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GREGG EDUCATIONAL MONOGRAPHS

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# Making Shorthand Teaching Effective

BY

JOHN ROBERT GREGG

(A paper read before the Eastern Commercial  
Teachers' Association.)



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## MAKING SHORTHAND TEACHING EFFECTIVE

(From THE TEACHING OF SHORTHAND)

THE topic "Making Advanced Shorthand Teaching More Effective" was assigned to me while I was away on a trip to Cuba. My associates chose a title for me calculated to raise great expectations—expectations which I do not think I shall be able to satisfy.

With your permission, I am going to revise the title by omitting the word "advanced," because I have always maintained that the theory and advanced work in shorthand are so intertwined that the methods adopted in the theory work will largely determine the effectiveness of the advanced work.

I have had the privilege of visiting schools teaching shorthand in nearly

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every country in Europe in which shorthand is taught to any extent, and in many other countries, including far-off Australia. As a result of my observations, I am thoroughly convinced that the methods of teaching shorthand in the United States are far in advance of those of any other country in the world. After saying this, you will probably be surprised when I record my belief that, in some respects at least, the methods of teaching shorthand in this country are at least twenty years behind the methods of teaching penmanship, and at least ten years behind the methods of teaching typewriting.

### FLUENCY NECESSARY

You will ask me on what I base this opinion and what should be done to effect an improvement. Let me say at once that I believe that the remedy is simply this: to teach students to

write shorthand *rapidly and accurately from the first*, instead of teaching them to write shorthand *slowly and carefully*.

Perhaps you will say that there is nothing startling about that. But, my friends, I believe if that principle were put into effect in all schools teaching shorthand it would completely revolutionize the teaching of the subject.

I frankly acknowledge that the phrase "write slowly and carefully" has become so habitual with me that, although I have been convinced for some time that it embodies a fallacy and is pedagogically unsound, I found myself using it — through force of habit — when I had occasion to take a class a few weeks ago.

Of course, my remarks are not intended to apply to the teachers here assembled. Doubtless, as you are so progressive as to attend these meetings, you are already acting upon the guiding principle I have enunciated.

## LESSONS FROM PENMANSHIP

In explanation of the statements I made about the teaching of penmanship and typewriting, I wish first to direct your attention to penmanship. You may remember that at one time penmanship was universally taught by placing before the student a headline which he was to copy. He was supposed to write several lines in a circumscribed space, and probably many of you have seen my friend, Mr. A. N. Palmer, give a very graphic and amusing imitation of how a small boy wrote under those conditions. What was the result? It was that the student painfully copied, or rather *drew*, the forms in imitation of those in the headline. When he attempted to write without a headline and at any speed, he lost complete control of the forms.

All of that has passed away. The successful teachers of penmanship today in America do not use copybooks;

they use free-hand exercises, and they urge the student to write these forms rhythmically, swiftly. In penmanship the idea of *rapid, continuous movement*, as well as form, is kept before the student from the first lesson. Indeed there is an impetus given to the work by counting as the forms are made. The result is that the students who are taught penmanship in this way write rapidly, tirelessly, continuously, and with a marvelous degree of uniformity.

In shorthand teaching a very large percentage of teachers still adhere to the old-fashioned copybook way of teaching. It is the traditional way, just as it was for a long time the traditional way of teaching penmanship. These teachers compel their students to copy laboriously the shorthand forms in a circumscribed space, and instruct them to write them "*slowly and carefully.*" The idea that the forms are to be written freely, or that the object

of shorthand is rapidity of writing, is taboo in most schools. I am not going to stress this point farther, because the time at our disposal will not permit me to do so.

#### APPLYING TYPEWRITING PRINCIPLES

Now as to typewriting: It is not so very long ago that there was absolutely no real method employed in the teaching of typewriting. The student was seated at the machine, and the operation of the space bar and the shift-key was explained to him. He was told to use the left hand for the letters on the left-hand side of the keyboard, the right hand for the letters on the right-hand side, and the thumb for the space bar. With these general directions he was left to shift for himself. Even at that time there were a few touch operators, such as Mr. Frank McGurrin and his brother, Charles H. McGurrin, who gave demonstrations not only in this

country but all over the world. These phenomenal writers, who could use the machine without looking at the keys, were able to write at the marvelous speed of over one hundred fifty words in one minute on "Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of the party," and, what is still more marvelous, they did not have more than three or four errors in each line! But they were regarded as freaks — people who had special ability or genius, who had acquired by extraordinary concentration the ability to do the unusual — just like the armless freaks in the side show who write with a pen between their toes. There were a few teachers — Mr. Bates Torrey in Boston, Mr. Griffin in this city, and Mr. Van Sant in Omaha — who maintained that it was possible to teach typewriting by touch in the regular school work without any appreciable lengthening of the course. Teachers of shorthand and

typewriting, however, were utterly skeptical on the subject until Mr. Van Sant came to a teachers' convention, just like this, and brought with him some of his regular students who wrote by touch for several minutes at the rate of fifty or sixty words a minute. As a result of that demonstration touch typewriting swept all over the country. Since that time I have always thought that the spread of touch typewriting, initiated by that demonstration of Mr. Van Sant's students, is the finest illustration that could be given of the value of conventions such as these. It raised the teaching of typewriting to a new plane, to a scientific plane, and it is impossible to estimate the amount of good that was accomplished in consequence. If the teaching of typewriting had remained in the chaotic and unscientific condition in which it was before the general adoption of touch typewriting in the schools, it is

safe to say that the volume of work turned out by the operators in the government service during the war would have been about one-half of what was actually accomplished. That, of course, is only one phase of it, because the advance made in the teaching of typewriting has benefited the entire world of business to an incalculable extent.

