

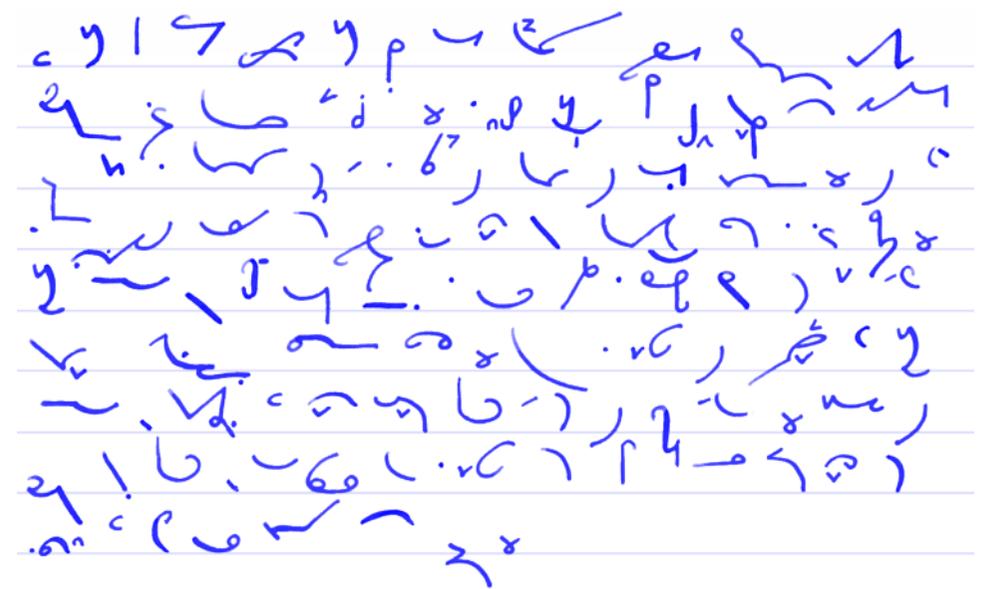
No Focus

My secondary school was a large Victorian building and the classrooms were spacious and bright with high ceilings and tall windows. In some of the rooms the windows were high up, so there was no view, and this was a common feature in many school buildings of that era. Distractions outside could not be seen and so it kept the children's focus where it should be. I was fascinated by the long poles with two curly brass hooks at the end, one to push and one to pull on the ring on each top window, in order to\* open and close it. I don't remember the teacher ever delegating that task to any of us, considering how easy it would be to put it through the glass. There was good discipline, and whether the windows were

high up or not, our classes were generally well focused\* on the lesson, and our eyes and minds were fixed\* on the teacher and the blackboard. The exception to this was one particular lesson in the chemistry room when a sparrow was trapped in the domed skylight. One just could not listen to the chemistry teacher expounding when there was the intermittent sound of wings fluttering against the glass. We just had to hope that the assistant would open the top light later on to let the sparrow out.

\* Omission phrase "in ord(er to)"

\* "focused, fixed" Always insert the first vowel, as they are similar in outline and meaning



No Focus

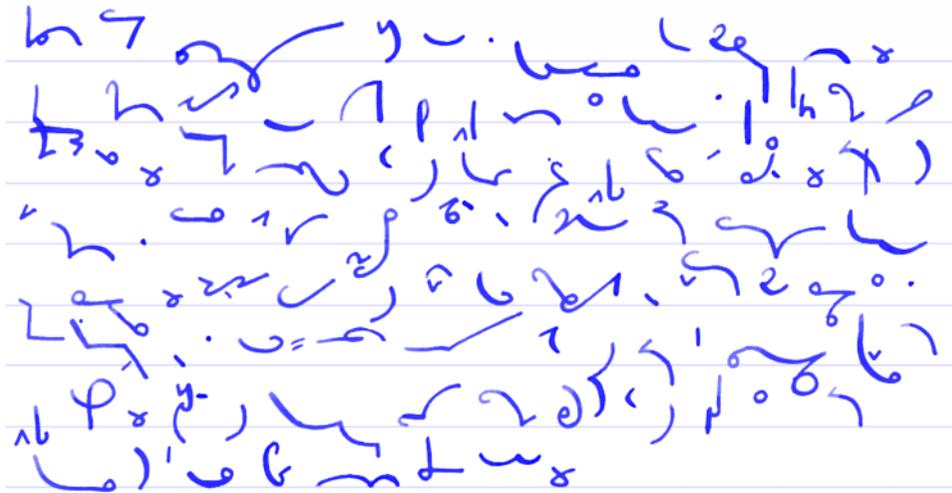
When I was at college, one morning I was sitting in the foyer using the spare time\* to read the shorthand book, completely focused\* on the contents. A student I did not know sat down beside me and wanted to talk about a family issue and a choice she felt she needed to make. She thought an impartial answer or useful comment might be forthcoming from a complete stranger. I was not going to be drawn into giving an opinion\* on such a sensitive subject, so I offered polite and vaguely sympathetic remarks. After a while she realised that I was not going to participate with my entire attention and so she drifted

