

# Taking Shorthand for Literacy: Historicizing the Literate Activity of US Women in the Early Twentieth-Century Office

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## ABSTRACT

In this essay, I argue that neglect in literacy studies of the early twentieth-century office as a site of women's literate labor has been reinforced by two commonplaces about clerical work: first, that clerical work was routinized and deskilled after the turn of the century (and, consequently, became "women's work"), and second, that the labor of writing was split into the "head" work of male executives and the "hand" work of female clerical workers. Focusing on the figure of the early twentieth-century female stenographer, I identify some of the problems with these two commonplaces and urge literacy scholars to recover the labor of clerical workers in their histories. The essay concludes with a brief discussion of the diary of a stenographer named Irene Chapin, who lived and worked in Western Massachusetts in the late 1920s.

## KEYWORDS

clerical work, literacy, stenographers, shorthand, deskilling, diaries, women, writing

Whenever people have learned that my research relates to the history of clerical work, it has been remarkable how quickly and spontaneously they have offered up personal connections and stories: anecdotes about a mother, grandmother, or aunt who supported the family by working as a stenographer or secretary, memories of summers spent working for a temp agency during college or graduate school. Given the power and prevalence of such stories, the overall lack of historical attention paid to clerical work as a site of women's literate activity is striking. Certainly, the cultural impact of clerical work, constructed as *women's work*, has been profound. In 1880, the number of women in clerical jobs stood at 6,600; by 1920, that figure had risen to well over a million (1,396,000), and in the next decade it would jump yet again to reach nearly two million, with women making up more than fifty percent of all clerical workers (Kwolek-Folland 4). During that same period of growth, the female clerical worker (or "business

girl”) would show up in fiction, film, newspapers, and magazines—becoming one of the most visible figures in popular culture to link women with literate labor and modern technologies for writing.

The fact that so prominent a site of women’s literate activity as clerical work has garnered so little attention from literacy historians<sup>1</sup> bears pausing over, particularly given the steady proliferation of historical work that has emerged within the field of composition and rhetoric, much of it directed toward the study and recovery of US women’s literate and rhetorical practices (Royster, Gere, Enoch, Hollis, Johnson, Kates, and Sharer, to name just a few). While this scholarship has grown to encompass both curricular and extracurricular sites of literacy, the office has thus far failed to attract much attention as a scene for the production of “usable” histories of literacy. Why might this be? And what might this neglect, or omission, tell us about the terministic screens at work on our ideas about which kinds of writers and writing count as worth recovering? Why do we seem to value some literacies more than others?

The reasons that clerical work remains well to the margins of composition histories are various and not easily untangled, and I can only hope to offer a piece of that larger explanation here. But the question merits attention, given the reach and scale of clerical work as a shaping influence on writing instruction, women’s employment prospects, and indeed the ways that conceptions of clerical work and the clerical worker as a feminine stereotype have served at times to classify, contain, and dismiss women’s literate and intellectual labor.<sup>2</sup> Certainly notions of writing as “women’s work” were not limited to the business office. The influx of women into the office, beginning in the last decades of the nineteenth century, occurred at the same time that the first year composition course was emerging and writing instruction was coming to be feminized, both in status and staffing. As Deborah Brandt, Richard Ohmann, David Russell, Donna Strickland, and others have shown, the growth and transformation of business in the US has not been separate from the business of writing instruction.<sup>3</sup>

A story commonly told about the early twentieth-century corporation is one that emphasizes a relentless drive toward efficiency through systems management, division of labor, and mechanization. As a historical lens, this story has been used to advance valid critiques of both business and education. However, I want to suggest that the dominance of this narrative has made it difficult to see clerical workers as anything but victims of (or cogs within) an impersonal and exploitative machine—except, perhaps, to see them as white-collar workers and, thus, obedient beneficiaries of race and class privilege, set apart from the political struggles of their working-class sisters and brothers in the labor movement. Neither of these images (the victimized cog or the obedient worker of privilege) presents itself as likely candidate for recovery. The “everyday” literacies of clerical workers do not seem to offer up the sorts of narratives of writerly agency and political resistance—what might be termed “activist literacies”—that we tend to privilege and celebrate in our histories. Despite warnings against studying only those figures whose politics seem to align with our own present-day values and identifications (Mattingly 100-03; Sutherland 16, 27-29) and critiques of dichotomous hero/villain narratives (Paine xi, 34-35), business is always subject to suspicion.

In this essay, I argue that composition and rhetoric scholars’ continued neglect of women’s

literate labor in the early twentieth-century office has been reinforced by two commonplaces that dominate our thinking about that labor: first, the understanding that clerical work was routinized and deskilled after the turn of the century (and, consequently, became “women’s work”), and second, that the labor of writing was split into the “head” work of male executives and the “hand” work of female clerical workers. Both of these commonplaces grow out of prominent discourses of this period and reflect an impulse to devalue the material tools and bodily labor of writing, which in the context of clerical work have routinely been coded as both feminine and “mechanical.” The stereotype of a feminine body as a circuit that merely reproduces the words and ideas of others assumes and perpetuates a simplified notion of literacy, writers, and writing technologies that is out of step with current scholarship in literacy and composition. If clerical workers and their literacies are to be brought more squarely within the historical purview of composition and rhetoric, and if we are to chip away at the persistent binaries that continue to frame clerical work, then we must acknowledge the limitations of these commonplaces—particularly insofar as they overshadow and obscure individual experiences within wider economies of literacy.

In what follows, I unpack some of the problems in the two commonplaces described above by focusing on one particular type of clerical worker from the early twentieth century—the female stenographer. Often considered to be a more “mechanical” class of worker than the secretary, the stenographer would seem to present the less compelling site for an examination or recovery of workplace literacies, and it is partly for this reason that I choose her.<sup>4</sup> There are at least three senses in which the stenographer’s work might be considered “mechanical”: (1) such work frequently involved mechanical devices such as typewriters and dictation machines; (2) in order to keep up with spoken dictation, the stenographer was expected to have mastered a shorthand system well enough to type and to convert speech to shorthand symbols more or less “mechanically” (that is to say, automatically: quickly, accurately, and with a minimum of conscious thought); (3) in transcribing dictation, the stenographer was expected to enact and ensure “mechanical correctness,” extending to spelling, punctuation, capitalization, grammar, and paragraphing, as well as the overall neatness and formatting of the page (evenly striking the keys for uniform darkness, anticipating how long the document would be so as to ensure its fit and placement on the page, and so on).

By considering the figure of the early twentieth-century stenographer in a more nuanced way, I hope to upend some of the mechanical biases that have persisted around clerical work and thereby served as obstacles to the recognition and study of clerical work as *literate* work. One aim of this essay, then, is to help clear the way for historical recovery of early twentieth-century women’s literacies in the office and related settings. In the concluding section of this essay, I draw from the diaries of a real-life stenographer named Irene Chapin, whose written entries (1926-1928) provide a useful counterpoint to representations of the stenographer as a human machine and suggest some of the ways that clerical literacies migrated beyond the office door.

