – it has to be based on a standard word count; the NCRA standard being 1.4 syllables equal one standard word.

So where is the short in shorthand? The biggest and most obvious short in machine shorthand is the fact that we depress multiple keys, creating multiple letters, in one stroke. However, that alone still isn’t short enough for us to write at the high speeds necessary for making a verbatim record.

The speed for the RPR certification, and the graduation requirement for many, if not most, court reporting schools is 180 wpm on literary material. Using the standard word count, 180 wpm equals 252 syllables. Stroking one stroke per syllable would require stroking 252 strokes per minute, or 4.2 strokes per second, to write at 180 wpm.

But, thank heavens, we don’t stroke one stroke per syllable! After all, we write shorthand!
So where, exactly, is the rest of the “short” in shorthand?

Using the Brown Corpus of 5,000 most-commonly-occurring words, and after eliminating abbreviations, non-words, and proper names that are no longer common/relevant, we have a list of 4,822 high-frequency words:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syllable Level</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Syllables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-syllable</td>
<td>1,517</td>
<td>(1,517)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-syllable</td>
<td>1,852</td>
<td>(3,704)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-syllable</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>(2,901)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-syllable</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>(1,460)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5-syllable</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>(545)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-syllable</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>(72)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>4,822</td>
<td>(10,199)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**One-syllable words**

One-syllable words can be the steno writer’s nemesis.

1. A standard word is 1.4 syllable, so each one-syllable word only counts as .71 of a standard word.
2. Many past tense and plural/verb forms are verbalized as one syllable but require a second stroke to add the inflected ending in order to avoid numerous conflicts and to comply with NCRA’s recommendation and Vitac’s requirement for captioners. Consequently, it takes 1,742 strokes to write these 1,517 high-frequency one-syllable words, which means each stroke represents only .87 of a syllable! Ouch!
3. Our options for “shortening” one-stroke words are almost nil. We can’t stroke “half” strokes, so the only way to shorten the stroking of one-syllable words is to use one stroke to represent a phrase of two or more words: are you, did he, can you tell, as soon as, etc. Strokes for high-frequency multi-word phrases can be a tremendous help in shortening the stroking of one-syllable words – provided they are devised with care to avoid using strokes identical to those needed as words/word parts. (Captioning companies also request/require minimal use of phrases, presumably because pre-realtime theories were replete with phrases which created stenonyms: e.g., can you tell/cut, I will/iill/il-, had you been/hub, rate of speed/raped, do you believe/double, if you will/full, if you are/fur, can you recall/curl, etc. Even some of today’s “realtime” theories use hundreds of strokes for briefs/phrases which are identical to strokes needed as “word parts” for piecing together words/proper names. Phoenix Theory does not use strokes for words/word parts as briefs or phrases.)

**Two-syllable words**

A significant number of two-syllable words are reduced to one stroke just by applying common theory principles. Some examples of two-syllable words representative of the theory principles which allow us to write them in one stroke: Stable, payment, final,
journal, motion, action, special, partial, visual, trifle, playful, shovel, chauffeur, quiver, parent, torrent, clearance, Florence, thesis, stasis, verbal, jealous, etc.

Basic theory principles shorten word beginnings. Examples: excite, divorce, decide.

We use the elision principle (omitting an unstressed vowel) to “compress” two beginning syllables, and we write words such as the following in one stroke: collect, pollute, belief, select, delete, direct, corrode, parole, commit, suffice, etc.

The result of these shortcuts is that the 1,852 high-frequency two-syllable words, even when adding numerous second-stroke inflected endings, are stroked in 3,657 strokes, with each stroke representing 1.01 syllables. (3,704 syllables divided by 3,657 strokes.) Hmm, that’s a big improvement over one-syllable words!

**Words of 3 or more syllables**

With words of three or more syllables, our options for shortening shorthand expand dramatically. YES!

Again a major contributor is the elision principle, and now we also omit unstressed vowel syllables. This simple technique alone reduces hundreds of three-syllable words to two strokes: Examples: relative, register, precedents, villagers, chislers, visitors, medical, practical, coconuts, canisters, massacres, liberals, captols, principles, prodigals, bulletins, maximums, lateral, payable, horrible, durable, sediment, celebrate, medicate, organize, subsidize, criticize, remedy, notary, diagram, cigarette, hexagon, egotist, prototype, orthodox, classical, abacus, terminal, validate, polarize, etc.

