



Handwritten shorthand symbols on a blue-lined background.

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## Landing On A Sixpence

I was listening to a talk recently about changing the way one habitually does things or conducts oneself in certain situations. The speaker drew an analogy with a giant ship being turned by a small rudder and the fact that it was not going to suddenly "turn on a dime" but that it would most certainly reverse its direction eventually, as long as the rudder continued being applied. The point being made was that changes do not always appear to take effect immediately once you alter what you are doing or saying, especially if those old habits or patterns of behaviour are long-standing ones. The changes are definitely happening but too small at first to notice.

This has an immediate and clear application to the study of shorthand, or indeed any other learning, especially if, like shorthand, it is replacing another ingrained habit. This is why it is preferable not to have longhand in view, or write it at all, keeping it out of your eyes and mind all the time during study periods. Best avoided is writing out a printed passage or vocab list into shorthand. It would be better to read it out loud into your phone and then take it down from the playback of the recording. Writing from the spoken word all the time is essential, with no longhand on view anywhere to intrude. In other words it needs to be out of sight, out of mind, and excluded from the process, as it will only fight the shorthand and try to get to the writing fingers before the outline does. The sound of the words and the shorthand outlines are the only welcome guests at this party. The place for text is the initial reading of the lesson instruction, and the final transcribing of some of your takes. With both of the above, you are still not actually writing longhand, only reading it or typing it, and so the actual writing of it with pen on paper is still excluded.

The mark of a dedicated shorthand learner is when they are filling in a paper form, or writing a note to someone. Their hand now wants to write the outlines but that has to be resisted when one realises that the recipient would not appreciate all the squiggles. This is the opposite of the first week or so of shorthand learning, when the giant ship, happily travelling through the Ocean of Longhand, has to be turned around and directed instead to the wonderful Sea of Shorthand, where travel is fast and easy, and less time and energy are needed. Save the Longhand Ocean for the occasional slow and lumbering cruise.

The phrase that the speaker used reminded me of a more British one "Turn on a sixpence". A sixpenny piece was the smallest coin, before decimalisation of the UK currency in 1971. In that decade, shortly after starting work, I took a rather brave holiday of a week at a gliding club. It was great fun, but a lot of hard work as well, as we were not always flying, but standing around helping with everything needed for the flights. We would attach the cable to the tow hook under the glider, run with the wingtip on take-off, or fill in the flight log with details of each flight. One morning there was no pencil handy and I spent a rather stressful twenty minutes memorising the figures until a pencil was found! A big compliment for an experienced glider pilot was that they could "land on a sixpence" which meant bringing the glider down so that it landed and stopped at exactly the place required, somewhere reasonably near the launch point, rather than at the far end of the field, so that there was no time wasted in bringing it back for the next flight.

## Landing On A Sixpence

The other skill to be mastered, amongst many, was to not let the wingtips touch the grass until the glider had stopped, otherwise it would skew round and possibly damage the wings, tail wheel or main wheel. This could not always be blamed on the long grass! The airfield had a ridge of high ground next to it, covered in shrubs, with a grassy top popular with walkers, and spectators on gliding days. This hill produced good up-currents of air for those wishing to soar along its length and back. We would admire all this to-ing and fro-ing whilst standing around in the field below. We were informed by the instructors that anyone flying rather too low along the ridge was said to be "picking blackberries". Some of this may have been due to losing the up-draught but I suspect that occasionally it was showing off to the onlookers on the edge of the hill.

Although I may have mixed up the metaphors here, with ships and flying, I think I prefer the flight analogy, with its thoughts of the freedom of the skies rather than pushing through cold choppy seas. Maybe the answer is to start off with the slow and heavy ship and then, as speed and skill increase, transfer to the glider, flying aloft with no noisy engine, no smell of fuel, and only the sound of the rushing wind over the canopy, the green fields below and blue sky above. Too soon the instructor says it is time to lose some height and make our turn in to land. All thoughts are then on positioning ourselves for a smooth shallow descent, landing not on a sixpence for the novice, but just avoiding bumps and premature wing drops onto the grass. Then, after the exhilaration of the flight (dictation), all is entirely silent and it is time for a brief appraisal of performance, in order to improve next time. (961 words)