off. I knew she would not be paying attention to any lessons for a while, or at all, because her mind was consumed with other things of greater importance to her.

\* "spare time" Halving for the T of "time"

\* "focused, fixed" Always insert the first vowel, as they are similar in outline and meaning

\* "opinion" Ensure clearly on the line with a small hook, so it does not look like the short form "information" which is above the line

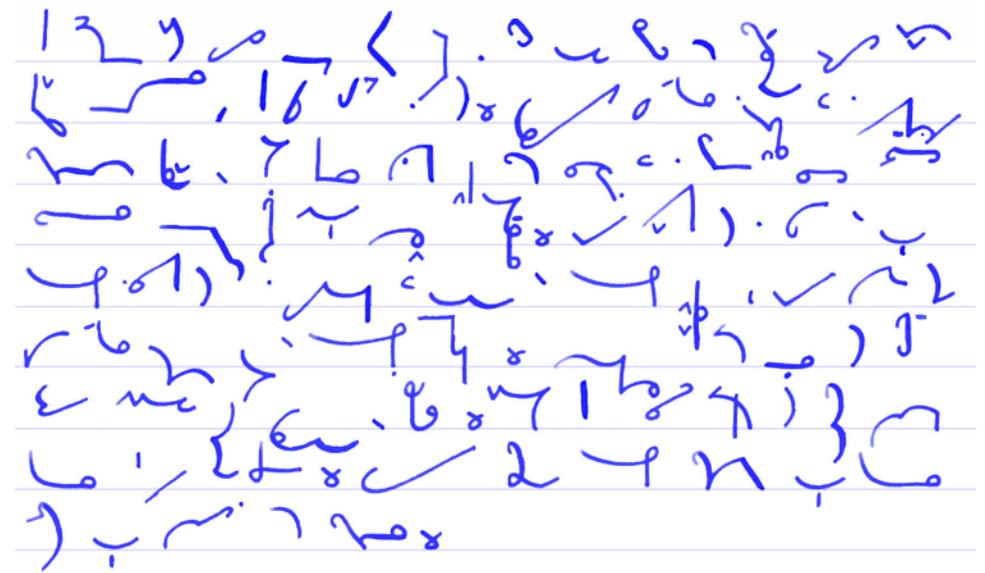


No Focus

At the same college some years later, I was in an evening class for shorthand speed improvement. It was the beginning of the term and one young lady stood out to me as having a different attitude from the rest of us. I got the impression that she felt completely out of place and self-conscious. Her attention was on the room, the class and the whole situation, and thoughts of shorthand writing\* were clearly having to take second place\*. I wondered whether

she might have been persuaded to acquire shorthand skills as a backup to a non-commercial career, and that she was here on someone else's advice or out of necessity. I don't think she benefitted greatly from the sessions that she attended, as her focus was on things other than the immediate task in hand.

