

To Read or Not to Read: That is the Question

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One of the key elements in developing speed and accuracy in machine shorthand is reading from your shorthand notes. Too often speedbuilding students think it's unimportant, that it takes too much time, and that it doesn't benefit them. Reading your shorthand notes is extremely important!

When I was in court reporting school many years ago, I, too, did not know the value of reading and correcting my shorthand notes. I'd been in school for three years and hadn't passed a test in over a year. Unfortunately, I was attending a school that didn't emphasize readback. We wrote and wrote and wrote on our machines in class. That was it. After class, I worked on speedbuilding tapes and wrote and wrote and wrote more on my machine. But it seemed that the more I wrote, the more I practiced, the less I progressed. I felt I was losing, not gaining speed. I was sure I would never get past 140 words a minute; but before giving up, I transferred to another school with another court reporting student.

The first day at the new school, the teacher noticed that we were reusing our paper and that prevented us from reading our shorthand notes. During break, we each bought a pad of steno paper, loaded the fresh paper into our machines, and went back to class. Still unable to read the steno we had just written, we passed when it was our turn to read. Instead, we diligently corrected our notes when other students in class read back. Later we read our corrected notes to each other on the train ride home. I read my corrected

notes two more times at home, and we read them again the next day on the train. After a few weeks of reading and rereading our notes, we both began to pass tests; and in the next year, we went from 140 wpm to 225! We both learned the hard way that reading, correcting, and evaluating shorthand notes are essential in developing machine shorthand speed.

Use the following technique when you read your shorthand notes:

1. Read from the paper notes that come out of your shorthand machine, not from the realtime translation screen. When working on speedbuilding, do not read the steno or translated notes on your computer screen. As a matter of fact, you should not have your translation software running, nor should you watch your computer screen when building speed.
2. Use a red pen handy to correct your notes when reading them. *Just reading* your notes is fairly effective; but for maximum productivity, quickly correct your notes with a red pen. When reading and correcting your shorthand notes, you should have the following objectives:
 - a. Identify your drops. Each time you drop a word, put a slash (/) with the red pen on the paper notes. At the end of the selection, count the slashes and write how many words you dropped. Circle the number of dropped words. Don't count dropped outlines, but count dropped words. If you dropped a three-word phrase, count that as three dropped words (// /).

Repeat writing the selection, and force yourself to get more words on each take. In other words, if you dropped fifteen words on the first take of a selection, your goal is to get five more words each time you write it until you can write the entire selection without dropping one outline.

b. Indicate misstrokes with a red pen. You may put a check (✓) exactly where a misstroke occurred, or you may write the correct letter. To save time and quickly correct your notes, write the English letter, not the machine shorthand keys. For example, if you wrote an initial S- when you wanted an initial D-, write *D* not *TK*.

c. Read your notes out loud whenever possible. A fundamental learning principle is that students learn twice as fast when they hear and see something at the same time; therefore, always try to read your notes out loud. When practicing from taped dictation, replay the selection and read from your notes along with the tape.

The importance of readback is not just my opinion based on my experience in court reporting school, but it is based on many studies of how learning takes place and how psychomotor skills are developed. Reading your notes and correcting them with a red pen conditions your subconscious to write the correct shorthand. If you repeatedly make the same correction on a steno outline, you will eventually write the correct outline. It's the well-known principle of Pavlov's theory "classical conditioning." Pavlov proved

that behavior which is reinforced will be repeated. Pavlov's law of classical conditioning is the basis for producing desirable responses in quickly writing machine shorthand without hesitation.

Building speed and skill are developed by stimulus and response. Many psychologists have applied Pavlov's theory to developing psychomotor skills in humans. For example, do certain songs remind you of something in your past? Does the scent of a perfume or soap have pleasant or unpleasant memories? Do you salivate when you smell chocolate or freshly baked bread? If so, these are forms of classical conditioning. Classical conditioning develops skills through both positive and negative reinforcers. Reading shorthand outlines is an example of positive reinforcement. Correcting incorrect outlines is an example of negative reinforcement. When positive and negative reinforcers are combined in the process of reading and correcting your notes, conditioning for skill and speed takes place.

Learning is accomplished faster when you employ more than one learning principle. You learn, store, and process information when you see something, when you hear something, when you read something, when you write something, or when you repeat and say something. You learn best when you incorporate many senses together: writing shorthand outlines; reading, visualizing, and correcting steno outlines with your red pen; and hearing them one more time when you read out loud from your shorthand.

There are many valuable learning reasons for reading your shorthand notes:

1. Reading from your shorthand notes also conditions, or programs, your subconscious to think in shorthand. Thinking in machine shorthand is a key to successfully developing speed and writing

without hesitation. Take a pack of corrected shorthand notes with you to read when you're not sitting in front of your machine: read notes on your break at work, during a child's swim meet, while waiting for a train, etc.

2. Learning continues on a deeper level through repetition. When outlines become second nature, you automatically write them. Shorthand outlines will flow from your fingers without you having to hesitate to think how to write something.
3. Marking your notes with a red pen makes you aware of your weaknesses and lets you establish your goals and objectives for subsequent practice sessions. When reviewing your corrected notes, you can identify weaknesses and establish goals and objectives for your next practice session. For example, if most of your red marks are along the right edge of your steno paper, you need to work on drills and words that emphasize specific final strokes.
4. Marking your notes with a red pen helps you see how much you improve from the beginning of a practice session to the end. If your first take is full of red check marks (✓), compare your last take and see if there are fewer red marks. As my high school Spanish teacher used to say, "Think of the red marks as a bloody battlefield." Think of your good takes as "winning the war" of

machine shorthand speed and accuracy with little blood shed on the battlefield!

5. Many times a difficult outline will cause you to hesitate. You'll get that outline correct, but you'll misstroke or drop a word later. When reading back your notes, circle the outline that caused your hesitation, and put that word in your notebook to practice.
6. Attempt to read your notes rapidly. At beginning and intermediate levels, you cannot write shorthand faster than you can read it. Many students are surprised to learn that they actually gain writing speed by reading faster. If your goal is to write at 80 words a minute, you must be able to learn to read shorthand at 80 words a minute. After you've read and corrected your outlines for a selection, take the notes and reread them until you can read them one and a half or two times as fast as they were dictated. In other words, if the selection was a five-minute take, repeat reading the notes from that take until you can read them in three minutes or less.
7. Last but not least. Reading and correcting your notes help you to read through your errors. Most students and reporters find they frequently make the same misstroke. If it's not a conflict with another word, that's okay. You will learn in your CAT class that you can enter more than one outline for a word; and if you

consistently misstroke a word, you can define that misstroke to properly translate into the word you want.

In conclusion, reading back and correcting your shorthand notes is an essential element in developing speed and accuracy in writing machine shorthand. As paraphrased from Shakespeare's play *Hamlet*, 1603:

To read, or not to read: that is the question:
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of horrendous progress,
Or to take arms against the lack of progress,
And by proposing to end it? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache of not writing faster and faster.
That speed is heir to reading back your notes
Devoutly to be wish'd. To read, to read, to read:
That is the answer to the question!