

Handwritten shorthand symbols on a blue-lined background.

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ل ف ج با تا ج ه و ی - ی

و ه ج ه و ی - ی

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◦ 4 6 7 8 //

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30

31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40

41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50

4 5 6 7 8 9 10

11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30

31 32 33 34 35 36 37 38 39 40

41 42 43 44 45 46 47 48 49 50

51 52 53 54 55 56 57 58 59 60

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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.

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.

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.

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.

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)