# Guide to reading Samuel Pepys's shorthand

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# Introduction

Samuel Pepys used Thomas Shelton's shorthand system called 'tachygraphy' for keeping personal notes, for naval business, and for writing his diary of the 1660s. Shelton devised his popular system in the late 1620s. Manuals teaching it continued to be published throughout the seventeenth century. Pepys probably learned it in the early 1650s. We don't know exactly which edition of the book he used, but you can find a 1693 edition of *Tachygraphy* on Googlebooks.

In what follows, I summarize the basics of Shelton's system and give some examples to show how shorthand 'transliteration' (turning shorthand to longhand) works. I also briefly discuss what we can learn by looking at how Pepys used shorthand in some diary passages.

If you'd like to just see images of Pepys's diary shorthand, skip to page 7.

# Shelton's Tachygraphy

## Letters

Shelton's system has symbols for 24 letters of the alphabet. As i/j and u/v are often interchangeable in seventeenth-century spelling, these have one symbol each.

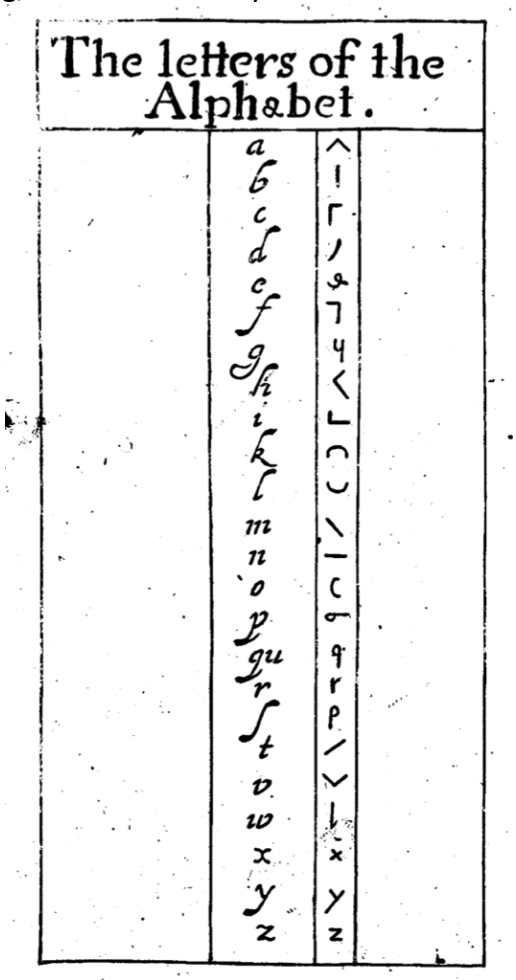



*Figure 1. From Shelton's Tachygraphy (1693), fol. A6v*

Although the vowels each have their own symbols, when a vowel occurs in the middle of a word, you don't write the symbol for it. Instead, that vowel is indicated by the position of the symbol that follows it. (And this is where shorthand starts to get tricky, so bear with me…)

Shelton gives these diagrams (and others) to explain:

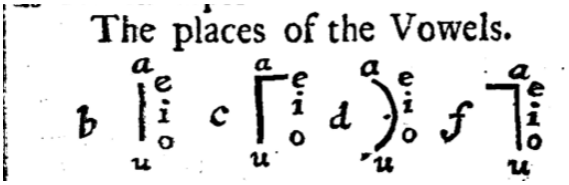



*Figure 2. From Tachygraphy (1693), p.4*

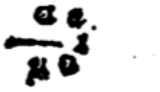
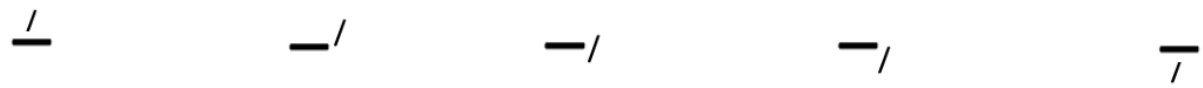


*Figure 3. Letter 'n', Tachygraphy (1693), p 5*

The first diagram shows the letter 'b' (a vertical straight line), with the positions of where you would start writing the next symbol around it to indicate the vowel. Shelton then does the same with the letter 'c' 'd' and 'f', and for the letter 'n' (a horizontal straight line)

For example, the letter 'n' is like a dash (–) and the letter t is like forward slash ( / ) . Here are words written with those letters, where the position of the 't' changes the vowel:



nat net nit not nut

If a word ends with vowel, you use a 'tittle' (meaning a dot) in the correct position for the vowel. This is 'no':



Putting a tittle in front of a word indicates it is plural (the equivalent of adding an 's' at the end).