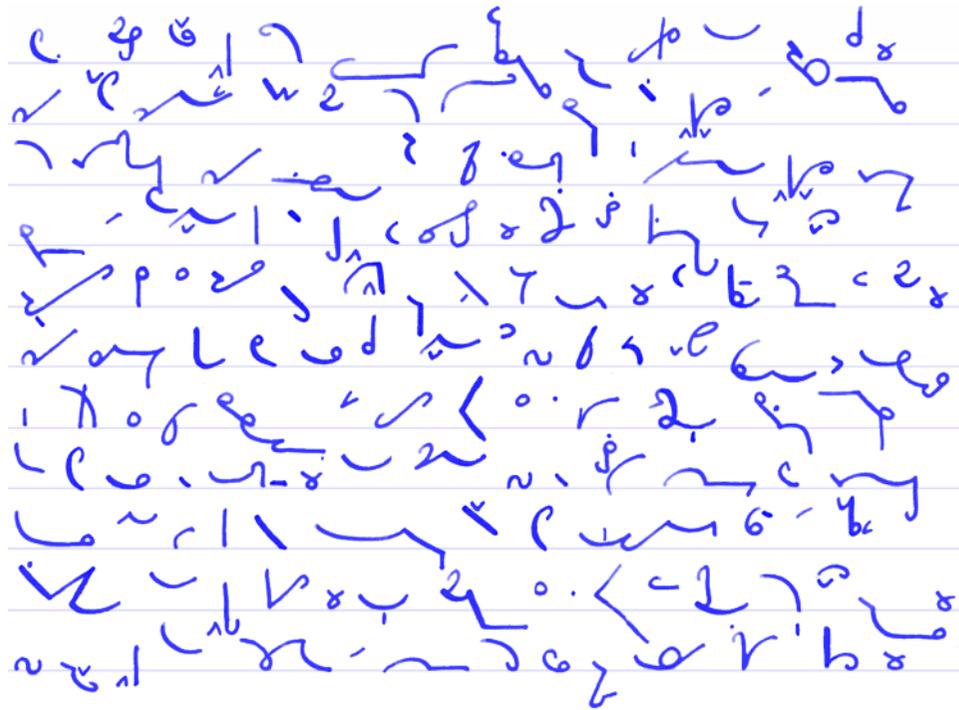
\* Omission phrases "short(hand) writing" "sec(ond) place"



No Focus

At work I was once given the job of teaching the brand new subject of word processing to one of my typist colleagues who had just joined us. These were the first office computers, with a rudimentary program designed to handle text laid out very simply, with a black screen and green characters, keyboard controlled and no mouse in those days. To our right was a wall, of no interest, ahead was a window,

with nothing of interest outside, but to our left was the whole office room, full of interesting activity. Many times her gaze was drawn that way and I knew she was not listening to instructions. I only had half her attention so there was limited focus on our task. Where there is no interest, there will be no focus and therefore no learning or progress.



No Focus

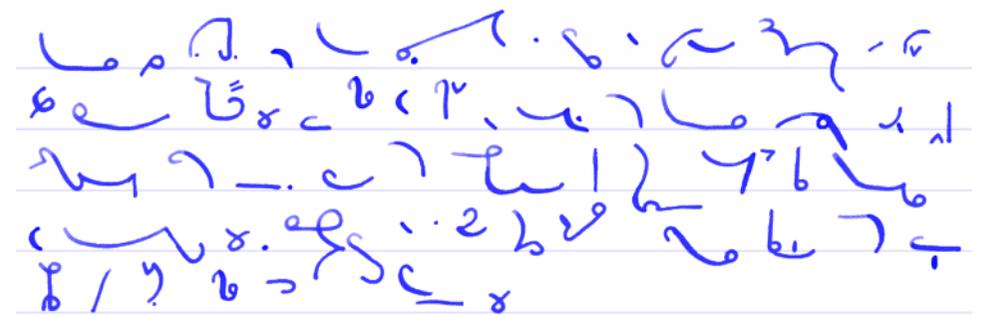
Every shorthand student\* finds out very quickly that it is not possible\* to have one's attention in two places at once\*. You are either worrying about the shorthand, your lack of speed, bad outlines and gaps, or alternatively you are excluding all that and just concentrating on recalling outlines to match the speaker and writing it all down without hesitation. There is the constant temptation\* for the mind to wander, as it has always been allowed to do up until now. That doesn't\* work with shorthand. You are certainly doing several things at once\*, writing what you have just heard whilst listening to the next few words\*, but your attention is still specifically on the one job as a whole and there is no spare capacity for other things to intrude. In shorthand writing\*, you have to constantly make the

effort to maintain focus and not let it be interrupted by other unwanted thoughts and ideas barging in out of turn. No shorthand book has a chapter called "Training your mind to focus", you have to find out for yourself and make your own efforts to achieve the necessary control on demand.

\* Omission phrases "shorthand s(t)udent" "it is not poss(ible)" "at (w)uns" "ne(k)s(t) few wo(r)ds" "short(hand) writing"

\* "temptation" Omits the lightly sounded P, so has M stroke rather than Imp

\* "doesn't" Apostrophied phrases should always be vocalised



No Focus

Focus is the Latin word for hearth, a place of welcoming warmth and light that is the centre of attention. Cold draughts that try to invade\* your focus must be shut out and prevented from coming near or extinguishing\* it, so that you can enjoy its benefits without interruption. The successful completion of a shorthand assignment always brings its own cosy glow of satisfaction which icy\* draughts cannot overcome. (905 words)

