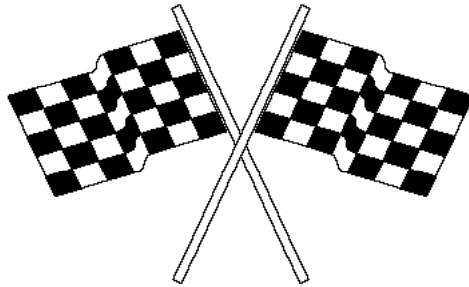


Student Scope

Feeling the Need for Speed

by Georgia Green, CMT

Quality or production? Which is more important to success in the medical transcription field? The answer should be obvious. It doesn't matter how many reports you produce in an hour, a day, or an entire pay period if those reports contain medical inaccuracies or if misspellings, typos, and errors in grammar and punctuation compromise their readability. That doesn't mean productivity is not an issue. Speed does count when it comes to the size of a paycheck based on production wages. It is even more important when mandated minimum production requirements determine whether or not you will continue to be employed. So how can a medical transcription student increase production without jeopardizing quality?



Proceed with caution. This article gives specific suggestions for improving your productivity, but these suggestions must be prefaced with this cautionary note: Speed should be the furthest thing from your mind until the last stages of training. Traditional speed-building techniques work by eliminating redundancy, but redundancy is an essential element of fundamental transcription training. Taking shortcuts of any kind undermines the learning process, with the end result being a decrease in production and quality. Looking up the same term for a second, third, or fourth time is not a wasted effort but an investment in building your fund of medical knowledge. **Until you have committed to memory the widest possible range of medical concepts and associated vocabulary, avoid spellcheckers, macros, expanders, or templates.** Electronic references that link terms with their definitions are fine for student use. If you keep a quick-reference word list, manual or electronic, jot down a brief definition with each entry to reinforce these connections in your mind every time you consult the list.

If you are enrolled in a formal program of instruction, discuss this article with your instructor and determine how these suggestions can best augment your learning process. If you are an independent student, utilize speed-building techniques only after you have completed an entire unit. For example, after completing the entire Beginning Medical Transcription unit of *The SUM Program*, transcribing each report twice and achieving an acceptable accuracy score on the final attempt, you can focus your attention on speed-building tech-

niques in random practice sessions before moving to the Advanced units.

Your mileage may vary. It is important to understand the difference between *production* and *productivity*. Your total output, whether lines, characters, or reports, during your regularly scheduled workday is your production. Produc-

tivity, on the other hand, is a measure of your rate of production over a standard unit of time, e.g., lines per hour. If you work more hours per day, you increase your production but not your productivity. However, as your proficiency as an MT improves, you can increase both your productivity AND your production.

Let's say that your productivity is 100 lines per hour. If your total production for a particular 8-hour workday is only 400 lines, there is a discrepancy of 4 hours. Perhaps it was necessary to slow down in order to accommodate a difficult dictator or two or three. But there is still a large chunk of time spent with an idle keyboard. Some of this downtime is a necessary part of the job—researching new terms, reviewing instructions for format and style, overcoming the occasional problem with hardware or software, and time spent mastering a new work procedure or productivity technique. When it is appropriate to turn your attention to increasing your speed, keep a notepad next to your keyboard and keep track of time away from the keyboard so you can analyze it later. Use a chart with columns to designate various types of “downtime”—word research, technical problems, consulting another MT, and so on—and then just make checkmarks in each column to indicate each 5-minute block spent in an activity away from the keyboard.

What's under the hood? Even the clearest dictation can stump you if you encounter a term that is unfamiliar. And if you don't understand the concept behind a term, you can't be sure that what you are hearing is correct. A deficit in your internal medical knowledge database correlates directly with both the amount of time you spend researching unfamiliar terms and the number of mistakes you will make in selecting the right term. The best defense is a well-rounded program of study that includes academic coursework in the structure and function of the human body, human diseases, physical diagnosis and treatment, pharmacology, laboratory medicine,

and more. If your training program does not have these elements, augment it by studying on your own. A list of suggested textbooks for self-study can be found under MT Training at <http://www.hpisum.com>.