## DESKILLING THE OFFICE WORKER

Readers of this essay have likely encountered an image like the following at some point: a black and white photograph that shows women at work in a large room, seated behind desks neatly arranged in long rows, perhaps positioned at typewriters or adding machines.<sup>5</sup> Like so many symbol-using cogs, they churned out information that helped lubricate the workings of burgeoning

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corporate machines. Such images have functioned as a kind of visual shorthand for the now-familiar story of how clerical work came to be gendered and deskilled, a story that usually goes something like this: in keeping with the new scale of growing corporations and a drive toward efficiency, Taylorites and other efficiency experts re-imagined the nineteenth-century office by breaking work down into smaller component tasks that required only limited skill or thought. These

scientifically-minded men and women sought to identify the “one best way”<sup>6</sup> to accomplish a given task, with “best” often measured in terms of speed, efficiency, and output—rather than, say, workers’ satisfaction or understanding of the larger production process. The assembly line is perhaps the best known and most vivid example of this impulse to “scientifically manage” work, as Charlie Chaplin memorably demonstrated in the 1936 film *Modern Times*, by showing how the pace of work could be set to machine speed. Some clerical workers, particularly those classified as “machine operatives,” complained that they felt like factory workers (Strom 246). Yet, as much as the assembly line has come to symbolize routinization and deskilling, it can be a misleading metaphor for evaluating the literate labor of the clerical worker. Scientific management may have brought similar values to both the factory and the office, but the outcomes varied, and not all forms of office work proved equally conducive to the use of such techniques. Stenography and secretarial work, in particular, seem to have been more resistant to being scientifically managed.<sup>7</sup> Written correspondence entailed more variability than a manufactured widget, and the time it took to record a dictated letter depended as much upon the efforts and work habits of the dictator as it did upon the shorthand skills of the stenographer.

Well into the 1970s, many scholars held that the type of deskilling associated with the factory had also occurred in the office (Cohn 65). It seemed apparent that by the first part of the twentieth century the role of the clerk had been transformed and degraded—a result of the rapid growth and mechanization of business. Rather than apprentices who would, over time, move into managerial positions, the male clerk of the eighteenth or early nineteenth century would be displaced by the (usually) female worker who toiled with little autonomy in a large and impersonal corporation. Harry Braverman’s influential *Labor and Monopoly Capital* describes bookkeepers in pre-industrial

America as “master craftsmen” (299) who would come to be replaced, along with their clerk apprentices, by semi-skilled machine operators overseen by a smaller group of office managers. This deskilling narrative had the advantage of allowing scholars to group clerical workers together with factory workers, understanding both groups to be similarly alienated from their labor. It also offered a possible explanation for sex segregation in offices: as certain types of work were deskilled and degraded through mechanization and rationalization, those positions would have become less appealing to men and their (masculine) skilled labor less necessary.

Yet, it is not clear that office work after 1900 did, in fact, require less skill than it had throughout the previous century. There is no question that offices underwent a significant transformation in the period between 1870 and 1930, or that scientific management and mechanization left their mark on the office, but the speed and enthusiasm with which these new methods were adopted varied considerably. As historian Lisa Fine points out, “Only the largest companies had the need and the resources to adopt these rationalized methods of white-collar work” (171); even as late as 1930, “many firms remained relatively untouched by scientific management,” despite its undeniable influence (Davies, *Woman’s Place* 107). Just as the adoption of rationalized methods for office work was uneven, so too was the impact on workers’ skills. Samuel Cohn, in his book-length study of occupational sex-typing, questions the extent to which clerical work was deskilled. He notes that some of the new office technologies helped to speed up repetitive tasks requiring less skill (licking stamps, copying documents, and addressing envelopes, for instance), and so may have actually eliminated positions that had formerly employed unskilled workers (84, 86). By contrast, other devices required the development of new skills. The typewriter, for example, required wholly different motor skills than did penmanship; clerical workers who used typewriters also typically learned to clean and maintain their machines, sometimes even making basic repairs (89). In sum, clerical work in the early twentieth century seems for many workers to have required about the same and sometimes more skill than it did for their nineteenth-century counterparts (Cohn 66, 89-90).

As this brief history illustrates, certain familiar narratives about clerical deskilling oversimplify and thus elide the nuances of literate labor. In the rest of this section, I suggest that such oversimplifications are not innocent but gendered; they position female workers differently from their male counterparts in this history of the office. When we situate women within a more nuanced history of clerical work, it is possible to see how the stenographer as a literate subject becomes ideologically overdetermined as lacking in skill, as non-intellectual—thus positioning literate activities associated with that subject as feminine and thus not deserving of status, pay, or scholarly attention.

The very concept of deskilling implies that we can compare levels of literate skill across contexts and time periods. Such assessments are tricky, in part because of how conceptions of literate skill are bound up with factors like economic value and scarcity (Brandt, *Literacy* 1-2), tacit or naturalized cultural knowledge, and judgments about the possessors of the skills in question (as grounded in social status or other identity categories, for example). As feminist historians of technology have

argued, beliefs about gender have shaped and been shaped by societal beliefs about skill and technology (Lerman, Oldenziel, and Mohun 2-3, 5-7). We see this shaping at work in comparisons that contrast the purportedly eroded skill of the early twentieth-century (female) clerical worker against that of the nineteenth-century (male) clerk. Such comparisons often have relied upon romanticized images of the latter that gloss over the challenges many men faced in finding work that was satisfying and remunerative (Cohn 67; Srole 18-21). The nineteenth-century clerk has been depicted as an apprentice who, under the guidance of a paternalistic employer, amassed increasingly more skill over time; once trained, he was expected to ascend into a management position, launch his own business, or perhaps marry the boss's daughter. While some clerks did obtain such success, the happy narrative of the self-made man hardly reflected the experiences of all. The term "clerk" was a generic one, equally likely to be applied to the man working as a copyist as to the young businessman on the rise.<sup>8</sup>

Already by the mid-nineteenth century, before women or typewriters had entered the office, the clerk's relationship to his employer was becoming more impersonal, and fewer clerks were finding opportunities to become proprietors (Srole 21). Some clerks were hired to do copying only on a temporary basis, similar to modern day "temp" workers (Cohn 67), and even permanent workers might never manage to advance beyond the position of a low- or mid-level clerk, particularly those who came from working-class backgrounds (Davies, "Feminization" 4-5). As a result, a clerk's status could be liminal and uncertain, and men who remained in clerking positions for too long might feel their masculinity called into question.

Rather than experiencing a uniform loss of skill and autonomy, clerical workers in the late-nineteenth- and early twentieth-century office were subject to, and participants in, a more complicated restructuring. This involved a deskilling process that was rhetorical as well as technological. Differences in skill, education, and status among office workers were reflected in workplace hierarchies that incorporated separate tracks and job titles for men and women. Even within the comparatively truncated women's "track," workers were organized into different classes—from file clerk and typist at the lower end, stenographer in the middle, and private secretary or female office manager at the upper end. According to Strom, "the division of workers into different categories of class and status—was as acute in office work and among women workers as it was in the workplace at large" (4). Yet, despite these distinctions, twentieth-century labor economists for a long time failed to discern much difference among female clerical workers, treating them as "[a]pparent victims of an all-encompassing women's labor market principle" and "an amorphous group characterized by nothing but their gender" (Strom 4). One way that skill has therefore been obscured or erased has been through a tendency to group all clerical workers together: viewing them as interchangeable and eliding distinctions in the nature of their work.