\* "invade" "invite" Always insert the vowel after the V, to differentiate, as the outlines for the present tense are the same but the meanings are opposite

\* "extinguishing" The contraction omits the "-guish" part

\* "icy" Insert the final vowel as "ice draughts" could possibly make sense as well

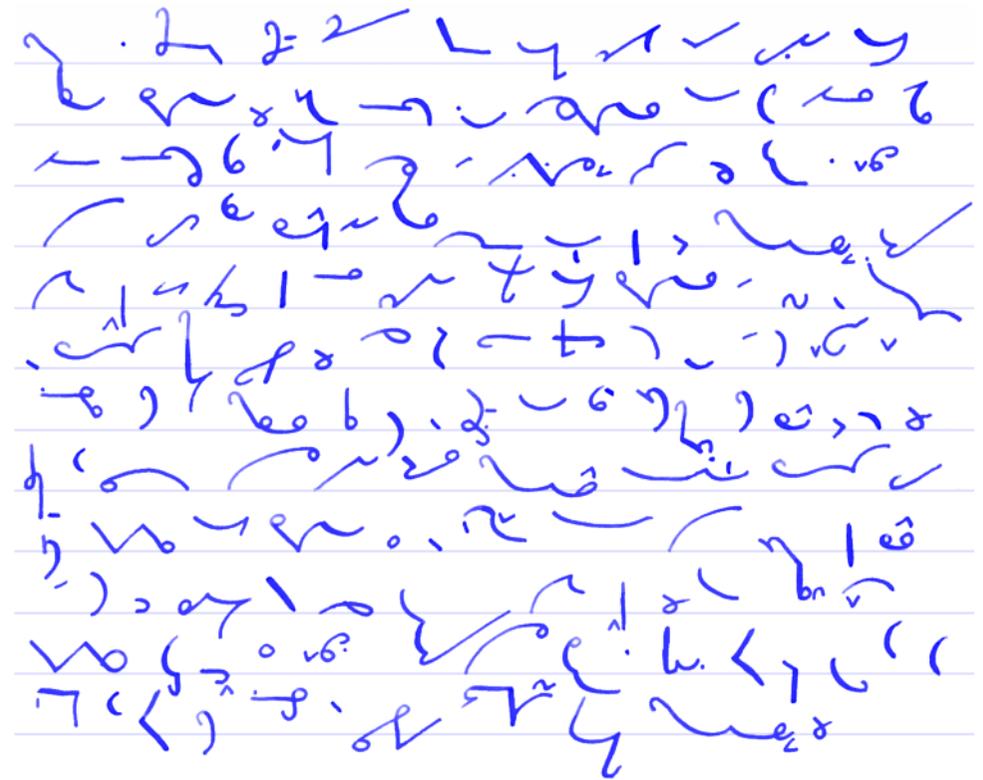


**Silent Letters 1**

As you have been learning shorthand, I am sure you have become used to writing the words as they sound, ignoring the longhand spelling and just matching sounds and strokes. A classroom situation is the ideal because the instruction there is mostly\* verbal, with no necessity for longhand writing and little need for longhand reading. After a short while it seems perfectly obvious that there is no other sensible way to write. Reading your shorthand notes aloud is the quickest way to zip through the pages but a neat transcript\* is necessary at times as well, as that is a separate skill that needs perfecting. If you are a good speller and well trained on the keyboard, your fingers will just peck\* out the words

without much thought, silent letters and all. Writing it all out in longhand is just too slow and frustrating, and a waste of your precious study time, although it may be necessary if no other\* method is available.

- \* "mostly" Omits the lightly sounded T
- \* "transcript" Omits the R, so that it does not look like "describe" which has a similar meaning
- \* "peck" Insert the vowel, as "pick" could also make sense here
- \* Omission phrase "no oth(er)"