We use one-stroke shortcuts for numerous multi-syllable word endings, reducing hundreds of three-, and even four- and five-syllable words, to two easy strokes: distention, contraction, lovable, sensible, sinuous, menial, linear, speculate, predatory, jeopardy, locally, magically, graduate, thoughtfully, craziness, anarchy, euphoric, empiric, hysteric(s), punctuate, affluent, fluctuant, effluence, topographic, secular, startling, equably, eventual, realism, hurring, fabulous, capably, truancy, modesty, artistry, puzzling, strengthening, equator, classification, eligibility, sensitivity, momentarily, nocturnal, fatalism, supplements, terminable, deplorable, navigability, educability, compilation, declaration, spiritually, honorably, amnesty, bankruptcy, galaxy, skepticism, whimsicality, plagiarism, perpetrator, seismologist, toxicology, pustulous, cadaverous, eventually, necessarily, personality, possibilities, posthumous, cooperation, probability, examination, communication, sensitivity, realization, alienation, classification, temporarily, colostomy, laminectomy, pleurotomy, multiplication, fabricate, orchestration, implication, etc.

We use one-stroke shortcuts for multi-syllable word beginnings. Examples: interview, entertain, intromit, antedate, polymer, microphone, hydroplane, superstar, autograph, aeronautic, counterclaim, upperclass, underplay, overstate, telephone, universe, hypermorphic, homophone, hologram, isometric, etc.
These shortcutting techniques even allow us to write many five- and six-syllable words in three simple strokes. Examples: fraternization, reciprocation, continuance, capitalistic, evolutionary, derogatorily, subsidiaries, potentiality, devaluation, effectuation, catastrophe, horologically, nitrification, etc.

With the number and variety of shortcutting principles available for stroking words of three syllables or more, and the hundreds of words to which they can be applied, the balance of our high-frequency word list shows the following:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Syllables</th>
<th>Words</th>
<th>Strokes</th>
<th>Syllables per Stroke</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>967</td>
<td>2,363</td>
<td>1.23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>365</td>
<td>1,046</td>
<td>1.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>109</td>
<td>338</td>
<td>1.61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>1.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The big question remaining is: Do you need more short in your shorthand in order to write at graduation speeds or verbatim reporting speeds?

Simply stated, writing speed is the number of strokes written per second TIMES the syllables per stroke (average number of syllables each stroke represents). If you want to increase your writing speed, there are only two options: (1) Increase the number of strokes you write per second; or (2) Write shorter shorthand; in other words, reduce words to one-stroke briefs.

The most appealing choice for many students is to memorize briefs. Briefs are “instant gratification”: You memorize a brief, you save a stroke(s) – or at least you save a stroke every time that particular word comes up, which could be the next sentence, next paragraph, next take, next job, next day, next week, next month. But eliminating a stroke does not necessarily increase speed. Replacing a two-stroke word with a one-stroke brief increases speed only if the stroke for the brief is (a) so simple that it can actually be stroked in half the time it takes to stroke two strokes; and (b) if you make it such an automatic part of your writing that it can be recalled and stroked at the speed needed for verbatim reporting; i.e., at the rate of three to five per second. If that marvelous new brief you’re using when writing at 150 or 160 wpm requires such complex fingering or there’s enough hesitation recalling it so that you can’t stroke it at the rate of three to five per second, it actually reduces speed at the higher speed levels.

Let’s assume you have those briefs absolutely mastered and you can stroke them just as fast as any other stroke. Now let’s do the math. Our high-frequency word list contains 4,822 words (10,199 syllables). Using only basic theory principles and no briefs, they require 9,189 strokes (1.11 syllables per stroke). To write the entire list of 4,822 words at 180 wpm would require stroking 3.8 strokes per second. (3.8 strokes per second X 1.11 syllables per stroke = 4.22 syllables per second X 60 seconds = 253.8 syllables per minute, divided by 1.4 syllables per word = 180 wpm.)

To reduce the number of strokes required to just three strokes per second, you’d have to increase your syllables-per-stroke to 1.40. (180 wpm X 1.4 syllables = 252 syllables per
minute divided by 180 (three strokes per second) = 1.4 syllables per stroke.) How many briefs would you have to use to accomplish that? It depends on how much the briefs shorten your shorthand; i.e., how many strokes each brief saves. Just based on the list of briefs available for these high-frequency words, averaged out over the two- through six-syllable words, each use of a brief saves an average of 1.25 strokes. To eliminate enough strokes to reduce your stroking rate to three strokes per second when writing this list of high-frequency words would require writing 1,407 one stroke briefs – or roughly one every third word.