An example of this tendency to lump clerical workers together can be seen in the habit of imagining them, first and foremost, as operators of office equipment—as button pushers or machine operatives. The similarities shared by the adding machine and typewriter's physical form and mechanism of

operation (a metal box with keys to press) invite this sort of grouping, as does the proliferation of office devices during the early twentieth century (see Leffingwell's hefty 1926 *Office Appliance Manual*, for example). But to adopt such a view is to obscure the different types of symbolic work and tacit knowledge associated with each machine and its use in different work contexts. Calculating machines had mathematical rules built into their operations, for example, whereas typewriter manufacturers did not incorporate similar rules for language usage into their machines. The adoption of writing technologies such as typewriters and shorthand systems, while speeding up the production of written texts, "may not have threatened the traditional stenographer or secretarial worker with either the loss of a job or job-deskilling, and may, in fact, have made him or her more indispensable

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to an employer” (Strom 185). By contrast, “[a]dding machines had more ominous possibilities for bookkeepers, who held relatively prestigious positions in traditional offices” and therefore “had far more to lose than copyists as both mechanization and rationalization set in” (Strom 185; see also Cohn 89).<sup>9</sup> Despite

differences in the ways that mechanization affected different types of clerical workers, references to clerical work's history are often painted with the same broad brush, with little to say about the domain knowledge workers acquired on the job or the literacy skills that were necessary and, increasingly, assumed. Such treatments amount to a kind of deskilling by omission.

A more deliberate type of rhetorical deskilling came about through the efforts of male stenographers who, concerned about losing status, sought to shore up and protect their professional (masculine) identities. Prior to the invention of the typewriter, men had had a near monopoly on stenographic work. At the end of the nineteenth century, however, women were rapidly making inroads into stenography. First trained as typists, it wasn't long before they began learning shorthand as a complementary skill. It quickly became clear that combining typing ability with stenographic skills was the new “killer app” of clerical work, and women's incursion into typing and stenography was rapid and pronounced. By 1900, women held seventy-seven percent of all typing and stenography jobs in the US, and by 1920 that number had jumped to ninety percent (Lupton 43). In response to this feminine threat, a growing perception of stenography as “mechanical,” and out of concern for the quality of stenographic instruction offered by a growing number of commercial schools, some male stenographers sought to brand certain types of stenographic work as particularly demanding of “masculine” qualities. They argued that court reporting (legal stenography) in particular demanded physical stamina, memory, and intelligence, and that the nature of statements made in the courtroom would shock and upset the sensibility of any modest, self-respecting woman (Srole 145). Seeking to

cement their status as professionals, male stenographers presented business stenography—an area in which women were beginning to dominate—as a weaker and less professional type of work (Srole 127).<sup>10</sup> Images that showed women using office machines, along with a tendency to assign more tedious or repetitive office jobs to women, further contributed to perceptions of women’s work in offices as more mechanical than intellectual.

It goes without saying that the word “mechanical” has negative connotations for composition and rhetoric scholars. The phrase “mechanical correctness” evokes at once a problematic pedagogy, the unthinking application of rules for writing, and images of student papers besprinkled with red ink from Miss Grundy’s pen (Connors 112). These are associations from which the field has tried to distance itself, though not, perhaps, without cost.<sup>11</sup> The result of this distancing or “anti-mechanic sentiment” (Rice 370) has not only been to transform the way we talk about our work in the writing classroom; it has also informed the kinds of histories we see—or, rather, don’t see—as worthy of recovery and study.

Writers or scenes of literate activity that have come to be seen as “mechanical” have been more difficult to recognize as examples of meaningful writing: they seem to present themselves as evacuated of intellect and agency (rhetorical, political, or otherwise). At the end of the nineteenth century, despite myriad social and technological developments that were helping to alter the way writing was being used by workers within and beyond academia, the idea that writing was merely the transcription of spoken language persisted within higher education. Conceived of as “transcribed speech,” writing was regarded by many as an elementary skill (Russell 4-5). Russell has suggested that one result of this persistent conception of writing as a mere act of “talking with the pen” was “a conceptual split between ‘content’ and ‘expression,’” mapped onto a binary hierarchy that privileged the former over the latter. This misconceived division was to have, in his words, “profound consequences” for composition as it justified the relegation of writing instruction “to the margins of a course, a curriculum, an institution” (5-7). A similar marginalization—and feminization—was at work in the turn-of-the-century office; there is perhaps no figure that more aptly symbolizes this content/expression split than the (female) stenographer, whose job it was to usher the spoken ideas of others into the form of a written text.

## HEAD, HANDS, AND “AUTOMATIC” WRITING IN THE OFFICE

When men are deprived of the quill and women of the needle, all hands are up for grabs—as employable as employees. Typescript amounts to the desexualization of writing, sacrificing its metaphysics and turning it into word processing. (Kittler 187)

The connections between authorship and writing became attenuated and obscure when the latter became newly “automatic.” (Gitelman 187)



The idea of a form/content split, attributed to the adoption of the typewriter, has worked to obscure alternative discourses that might construct the stenographer's role as active and collaborative rather than one of simple mechanical reproduction. When deskilling narratives reduce women to "hands," they create a terministic screen that prevents us from seeing these workers as literate subjects or active participants in larger flows of information. Mike Rose has argued that we ought to "think more clearly and fairly" about the intelligence of the American worker; I, too, would like to see us "give workers back their heads" (xvii, 145). In order to do this, says Rose, we must be willing to "reimagine and unsettle our prevailing vocabulary of work," particularly those terminologies grounded in "the Western, Cartesian divide between body and mind . . . the opposition of hand to brain" (141). So long as the labor of clerical workers is reduced to the motions of their hands, and their relationship to written texts considered "merely mechanical," it seems likely that the history of that labor will continue to be marginalized within composition and rhetoric.

I began the previous section with an image of women working at rows of desks and the idea of an assembly line. I turn now to a second image: a woman seated at a typewriter, listening through ear tubes or headphones as she transcribes recorded speech into typewritten text. This image of the transcribing typist has been associated with a particular type of deskilling, a gendered division of labor that ostensibly split the act of writing into two parts: conception and production, mental work and manual work. In the quotation that opens this section, Friedrich Kittler suggests that typing symbolically "desexualized" writing, replacing the "phallic" pen with the impersonal typewriter. Yet typing and stenography, as should be obvious by now, were far from unsexed. All hands might have been "up for grabs" as employees, but the workers to whom they belonged were still subject to gendered representations of work that cast the workplace tasks of male executives as "mental" and those of female clerical workers as "manual."