After a little while there came, through the Business Shows, the typewriting speed contests. Gradually, the records of the "champions" went up to about eighty or ninety words a minute. With each contest there was an advance of just a few words a minute. At that time the teacher who would argue that it was possible to reach one hundred words a minute on the typewriter was an exceedingly optimistic individual. I remember that the ultimate speed to be attained by the champions was a matter of keen discussion, and that there was a

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concensus of opinion that it was humanly impossible to operate the machine at more than one hundred words a minute.

Then came another factor. The type-writer companies began to realize the advertising advantages of high speed records made on their machines, and they employed efficiency experts to undertake the scientific training of some of their operators. You all know what happened. Suddenly the records made in the contests shot up twenty or thirty words a minute. Soon they were far above one hundred words a minute, and they have now reached somewhere in the neighborhood of one hundred fifty words a minute. That is to say, they are now fifty per cent higher than what was believed to be humanly possible a few years ago.

I was at the Business Show in Boston last Monday night, and saw a young girl who had entered a business school after September first last win a cup by

writing over seventy words a minute net for fifteen minutes. Here you have the case of a girl in less than seven months of regular school work attaining a speed equal to the championship speed of ten or twelve years ago. A speed, too, that when accuracy is considered, completely eclipses the celebrated demonstrators and champions of even ten or twelve years ago, because to-day *ten words* are deducted for each error, where *only one word* was deducted in the early contests.

Now, why has touch typewriting advanced so rapidly under the skilled training of the operators by efficiency experts employed by the typewriter companies? Or, to broaden the question a little, why has the average teaching of touch typewriting in good schools advanced so marvelously under the instruction of teachers who have studied the methods employed by the efficiency experts of the typewriter companies?

I believe the answer is to be found, as it is in the case of penmanship, in the statement that the teachers *keep before the students from the beginning the end to be attained, and that is rapidity as well as accuracy.* They start the student right; they see that the posture is right; that the method of doing the work is right; that the student is kept alert and enthusiastic from the very first day and all through the course; above all, they aim to eliminate every false motion.

#### EARLY BAD HABITS PERSIST

Now, for another phase of this question: Suppose that one of the experts employed by the typewriter companies was asked to select an operator to enter a contest at a high rate of speed to be held a year from now, and that he had his choice of a good operator writing seventy words a minute who had been out in the business world for two or

three years, or a girl of equal ability who was still in school and could write thirty words a minute. Which do you think he would select to train for the contest? One would naturally suppose that he would select the operator who had a start of forty words a minute, and who had been seasoned by practical business experience. But I am positive that the expert would select the girl who was still in school; for the reason that the operator who had been out in business for two or three years would, in all probability, have acquired certain time-wasting habits which would require more time to eliminate than would be required to increase the speed of the student to a higher speed than that of the girl who had been out in business for some time.

Our own experience in training writers for rapid shorthand work has been precisely the same as that of the type-writer experts. I remember that in

the only real experience of that kind which we had, a great deal of time and effort was necessary to get a very fine writer to acquire greater facility. She had acquired a certain uniform method of writing, and it seemed impossible to "force" her speed beyond that point. In the case of younger writers, just out of school, we could see definite progress from week to week, but in her case for quite a long time there was no perceptible progress. She wrote a very precise style, and it seemed impossible for her to get a more rapid one. She did finally succeed, and she made a record as a writer of which she had reason to be proud, but I am convinced that if we had taken her through the course from the beginning it would have required less time.

The point I am trying to make is that the way to make shorthand teaching more effective is to drill the students in *correct habits from the beginning, and*

that we must keep before them the idea of rapidity of execution.

In teaching shorthand we have given too little thought to the right posture and to the development of swift, effortless writing from the beginning. Many teachers place such emphasis on *slow*, careful writing that the *habit* of slow movement is fastened on the student. Afterwards, in the advanced work, the student finds it difficult, and sometimes impossible, to overcome the sluggish, painfully precise style thus acquired. He has no facility in "getting around corners," as it were. Under pressure his notes go to pieces, just as the penmanship of the "copybook" penmanship student went to pieces when rapidity was required.

It is not sufficient to talk about these things; they must be enforced by *daily drill*. The manner in which the teacher gives the instruction is all important. If he is enthusiastic and ener-

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getic; if he insists upon the student working *continuously* and *rapidly*; if he imparts snap and vigor to the work, there will be an increase in the interest of the student, a deeper appreciation of the purpose in view, and of the way in which that purpose is to be attained.

[Editor's Note. — Mr. Gregg concluded by telling some of his observations in visiting shorthand classrooms. He also gave some blackboard illustrations of his methods of drill for speed work.]

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