Let’s do the math from the other direction. Say your present speed is an average of X strokes per minute and you want to increase your writing speed the equivalent of 30 strokes per minute. You can do that (a) by increasing your stroking speed by one-half stroke per second (30 strokes per minute); or (b) by adding an average of 24 one-stroke briefs per minute of writing.

An important point to consider: Increasing your stroking speed increases the speed at which you write everything. Increasing the number of brief forms only increases your speed in segments of writing in which the specific brief forms you’ve memorized occur – and occur in sufficient numbers.

If you’re relying on briefs for writing speed, what’s a sufficient number of briefs? What about every word of two syllables or more in the 30-35,000 words in the average adult’s word recognition vocabulary? You’re bound to run across most, if not all, of them. Or is it sufficient to limit it to the 3,305 words of two-syllables or more on our high-frequency word list, words which are guaranteed to need to be written? Plus, of course, all the phrases and the briefs for specific subject matter or jobs. Are you capable of memorizing a sufficient number of briefs to the point where you can recall/stroke them at three to five per second so you can rely on briefs as your choice for building speed?

I have a plaque on the wall behind my desk reading: Everyone has a photographic memory…some of us just don’t have any film. I like to think I have an average amount of film, but I’m far from convinced that I have enough film to memorize sufficient briefs that I could rely on briefs alone for writing speed.

“Shortcutting to the reporter is what alcoholism is to the bartender: an occupational hazard to be guarded against at all costs.” [Arnold Cohen, RPR, Writing Long, Unusual Words, NCR/February 1977]

I have to smile when I read Mr. Cohen’s quote because it’s so insightful in its recognition of how addictive briefs can become. They’re almost liking eating potato chips or popcorn: once you start, it’s hard to stop. If your instinctive reaction to every word you encounter of more than one syllable is to think “brief” rather than just stroking the word out naturally, you’ve become a “briefaholic.”

The true secret of shorthand speed, difficult though it may be to believe, on first hearing, is that speed comes from training the mind and not the hand,
or the hand is quicker than the mind. Thus, any procedure designed to increase shorthand speed by relieving the hand of the shorthand burden is misdirected. Probably the commonest manifestation of this misdirection is the excessive use of shortcuts. The neophyte tends to devise or borrow shortcuts for every word that gives him the least trouble. The result is that the mind is so clogged with shortcuts that the writer’s speed is actually reduced, because the mind cannot feed the outlines to the hand; and the overloaded mind is too busy trying to recall the appropriate shortcut.

[Martin J. Dupraw (NSRA Gregg Speed Champion, 1925-1927), The True Secret of Shorthand Speed, The NSR/November 1973]

Some of you are undoubtedly saying, “But I don’t think I can force my fingers to move any faster!”

You don’t have to force your fingers to move faster. Lacking some unusual physical limitation, the average steno writer’s fingers can physically stroke the keys at ample speeds. It’s your brain you have to train to work a little harder to comprehend, process, and respond to incoming data a little faster in order to eliminate the hesitation between strokes!

Today’s shorthand is short enough for steno writers to write at verbatim speeds – as evidenced by the many who are using today’s shorthand theories as court reporters, realtime reporters, captioners, and CART providers. In fact, NCRA has reported that the average time to graduation is actually decreasing.

It’s your choice as to the best way for you to achieve graduation/verbatim reporting speeds: (a) Using your mental resources to train yourself to hear, comprehend, and respond faster, eliminating the hesitation between strokes so you can stroke faster; or (b) Using your mental resources to memorize more and more and more brief forms.

Common sense tells me that the best choice for most people is a combination of increased stroking speed and judicious use of briefs. If your goal is court reporting, master those briefs for ladies and gentlemen of the jury, preponderance of the evidence, vague and ambiguous, after the accident, is that right, is that correct, etc. By all means, use briefs for high-frequency words where the brief saves two or more strokes or where stroking the word out is unusually awkward because of the structure of the word or the fingering involved. But be realistic about how much briefs contribute to overall speed, don’t become a briefaholic. Keep in mind that even if you memorize/use 5,000 briefs (and I seriously doubt you’d even be reading this if you’d been told that a court reporting course requirement was memorizing 5,000 abbreviations to the point where you could recall/stroke them at the rate of three to five per second), there are still a few hundred thousand English words you may need to be able to write on the job – especially if you opt to become a captioner or CART provider. Don’t use so much of your “film” on briefs that you don’t have enough left over to process all the other words you’ll need to write.