THE CHEAP AND SLEAZY INTERVIEW

By G.D. Warner

Steno Rebel Stephen Shastay

The Force Behind CourtReportingHelp.com

If you visit any of the CR-related boards I frequent (phoenixtheory.com/forum, stenolife.com, depoman.com to name but a few), you have probably read my advice to people starting speed building. If not, that advice basically sounds like this:

"Blah blah blah courtreportinghelp.com, blah blah blah Speed Teacher, blah blah blah Drill Machine, blah blah blah blah blah Ultimate Speed Teacher Drill!"

And that, ladies and germs, is all you need to know about increasing your speed.

No, really.

Oh, you want more? Okay. Howzabout an interview with the man behind courtreportinghelp.com, the Drill Machine, and Speed Teacher, Mr. Stephen Shastay himself?

Sound good? Keep reading!

Glen D. Warner (GDW): Who is Stephen Shastay?

Stephen Shastay (SS): I am your basic teacher. I was a reporter in Colorado and Pennsylvania. Those were great years, thank you very much. But life is a series of unplanned adventures, and somehow I ended up in Houston, Texas as a teacher. I've held that position for the past 13 years, first with the Shirley Baker Career Institute and presently with the Court Reporting Institute of Houston.

GDW: How long did you work in the field before switching to teaching?

SS: I spent about a year each in Colorado and Pennsylvania as a reporter. At the time I was very interested in a lady stenographer from Houston. The career change was a matter of expediency. The State of Texas would not allow me to become a reporter until I passed their state test. Paradoxically, there was no such restriction to becoming a teacher. As I like to say, "Go figger."

GDW: Which theory did you learn?

SS: I cut my teeth on the Stenograph Theory at Denver Academy of Court Reporting in -- duh -- Denver, Colorado. It was a solid theory taught at a great school. I was there when Mary Smith, former President of NSRA, was running the joint.

GDW: How did your school teach theory?

SS: Overall, my experience was typical. We stayed with the book for the most part, and we were given generous portions of reinforcement and review. One bright spot in particular was my theory teacher, Sharon Diaz. She introduced alternate strokes at times. I think outside the box a great deal, and I loved being given choices.

GDW: Were you a "natural" or did you struggle?

SS: I was definitely not a "natural." I made every mistake in the world. The day of my graduation, as I was leaving for the parking lot, the teachers, the faculty, and yes, even the building itself, let out a collective "Phew." They had been holding their breath for more than three years.

GDW: What kinds of mistakes did you make?

SS: I made most of the ones that you can think of. I drilled constantly at high speed. I tried to "get a stroke for everything." I did not compile a list of my "trouble strokes." I practiced for hours without a break. I trailed behind the speaker way more than I would accept from any student today. I never drilled within my comfort zone. I rarely did Finger Drills. I didn't review my theory book. I used briefs and phrases that slowed me down. And on and on and on.

Now ask me "If you made so many mistakes, how did you graduate?" It's a good story.

GDW: Well, I can never resist a good story ...! How did you graduate having made all of those mistakes?

SS: It's the story of how to succeed without really trying. I use it to illustrate proper writing principles to my class.

When I was a 140s student, I knew a young woman who did not care about school. It did not matter to her if she passed or failed. She spent her nights at the bar. Her machine case was never opened outside school. Mother was paying the bills. She steadily progressed through school.

I practiced continuously, but my results paled next to hers. It was frustrating. One weekend while paintballing, she broke her right wrist. She came back with a cast from her elbow to the first joints of her fingers. She could wiggle her fingers, but her thumb was totally immobilized. She still made better progress than most of us. She was still passing tests. The rest of us were struggling. The reasons are quite simple and obvious. She was lazy. She did the minimum. She could not be bothered to chase the dictation. Consequently, she always wrote at a more relaxed speed than the rest of us. She learned clarity and rhythm because she never 'pushed' herself beyond her abilities.