With shorthand, the only time you take your pen off the page during a word should be to write a vowel, so consonant symbols are joined together. Lifting you pen off the page during a word and starting to write again indicates a vowel, and where you start indicates what the vowel is.

## Combinations of letters

Shelton's system has symbols for individual letters, but it also has symbols for common pairs of letters (such as fr, gr, st, nd). These often look like the two symbols for the letters run together, but not always.

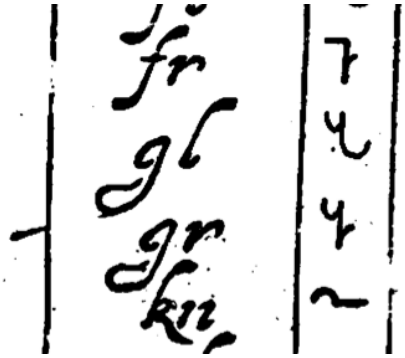


*Figure 4. Symbols for common 'double consonants', from Tachygraphy (1693), p. 3.*

There are also symbols for 'prepositions' and 'terminations' (combinations of letters that often start and end words), such as 'con-' and 'pre-' or '-ing' and '-tion'. These do not look like combinations of the letter symbols. For example:

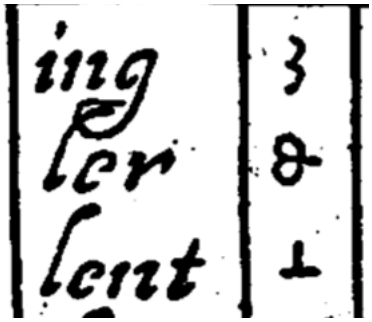


*Figure 5. 'Terminations' from Tachygraphy (1693), p. 13*

Shelton also has separate symbols for common words, such as 'from' 'good', and 'more'. You can use these on their own, or as syllables within longer words. He expected his system to be used for taking notes on religious matters, especially recording sermons, so there are symbols for common biblical words such as 'God', 'eternal', and 'reprobate', along with single symbols for 'commonly' used sermon phrases such as 'The Kingdom of Satan'.

This means that there are a lot of symbols to memorize, and also that some symbols do double duty. For example, the symbol for 'g' is also the symbol for 'God'; the symbol for 'fr' also means 'from'; and the symbol for 'kn' also means 'know'.

Some symbols can cover more than one tense. For instance, Pepys uses the symbol for 'have' to also mean 'had/hath'. It is the context that conveys which one is meant.

It's usual for shorthand users to create their own symbols for words they use often, and Pepys was no exception.

## Spelling in shorthand

Since the main aim of shorthand is to write quickly, you spell phonetically *and* remove all 'superfluous' letters. These are letters that aren't sounded or aren't strongly sounded.

For example, 'enough' is spelt 'enuf', end is 'nd', people 'peple', and name 'nam'.

A literal transcription of the shorthand symbols into longhand letters therefore looks very different from seventeenth-century English!

Shelton's system can be used for foreign language words too. Words that are proper names or place names are usually written in longhand. This isn't because the system can't handle those words, it's because it may actually be quicker to write unfamiliar names in longhand, and it serves as a navigation tool – longhand words leap off the page.

## Punctuation

Shorthand uses minimal punctuation. Shelton thinks only full stops are necessary and, since they might be mistaken for other marks, he suggests they be set a little below the line. Pepys evidently agreed about the potential for confusion, since to signal a full stop he used the triangle of dots that Shelton recommends as a symbol for signalling the end of a biblical verse  He later switched to using a tick.

