The lost art of Shorthand

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SHORTHAND is an abbreviated, symbolic writing method that improves speed of writing or brevity as compared to a normal method of writing a language. The process of writing in shorthand is stenography, from the Greek *stenos* (*narrow, close*) and *graphos* (*writing*). It has also been called brachygraphy and tachygraphy. Many forms of shorthand exist. Typical shorthand systems provide symbols or abbreviations for words and common phrases, which allow someone well trained in the system to write as quickly as people speak.

Shorthand was used more widely in the past, before the invention of recording and dictation machines. Until recently, shorthand was considered an essential part of secretarial training as well as being useful for journalists. Although the primary use of shorthand has been to record oral dictation or discourse, some systems are used for compact expression. For example, health-care professionals may use shorthand notes in medical charts and correspondence. Shorthand is also common in the food service industry, allowing wait staff to write down detailed orders without delay.

HISTORY

The earliest known indication of shorthand systems is from Ancient Greece, namely the Akropolis stone (Akropolisstein) from mid-4th century BC. The Hellenistic tachygraphy is reported from the 2nd century BC onwards, though there are indications that it might be older. The Hellenistic tachygraphy consisted of word stem signs and of word ending signs. Over the time, many syllabic signs were developed.

In Ancient Rome, Marcus Tullius Tiro (103 BC 4 BC), a slave and later a freedman of Cicero, developed the Tironian notes so he could write down Cicero's speeches. The Tironian notes consisted of word stem abbreviations (notae) and of word ending abbreviations (titulae). The original Tironian notes consisted of about 4000 signs but new signs were introduced so that their number could increase up to 13,000. In order to have a less complex writing system, a syllabic shorthand script was used sometimes.

When many monastery libraries were secularized in the course of the 16th century Protestant Reformation, long-forgotten manuscripts of Tironian notes were rediscovered.





In imperial China, clerks used an abbreviated, highly cursive form of characters to record court proceedings and criminal confessions. These records were used to create more formal transcripts.

An interest in shorthand or "shortwriting" developed towards the end of the 16th century in England. In 1588 Timothy Bright published his *Characterie; An Arte of Shorte, Swifte and Secrete Writing by Character* which introduced a system with 500 arbitrary signs resembling words.

Shelton's system became very popular and is well known because it was used by Samuel Pepys for his diary and for many of his official papers, such as his letter copy books. It was also used by Sir Isaac Newton in some of his notebooks. One drawback of Shelton's system was that there was no way to distinguish long and short vowels or diphthongs; so the b-a-t sequence could mean "bat", or "bait", or "bate", while b-o-t might mean "boot", or "bought", or "boat". The reader needed to use the context to work out which alternative was meant. The main advantage of the system was that it was easy to learn and to use. It was extremely popular, and under the two titles of *Short Writing* and *Tachygraphy*, it ran to over 20 editions between 1626 and 1710.

Modern-looking geometric shorthand was introduced with John Byrom's 'New Universal Shorthand' of 1720. Samuel Taylor published a similar system in 1786, the first English shorthand system to be used all over the English-speaking world. script.

Taylor's system was superseded by the Pitman Shorthand, first introduced in 1837 by Isaac Pitman and improved many times since.