I did not fully understand the reasons for her success until years later, but I knew she was doing something right. Although I lost my way several more times, I attribute much of my success as a student and as a teacher to the lessons she taught me. Despite her lack of practice she improved because she always wrote correctly. The rest of us practiced, but we had poor habits. She got it right without trying. Her non-existent practice regimen was better than our best efforts. The moral is that stenography is not hard. We merely practice poorly.

GDW: Did this student graduate? ... and is she working in the field?

SS: I believe that she graduated, but my memory is hazy. After all, she wasn't part of my original class. She passed me in the low speeds, and I never had a class with her again. I doubt that she is working. She did not have any interest in the field.

GDW: Could you explain the concept of "chasing the dictation?"

SS: Your writing style is dependent on your standards. If you value clarity, you will produce solid strokes -- the mark of the professional. On the other hand, if speed is your focus, you will attempt to get as many strokes as possible. That is chasing the dictation. It leads to the corruption of your writing. Every student who has trouble with readback is guilty of chasing the dictation.

GDW: I'm all for minimizing my practice time; seems like this young lady had the concept nailed! How should we practice, keeping this young lady's lessons in mind?

SS: Don't push beyond your ability. Stroke strong and clear at all times, but don't rush. Quality beats quantity.

GDW: Which theory do you teach at the Court Reporting Institute of Houston?

SS: We use the StenEd theory. It is a nice robust theory. To be fair though, all contemporary theories deserve similar marks. The breakthrough theory has not yet been written. It will be the steno version of Esperanto. If you are a computer nerd, think "open source."

GDW: What do you mean by "open source?"

SS: There are many open-source programs. The most famous is Linux. A student named Linus Torwald developed a cool computer program. Instead of selling it, he put it on the Internet for everyone to use for free. He let any programmer add to his program. Lots of people joined in, and today the Linux systems are known to be years ahead of anything that Microsoft or Apple can produce. And anybody can use it.

We could do that in stenography. We would end up with fantastic CAT software at reduced prices. There is still money to be made for the big companies. The Linux companies package the free Linux software into nice neat bundles and sell them to regular people like you and me. They make money. We get cool software.

Everybody is happy.

GDW: So, you're saying an open source theory would use bits and pieces from many theories; correct?

SS: I say that, and so does practically everybody else.

There are countless magazine articles that contain lists of briefs and phrases. Every teacher has their own set of "favorite" strokes that are not part of the theory that they use. Entire dictionaries have been written independent of any particular theory.

Why does this happen? Every theory has its weak points. I teach one of the major theories. It is solid. Nonetheless, I would be a more effective teacher if I could offer alternative strokes for some of the real stinkers. I can't. I must stick to the book. It would be nice if I had a book that contained optional strokes that were compatible with my theory.

Theory A does not incorporate strokes from Theory B even when it knows that Theory B has an easier solution. That means that students are not being given the best strokes. And that leads us back to why lists of briefs and phrases are constantly being published: no one theory has all of the good strokes.

GDW: There are many methods of teaching theory, including self-paced and as a class. Which method is best?

SS: Stenography is self paced. It is a skill. You should stay at one level until you show a mastery of it. Also, students should not be forced to move just because they have passed their tests. We are beginning to allow students to stay a little longer in the lower speeds until they feel comfortable. That's an enlightened decision. I know a student who had just one error on a test and did not feel ready to move. Why should she be forced? Obviously she is doing pretty well.

GDW: The field of court reporting is rumored to be pretty lucrative (depending on where you are, among other factors, I guess). How difficult was it for you to (virtually) give up the profession to teach?

SS: Our profession is experiencing a Renaissance period. Wages are rising. The demand outstrips the supply. But I chose to switch a long time ago. The income that I made as a reporter in Pennsylvania was comparable to the income as a teacher in Texas. The real question that I had to answer was "Do I care for her enough to move to Texas?" That brought me down here.

After that question was answered, I had to deal with the fact that Texas requires reporters to be certified. It was quite a hurdle. Luckily, Texas was not as stringent in its requirements for teachers. I was hired and went to work immediately. Basically, Texas said I wasn't good enough to do it, but I was good enough to teach it. Go figger.