Pepys also uses his 'full stop' symbols for the kind of break where we might put a semi-colon or a dash. His other main form of punctuation was brackets.

This means most punctuation that you see in editions of Pepys's diary (commas, dashes, even full stops) is editorial rather than Pepys's own.

## Challenges when reading shorthand

One of the difficulties of reading Shelton's shorthand (aside from recognizing the various symbols), is that symbols often closely resemble each other. The symbol for 'b', for example, is also the symbol for 'but', and resembles the symbol for 'them'.

The difference between vowel positions is very small, so working out which vowel is meant can be difficult.

Finally, the phonetic spelling and the practice of removing 'superfluous' letters mean you have not only to think how a seventeenth-century writer might spell, but also how they might sound. What would a word have sounded like to them, and what letters might therefore be cut?

For an editor, trying to construct seventeenth-century longhand from shorthand can be a complicated process, and if you want that longhand to be easily understood by twenty-first century readers, you may have to make further decisions about modernising spelling and punctuation.

## Examples from Pepys's Diary

This section has two passages from Pepys's diary. For each, you'll see the image of the shorthand, a basic transliteration of the symbols on the page, and a conversion into English longhand spelling. There's then a commentary about the shorthand in each passage and what looking at the original can add to our understanding of Pepys's meaning. These are each significant episodes in the diary, but I'm limiting the discussion here to the shorthand rather than the wider contexts.

Note: The basic transliterations of these passages aren't what an expert shorthand reader would see in reading – because you learn to jump over the intermediate stage and just see the word meant. For example, shorthand 'mi' means 'my', and someone familiar with the system would understand 'my' immediately. Similarly, on seeing the symbol that means b/but standing alone, you'd understand 'but'. However, it's helpful for beginners to see what the literal spelling is – and it also conveys just how much editors working with the shorthand have had to do to make Pepys's language easily understandable for their readerships.

## 5 April 1669: Doll

Pepys's diary shows that people of colour lived near to him in Seething Lane in the 1660s. Some were enslaved; at least one person by the end of the decade was free.

At the close of his entry for 5 April 1669 he mentions Doll (short for Dorothy) who was working in his house. It's a brief mention that's easily missed. It's not clear from Pepys's passing reference if she was enslaved or free (other clues point to the former), but she had come from the household of his neighbour, William Batelier.

Pepys uses a seventeenth-century racial term in this passage, which is discussed in the commentary.