An example of this gendered mapping appears in a 1907 advertisement for an Edison dictation machine, which has been reproduced in JoAnne Yates's widely cited history of business communication, *Control Through Communication*, and more recently in Strickland's *The Managerial Unconscious in the History of Composition Studies*. The ad's slogan, written in bold letters, reads "From Brain to Type" and accompanies an illustration which makes clear that the brain belongs to the male business executive, who is shown using the device to record his dictation. The female stenographer-typist, the ad implies, is merely a set of ears and hands—a physical circuit that receives the dictator's words, thereby linking together the dictation machine and typewriter and producing the type mentioned in the ad's slogan. Similar assumptions about "men's" and "women's" work roles

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showed up repeatedly in advertisements for office furniture and supplies as well as office machines. In some ads, images of women were used to suggest that a device was easy to operate or to reaffirm the thinking and decision-making role of a male executive (Kwolek-Folland 72).

Yates seems to take the message advanced by the Edison advertisement more or less at face value; she explains that the typewriter not only offered a means to write more quickly, it also

opened the way for another change in the procedure by which documents came into being in business establishments: *creation was completely separated from final production*. Before the typewriter, the writer sometimes drafted a document . . . and turned it over to a clerk to copy it out in final form . . . . But the almost universal separation of those functions only occurred in conjunction with the typewriter. (42-43, my emphasis)

According to the logic of the Edison advertisement and Yates's description above, the typewriter helped to create a physical and temporal gap between the moment of a text's oral composition and its eventual form as a typewritten document arranged visually on the page. This gap, filled by the typist, marked a division between writing as "creation" versus "production" (Yates 42), or as "conceptual" versus "mechanical" (Strickland 19). In the wishful metaphysics of the Edison marketing department, the female stenotypist is evacuated of mind and agency, a mere receiver (or "medium") for others' words.

Like the larger narrative of deskilling, this image of the stenographer as a set of hands severed from the composing brain is problematic. Yet when it comes to the dictator-stenographer relationship, there still seems to be an impulse and desire to locate a singular "Author" rather than to think of a dictated letter as the product of a collaboration, or to place it within a network of writerly effort distributed through time and across multiple modes and technologies. Such an impulse seems difficult to reconcile with the scholarly work that's been done in recent decades to deconstruct and complicate Enlightenment notions of authorship and to recognize the myriad ways that writing entails collaboration.<sup>12</sup>

I want to continue to put pressure on the idea of the stenographer as a mere "tape recorder" for others' words by considering another device that participated in the symbolic deskilling of the stenographer. If the typewriter seemed to split conception from inscription, then the dictation machine promised to take this division one step further: by eliminating the need for shorthand, devices like the Edison Business Phonograph removed the stenographer from the scene of dictation altogether (Fig. 1). Yet, the dictation machine was never a major agent of deskilling because, as many historians have noted, it never enjoyed the universal adoption that typewriters did (Morton 48-50; Srole 225-26; Cohn 85; Yates 45). It is not difficult to imagine some of the reasons why: a human "recorder" is much more responsive and flexible than a machine, and for many male employees, dictating to a female stenographer would have been a more compelling confirmation of status and masculinity than operating a machine. Although some lower-level clerks were required to use dictation machines, middle- or upper-level managers with clout were more likely to be successful in resisting such requirements (Morton 48).

The preference for a human stenographer wasn't solely a matter of status or convenience, however. Early dictation machines provided what might be described in today's technological parlance as a bad "user experience." One commentator, writing for *The Atlantic* in 1904, observed that

the failure of the graphophone [as a tool] for composition arises from the unwillingness of a human being to be left behind in a race. The waxen wheel begins to spin; the person dictating must either keep pace with its rapid rotations, or bring it to a standstill. Such a race is not an invitation to careful thought or accurate utterance. (O'Brien 471)

Businessmen simply found the machines difficult to use as a means of composing: "[t]hey could not remember their train of thought or include all of the punctuation without prodding from the stenographer" (Srole 225-26). Dictation, in other words, was experienced by many writers as an interactive activity where the stenographer acted as interlocutor and audience rather than simply a mute human recorder. We might therefore think of dictation and transcription less as a *division* of labor and more a *distribution* of labor. Sometimes this distribution followed sharper delineations (when the written product was more uniform, as with mass mailings, it could be treated more like widget-making), but in other situations the distribution might be messier, and the roles of dictator and scribe more fungible, more apparently a collaboration.

While devices like the Edison Business Phonograph held out a promise of greater efficiency (Fig. 1), it was more often written shorthand—a specialized skill that had to be acquired and cultivated—that remained the predominant literacy technology for taking dictation throughout early twentieth century. As with learning a second language, regular practice with shorthand was important for stenographers wanting to acquire and maintain speed and accuracy, as well as for those wishing to expand their shorthand "vocabularies." Yet, even as dictation machines failed to achieve the popularity and success of other office equipment, the *idea* of the dictation machine nonetheless stuck as an image and a metaphor that has contributed to the "continued perception of business stenographers as machinelike workers who provided no input into the dictation process" (Srole 226). Whereas businesses may have been slow to adopt practices of scientific office management, advertisers for office devices like the dictation machine were far more enthusiastic in embracing rhetorics of efficiency, producing ads that promised speed and convenience for dictator and stenographer alike.

Instructional materials from the early twentieth century, such as textbooks and advice literature for the "business girl," offer a representation of literate activity that is distinctly different from what we find in the Edison marketing campaign. Authors of such materials frequently imagined the diligent student or ambitious stenographer developing increasingly more sophisticated language and writing skills over time that would enable her (or him) to provide correspondingly more editorial input. The most skilled stenographers could aspire to become private secretaries, entrusted with the solo writing of correspondence. A 1919 textbook by Edward Hall Gardner, titled *Constructive Dictation: "Plan Your Letter,"* illustrates this progression. I quote at length here to show the rhetorical sensibility and expectation of ongoing literacy learning that characterize the author's remarks:

You are looking forward to the day when your employer will give you a simple memorandum,

or a brief note, and will ask you to “write that letter.” In other words, you, and not he, will some day write most of his letters.

Consequently you wish to study and to understand each letter you transcribe. Study each unfamiliar word, referring . . . to the glossary and vocabulary in the Appendix, and to a dictionary for other words new to you.

Then ask yourself, “*Do I understand the situation covered by this letter? What result does it aim to accomplish? What impression does it wish to leave, or what action is the reader desired to take?*” . . . . As you practice to become a skilled recorder and transcriber of other people’s words, determine also to understand the ideas [behind] the letters you take down. You will take dictation more accurately and rapidly if you understand what you are writing. Moreover, when your chance comes, you will be ready to play a more responsible part in the business in which you have a share.” (12-13, my emphasis)

The picture that Gardner paints for a stenographer is quite different from that of a passive circuit whose ears and hands dumbly receive the message. Here, the stenographer is encouraged to think of content, context, and purpose, and to use her (or his) position as a means of learning about the business and its language. The stenographer’s potential role in the writing process is shown falling along a spectrum: from a more-or-less verbatim transcription to a give-and-take collaboration (with the stenographer providing suggestions, reminders, or information to the dictator), to the autonomous writing of letters. Secretarial manuals and advice in the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s suggest that even “basic” transcription entailed editorial or fact-checking responsibilities, and it was not unusual for authors to advise even lower-level clerical workers like file clerks to learn about the business’s operations by reading the documents they handled.