GDW: From your experience, how does Stenograph Theory compare to the realtime theories of today (Phoenix Theory, CRAH (**C**ourt **R**eporting **A**t **H**ome) theory, etc.)?

SS: The biggest improvement has been the dictionary. If there was such a thing in my day, I did not know it.

We kept our outlines in a notebook. It is true that the current theories have worked out all of the conflicts. The true advantage, though, is that they have published those strokes for easy reference. You can't use it, if you don't know that the stroke exists.

GDW: Any advice for locking theory into the minds of theory students?

SS: Theory is easy. There are only two types of hard strokes: One, physically awkward strokes. Those must be reviewed daily to create the requisite muscle memory. Until the proper dexterity is achieved, those strokes will remain difficult.

Two, memory. Wordlists and flash cards work like a dream. If the problem is knowledge, retention, or instant recall of the stroke, then the student is best served by bookwork, not machine work.

GDW: If you were to go through CR school again, armed with everything you know about practicing and speed building (but not the theory; sorry!), do you think you would still struggle?

SS: I know my tendencies. I would struggle with the same problems, but not to the same extent. I know the answers now. I would succeed faster, and my proficiency at graduation would be much higher.

GDW: When courtreportinghelp.com initially went online, were there any problems with your employers at the Court Reporting Institute of Houston?

SS: Actually, I worked at Shirley Baker's school at that time. She graciously approved my efforts. Later, due to the closing of Shirley's school, I applied at the Court Reporting Institute of Houston. They have been great. I'm blessed with constant encouragement and support. Life is good.

GDW: Besides yourself, who were the founding members of courtreportinghelp.com?

SS: Originally, Court Reporting Help was simply a support site for the Drill Machine. There was download info, a few drills, and nothing else. As we evolved into a student resource site, writers seemed to find us. Many were excellent. I would consider Joseph Kinaim, Anna Mae Tedley, Barb DeWitt and myself as the architects of the present site. It wouldn't be home without them.

GDW: Are they still contributing to the site?

SS: Several are active. Anna Mae Tedley and Barb DeWitt have pledged a certain number of articles this year. Joseph Kinaim remains entrenched in the back office, but I expect the occasional manuscript. John Boulet is now a major contributor. You will find his voice on our MP3 drills. I produce my usual half-coherent blitherings on a regular basis. Other than that, I'll have to wait to see who submits what.

GDW: Are they working reporters, or teachers ... or both?

SS: Anna Mae is retired and living the life of Riley. She has a lakeside view deep in the heart of Washington. Barb DeWitt tutors in Chicago. Joe Kinaim, John Boulet and myself are the rowdy crew from Houston, by Gawd, Texas. Joe is retired. John and I greet the students every 7 a.m. at the Court Reporting Institute of Houston.

GDW: Tell me about The Drill Machine: Where did the original idea come from, who did the programming, etc.?

SS: The seed was frustration. The CAT software programs were becoming sophisticated, but they ignored student education. Eventually, a friend told me to stop griping and learn to program. It was tough. I knew nothing except the address of the bookstore. I bought everything on the shelf. About a year later, I became the proud parent of an exceptionally ugly drilling program. That became the Drill Machine. It works great, and any student, school, or organization is free to use it.

Frankly, the Drill Machine is primitive; and my other program, the Speed Teacher, suffers from a similar lack of programming skill. They remain popular, because they offer good solid drills, but you can't consider them to be cutting edge. I have thousands of ideas for improvements that are beyond my technical ability. I predict that similar programs will surface shortly. It is about time. Students will flock to a system that addresses their needs.

GDW: Do you have any plans to update either Speed Teacher or the Drill Machine?

SS: I would love to update both of the programs. We're waiting for the right opportunity.

GDW: What are the top five requests from users for improvements to both programs?

SS: I couldn't name five, but in this case, one is more than enough. The students want to hear the drills.