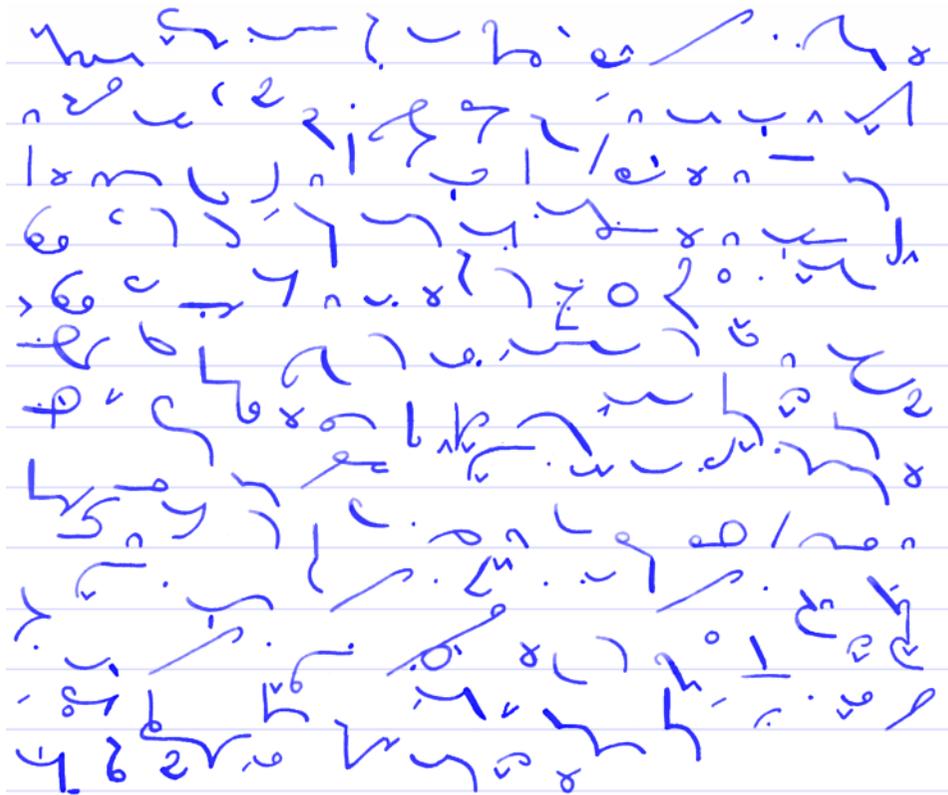


**Silent Letters 1**

Producing a transcript\* throws the shorthand writer\* back into the world of our wayward English spelling. I have covered common misspellings in other articles and this article covers those naughty, mischievous and rebellious little words that have a silent letter, one that is not sounded and would make no difference to the pronunciation\* if it were left out, which you cannot do, because you are not in charge of English spellings and you have to conform to normal traditional usage. Most of them occur at the beginning or end, and so, while the eye accepts their presence, it is easy to suspend any thoughts of their contributing their sound to the word. It is true that some other\* letters are not always pronounced in their own normal way, but their purpose in the spelling is to modify another letter to produce different sounds and so would certainly be missed if they were left out.

For my purposes they do not count as silent letters, as they have a definite\* job to do, even though they got that job through accident of history and gradual change of pronunciation\*.

- \* "transcript" Omits the R, so that it does not look like "describe" which has a similar meaning
- \* Omission phrase "short(hand) writer"
- \* "some other" Doubling to represent "other"
- \* "pronunciation" The diphone is placed against the small shun hook, not against the N stroke
- \* "definite" Insert the vowel after the N stroke, and the diphthong in "defined", as these are similar in outline and meaning



**Silent Letters 1**

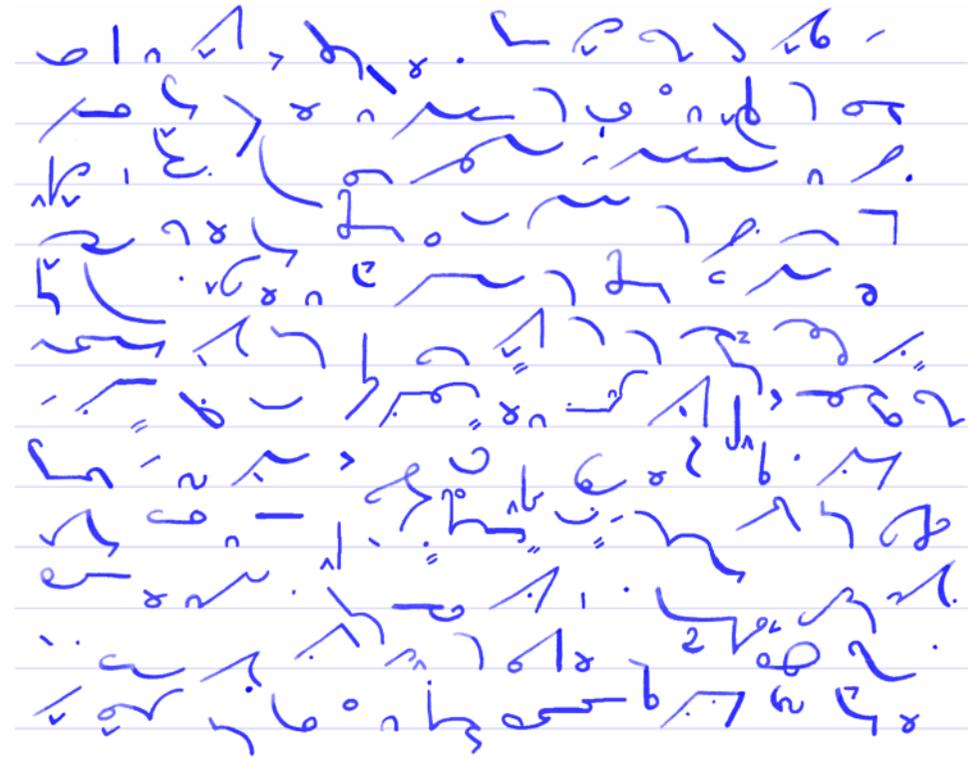
I hope you have now\* acquired the knack of thinking in terms of sound rather than an alphabet. You always knew that shorthand would be a useful skill to have and you now know how to write it. You may even wish you had known it much sooner. You go to your lessons with your pen and pad in your knitted knapsack. You knuckle down to the lessons in order to\* gain the knowledge you need. Although your intellect is as sharp as a knife, excessively fast dictations will have your knees knocking or find you kneeling exhausted on the floor. Some difficult outline may be gnawing at your mind but your shorthand dictionary comes to your rescue like a knight in shining armour. Occasionally you gnash your teeth over a missed opportunity for speed