The textbook *English for Secretaries* (1944) underscores the literacy skills considered important for secretarial work, which include “technical knowledge beyond the normal needs of others” and “training in the *transcription* of letters dictated by others” (Nichols x). Such training is important because

[r]arely does a dictated letter reach the secretary in exactly the form in which it should go out. In the stress of dictation little slips are made by many dictators, and occasionally even big ones by the best of dictators. It is the secretary’s job to polish each letter off so that as it goes out it is not only factually accurate and technically correct, but also structurally attractive. Often excellence in this aspect of secretarial work is the most effective means of attracting the notice of executives on whom promotions depend. (Nichols x)

When considered alongside stereotypes of the rationalized office, this textbook commentary evinces a pair of contradictory attitudes toward literacy that thread through the discourses surrounding clerical work. On one hand, “basic” office literacies are assumed, having become nearly invisible against a backdrop of machines and scientific management; on the other hand, an above-average facility with written language and its technologies remained a defining feature of the clerical worker—a quality to be cultivated, particularly by ambitious stenographers and secretaries. Language

ability was represented as a way to distinguish oneself and advance within the hierarchy of office work; discourses encountered by female clerical workers in the first half of the twentieth century thus borrowed from the masculine rhetorics of upward mobility, professionalism, and independence previously associated with the nineteenth-century male clerk-apprentice or stenographer (Srole 9-10). Though there is plenty to critique about these rhetorics, the point remains that women, too, were encouraged to view clerical literacies as a means to success in the workplace.

## OFFICE LITERACIES AND THE DIARIES OF A STENOGRAPHER

***“My hunch is that the history of women’s literacies in the context of clerical work will need to be told through the aggregation of many such smaller stories, rather than through the recovery of a few extraordinary women.”***

As a category of symbolic activity, clerical work has functioned as a “black box” through which information flows, with stereotypes about that work occluding our view of variations in material and mental labor exerted from one context to another. The result has been to produce a gap in our historical understanding of the office as a scene of women’s literate activity. In this final section, I argue for the historical recovery of literacies associated with clerical work. Scholarship of this kind

can give us a more textured understanding of literacy practices in the office and help us see how those practices have emerged in response to both local circumstances and wider economies.

Part of the complexity that I’m suggesting we need to recover includes tracing and describing the experiences of individuals who acquired and used workplace literacies. Interviews and oral histories—as represented in Brandt’s discussion of Genna May, who worked in the office of a laboratory and with a land title company after the turn of the century (*Literacy* 79), and Liz Rohan’s account of her grandmother’s work in a typing pool at Sears in the late 1920s—represent valuable means for accomplishing this sort of historical work. These methods become less accessible, however, with the passing of time and the loss of that generation of women. For twenty-first-century researchers, archives and print resources like personal letters and diaries will play an increasingly important role in enabling scholars to gather the details needed to adopt “contextual perspectives” that recognize a *multiplicity* of clerical literacies and attend to their embeddedness within broader systems of activity (Brandt, *Literacy* 3-4). Primary sources, as we shall see, bring new interpretive challenges as well as new insights.

What follows is a discussion based on my analysis of one such resource: the personal diaries of a woman named Irene Chapin (b. April 1, 1901; d. March 25, 1987). At the time the diaries were written, Chapin was in her mid-twenties and living on the family farm with her brothers and widower father. Chapin recorded details of her daily life into three pocket-sized diaries that span the years 1926–28 (Fig. 2), during which time she was employed as a stenographer in the offices of the

Fisk Tire Company (later to become Uniroyal) in Chicopee, Massachusetts. Brief observations about her work are woven in among descriptions of the weather, driving the new “Chevie,” outings with friends and family, and other social occasions.

I have compiled a collection of passages that relate specifically to Chapin’s office work (Fig. 3); most of these come from her 1926 diary, which chronicles a period of transition as she returned from California to Massachusetts and tried to settle in to her work at Fisk. Chapin’s remarks about her work tend to be brief, and I found that by gathering and organizing them chronologically I was able gain a clearer sense of the rhythms of her work at the office. Significantly for my argument, Chapin’s descriptions of that work resist simplistic characterization as “merely mechanical.” Her work is neither glamorous nor overtly political, but it is not my aim here to produce a “great man” history or add Chapin to a canon; nor is this a “literacy for liberation narrative” (Daniell 399). Rather, it is a single example meant to illustrate the diary as one type of historical artifact that we might work with to begin exploring how clerical literacies were woven into the lives of real women. My hunch is that the history of women’s literacies in the context of clerical work will need to be told through the aggregation of many such smaller stories, rather than through the recovery of a few extraordinary women.

Chapin’s diary reveals that her work as a stenographer is material and technological, but it is not “mechanical” in the sense of being unthinking or having the uniformity of an assembly line. Instead, Chapin’s work days vary in the nature and pace of work, with some space for flexibility and agency. There are several days, for example, when she arranges to leave work early to run errands or chooses to stay late because she doesn’t want to leave untranscribed dictation waiting over the weekend. We see that there are busier days and slower days. The latter—which take the form of “lazy” days spent gossiping with a coworker (June 23, 1926) or afternoons spent “loaf[ing]” after a morning of “tedious work” (May 28, 1926)—are exactly the sort of “inefficiency” that dictation machines were supposed to eliminate by ensuring a constant supply of recorded dictation ready to be transcribed. At other times Chapin describes being overwhelmed with work. One Thursday there was so much to be done that she and a dozen of her coworkers “worked until ten o’clock” at night (May 27, 1926), and the following week she would find herself again “swamped’ with dictation” (June 2, 1926). In fact, Chapin writes repeatedly of having “slews of dictation” (she uses that same phrase in at least five separate entries), and elsewhere of being “snowed under” with dictation and other work (Nov. 2, 1926; Oct. 31, 1928).

While Chapin’s diary entries don’t tell us much about the nature of her stenographic relationship with the business men whose dictation she recorded, we do get a sense that her skills were in demand: after a few months on the job, she complains, “I think some others [in the Steno Dept.] might try dictation once in a while” and asks jokingly, “Whose Steno is she? Tute’s or W.H.B.?”—this, during a week when she had been kept busy moving back and forth between the two men (June 11 and 21, 1926). A few months later, Chapin writes that she “[t]ook dictation from JD Anderson V.P., such excitement”; that same week, she also received a two-dollar raise (Aug. 6 and 10, 1926). All of this

indicates that she did her job well and that others recognized her competence. After less than a year on the job, Chapin was moved on a trial basis to the Dealer Promotion Department, where she found the work to be “much more interesting tho’ more exacting” (Nov. 1, 1926). There would continue to be ups and downs: a few weeks after being moved to the Promotion Department, Chapin reports being subject to “call downs” (reprimands), noting, “Honestly, me & my bosses just can’t seem to please each other” (Dec. 10 and Dec. 13-14, 1926). Despite these challenges, Chapin held on to her job through the next two years—even as other Fisk employees, including V.P. JD Anderson and six members of the Stenographic Department, lost theirs (Sept. 30, 1927).