We don't have a way to create what is needed; so the question is moot at this time. Let me add that drills with sound do not allow us to control the student's rhythm and technique. Standard drills could be hooked up to a program, but students would carry, rush to catch up, drop words, etc. That's what happens every day in school. Our programs remove the need for a student to carry or remember words. They concentrate on the strokes.

GDW: What are your desired top five things to do to improve them?

SS: We need more drills for the Drill Machine and updated word lists for the Speed Teacher. Beyond that, an even simpler user interface would be nice. We have drilling methods that we recommend to students. It would be better to assimilate them into the programs.

For instance, I know of an update that would absolutely force students to write without hesitation. I publish a method for the Speed Teacher that can obtain similar results, if the student follows all the rules. But wouldn't it be nice if the program took care of the rules, and the students could focus on stroking?

GDW: Would that drill be the Ultimate Speed Teacher Drill?

SS: It would be close. The drill would remove the aspect of carrying or falling behind the dictation. When that is done, it is simple to get students to write at their optimum speed. Further, such a drill could easily show the student exactly what strokes need work.

GDW: You mentioned the desire students have to hear the drills in both programs. Earlier I read a post from somebody on one of the forums I frequent that said the exact same thing: She loved the program, but wanted the audio. If you release an update to Speed Teacher and the Drill Machine that does allow the student to have the program read the drills, do you have any ideas on getting past the problems you mentioned earlier (i.e., dropping, carrying, etc.)?

SS: The big four (clarity, hesitation, carrying and editing while writing) can be cured by making the Drill Machine into a realtime program. Adding voice capabilities would be a boon, but it truly is not an absolute necessity.

The Speed Teacher and the Drill Machine could easily be programmed to cure carrying and dropping with or without sound. The issue is the technique of the student. If the drills are used properly, progress will occur.

GDW: I'm sure we all know what you mean by editing, hesitation and clarity. Could you define carrying?

SS: Carrying is second in importance to clarity, but it is the most widely misunderstood aspect of a student's writing style. Carrying refers to the number of words that a student lags behind the dictation. Three words behind is great. Six words behind is barely acceptable. Any more than that is absolutely wrong.

Some teachers actually encourage students to carry in order to use briefs and phrases. That isn't right at all. We must change that mindset. I know that my standard for carrying sounds very strict, but it is not hard to do. If you want to read more on the subject, I refer you to my blog "Stenography is Easy." It is available on the home page of CourtReportingHelp.com. I am writing a book, and I use the blog to brainstorm. I have hundreds of students who signed up for the blog. It's free. They are learning my methods step by step as I write the book. When the book is done, it might be time to give seminars at the schools.

GDW: I have been reading your blog; most interesting! ... but the trailing by three words idea sounds, as you said above, rather strict. Does trailing by such a small number of words detract from using briefs at all?

SS: Oh, definitely, and for good reason. Briefs and phrases are time-savers. If you are caught up with the dictation, you don't have much of a need for them.

It is a sad day when a student chooses to alter her writing pattern so that she can use more briefs and phrases. The "solution" always involves trailing the speaker on purpose. Why would anyone want to learn how to fall behind?

But if I had to choose between knowing briefs or knowing phrases, I would choose to know the briefs. You can employ them even when you are caught up with the dictation. You can't use phrases unless you fall behind the dictation.

GDW: Just to be clear, when you say 'brief,' that's one stroke for a normally multiple stroke word, like /STHPBG for something? And a phrase is a single stroke for something like "preponderance of the evidence," correct?

SS: That is exactly right. I have a stroke for the word 'lady,' and I have a stroke for the phrase 'Ladies and gentlemen of the jury.' If I am right on top of the dictation (as I should be), I can use the brief. It keeps me from falling behind.

But the only time that I can use the phrase 'Ladies and gentlemen of the jury' is when I am seriously behind. If I have fallen that far behind the dictation, I have bigger problems. After all, you can't expect a phrase to appear every time that you carry too many words. Ultimately, I will be dropping lots of words.