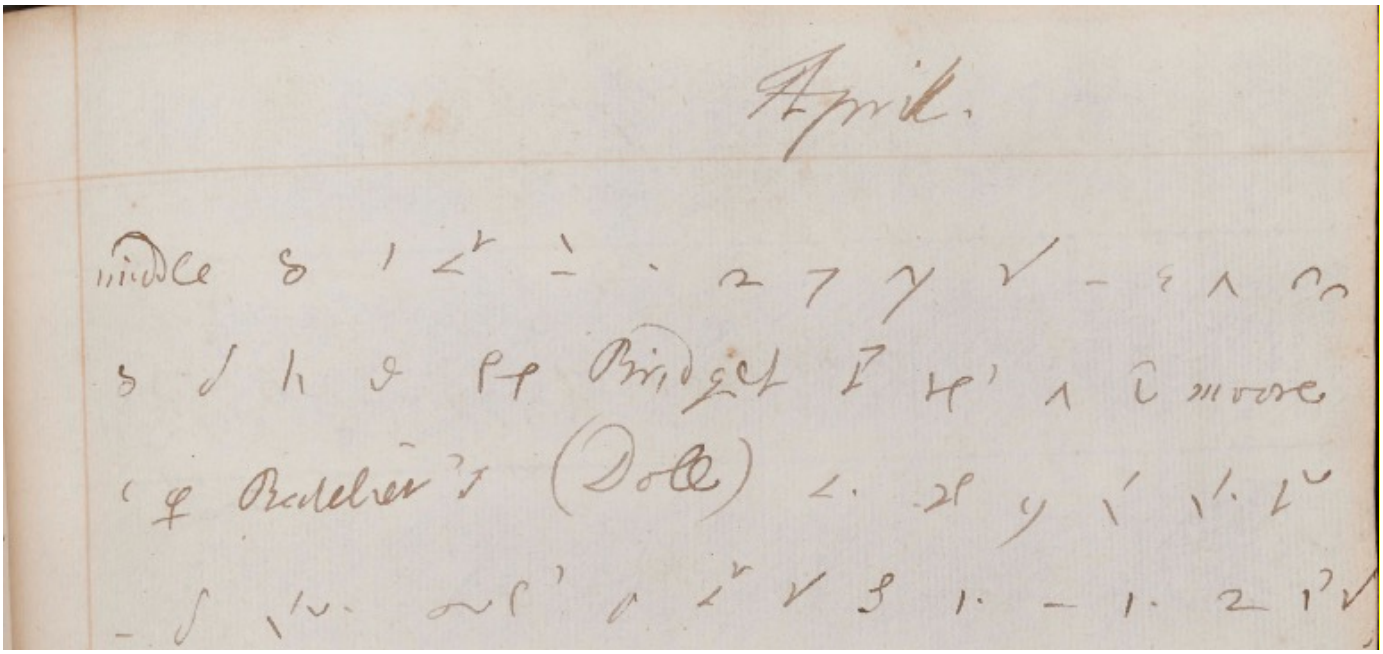


*Figure 6. Pepys Library, PL 1841, Diary. By permission of the Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge.*

### Basic transcript

In this transcription, word symbols that double as single letters or consonant clusters are shown as those letters, rather than the word. Longhand words are given in bold.

[The passage begins on the preceding page with 'This day came another new maid for a…']

**Aprill.**

**middle** made b her nam I kn nt yet. n for a cok made we hath e sins **Bridget** went used a blak **moore** of Mr. **Batelier's (Doll)** ho dress our met miti wel n we mitili plesed with her. So bi n bi to bed.

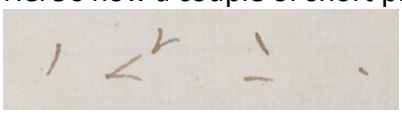
### Non-phonetic transcript

**Aprill.**

**middle** maid but her name I know not yet. And for a cook maid we have ever since **Bridget** went used a black **moore** of Mr. **Batelier's (Doll)** who dresses our meat mighty well and we mightily pleased with her. So by and by to bed.

Commentary:

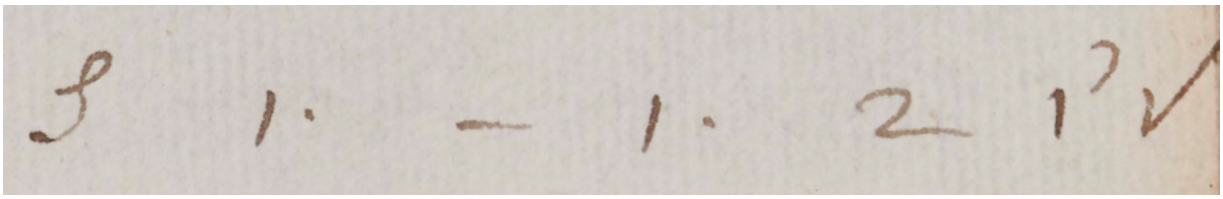
Here's how a couple of short phrases work. From the first line:



but h(e)r n(a)m I

That's the b/but symbol; 'her' made up of the symbol for 'h' followed by 'r' in the 'e' position; 'name' made up of 'n' with an 'm' above it in the 'a' position; and a dot (a tittle) midline for 'I'.

From the end of the last line:



So bi n bi to b(e)d full stop

That's the symbol for 'so' (a longhand 's'); 'by' made up of letter 'b' and a tittle in the 'i' position; the symbol for 'and' (which is also the letter symbol 'n'); another by; the symbol for 'to' which is a number 2; 'bed' which is made up of a letter 'b' and a 'd' in the 'e' position. The full stop is a tick.