In *Literacy in American Lives*, Brandt shows how the workplace has been a frequent and often powerful sponsor of literacy. Chapin’s diary entries suggest that the office was a site of ongoing literacy learning for her, as well. In particular, we get a sense that Chapin’s technological literacies were being further developed through her work at Fisk. She describes using a variety of office technologies, some of which are new to her, including an LC Smith typewriter, which sported “many features which are different an[d] time and energy savers,” and a special “long carriage” typewriter with a carriage wide enough to handle blueprints or oversize paper (June 10, 1926; June 29, 1926; Aug. 24, 1926). She also learned to use a hectograph, a means of duplicating documents using special inks and gelatins—a process that Chapin describes as “rather particular work” (June 11, 1926). As Rohan has pointed out, women employed in office jobs have consistently “been required to gain expertise in . . . new technologies to gain, maintain, or better their positions” (240), but this work has rarely been

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recognized as “technological.” Instead, technology has been nearly synonymous with masculinity and men’s achievements, though feminist scholars such as Ruth Schwartz Cowan, Judith McGaw, and Autumn Stanley have challenged such gendered assumptions and worked to recover histories of technologies used or invented by women.<sup>13</sup>

Given the technologies available in the Fisk offices and its day-to-day fluctuations in workload, it is perhaps not surprising that Chapin’s “personal” literacies sometimes crossed over into the space of the workplace. On at least a few occasions, she arrived to work early in order to do typing for family members:

a play for her eldest sister Alice, a teacher, and a paper for her younger brother Kenneth, a student (Jan. 16, 1928; Dec. 11, 1928). In the fall of 1926, Chapin began teaching an evening class at a local high school (she also continued to work at Fisk) and would often stay up late preparing for class or correcting her students’ bookkeeping papers. About a month into the class, she wrote, “Not much work at office today tho’ [they?] managed to keep me busy because I wanted to work on my school work. Stayed up till about one a.m. correcting papers.” During other slow periods at Fisk she

occasionally “kill[ed] time” by writing letters or reading (Nov. 15, 1926; May 29, 1926; June 26, 1926).

As much as personal uses of literacy are enabled through the use of office technologies, resources, time, and knowhow, so too can these literacies migrate beyond their workplace origins and take on new uses or meanings for writers. One of the most intriguing aspects of Irene Chapin as a historical case study has been, for me, her decision to use shorthand for certain passages recorded in her personal diary. While all of the entries in Chapin’s 1926 and 1927 diaries are written in ordinary longhand, her 1928 diary includes a number of passages written in shorthand, suggesting that she may have wanted to keep some of the entries more private (Fig. 4). I was curious about the contents of the shorthand passages, and since I lacked the skills to transcribe them myself, I sent photos of three such passages to a semiretired legal stenographer named Nancy Baker, the mother of a friend of mine. I gave her a little context and asked if she could make out what the passages said.<sup>14</sup> Baker replied via email, reporting,

I’ve been looking and relooking at the shorthand notes in the diary and I think I’ve come to the extent of my translation, and it may not be right even now. There are so many factors that determine a person’s shorthand. The same characters can mean totally different things, depending on the context of the paragraph or sentence. For instance, the words “are, our, hour” are all written with the same character, and the person doing the writing knows what it is because of how it’s used in the sentence. So keep in mind that depending on what I “thought” was said in the sentence, I translated some of the characters accordingly.

Baker’s comments about the transcription *process* were in some ways even more enlightening to me than her transcriptions of the diary entries, because they highlighted the mental work and specialized training involved in decoding shorthand and reconstituting it as alphabetic text. Her comments suggest, too, that shorthand can be at least as individualized or “personal” as handwriting.

In a piece written for the *London Review of Books* a few years ago, Leah Price, a scholar of Victorian literature, sounded a death knell for stenography noting that “[o]n shorthand-themed list serves, the most poignant postings ask for help decoding a grandmother or an aunt’s diary” (43). The existence of such materials presents a challenge to scholars and family members alike. When a widower named Don Lillibridge decided to donate his wife’s diaries to the Schlesinger library, a team of at least a dozen women (some of them retired secretaries) was assembled to transcribe the diaries for the benefit of future researchers. His wife, Florence, who had been an English teacher and dean of a girls’ school, had used Gregg shorthand to record her diaries—some thirty-two volumes, spanning more than thirty years (Jacob). That such diaries exist is both a testament to women’s widespread mastery of shorthand as a technological skill and a reminder that there are many of these personal appropriations of office skills yet to be studied.

To dismiss the literate activity of clerical workers as purely or primarily “mechanical” runs counter to current theories of writing, which understand literacy to be situated, material, and distributed—and worthy of study whether used to ends that are dramatic or ordinary, within contexts that are empowering or oppressive. I do not mean to suggest that deskilling is a made-up idea or that white-collar workers never felt the effects of segmentation and routinization. Many did.



Nor do I mean to suggest that workers were never alienated or unhappy. Chapin expresses a range of emotions in response to her work at Fisk; she questions her purpose and expresses regret about not having pursued a career in teaching. Yet, even as we acknowledge the real limitations that women encountered in the early twentieth-century office, it is important that we not accept uncritically the discourses that helped shape those limitations. I believe that the twin narratives of deskilling and a gender-coded notion of “head” work removed from “hand” work have become so dominant as to overshadow the individual stories and voices of real office workers like Chapin. When we in composition and rhetoric look at clerical work from this period, it has become, I think, difficult to recognize the textual production that occurred there as connected to what we study: writing, rhetoric, and literacy.

I want to return now to a question raised earlier: why do we (historians) seem to value some literacies more than others? First, as I have argued above, stereotypes and other identifications (assumptions about clerical work as “mechanical,” for instance) can become calcified and shape our thinking about which subjects are worthy of recovery. Second, we might consider the extent to which our histories have focused on narratives that privilege activist literacies, civic engagement, and the achievements of elite women to the exclusion of seemingly mundane or “utilitarian” literacies. Without question, such histories do important work and serve as a much-needed corrective to histories that have focused disproportionately on the experiences of famous white men. But as historiography in composition and rhetoric continues to broaden and mature, we must continue to ask whose literacy experiences are being left out. As Susan Miller has argued, we should consider “*all* available writers and *all* available writings” to be worthy of study (“Writing Studies” 45). At the start of this essay I asked what we miss when we accept, more or less uncritically, narratives of women’s clerical work as deskilled and mechanical. One consequence is an identity consequence: there is an entire class of people whose literacy practices we marginalize, though who falls into that “class” may not be so easy to pin down. Some have argued that clerical workers have been overlooked due to a working class bias (Rohan 242-3) or because clerical workers constitute an intermediate class, neither skilled blue-collar workers nor management (Bjelopera 2, 9). In the early twentieth century, clerical work was coded as *both* working class and middle class, and language use and rhetorics of mechanization were both part of this ambivalent coding.

In closing, I simply wish to urge that we prevent the erasure and loss of stories about women’s clerical literacies, and that we present this history in all its complexity, resisting the easy stereotypes that have been made so readily available. So, with that in mind, and as my title says: Let’s take shorthand for (*as*) literacy. Let’s recognize clerical workers as writers worthy of study and bring them into the larger project of historicizing literacy in the United States.<sup>18</sup>

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Historians in other disciplines, by contrast, have produced an abundance of work on women in the early twentieth century office; see, for instance, book-length histories of clerical work by Davies, Fine, Kwolek-Folland, Strom, and Srole.