Drivers ed. Does your understanding of grammar and punctuation allow you to supply necessary commas or correct verb tense as you transcribe, without consulting a style guide each time? Sometimes a dictator does mangle a sentence so badly that you know English teachers are rolling over in their graves, but most of the time you should be able to make minor fixes without interrupting your rhythm. If this isn't a problem for you, this is one productivity leak you don't have to worry about. If it is a problem, don't worry—you can overcome it with some remedial work in grammar.

Grammar guides are invaluable and you should study them (a quick on-line guide is available at <http://www.grammarbook.com/>), but your study should include not just a review of rules but plenty of exercises, including bare-bones sentence diagramming. When you really get a solid understanding of sentence structure and why words and phrases are arranged the way they are, punctuation will fall into place much more easily. Here is a great Web site that can guide you through the basics of sentence diagramming: http://www.geocities.com/gene_moutoux/diagrams.htm. Capital Community College hosts a comprehensive grammar site at <http://webster.comnet.edu/grammar/index.htm>. They provide a section on diagramming sentences, but be sure to click the links for quizzes and for Power Point presentations and see everything they have to offer.

If you are enrolled in a formal program of study, don't forget to ask your instructor for advice. Your school may offer a nuts and bolts grammar course and your instructor can help you find the course that is right for you.

The Indy 500. There are so many different ways to express the same idea, and for each of these variations in expression there are hundreds of ways for an individual dictator to render that idea in a nearly incomprehensible manner. The only way you can gain a reasonable level of competency is to engage in as much practice as possible, transcribing each report as many times as necessary to achieve mastery not only of the content but also the nuances of a particular dictator's voice and style, many of which are missed on a single pass at a report. You may not realize this, but it takes more than 500 hours for the "average" student to complete the 31 hours of *The SUM Program*, Beginning and Advanced, to mastery level. Once you enter the workplace, you lose this wonderful opportunity for true mastery unless you are lucky enough to encounter a supervisor or mentor who understands this concept and makes work assignments that include enough repetition to allow you the opportunity for continued mastery. While you are still a student, it is crucial that you understand the role of retranscription in "training your ear." Never take shortcuts here.

The pit stop checklist. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine this scenario: You are transcribing along without a hitch, then all of a sudden you come to a grinding halt. Either you didn't hear something at all or what you heard didn't make sense. What do you do? Back it up and play it again. And again. And again. Slower. Faster. Reread the sentence, the paragraph. Scan the whole report. Play the dictation forward and finish the paragraph or even the report. Should you grab a book? Which book? Should someone else listen?

The answer may be "all of the above" or "none of the above," depending upon the circumstances, but developing an efficient "process" can contribute greatly to your productivity at the latter part of your training and as you transition to the work environment. An "efficient process" might also be referred to as "time management," as it describes how you handle the inevitable interruptions in work flow that occur when you must pause on an unclear word or phrase, replay it, research it, ask for help, etc. If you spend 10 minutes each researching only a dozen words during your transcription session, that totals 2 hours in lost production. Could that time have been cut down to 1 hour or even to just half an hour if your process was more efficient? When you are producing high quality lines but far less than anticipated, this is usually the area that needs attention.

Most productive MTs have an efficient process in place even if they aren't consciously aware of it and cannot explain it to you, and each MT will have his or her own twists that make that process unique. There is no single "one size fits all" process, but you can start with a guideline and gradually develop the process that you find most efficient for you. Here is one you can use as a starting point and customize it to meet your own style and available resources:

1. When you have stopped on a word, relisten to it one or two times.
2. Ask yourself why you can't hear it—is it mumbled, too fast or too slow, obscured in some way, or is it a term you think you can hear clear enough but just don't know? If you can hear it, but don't know it, skip down to #5.
3. If appropriate, speed up and slow down the dictation to see if this makes a difference. If the word was said too rapidly, say it aloud to yourself syllable by syllable, fast and slow. Write down a phonetic equivalent and look at it. Does anything come to mind?
4. Reread the sentence and/or the whole paragraph to develop a context. Ask yourself what kind of word would go here if you had to guess—is it a drug name, a body part, an English word?
5. Choose the right reference book for the job. If it is a drug name, go to a drug book; if it is an English word, try

Webster's; if it is a body part, go to your medical dictionary. If you think it is a brand-new term or if you have already checked a medical dictionary, try *Vera Pyle's Current Medical Terminology* (new, difficult, and hard-to-find terminology with definitions). Go to the appropriate specialty wordbook or general phrase index to narrow down your choices after consulting the medical dictionary—and then come back to the medical dictionary to confirm the meaning. Context is everything.