GDW: From time to time, I've seen some excerpts from a book on your website entitled "It Ain't Rocket Surgery" or "Your Theory Book is All Lies" or "The Plateau." The advice in the excerpts seemed pretty good! Are you planning on publishing this book?

SS: A serendipitous question. We received the final draft last week. As our gift to the students, one chapter per week will be published on our site. Look for the link on the home page. Our next book is due shortly after. It will be serialized in similar fashion. This year, we reveal all of our secrets.

GDW: What is the title of the book?

SS: We're going with "The Plateau." The name describes that impalpable but terrifying real barrier that prevents them from moving steadily through school.

Once you know why students sputter to a halt (usually in the 120 to 160 range), the solution is both self-evident and straightforward. I have a technique that can be learned by a teacher in five minutes that will show great results each time it is used.

GDW: Do tell --!

SS: Here is a technique that any teacher can master in 5 minutes.

StairStepper:

I will use the 160 speed as my example. I will use the standard 20 word count to explain the math.

For the 160, I start way down at 100 wpm. My drill will end at 200 wpm. The drill starts very slow, and the students have an opportunity to write clearly and with rhythm.

The speed increases without stopping the drill. The end of the drill is very fast, but it is also the shortest part.

The timing marks that I use are not the true marks that teachers use. I start at 100, so I reach my first mark at 12 seconds. From then on, I reach each mark one second faster than the last mark.

Mark One: 12 seconds

Mark Two: 11 seconds

Mark Three: 10 seconds

Mark Four: 09 seconds

Mark Five: 08 seconds

Mark Six: 07 seconds

Mark Seven: 06 seconds

As far as using the stopwatch, I will hit the marks at 12, 23, 33, 42, 50, 57, 63.

It is basically a one-minute drill that peaks at high speed. Students like the drill a lot. It is a confidence boost.

Although this sounds like a speed drill, it is the opposite. As always, I do not believe in pure speed.

Notice the amount of time that is spent below the normal speed. I used a 160 class for my example. Only Marks Six and Seven are at or above the 160 speed.

It is really a Control Drill that masquerades as a Speed Drill.

GDW: Will these kinds of drills appear in your book, "The Shastay Way?"

SS: I love the StairStepper drill. It works wonders. I use it with the Shastay Way, but it is not an integral part. I have considered writing a book of drills. I have quite a number. More likely, I will clean up my notes and publish them on CourtReportingHelp.com.

GDW: When can we expect that first excerpt?

SS: The 15th of February. The final draft is being prepared. I applaud the editor, Terecia Seay. It is a daunting task to make me appear intelligent and articulate.

GDW: About 15 to 20 years back, there were a lot of CR schools. When compared to today, there are about half as many. Graduation rates have decreased, and graduation time has increased. Do you have any thoughts on what happened – that is, what changed in those years?

SS: Oh, boy, am I going to hear it about this.

Schools are requiring more academic subjects. Some push their students to a degree. Now listen carefully. I believe that knowledge is power; so I like the academic classes. But any time you increase the requirements, you will suffer a decreased rate of graduation.

The heresy in the above answer is miniscule to what I am about to say. Schools should stop trying to teach students to write realtime. Instead they should work on producing quality entry-level reporters. We have turned out years and years of "realtime" reporters. And yet the present workforce has not filled all of the available realtime jobs. Shouldn't that prove that writing realtime is harder than simply writing at a professional level?

GDW: How do you define a quality entry-level reporter?

SS: Most of the reporters in the world do not write realtime. They don't have perfect strokes, but they can produce a quality transcript. Besides being able to write and transcribe 100% of the dictation, an entry-level reporter must be able to

produce a transcript in the style of her firm or court system. Other than that, she must be reliable, punctual and professional in dress and manner.

GDW: On your site, you have steps 1 - 3 for the Speed Teacher. Isn't the purpose of these drills (steps 1 and 2, anyway) to teach the student good, clean strokes -- or basically, how to realtime?