<sup>2</sup>For instance, the women who worked as computer programmers and technicians on the ENIAC project during WWII were classified as clerical workers (at a “subprofessional” grade), despite the high level of mathematical skill the work required (Light 301). Technical writers have sometimes complained of being viewed by engineers as “secretaries,” and in educational settings the expectation that young women will “just” go on to become clerical workers shows up in the way educators talk about students. For an example of the latter, see CCCC chair Karl Dykema’s 1951 article on the problem of assessing mechanical errors in freshman themes. In it, Dykema describes the challenges presented by three hypothetical students: the first two are male students (called X and Y) who have good ideas but problems with spoken or written expression, while the work of the third student, “a girl of mediocre capacity” called Z, is both “perfectly correct and perfectly dull” (5). Dykema concludes that “it is Z who does not matter,” since she “will ultimately vegetate her life away as an excellent typist, preferably for X, who sorely needs her, though strictly in a stenographic capacity” (5).

<sup>3</sup>Ohmann, for example, has argued that “English teachers have helped train the kind of work force capitalists need in a productive system that relies less and less on purely manual labor” and have helped to cultivate the personal qualities and discipline “necessary to perform the alienated labor that will be the lot of most” (8). Strickland suggests that while scholars like Ohmann have examined the ways that capitalist interests shape English instruction, they have given less attention to discursive networks and their ideological investments—for instance, managerial logics that bind together economic imperatives with ideologies of gender and race (21). Brandt’s *Literacy in American Lives* likens literacy to a commodity whose value is always shifting in response to changes in larger material systems and economies; her study demonstrates, as well, the importance of the workplace as a sponsor of literacy for many Americans during the twentieth century.

<sup>4</sup>As Strom observes, these two jobs classifications (secretary vs. stenographer) conveyed “important distinctions . . . based on class, craft, and age” (1). These distinctions have been blurred, however. Many women employed in clerical work preferred to identify as “secretaries” because of the higher status that title connoted; for much of the general public, “secretary” functioned as a generic term for any woman who worked in an office, regardless of her actual title or status.

<sup>5</sup>Other images, showing rows of male clerks on one side of the room and female workers on the other, or distributed according to supervisory patterns, further illustrate some of the ways that gender was reinforced in the office. For a discussion of gender and status in such spaces, see Kwolek-Folland (94-128), who argues that the office workplace was neither the model of efficiency that employers wanted nor “the personalized space workers attempted to achieve” (128).

<sup>6</sup>Although “the one best way” has sometimes been associated with Taylor, it is more rightly linked to Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, pioneers and proponents of motion study, who used the phrase repeatedly in their writings.

<sup>7</sup>For example, Strom observes that Scovill Manufacturing Corporation was one company that “made little progress in systematizing its stenographic work” (46). This did not prevent scientific managers from trying, of course: some stenographers found themselves relocated to centralized steno departments or typing pools where they took dictation for many executives rather than working exclusively for one person. William Henry Leffingwell, a disciple of Taylor, made it his mission to bring Taylorism to the office and proposed an array of inventive strategies for doing

so, including a system of numbered, pre-written paragraphs that could be mixed and matched by “lower-calibered” workers to meet the needs of a variety of common recurring situations. Even so, Leffingwell conceded that “[such a system] cannot be used without brains entirely” (*Scientific* 89).

<sup>8</sup> Even Braverman has acknowledged that “[t]his picture of the clerk as an assistant manager, retainer, confidant, management trainee, and prospective son-in-law can of course be overdrawn” (294). See Augst for melancholy sketches of day-to-day life as set down in the diaries of nineteenth century male clerks (207-15). Bjelopera draws upon records of a Philadelphia business college and department store to develop a book-length historical analysis of male and female clerks that extends beyond the workplace.

<sup>9</sup> For an alternate take on the differences between stenography and bookkeeping, see Srole, who contrasts the push to simplify shorthand systems and streamline education for aspiring stenographers with the growing sense of accounting as an emerging profession with abstract “theoretical trappings” that “became the basis for expansive theoretical training” (117).

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion of this rhetorical reshaping of stenography as “masculine,” see chapter 4 of Srole’s *Transcribing Class and Gender*. Of particular interest, for the purposes of this essay, are late-nineteenth-century characterizations of the male court reporter’s labor as strenuous mental work that required both physical endurance and manly toughness.

<sup>11</sup> Strickland points to use of the “current-traditional” label as a distancing move that “slough[s] off” the early twentieth century as a period defined by what “has been too easily dismissed as a formalistic, mechanistic writing pedagogy” (74-75). Rice argues that the danger of such distancing is that we “risk calcifying a distinction between the production work of texts . . . and the produced texts themselves” (367-68). She notes that our prejudices against “mechanics” pose a particular problem in this age of digital composition and urges that “we ourselves must be able to imagine, improvise, and enact texts in different media”—to teach and engage in “rhetorical mechanics” (379).

<sup>12</sup> There is a robust scholarship to point to here, but we might begin with Ede and Lunsford’s work on authorship and collaboration, especially their discussion of one executive’s collaborative writing relationship with his secretary, Glenna Johnston (36-38); Woodmansee and Jaszi’s work on authorship; and Brandt’s work on ghostwriting (“Who’s the President?”). See also Susan Miller, who in reviewing the historical configurations of writing reminds us that “writers may be scribes, compilers, and commentators on others’ writing” (*Rescuing* 54).

<sup>13</sup> For a brief introductory overview of scholarship that takes up women, gender, and technology, see Lerman, Oldenzil, and Mohun’s “The Shoulders We Stand On/The View from Here: Historiography and Directions for Research.”

<sup>14</sup> The library finding aid for the Chapin diaries suggested that the shorthand entries might offer insight into Chapin’s increasingly “intense friendship” with a stenographer named Marion Warner. According to the archivist, however, no translation of the shorthand had been attempted, and the library had no additional information about Chapin’s friendship with Warner beyond what appeared in the diary. With all of that in mind, I selected two shorthand passages for translation that, based on the surrounding content, seemed to be about Marion, as well as a third passage (for comparison) that seemed obviously related to someone else (a woman named Betty). I suspected that Chapin had probably used a version of Gregg shorthand, which was more commonly used in US businesses than Pitman. While I do own a Gregg shorthand manual, I did not attempt the translation myself, as it seemed likely that I would get faster—and more accurate—results by consulting someone who was experienced with shorthand. The transcribed passages from Baker support my sense that Chapin used shorthand for content of a more personal nature. One of the transcribed passages reads, “Marion made a great resolve and I prayed God to help her keep it. May she never fail!” (Saturday, April 28, 1928). As for Chapin’s friendship with Marion Warner, more research is needed. Based on

my analysis of the diaries, it seems that Chapin knew at least three or four different women named Marion, which presents an additional challenge for tracking the development of their relationship.

<sup>15</sup> Many thanks to Donna LeCourt, Amy Wan, and two anonymous reviewers for their feedback on this essay; thanks also to Nancy Baker for generously agreeing to transcribe passages from Chapin's diary and to Lori Baker for putting me in touch with her mother.