There are a lot of Shelton's 'common word' symbols in this passage. For example 'know' (simply the letters kn); 'and' (letter 'n'); not (letters nt). Pepys has used Shelton's symbol for 'made' to mean 'maid'. He has devised his own symbol for 'ever', using the shorthand symbol for 'e'.

Some examples of removing superfluous letters: 'nam' for name; 'cok for 'cook'; 'met' for 'meat'. 'Sins' is used for 'since'.

**Use of longhand**: Pepys has put proper names (Bridget, Batelier, Doll) in longhand, as was conventional. However, he also put two other words in longhand: 'middle' and the word 'moore'. The latter is part of a common racial description in English at the time: 'blackmoore' or 'blackamore'. Pepys's decision to write out 'moore' in longhand seems meaningful, as there is a single symbol for 'more' (sic) which he could readily have used. Pepys thought it worth recording that Doll was black, and apparently further emphasis on this fact was needed: the longhand is working like bold or italics here. She is the first Black person he records working in his household, which may have meant her race was interesting to him as novelty. 'Middle' (which would have been easy to write in shorthand) is probably a navigational aid, as recording Doll's name in longhand would have been. He doesn't know the middle maid's name, but might want in future to locate when she was first employed (to pay her the correct wages, for example).

## 6 January 1663: Destroying Elizabeth's Papers

No writing is known to survive by Pepys's wife, Elizabeth. One reason for this is that Pepys was careful about what survived. On 6 January 1663, the couple had a fight about Elizabeth's desire to hire a waiting woman to ease her loneliness. This led to Pepys destroying papers that belonged to her, including the letter to him that she'd written making her case for a paid companion.

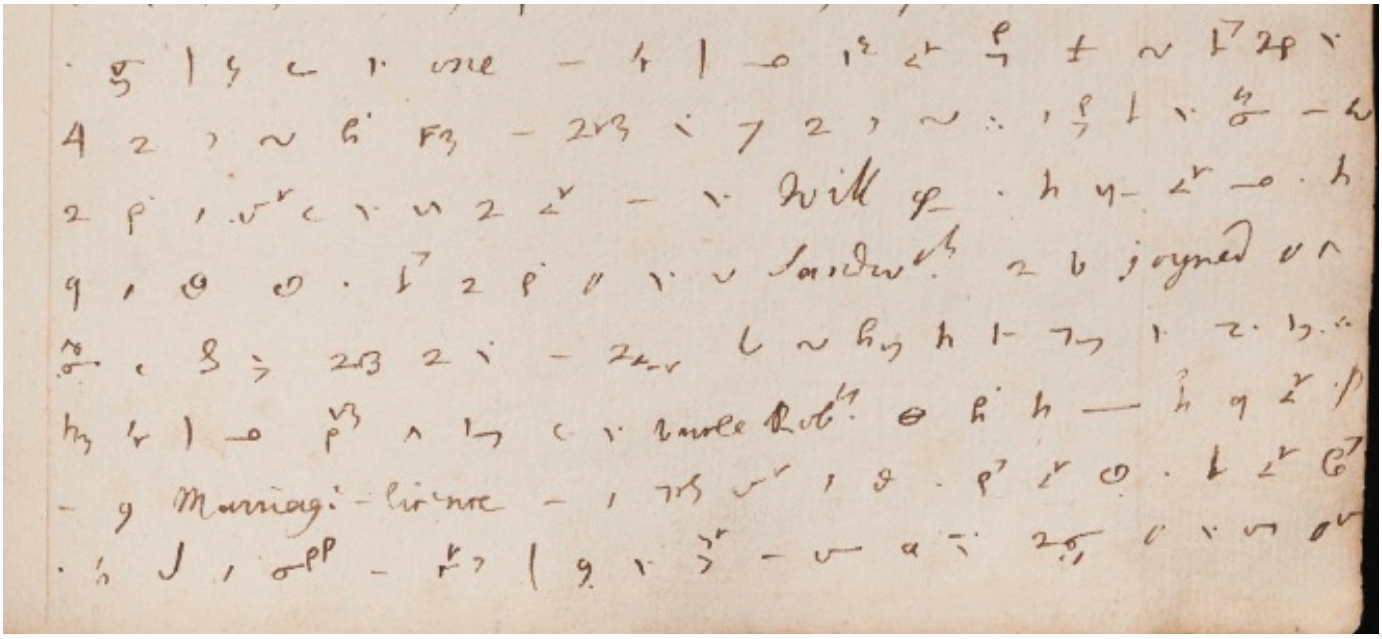


*Figure 7. Pepys Library, PL 1837, Diary. By permission of the Pepys Library, Magdalene College, Cambridge*