SS: Realtime requires that you know the actual stroke recommended by your Theory. Stenography requires that you write a good solid readable stroke, regardless of whether that stroke will instantly translate. Most reporters do not want to write realtime. They make a handsome salary without it. I'm not knocking realtime, but there is a difference between knowing the principles of realtime and knowing how to write realtime. Steno schools teach the principles of realtime. Captioning schools teach how to write realtime. Steno schools do not graduate realtime writers. They graduate people who have the option to continue their education and become realtimers.

GDW: On academics, what is the best way to teach these subjects (specifically medical and legal terminology)?

SS: That's a toughie.

The academic teachers have a daunting task, and I think that they perform admirably. The trouble that I see is that students only take an academic one time. After that, they can forget everything. I would like to see tiny refresher classes or workshops offered to students who have already passed their academics. Hmm.

GDW: One of our speed building instructors has taken to adding in some medical terminology to her course. She listed on the board several medical terms, some prefixes and suffixes. The assignment: Define the listed items. The deadline: Two days hence.

It should be noted that most of the students in that class haven't taken medical terminology yet.

Any thoughts on this method?

SS: I think that is wonderful. Let's put her up for teacher of the year. The famous comic strip, Pogo, once had it lead character say, "We have met the enemy and he is us." Hard words will appear on tests. We will not get better at them unless we turn our attention to them. It makes it so much easier to stroke the words when there is a modicum of familiarity with the words or their roots.

GDW: Recently there was a discussion on the Phoenix Theory.com forum about finger exercises. I chimed in with some that I learned from my piano days, and from my magic days.

I demonstrated one of these (place both hands flat on a table, raise the pinky and middle fingers together, put them down, raise the ring and forefingers together, put them down, then the middle finger and thumb, and put them down) to one of my classmates, and she could not do it.

My question ... do you recommend any finger exercises to your students, and if so, what are they?

SS: I have never heard of such exercises, but I am all for them. It makes perfect sense. We perform a physical skill. All other skills have warmup exercises that are distinct from regular practice.

I recommend regular Finger Drills, and an advanced type of finger drill.

Instead of thinking STPH, think 1, 2, 3, 4. Write

these patterns, but don't use the number bar. Think 1234, but write STPH.

14, 23, 14, 23, 13, 24, 13, 24, 12, 34, 12, 34,

Now do that pattern with SKWR.

Now alternate. Do 14 on the top bank and 23 on the bottom bank.

It goes on and on through lots of variations. You can do both hands at once. If you want to twist your soul, try doing the left hand upper bank and the right hand lower bank. It gets goofy.

GDW: An alternative practicing technique I read about somewhere talked about going to a website of your choice, finding something you find interesting to read, and stroking it on your steno machine. Is there any merit to this technique?

SS: Great idea. The drills are always easier if they are interesting. I would gravitate towards sites about guitar, disc golf, fishing, and current events. Those are my interests. I can drill and satisfy my insatiable thirst for knowledge. I love the Internet. I am creating a daily handout for my Theory students. One of the tips this week concerned stroking names. The students were instructed to search for the Internet for lists of baby names. Another tip told them where to access the Oklahoma City bombing transcripts. A third pointed them to a great site for O.J. Simpson.

GDW: Another practice technique I plan on trying when I have the time was a writing exercise from a book on writing ("How to Write a Book in Two Weeks -- Or Less," by A. & E. DeEver). The book has a list of words grouped in threes, and you would select one group of three words, set a timer for five minutes, and write at least 250 words in that five minutes, using all three words. The catch: You have to start with one of the words as your first word, and the other two must be in the same paragraph. One example I recall is **Fork Forehead Klutz**.

Would there be any benefit from doing something like this with the steno machine?

SS: I'm not sure how we can make that work. It's a concept that I was going to use in a future program. The student would select certain words that would appear more frequently than other similar words. In that way, the student could work on a particular set of strokes or could pick out individual words.