success, which makes you feel like a gnome rather than a giant, a gnat rather than a beautiful butterfly, a gnu rather than a sleek racehorse\*. If your brow has become lined and gnarled, it is clearly time to turn the knob on the bedroom door and let a night's rest undo\* all those shorthand knots in your mind.

\* Omission phrases "I (h)ope you have now" "in ord(er to)"

\* "racehorse" The large circle is used here to represent two circles i.e. one circle S and one Stroke Hay circle

\* "undo" Not using the short form "do"



**Silent Letters 1**

Next day you write to the best of your ability\*. The black line from the pen writhes and wiggles over the page. You wrinkle your nose as you decipher your scribbled outline but finally, after some wrestling and wrangling, you wrest the meaning from it. If the transcript is in longhand, your wrist may get tired after a while. You avoid wrecking your transcript with wrong words, and incurring the wrath of your teacher Mr Wright or your employers Messrs Wray and Wragg based in Wrexham. You accurately wrote down all the examples from the blackboard and you have wrung all the useful information out of the lesson. Although it is a wrench to leave the class, you go out to The Ptarmigan Inn

and remove the wrapper on your well-deserved snack. You are not\* a poor ignorant wretch but a victorious winner worthy of a golden wreath wrapped round your head. Today's shorthand successes bring a wry smile to your face, as you contemplate the stenographic wreckage that you have avoided.

\* Omission phrase "bes(t of) your ability" and also using the "-bility" suffix to represent the whole word "ability"

\* "you are not" Full outlines in this phrase, compare "you will not" which uses N Hook and halving, this keeps these two phrases different to prevent misreading