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## APPENDIX


Figure 1: This 1911 advertisement promises that the Edison Business Phonograph will deliver efficiency by ensuring that dictators won't be kept waiting by a busy or absent stenographer.

**THIS IS THE WAY IT WORKS**

 ¶ You dictate your letters to the EDISON BUSINESS PHONOGRAPH at twice the speed of the old method.

¶ The operator transcribes the letters like this. She can be writing at the same time you are dictating. 

 ¶ She has finished her work and is ready to go home at 4 P. M. If she is an efficient operator she will write 75 to 100 letters per day.

¶ Or all the men can dictate when they are ready, without being obliged to wait because the stenographer is busy with some one else. 

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**THE EDISON BUSINESS PHONOGRAPH**

is in use by the largest offices in Worcester every day, and is saving enough on every letter written to pay the postage.

¶ We want to put one on trial in your office to demonstrate the wonderful efficiency of this system of writing letters. It will cost you nothing, and might make a big saving for you.

Write or phone us

**G. E. Stimpson Company**

Telephone 1787 Pleasant Street, corner Chestnut



Figure 2: Irene Chapin's pocket-sized diaries for 1926, 1927, and 1928. Pencil has been included for scale. Photo by Janine Solberg.



Figure 3: Work-related excerpts culled from Irene Chapin's 1926 diary.

Tues, May 11	"Stayed awake all day!"
Wed, May 12	"A perfect day. Drove the Chevie [sic] to work & home again. Can't manage to get out of a small space yet. Class meeting at Mrs. Alice Thomas' [.] Had a delightful time. Ruth Wentworth there. A dollar meeting—some clever poems telling how they were earned."
Fri, May 14	"Worked on enclosing all day—a kindergarten job. Less muggy tonight—Worked all evening. A pretty little moon—bright stars—peeping frogs and the breath a spring in the air tonight"
Mon, May 17	"Stuck steadily to addressing envelopes most all day [.] Had a little dictation."
Tues, May 18	"The days in the office pass more swiftly now. I'm getting acquainted more with the gang."
Wed, May 19	"No one busy in Steno. Dept. today—had a real easy day"

Taking Shorthand for Literacy

Thurs, May 20	“Kept quite busy—had considerable dictation from Mr. Tute. Cool and breezy tonight. . . . Found such lovely swamp violets tonight. I feel quite depressed. I don’t know why.”
Fri, May 21	“Had a rather enjoyable day. This world seems a pretty good place after all.”
Mon, May 24	“Hardly a thing to do at the office today”
Tues, May 25	“Busier today at office, pasting labels on ‘broadsides.’ How interesting.”
Thurs, May 27	“A day of work. Had supper and worked until ten o’clock tonight. Came home in a wonderful big 7 passenger car. 13 of us stayed.”
Fri, May 28	“Finished all that tedious work early so most of us loafed the rest of the pm.”
Sat, May 29	“Had to report to the office this am & stayed until 11 though had nothing to do but read.”
Wed, June 2	“I was ‘swamped’ with dictation today & even tho’ I worked all noon I couldn’t finish it.”
Thurs, Jun 3	“Worked industriously all day up to 1:40 pm (inc[luding] noon hour) so I could get the rest of the pm off.”
Wed, June 9	“Kept busy copying today.”
Thurs, June 10	“Used an LC Smith typewriter for the 1st time today. It has many features which are different & time & energy savers.”
Fri, June 11	“Worked on hectograph schedules today—rather particular work. . . . I am quite disgusted because I have to work tomorrow [a Saturday]. I think some others might try dictation once in a while.”
Sat, June 12	Marion Holmes came up to take me to work. Had but one letter all morning. Much rather have stayed home.
Tues, June 15	“Not very busy at office. Everybody drowsy.”
Fri, June 18	“Expected to have the p.m. off and go shopping but W.H.B. gave me oodles of dictation which kept me busy until 5:30 tonight. Didn’t want to leave it over the weekend.”
Mon, June 21	“A busy day—Whose Steno is she? Tute’s? or W.H.B? Between the two I certainly kept busy & couldn’t take the p.m. off as I had hoped.”
Wed, June 23	“Again a lazy day. Elva and I gossiped all day.”
Fri, June 25	“Not so busy today[.] Had the dickens of a time cleaning typewriters this a.m. all of them wrecks. Went to HS reunion tonight. No 1919ers there but me. Had a pretty good time[.] ‘9 dishes ice cream’ between the 4 of us. Shocking”
Wed, June 30	“Worked all a.m. on simple report. Terribly sleepy this p.m. & missed some of my dictation. Couldn’t possibly dope it out although I brót [brought] my notebook home and studied it faithfully.”
Thurs, July 1	“Didn’t work so very hard at the office today.”
Mon, July 19	“Such a pleasant day. Started off fine with a nice, long newsy letter from Ethel Barton and one from Miss Coff. I enjoyed my dictation at office and had a dandy time playing tennis tonight . . .”
Tues, July 20	“Got awfully hot & stuffy in [the] office this pm”

Thurs, July 22	“The mercury climbed still higher today. Some shops closed at noon[.] 97° in our office.”
Mon, July 26	“Went to a spiritualist ‘medium’ tonight with Alice Reid and Ruth B. She promises me a change in my work and Success. Oh that it might be true!”
Fri, Aug 6	“It was hard getting up after last nights party. . . . This was Elva’s last day at Fisk[.] I hate to have her go so far away. Took dictation from JD Anderson V.P., such excitement.”
Tues, Aug 10	“Worked mostly for J.D. today—Miss Burns informs me that she has put through a \$2.00 raise[.] It certainly will be appreciated.”
Wed, Aug 11	“Such a busy day—I’ve been working for everybody & everything seemed so upsidedown.”
Fri, Aug 13	“My last day in the Order Dept.”
Mon, Aug 16	“Seemed rather good to be back in Stenographic again. Still sleepy”
Tues, Aug 24	“Still on ‘long carriage’ work[.] I’m pretty slow at it.” ... “I wish he [Harley] could spell!”
Wed, Aug 25	“Still on same job. Somebody mysteriously destroys my morning’s work but I learn the office boys are guilty.”
Mon, Aug 30	“Back on the job. [T]ook slews of dictation . . . Take a week to transcribe, I’m afraid.”
Wed, Sept 8	“Just another day - moved to another desk - I wonder if I shall settle permanently. Feel rather out of sorts with the world today. Wish I were beginning teaching again. I think I could succeed.”
Fri, Dec 31	“New Year’s Eve - Another year has gone and again I look back and sigh—for what real thing have I accomplished during these 365 days? What good have I done—how much have I learned—whom have I helped? God grant that during this New Year that I may make a better record. Help me to think better that I may live better. Forgive me for my past failures and strengthen me. Help me to become more valuable to my employers—more patient with my family and more honest to myself.”

## Taking Shorthand for Literacy

Figure 4: Occasional passages written in shorthand entries appear in Irene Chapin's 1928 diary. Chapin recorded the majority of her diary in longhand and seems to have reserved shorthand for more personal or sensitive material. Photo by Janine Solberg.

