

THE EDUCATIONAL AND PRACTICAL VALUE OF THE STUDY OF SHORTHAND

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GREGG EDUCATIONAL MONOGRAPHS

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THE EDUCATIONAL AND PRACTICAL VALUE OF THE STUDY OF SHORTHAND

THE intensely practical value of shorthand in the work of the world has so completely overshadowed its educational value that the latter is rarely considered when the question of its addition to the curriculum of the school or college arises.

Indeed, shorthand is commonly looked upon as a mechanical art — something that may be picked up by almost anyone in a few weeks' study. It is this view of the subject that is responsible for many of the shorthand failures.

That shorthand has a great educational value I believe is realized by all who have investigated the art or who

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are at all conversant with it. Consider for a moment the processes through which the shorthand writer goes in reporting and transcribing a speech.

First, there is the hearing and the comprehension of the words, and the grasping of the thought of the speaker; second, the translation of these words into sounds (I believe we commonly think of words in their written or printed form); third, the selection of the shorthand material from which they are to be constructed into tangible form; fourth, the transferring of these impressions to the fingers; fifth, the manual execution of the forms. Here are five distinct processes through which each word must be put in the smallest fraction of a second.

To add still further to the complexity of the problem, the writer must follow closely *the sense of the matter being spoken*, or it will be impossible for him to make an intelligent transcript. I

think you will agree with me that this is a form of mental discipline — combined with manual execution — which has a value that is worthy of the consideration of thoughtful teachers.

The transcribing, or writing the shorthand notes on the typewriter, is another phase of the work that has an important educational advantage, training as it does the judgment, the powers of perception and analyzation, and developing what has been well termed a “logical imagination.” The reader of shorthand must analyze the shorthand symbols, give them their sound values, combine the sounds into words, grasp the significance of phrase signs, and translate the whole into English sentences. In other words, the practice of shorthand writing develops such intellectual qualities as were possessed by men like Kelvin — the “constructive scientific imagination which bodies forth the forms of things unknown with such

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definition and precision that the mechanical faculties work up to the conception as to a visible model."

✓ Of course, it will be understood that after a while a large part of this selection of material and the discrimination in the use of it becomes virtually automatic; yet it must be borne in mind that at one time it was *conscious* and hence had a deep educational significance. All of these fundamental processes in writing were at the beginning necessarily slow and deliberate. The speed in execution increased only as the capacity to handle the material with speed developed. Nevertheless, they possessed the highest disciplinary value and continue to possess it. The shorthand writer never reaches the point where his work is *completely automatic*. He always has new words and new combinations of words to deal with.

✓ To illustrate in a concrete, untechnical way, one of the difficulties: If

you had dictated to you an editorial from a newspaper, or an article from a magazine, and wrote it hurriedly — that is, at the top of your longhand speed — using the common abbreviations, dropping the terminations and the past tense of words, omitting all punctuation marks and capital letters, and were then called upon to make a correct transcript of your notes thus taken, it would require some clear thinking and the exercise of much judgment to reproduce the thought and language with fidelity.

Yet the stenographer does this and a great deal more. It is far more difficult to make such a transcript from the shorthand notes for these reasons: The actual physical representation of words in shorthand is very greatly lessened, as compared with longhand, as each character when correctly executed has a much greater power of expression; the abbreviations are more numerous

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and the chances for error in form are multiplied under stress of rapid writing, making the identity of the character less positive. All these present problems, in transcribing, that develop perception, alertness, quickness of thought, resourcefulness, discrimination, and judgment to the highest degree. The problem is comparable to that of hearing a discourse in French or German and *translating it instantly into English*.

Let us compare the study of shorthand with that of one of our required high school subjects — a foreign language — French, German, or Latin. The student of a language first takes up the elementary sounds — the vowels and the consonants. These are combined into words; he acquires a vocabulary by memorizing. Next the formation of sentences engages his attention, and, finally, proceeding from the simple to the complex, the more difficult matters of grammatical construction

and composition are considered, and actual translation is undertaken. All of these processes are paralleled in the study of shorthand. The student learns the elementary characters of the art — the vowels and consonants — and is drilled on the sounds. He gets a *new conception* of words, and gains some valuable experience in correct pronunciation. He is used to thinking of a word in its *printed form*; but in his shorthand work he must become accustomed not only to this form, but also to the sounds of which it is composed. The sounds have their shorthand equivalents, composed of curves, both long and short, and circles. These are combined into words. The grouping of words into phrases — that is, a series of words that may be expressed by a single shorthand character or “outline” — is the next step. Finally the whole sentence is written. In transcribing, the process is reversed. Hence it may

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be seen how perfectly, in the study of shorthand, synthesis is correlated with analysis.

A brief comparison with geometry, a study highly valued by educators for its disciplinary effect upon the mind, might also prove of interest.

Geometry is pre-eminently a study that develops the analytical powers of the mind — clear, logical reasoning. It has a distinct value also in inculcating habits of preciseness, neatness, order, and truthfulness. The same advantage may be claimed for shorthand. The shorthand writer is constantly *analyzing*; and his decisions must be reached and applied *instantly*. In taking his notes, neatness and accuracy, which practically form the basis of their legibility, must be kept constantly in mind. In transcribing the shorthand, correct form and the most attractive arrangement, as well as the absolute *accuracy* of his work, demand his attention.

Every stenographer worthy of the name has an ambition to make his work *accurate*; if it is not accurate it has no commercial value. He understands this from the beginning; and consequently his constant aim is for accuracy — which stenographically is a synonym for truthfulness. Shorthand does more than geometry in respect to clear, logical thinking — for it adds speed to it.