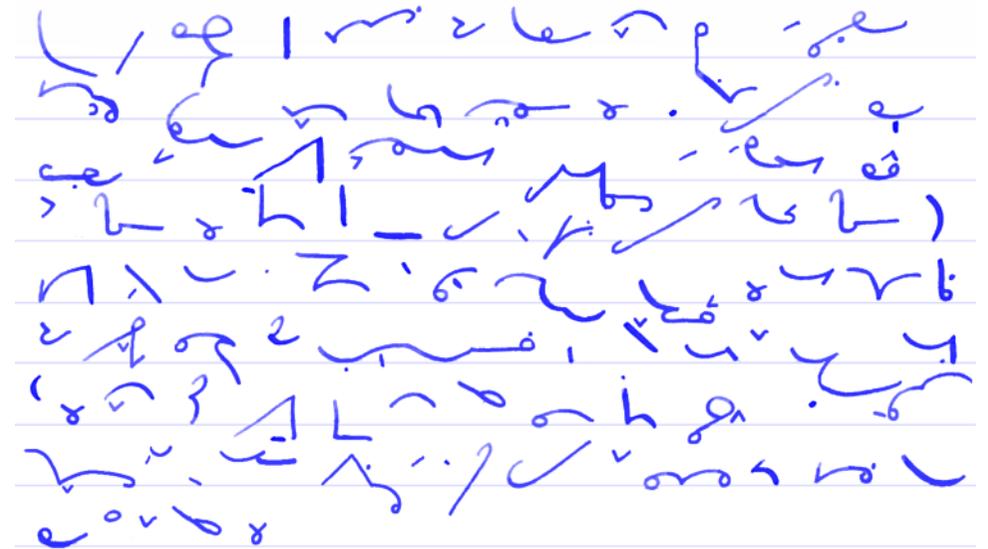
**Silent Letters 2**

Our teacher Mr Castle would bustle in every day at 9 o'clock sharp, his folders bristling with papers. He turned out to be an apostle of joy and we felt every lesson was like Christmas come early. We enjoyed the lessons so much\* we would jostle and hustle to enter the room and take our seats. It was a big room so the small class nestled

around his desk on long trestle tables. We would wrestle with the reading back and at the end of the allotted time he would blow a whistle for us to stop. We started off as rough thistles but ended up as fine blooms.

\* "so much" Writing "much" in full allows it to be joined, which is faster

Blank lined paper for handwriting practice.



**Silent Letters 2**

After each successful day of learning, I would fasten my seatbelt and hasten homewards, listening to my favourite\* music. The winter snow\* glistened on the road, moistening the windscreen and softening the sounds of the traffic. Autumn had given way to chilly winter and often\* the traffic was held up in a column of slow-moving vehicles. In the early days I would recite the simple shorthand mnemonics, but by now I no longer needed that. My shortest route\* took me past some condemned houses, a solemn reminder not to neglect repairs, and a church where I

sometimes heard hymns being sung as I passed.

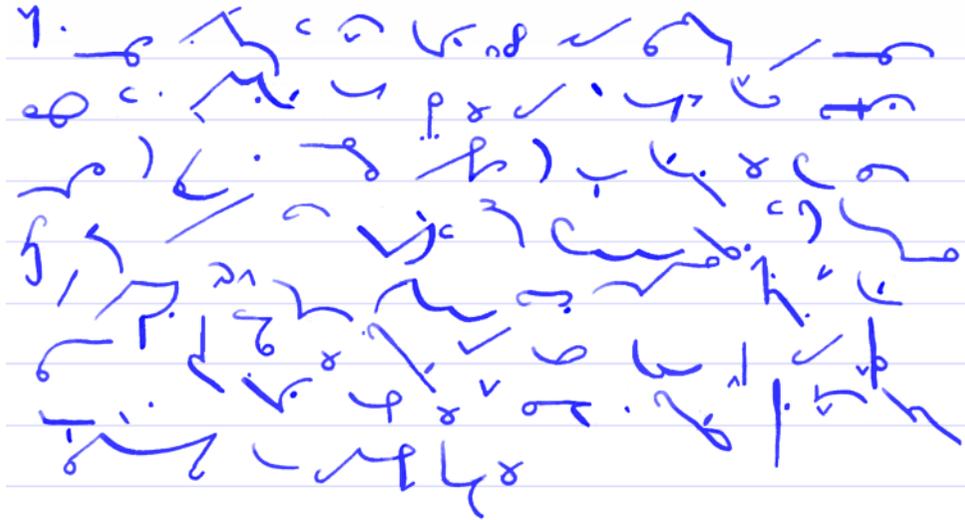
\* "favourite" Note that "favoured" uses a left VR stroke

\* "snow" Always insert the vowels in "sun/snow, sunny/snowy"

\* "often" Mostly silent, some people do pronounce the T sound

\* "route" Helpful to insert the vowel, so it is not misread as "road"

Blank lined paper for handwriting practice.



