

## WRITE LIGHTLY IN SHORTHAND!

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I usually receive e-mails from students of the online course, with the following question:

*"Professor, is it normal during shorthand speed dictations training to feel your hand and arm hurting? Specially in resistance training ...? My arm gets hot when I finish writing in shorthand. Is it a matter of getting used to it or am I putting too much strength? How can I improve?"*

As a shorthand professor, right in the first class, I closely observe students' posture and how they write.

Correct posture is essential to perform well in shorthand! Sit upright on the chair, feet flat on the ground, a slight inclination forward of the body, right elbow on the desk (in the case of left-handers, left-hand elbow on the desk) are, in a few words, the right posture to write in shorthand.

I've seen stenographers writing in shorthand with their fist on the edge of the desk, their hand almost falling out of the desk; a serious mistake, because besides compromising the sturdiness of the hand it can cause fatigue, pain and tendonitis to the arm. The forearm - including the elbow - should be on top of the desk.

An excessive stiffness (tension) in the right arm will inevitably lead to heaviness and consequent stiffness of the hand, making the flow and elasticity of the movement of the pencil on paper difficult. In other words, to write quickly, it is necessary to remove all the weight of the right arm, hand and fingers that are holding the pencil and thus leave them very relaxed.

It is not only with shorthand that a correct posture is necessary in order to have a good performance in any skill. It is not only with shorthand that an adequate posture provides the necessary conditions to perfectly execute an activity. This is true for other skills as well. Playing a musical instrument, for example, requires an adequate posture.

Correct posture and the relaxation described above are also applied to conventional writing.

With regard to shorthand, along with the correct body posture, we must insist on this item which is quite important: **relaxation** of the arm, hand, fingers... the entire body.

It is necessary for students to learn, as of the first class, how to relax their hands, arms and the entire body. Shorthand must always be an act of smoothness, relaxation, dexterity, with continuous swift, sensitive and flexible movements.

I usually say to students: "When holding a pencil (or pen), think that the pencil is a feather flying in the clouds so hold it very gently; the only tension you need to put on the pencil, when holding it, is that for it not to fall off your hand. Do not hold the pencil so strongly!"

For the student to understand well the ideal manner of how to hold a pencil, I ask him to get it and hold it. Then I ask him to squeeze the pencil a little. Then, to do it a bit more. Next, I ask him to hold it with as much pressure as possible. And finally, I ask him to hold the pencil with no pressure. "Presto! That is how you should hold the pencil when writing in shorthand!"

I continue by saying: "Relax your hand, arm and your entire body! A heavy hand, muscle tension, a stiff arm, a tense body... all these are very harmful when writing in shorthand."

To press the pencil down on the paper and hold it strongly ends up harming the flow speed and interrupts the continuity of the movement, besides overworking the hand and arm!" It's quite common for students who have not yet learned how to write smoothly in shorthand to end up breaking the tip of the pencils all the time.

When, I gave an improvement course for newly inducted ALERJ's stenographers in 1998, I used to joke with them and put a cassette tape with a dictation for them to write in shorthand. Then, I began to walk around the class and, by surprise, I pulled the pencil away from the hand of a stenographer. If the pencil came out easily, it was a sign that the stenographer was holding the pencil correctly that is, with no tension, no strength. If the pencil did not come out easily, it was a sign that the person was holding the pencil too tightly. Thus, I used to show in practical terms by joking with them, what actually "write in shorthand with smoothness" meant.



**Shorthand Improvement Course of ALERJ's newly-appointed stenographers in 1998.**

The correct posture, the smoothness when writing in shorthand, the softness in gripping the pencil, the relaxation of the hand, arm and entire body make the flowing movement of the hand across the paper easier, without causing overload, fatigue and other harmful results that the muscle tension entails.

If, on one hand, the shorthand speed is in the brain, or better, starts in the brain (it is there that the sounds heard are transformed into signs) on the other, the speed is closely linked to the harmonious motor coordination, whose components are the brain, hand, arm and the entire body. And the physical stress negatively affects the outcome of the mental execution, hindering and slowing (even by fractions of seconds) the fluency of shorthand.