Educators will concede, I believe, that the process of shorthand writing — if my statement of it has been correct — is a pure application of the fundamental movement of mind, which is to grasp a thing as an indiscriminate whole, analyze it into its parts, and to correlate these parts in relation to the whole. —

Thus far, I have considered principally the disciplinary value of the art. The advantages of a study of shorthand are threefold: First, the mental discipline secured in the mastery and the

application of its principles; second, the educational value of the writing and re-writing of the matter taken in shorthand; third, its practical or commercial value.

7 The close affiliation of shorthand with language gives to it, I think, one of its greatest educational advantages. Nothing can so familiarize one with the wonders and beauties of the English language as does the constant practice of shorthand. It compels a study of the grammatical and rhetorical phases of language and gives an acquaintance with the details of it that could hardly be so easily acquired in any other way. It is to the student of English what a course in dissection is to the medical student — but it goes still further, because the shorthand writer must reconstruct from the pieces the thing he has torn apart. As has been said, his work is synthetic as well as analytic. Some striking instances

have been noted of the value of shorthand as an aid in teaching a foreigner the English language — in acquiring correct pronunciation, in mastering the intricacies of construction.

The shorthand writer in his work as reporter, private secretary, stenographer to professional, literary, or business men, is constantly brought in contact with what is brightest and best — where brains are the busiest. He is constantly writing the cultivated diction of eminent speakers, writing out the thoughts of great educators and public men, and putting on paper the plans and purposes of the busy captains of industry. And what is more, he gets ideas first hand — hot from the forge. He is thus enabled to study, to absorb, to compare, to criticize, to enjoy, to broaden his general information, to see the reason behind the decision, to familiarize himself with the work of the world.

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But it is not at all necessary that this valuable training be left until the shorthand student is an *adept* in the art — a training which is so often looked upon as a mere by-product, but which is in itself sufficient reward for the study of shorthand. In most of the high schools where shorthand is taught, the dictation course preparatory for practical work is made an important feature. It generally covers not only a drill in commercial work, such work as ninety-nine out of a hundred students engage in, but also a great variety of other subjects — technical, educational, scientific, legal and literary. This work is intended primarily to give the student facility in handling all classes of stenographic work, but as he goes over this matter at least twice — in taking it in shorthand and in typewriting it — and oftentimes a third time in revising and in comparing it with the original, he naturally absorbs a vast amount of

useful information and gets a most practical drill in the use of the English language.

I believe that the study of shorthand could be begun profitably much earlier than in the high school — perhaps in the seventh or eighth grade — so that by the time the student reached the high school he would have mastered the mechanics of the art to such an extent that he could make practical use of his shorthand every day in his high school and college courses in making notes and taking the numerous valuable extemporaneous talks of teachers that are commonly lost. The principal objection in offering the work so early, however, would lie in the fact that many students, learning that their work had a commercial value, would leave school before obtaining the broad general education necessary to the highest success. This objection to taking up the work so early is minimized

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largely by the fact that the demand today is for the stenographer who has a high school or college education. Business men are more critical than ever before and are willing to pay for *knowledge* in addition to technical skill.

The practical uses of shorthand are so varied and so well understood by most of us that little need be said of them. Shorthand is an indispensable art in commerce, as is attested by the fact that hundreds of thousands are employed as stenographers. Business men do not waste money on useless employes. It is safe to say that shorthand has been one of the greatest factors in the expansion of American commerce, for through its aid, as a means in correspondence, the enterprising American business man gets business wherever the United States mail reaches. In the courts and in the legislative halls of the state and national governments, the shorthand reporter makes possible

an absolute record of the proceedings, catching and recording every word — words oftentimes fraught with the greatest import. The thoughts of statesmen, great teachers, and lawmakers are reported verbatim and preserved for the use of the world. Its value to the college student is great. In taking lectures, briefing, collateral reading, keeping notebooks, and in many other ways, it affords him a reliable and time-saving instrument. Its use prevents the longhand from degenerating into a scrawl.

To the young man or to the young woman, shorthand offers a great opportunity either as a career or as a stepping-stone. Many of our most prominent public men and women — business executives, transportation experts, lawyers, judges, bankers, *litterateurs*, journalists — owe their positions to the start shorthand gave them. Among these — to mention only a few — are Frank

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Vanderlip, Charles Dickens, Arnold Bennett, Edward Bok, Norman Hapgood, Irvin Cobb, Dr. A. E. Winship, George B. Cortelyou, William Loeb, Jr., Judge Landis, Hugh Chalmers, Judge Charles L. Guy, Samuel Insull, Colonel Bope, Talcott Williams, Judge Rhea Whitehead, Zelda Sears, Mabel Urner, Alba Johnson.

- ✓ The spread of the popularity of shorthand in our high schools is, I think, not only a recognition of its great utilitarian advantages, but also of the fact that it is coming to be recognized as having a very important educational value as well.

[Editorial Note]

CAN SHORTHAND BE INTRO-
DUCED PROFITABLY IN
THE GRAMMAR
GRADES ?

THIS is an increasingly important question. The address presented in this monograph throws much light upon it. Although prepared by Mr. SoRelle several years ago, it gives so clear and accurate a statement of the educational value of the study and practice of shorthand that it has come to be looked upon as a classic in shorthand literature.

The ideas presented are of especial interest at this time when the attention of teachers and school supervisors all over the country is being directed toward placing shorthand in the course of study for grammar schools. Shorthand is now being recognized as not

only of very great utility, but also as possessing marked educational value. Furthermore, educators of today realize more and more that subjects requiring manual skill should be introduced early.

What Mr. SoRelle ventured as a suggestion has come to be accepted as a fact—that shorthand can be studied with great profit in the first years of high school and even in the seventh and eighth grades. Many cities have introduced shorthand with success in the grammar grades for its educational and practical value, not with the idea of training professional stenographers, but to give students the benefit of a practical use of shorthand.

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