

Handwritten shorthand symbols on a blue-lined background.

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A series of horizontal blue lines for handwriting practice on the right side of the page.

Boat Race Lesson

A week ago I saw the televised version of the UK Boat Race where the Oxford and Cambridge University teams row from Putney Bridge to Mortlake on the River Thames, going upstream with the incoming tide. We were not at home at the time of the race and so had to record the programme to view later. This meant we had to avoid seeing the news or accidentally coming across the result online, so it was "news blackout" for us until the evening, when we sat down with our dinner trays on our laps, to watch the women's race, followed by the men's race. Not quite as good as seeing them on the live programme, but we were able to fast forward through an hour and a half of background information and interviews, and get to the real action.

In the women's race the Oxford team started very badly, when one of the oars became trapped low in the water as the other seven oars sped the boat ahead. The rowing had to stop for a moment so that the oar could be pulled from the water and equilibrium regained. This delay of a few seconds put them well behind the Cambridge team, and for the entire eighteen and a half minutes of the race they remained several lengths behind and were never able to catch up. Cambridge, who were the favourites to win, just kept motoring on and Oxford found no chance to reduce or close the gap. Cambridge won by 11 lengths, and Oxford finished in dismay and some tears of frustration at their serious error at the start.

This immediately struck me as a perfect picture of falling behind in shorthand writing. If you get too far behind the speaker, whether at the beginning or anywhere along the way, the chances of recovery get more and more remote, as the spoken words rush on ahead of you. The only way to catch up is to make an extra effort, or you may get unexpected help from a series of easy outlines and good phrasing opportunities in quick succession, and a useful pause at the end of the sentence. Most likely you will just have to press on harder to catch up, with

no random favours turning up to help you.

Keeping up with the speaker is a full time and "full mind" job, and practising and perfecting this particular skill is the main benefit of any dictation, whether it is a prepared one or an unseen one. Dictations themselves do not teach one single bit of shorthand theory, revision, outline or phrase. Dictation gives practice in the skill of instant recall and writing of outlines, whilst at the same time listening to the next few words. It is a wake-up call and a bucket of cold water in your face if you thought you knew the outlines sufficiently well or you have been carefully drawing them instead of speedily writing them. But the water does get warmer and less stinging as expectations become more realistic and writing skill improves.

Fortunately, acquiring the necessary laser beam concentration is entirely free, there is no price, drawback or shortage. You just make a firm decision that that is what you will do and aim for, from now on, but it will need to be reaffirmed regularly until it becomes a habit. Your friendly, warm and patient personality is put on hold, you ignore distractions, both internal and external, and you sink your teeth firmly into the task. After the speed attempt is over, with the notes safely recorded on the page and ready to be transcribed, you are free to re-join friendly relaxed humanity once again.

No doubt the Oxford women's team had a thorough and painful debrief, to discuss what went wrong and why, and how to make sure it does not happen again. The University Boat Race is a big event with millions of spectators around the world watching on their screens, and reputations are at stake. Errors must be corrected and strategy improved, and there is a whole year to work on it until the event returns and again there is just that one opportunity to get it right. The result is victory, smiles and champagne spraying in all directions to celebrate achieving the speed goal. (719 words)