6. If you didn't hear enough of the word to look it up and you have an electronic reference, try a wild card search (refer to your software for instructions).

7. If the term is part of a phrase, look up the parts that you do hear as the missing term may appear as a cross-reference. If it is the name of a ligament, look also under muscle and tendon as you may find clues there.

8. STOP. Don't spend more than 5 minutes researching in your books. Leave a blank (ideally with a phonetic "sounds like") and finish transcribing the report. Many terms are repeated later in the report.

9. Come back to any missing terms at the end of the report and see if you can hear it now, given that you now know the whole context of the report and are more familiar with the dictator's voice.

10. If you come up empty, now is the time where judgment is required. Does it seem reasonable to leave a blank? This depends on both the expectations for your performance (Is this practice dictation, a test, on-the-job transcription under full QA review, or are you on your own?) and the circumstances of the dictation itself. Ask yourself if a more skilled MT would have been able to fill in this blank. If the dictation truly is garbled, very heavily accented, or obscured in some way, any MT may have had trouble. Leave the blank. Did you leave too many blanks in this report? How many blanks constitute too many? Again, consider your expectations. If you feel you are not ready to abandon the search for the term, give yourself no more than 10 minutes and include any Internet research within this time limit.

11. Make a note about how the term sounded and its context so you can research it later if no feedback is forthcoming from your teacher or supervisor.

Buckle up. The ability to make independent judgments grows out of a combination of confidence in your skills and awareness of your limitations—and definitely impacts your "process," as noted above. This can't be taught from a book per se but can be enhanced through the use of critical thinking exercises. Consider the old adage about giving a man a fish versus teaching him how to fish. If you learn not just how to solve a problem in a particular situation but instead develop a mental framework for addressing problems in varying circumstances, you are able to think independently and will be able to exercise reasonable MT judgment without a teacher standing by. A good source of critical thinking exercises can be found in *H&P: A Nonphysician's Guide to the Medical History and Physical Examination* available from HPI's Web site at www.hpisum.com.

Pedal to the metal. One of the first things you learn when you begin transcribing is that your keyboarding speed on a copytyping exercise has little to do with the speed at which you will transcribe. In fact, the faster your raw typing speed, the greater the percentage of speed loss. A 100-wpm typist will feel much more discouragement than a 45-wpm typist. Nevertheless, good keyboarding skills are prerequisite for any MT. Generally, keyboarding speed picks up naturally over time, but if it doesn't, this area may need attention. One has to be able to move quickly through dictation that flows smoothly to make up for time lost on the more challenging parts. Keyboarding speed in and of itself should be assessed periodically apart from actual transcribing speed and any deficits that are discovered should be addressed. Luckily, an inexpensive software program can add 20 wpm onto your baseline keyboarding speed in just a couple of weeks.

The checkered flag is up. As you near the end of training and AFTER you have addressed all the impediments to production discussed in this article, it is time to look at the myriad of productivity tools used by experienced medical transcriptionists. Abbreviation expansion tools built into your word processing program or obtained through third party software can dramatically increase production—after you have mastered all the basics presented here. Abbreviation expansion programs, macros, and templates have been topics at HPI's on-line seminar series for students. You can download transcripts of past seminars by visiting the On-line Seminar link at HPI's Students Network (www.hpisum.com).

Georgia Green, CMT, is Director of Education for Health Professions Institute (HPI) in Modesto, CA. She has 25 years of experience as a practitioner and educator in the medical industry. She served as consultant and technical writer for medical transcription software products for HPI, Prentice Hall, and Horus Development. E-mail: ggreen@hpisum.com.