Therefore, while gaining speed, in the sense of transforming sounds much easier into shorthand signs, it is always necessary to be aware of this second important component when writing in shorthand: the physical self-relaxation (hand, arm, body).

When the student trains a speed dictation, he realizes that every minute the hand gets heavier, the tension increases. As an antidote, I always recommend students that at every minute, focus your thought on the following: "I have to relax... I have to relax my hand... I have to relax my arm... I have to relax my entire body; I have to hold the

pencil softly; the pencil is a feather flying in the clouds." The student develops then, the habit of self-relaxation, an essential habit for writing in shorthand.

Writing in shorthand softly reduces a lot the friction of the pencil (or pen) on the paper and enables a greater shorthand fluency, granting the hand to slide on the paper with much more dexterity.

The smoothness when writing in shorthand is a theme always cited by great masters of shorthand. Below, are just four of these great masters that, in my opinion, deserve to be mentioned:

In the book "Shorthand Teaching Technique", by BW Canning, we find the following passages:

*“On the other hand, writing shorthand is not the same as writing longhand. It is a different and a more delicate art, and it requires a different technique.”*

*“If the muscles of hand and forearm are relaxed then there is a better chance that the grip on the pen will be corrected and that there will be a better muscular control of what the pen does in order to create the symbols of shorthand”*

*“...the hand lies along the pen and there is only just sufficient grip exerted on the pen to prevent it from dropping to the table.”*

*“Practiced writers find it of help, when writing shorthand at speed and under pressure, to remind themselves of this fact and consciously ease their grip and become more relaxed. The mental effect is stimulating.”*

In the book "Obstacles to the Attainment of Speed In Shorthand," by Frederick R. Beygrau and H. H. Arnston, we read the following passage:

*“A faulty habit of many writers is the practice of gripping the pen too tightly. This produces a tenseness and stiffness of the entire hand and arm. The movement of the hand is jerky, spasmodic. The fingers are rigid, and their help in the formation of characters is lost. The excessive strain wearies the muscles. The pen should be held lightly – with just enough pressure to control it – and the muscles should be relaxed. Only in this way is it possible to gain the free, flowing movement so necessary to speed in Gregg Shorthand.*

*A common impediment to speed is the resting of the hand too heavily on the paper.*

*Sometimes this fault is due to, or is accentuated by, the use of a stiff pen or a hard pencil, which requires undue pressure in order to register. Some writers habitually bear down on the writing instrument and make heavier outlines than necessary, with a resultant loss of speed.”*

In the book by Edward J. McNamara, MA, "The Methods of Teaching Shorthand, A Practical Treatise on the Solutions of Classroom Problems", we find the following passages:

*“The development of stenographic speed rests, for one thing, on correct habits of writing.”*

*“Heavy-handed, finger-cramping penmanship makes the work many times harder than it would otherwise be.”*

*“There is the one who grips his pen, as David Wolfe Brown says, like as if some one was going to take it away from him.”*

In the booklet “Indicaciones y consejos acerca de la major manera de realizar PRACTICAS TAQUIGRAFICAS” by Avenir Rosell, we read:

**“One should never grip tightly the pencil or pen. The only function of the fingers is to grip the pencil and guide its traces, never exerting pressure on the paper. Holding the pencil tightly when writing quickly tires the muscles of the hand and arm; the writing should never be heavily outlined so not to raise a relief on the paper.”**

*(Em ningún caso se apriete el lápiz o la pluma. La única función de los dedos es tener el lápiz y dirigir sus trazos, nunca de apretarlo contra el papel. Escribir apretando el lápiz fatiga pronto los músculos de la mano y del brazo; la escritura nunca debe quedar como grabada, dejando relieve en el papel.)*

In the two videos below see examples of how to write lightly in shorthand. Notice how the two stenographers hold the pencil and pen without any pressure. Notice how the hand gently slides along the paper.

1st example: Douglas Drumont, a self-taught student of the Maron method, writing in shorthand at 90 words per minute.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wtKXD8SyiXQ>

2nd example: Marcos Vinicius da Fonseca, chief of the DETAQ's Review and Survey Section (Department of Shorthand, Review and Redaction of the House of Representatives), writing in shorthand, with the Leite Alves method, at 140 words per minute.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YP7ILgJ7D-E>