Students seeking higher speeds in shorthand should have as much practice writing shorthand as possible. We teachers are the primary source of dictation for the students during their practice sessions, and we must be taskmasters in the art of dictating because skill-building is a teacher-imposed activity.

Nearly all practice material should be timed. The students, however, should find additional suitable sources of practice material in order to keep improving their speeds. Here at Central Michigan University we use a great number of audio and video tapes, dictation machines, and anything else we can get our hands on to give students a wide selection of dictation sources.

The following are several of many dictation plans that I have used successfully over the years in getting students to write faster and with more accuracy:

One-Minute Dictation Plan
Before beginning to dictate for practice purposes, I preview approximately one-fourth of a five-minute piece of dictation material (called a “take”). The preview words are written on a sheet of paper, duplicated, and given to the students. Then I take the following steps to provide dictation practice with the one-minute plan:

1. I dictate for one minute at 20 words a minute below the average speed of the class. If the class is averaging 100 words a minute, then I dictate the first try at 80 words a minute.

2. Then, after having the students read back, I start over and dictate the same material for one minute at the class’s average speed.

3. Then I start at the beginning of the material once again and dictate for one minute at 20 words above the average—here, 120 words a minute. I like to put 5 to 10-second rests between takes.

4. Once again I start at the beginning of the material and dictate for one minute an additional 20 words higher—140.

5. Finally I start at the beginning of the material and dictate for one minute at the second speed—in this case at 100 words a minute. Then I ask students to read back the material.

6. Now I repeat the first five steps three times—with the second, third, and fourth quarters of the material.

7. Finally I dictate the entire take at the second speed to see if students can sustain the speed I am after—here, 100 words a minute.

Sustained Speed-Building Plan
The sustained speed-building plan can be used in a classroom situation or in an outside practice session. I find the plan to be an effective and motivating way of building sustained writing habits that lead to fluency and accuracy.

For purposes of illustration in most of the following examples I will continue to use the example of 100 words per minute. You may, of course, choose any speed you are after and adjust these examples accordingly. The material for dictation may be taken from the homework lesson or from another source, such as magazines, newspapers, and dictation books.

For this plan, I present the material in the following manner:

1. I preview “interesting” words and phrases found in the first 100 words of the material. There are many previewing techniques available.

2. I then dictate the first 100 words of the material at 140 words a minute and call on the students to read the material back.

3. Then I preview several outlines found in the second 100 words of the material.

4. I dictate the second 100 words at 140 words a minute and have the students read back what they have written.

5. I proceed in this manner with each group of 100 words until all of the material has been dictated. I always challenge the students to read back what they have written.

6. Then I dictate the first half (approximately 200 words) of the material at 120 words a minute.

7. Next I dictate the second half at 120 words a minute.

8. Finally I dictate the entire take at 100 words a minute. I ask the students once again to read back the material they have written.

9. I repeat the entire procedure with another 500 words or so, and keep repeating the procedure until the dictation period is over.

In the sustained speed-building strategy, students do not feel the pressure of sustained dictation since the speed is reduced each time the full material is dictated. As mentioned, the speed of the dictation can be adjusted to accommodate any speed you want your students to achieve. The overriding theory of this particular plan is to begin the practice at a higher speed than you ultimately want to achieve.

Descending Speed-Building Plan
Similarly, here are the steps I follow to implement the descending speed-building plan:

1. I ask students to mentally preview the material before I dictate each time. Mentally previewing is the technique of having the students close their eyes as the material is given and picture each outline in their minds the way they would write it. If my goal is to get the students to write at 100 words a minute, then I dictate the material to be pictured in the mind first at 60 words a minute.
dictate the first section at 120 words a minute, the second 110, the third at 100, the fourth at 90, and the fifth at 80 words a minute.

The students are able to go faster on the repeated material, but they can control the new material at their cruising speed of 80 words a minute.

Same-Speed Dictation
Here is another plan I find can be used in a classroom setting as well as an outside practice session. The plan is effective from the time the students begin writing shorthand.

The speed in this dictation plan stays the same throughout the practice procedure. Let's assume that I am drilling for 100 words a minute. Here's how I do it:

1. I begin the plan by challenging the students to read the material aloud at 240 words a minute or better.
2. I dictate the first 100 words of the material at 100 words a minute. Then I give the students 10 or 15 seconds to spot read the material or to check what they have written.
3. I dictate the first 200 words of the material at 100 words a minute. Then I let the students rest for 5 or 10 seconds.
4. I dictate the first 300 words of the material at 100 words a minute. Again, I provide a short rest so they may check what they have written.
5. I proceed in the manner just illustrated until all the practice material has been dictated.
6. Finally, I dictate the entire material at 100 words a minute and have the students read back from their notes.

I find that students who have a tendency to stay on a plateau too long often profit from this plan because they are constantly going back over outlines written, adding only 100 or so new words each time.

I have just reviewed for you some of the dictation plans I use in my speed-building classes. These plans provide variety. Above all, I find that using different plans leads to increased motivation on the part of the students as well as the teacher.

I have not made any attempt to include here all the many other methods that I know other speed-building teachers use in their classrooms. Many good, psychologically sound plans for increasing the students' speed and accuracy are used daily by many different teachers. Sharing speed-building ideas through articles, attendance at conventions and seminars, and discussions with other teachers will help all of us become better speed-building teachers.