### Basic transcript

In this transcription, word symbols that double as individual letters or combined consonant clusters are given as the word where relevant, e.g. t/the, n/and, d/do.

I puld them ot on bi **one** and tor them all befor her fas though it went against mi heart to do it she criing and disireing me not to do it. But such was mi pasion and trouble to se the leters of mi love to her and mi **Will** wherein I hath gin her all I hath in the world when I went to se with mi Lord **Sandw$^{ch}$** to be **joyned** with a paper of so much disgrace to me and dishonor if it shold hath bin fond bi ani bodi. Hathing tor them all saving a bond of mi **uncle Rob$^{ts}$** which she hath long had in her hands and our **Marriage-licence** and the first leter that ever I sent her when I was her servant I tok up the pises and carid them into mi chamber and there after mani disput with mi self whether [end of page]

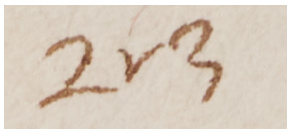
### Non-phonetic transcript

I pulled them out one by **one** and tore them all before her face though it went against my heart to do it, she crying and desiring me not to do it. But such was my passion and trouble to see the letters of my love to her and my **Will**, wherein I had given her all that I had in the world when I went to sea with my Lord **Sandwich**, to be **joyned** with a paper of so much disgrace to me and dishonour if it should hath been found by any body. Having tore them all, saving a bond of my **uncle Robert's** which she hath long had in her hands and our **Marriage-licence** and the first letter that ever I sent her when I was her servant,* I took up the pieces and carried them into my chamber and there after many disputes with my self whether…

*suitor.

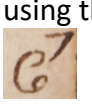
## Commentary

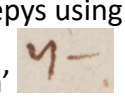
There are examples of how to form longer shorthand words in this passage. For example, desiring/disireing:



This is formed by the 'preposition' symbol for 'dis', which looks like a '2'; the 'r' symbol in the position for 'i'; and then 'ing' symbol in the 'e' position: dis(i)r(e)ing

Proficient shorthand writers use the minimum number of symbols to form a word. For instance, servant could be formed by writing the symbol for 's' followed by the letter symbols 'rv' in the 'e' position, and then putting 'nt' in the 'e' position. Pepys has instead reduced it to two symbols by using the word symbol for 'serve' (serv) for the first syllable, followed by 'nt' in the 'a' position :

 'servant'

Similarly, Shelton has a shorthand symbol for give: 
This is also spells 'gi' (letter symbol for 'g' and a tittle in the 'i' position). Towards the end of Pepys's first line, what looks like 'gin' is Pepys using the symbol for 'give' and putting the letter n (–) where the tittle would be to mean 'given' 

Pepys uses the symbol for 'hath' repeatedly in this passage. It's an editor's job to decide whether this means 'hath', 'had' or have (or, as here, 'hav-ing'), depending on the context. In writing 'she hath long *had*', Pepys gave the sign for 'hath', and put a 'd' above it in the 'a' position – evidently 'had' was meant but the symbols are 'hathad'.

**Use of longhand**: Pepys's choice of longhand words in this passage again seems significant. In the phrase 'one by one' he wrote the first 'one' in shorthand (on) and then switched to longhand for the second 'one'. This breaks up the expression in a way that mimics how he tore each paper singularly and deliberately. He put most of the documents he destroyed into longhand (including 'Will' which has a simple word symbol). This could be a navigational aid, but it also suggests the documents' importance. Finally, the word 'joyned' is also longhand. Double vowels sometimes cause issues in shorthand, but it's also significant that this action was Elizabeth's chief offence. It was not her writing of the letter that led to his destructive fit, but her decision to store it with other papers that showed his affection, for seeing them together might suggest to any readers that his professions of love and care were hollow.