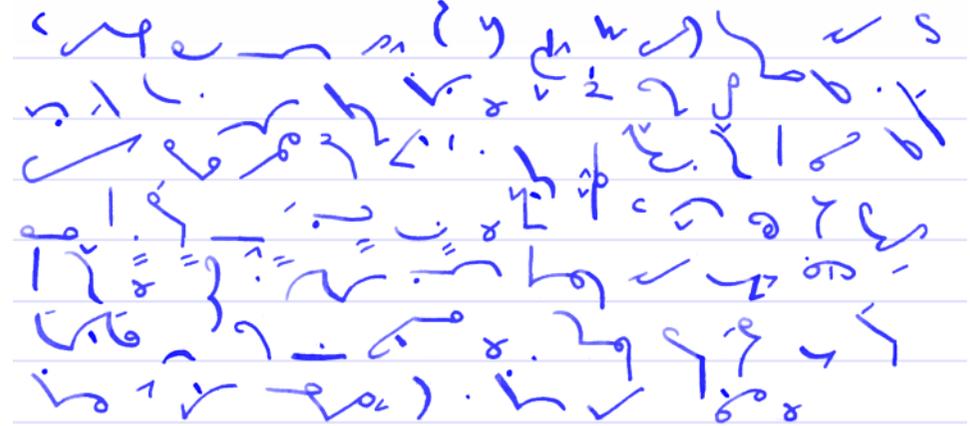
**Silent Letters 2**

I had an excellent rapport with my fellow students and we celebrated our exam successes with a rendezvous in the city. We all enjoyed fine gourmet meals so choosing an expensive restaurant was no faux pas. However, some children who were rather more bourgeois were flinging peas with their forks, which ricocheted around the room, leaving green marks and debris on

the faux silk tablecloths\*. Apropos of our next evening out, we decided to go to a ballet instead. I scribbled a proposed date on my paper handkerchief for Wednesday the tenth.

\* "tablecloths" The dictionary version is one outline, but that descends too far into the lines below

Blank lined area for student notes.



**Silent Letters 2**

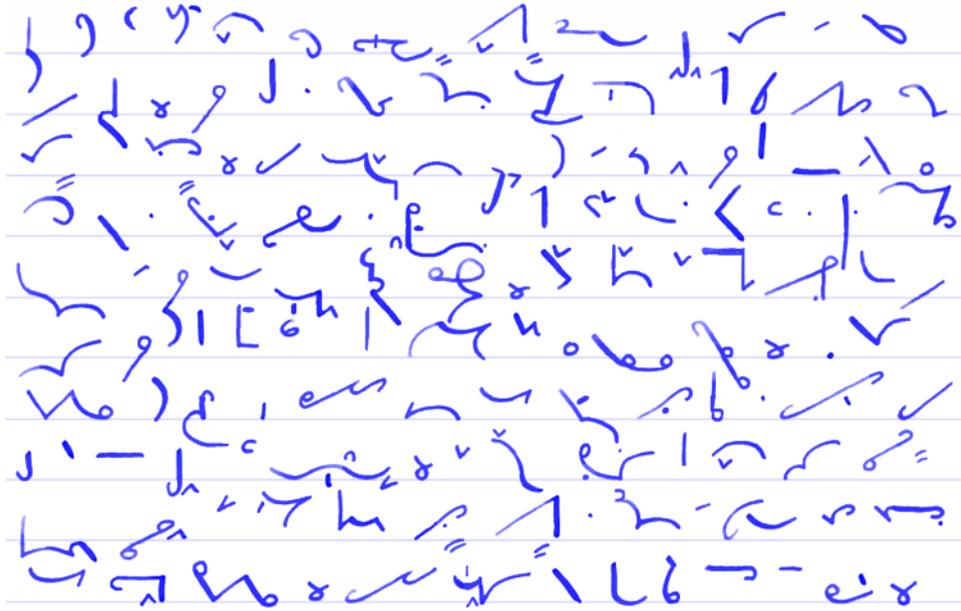
That Wednesday soon came round, although I was doubtful about the weather forecast, and we planned to meet up for a meal before the ballet. I walked from the station, past a pub where the sports results were chalked on a board outside, and finally arrived at half past six at The\* Spotted Cow and Calf Inn. I talked with my friends until everyone had arrived. There was a lovely calm atmosphere and we enjoyed the salmon and vol-au-vents\*

made from egg yolks. The orchestra played softly under the potted palms, and the whole experience was a balm to our souls.

\* "at The Spotted Cow" Not using Tick The, as that word is part of the name

\* "vol-au-vents" This is an anglicised pronunciation, the dictionary outline shows the French pronunciation

Blank lined area for student notes.



**Silent Letters 2**

It was there that I saw my friend Colonel Wright walking down the aisle and past our table. He had been a member of the Army Engineer Corps and had just returned from the Isle of Man. We invited him to join us and heard how he had given up his ambition to be a playwright using a pseudonym, and had applied for a job with a debt management firm, and he was in no doubt that he would be successful. By the time I got the receipt for our meal, he had

talked with us at length about his business prospects. The ballet performance was delightful, but as we went home in the pouring rain, it is a wonder we did not all go down with pneumonia. I arrived safely at my little half-timbered house on the knoll at the end of Wren Road, a warm and welcoming island of green in the crowded suburbs. We would undoubtedly be doing all this again quite soon. (803 words)

A series of horizontal lines for writing, corresponding to the text on the left page.