## Identifying a shorthand system: some tips

There were many shorthand systems in use in the early modern period and, as shorthand inventors tended to adapt each other's systems, they can look very similar. If you're trying to identify what system a piece of shorthand is in without knowing the shorthand, here are some suggestions:

1. The shorter the piece of shorthand is, the trickier it is to identify the system. Find the longest passage you can.
2. Get the best quality image of the shorthand that you can: the original is best; a high-resolution photo or scan is good; a photocopy is less good. Tiny dots in shorthand can be letters or words, meaning that smudges on photocopies can lead to bafflement.
3. Work out the likely date of the writing and investigate the shorthand systems available around that time. Bear in mind that writers may be using a system from an earlier date, learned when young. If you think you're looking at a shorthand system from the early seventeenth century to the early nineteenth century, then James Henry Lewis's *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of Short Hand* (c.1825) may help identify potential candidates. The book names shorthand systems from across the period and has tables comparing their alphabetical symbols. It's available on googlebooks.
4. Look online (e.g. Early English Books Online, archive.org, or googlebooks) for shorthand manuals that might be relevant. As Lewis shows, a lot of shorthand systems share alphabetical signs, but use them for different letters. Word signs can be more distinctive, so it's useful to look at manuals' tables for common words, to see if there are signs that appear in your passage.
5. To try and match the shorthand passage to a manual, your best bet is to look for a three or more words in the passage where each word is represented by a simple individual symbol, rather than for a phrase where words are made up of clusters of symbols. A sequence of simple symbols means you're less likely to have to wrestle with the system's complexities (such as vowel positions). If there are no suitable single-symbol sequences in your passage, look for words made up of two letter symbols, preferably in a sequence with whole-word symbols. This will mean dealing with however the manual handles matters such as vowel positions.
6. Look at the manual's information on word symbols. See if matching these symbols to the passage gives you a short phrase that make sense. For example, in Shelton's tachygraphy the phrase 'and not to' is 3 symbols; 'or the other' is 3 symbols; 'God be with you' is four symbols: all of these are words shown in Shelton's table of common words.
7. If you can see a few phrases like this in your passage that make sense, the chances are you've got the right shorthand and can start working on understanding more using the manual. If you're trying this method and you can't find more than two symbols together than make sense, it's likely to be a different shorthand even if the symbols that you're seeing in the manuscript have a lot of close matches with symbols in the shorthand system – unless your writer has got creative in devising their own symbols.
8. Finally, early modern copies of shorthand manuals do vary, even when they're the same edition. The tables and other inserts may appear in a different order, or not at all. Shorthand inventors also updated new editions with additional explanations and sometimes new symbols. Once you've got a possible candidate for your writer's system, it's therefore worth checking if other copies of the manual are available, as these may hold additional information.

## Further reading/viewing suggestions:

Henderson, Frances, '"Swifte and Secrete Writing' in Seventeenth-Century England, and Samuel Shelton's *Brachygraphy*', *Electronic British Library Journal* 2008, Article 5 https://bl.iro.bl.uk/concern/articles/f3db135f-c759-4c77-8c12-b666f3067337 [accessed 18.11.23]

Lewis, James Henry, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of Short Hand* (London, c.1825)

Matthews, William, 'The Diary', in *The Diary of Samuel Pepys: A New and Complete Transcription*, ed. by Robert Latham and William Matthews, I (London: Bell, 1970, repr. London: HarperCollins, 2000), xlviii-lxvii

Minot McCay, Kelly, '"All the World Writes Short Hand"': The Phenomenon of Shorthand in Seventeenth-Century England', *Book History* 24:1 (2021), 1-36

de la Bédoyère, Guy, 'Samuel Pepys's Diary and Thomas Shelton's Shorthand (Tachygraphy)', video, youtube.com, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqTk2GMqzL4 [accessed 18.11.23]

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