

**Blueberry Harbor Software, Inc.**  
*The easy-to-use solution for mental health professionals*  
9 Gilman Avenue  
Brunswick, Maine 04011

E-mail: [cstewart@suscom-maine.net](mailto:cstewart@suscom-maine.net)

## **Typing for Clinicians**

An e-article for clinicians

By

Charles M. Stewart, M.D.

Copyright 2007 All rights reserved

Hello!

I would like to talk about the efficiency of typing for clinicians. For many years, (more than I care to remember) I handwrote my clinical notes, and initial evaluations. I got quite good at it. I wrote in two thirds of the page on the right and left a large margin on the left for comments, navigational ideas, and bullet points and hieroglyphics. It was quite a system. When I reached 8 large filing cabinets stuffed full of records front and back I decided I needed to review what I was doing and try something more efficient. Computers came on the scene about then and it has been all downhill since then.

In modern clinician practice we need good legible records. They can protect us from the dangers of a malpractice suit. They are also needed for our own review of the clinical material. You might think that you will never get sued but that is not very self protective of you. If you have ever, even once been approached by a determined attorney you would quickly recognize the danger and be much more careful with your notes.

It is astounding what a determined attorney can do with sloppy notes. Before you know it he or she has thought of ten ways to think of things you never thought of, and unless you document what you did, he can point the finger at you and often make it stick in a very painful way. The most astounding interpretations of things can come out of the mouths of attorneys when malpractice money is at stake. Good records are the antidote.

You need to have good notes. You can't write everything down and have to be discriminating. It is hard work to determine what goes in notes. Whether you take contemporaneous notes, write down key words, or do your notes after seeing a patient it takes some mental effort to decide what to put down. You need a method that is fast and

easy, that will document what you have done and some of what you have thought. You aren't getting paid for this kind of work, but it must be done.

There is a lot of stress in practice. Many parts of our practice can't be changed but there is something you can do to make your life easier. You can find a method to keep your clinical records quickly and easily. So many things compete for our time and energy that it is essential that the record keeping parts of our practice be done efficiently. We really don't have much time to do something that is quite important. When they are hurrying to get something done is often when many people make mistakes. Consequently we need to be able to create and access records quickly, easily and accurately. It is one of the really time and energy consuming activities that every clinician faces.

The average person handwrites at about 20-24 words per minute but after an hour or so the rate drops. After a bit of practice average typists can type 40-50 words a minute for many hours. That is a substantial difference. We need the efficiency that typing can provide.

Initially when people start to type, they may not type well. Interestingly, in my conversations with others that really has little to do with their eventual typing skills. Practice really does make perfect for the vast majority of clinicians. Within a month if they type daily they are typing with fewer errors and better speed. Within a few months typing is often at 40-50 words per minute and sometimes higher. They become more familiar with the keyboard and keyboard commands and have more assurance about where to place their fingers. Few people write by hand at 50 words per minute and even fewer who do have legible handwriting, especially if they write all day long. As the day wears on handwriting legibility goes down.

Programs such as those at <http://www.typingsoft.com> can go a long way to get you started. I particularly liked "Stamina" and found it easy to use. It was \$19.95 a few years ago. The most important part of this is just to type regularly. That, in and of itself, will help you to be a much better typist.

It is important to overcome bad typing habits you may have learned earlier in your life. If you hope to reach efficient speeds it will be necessary to learn how to touch type with your fingers reaching all the keys in a systematic way. Unlearning bad habits in typing is sometimes the hardest part. Using the home keys and developing

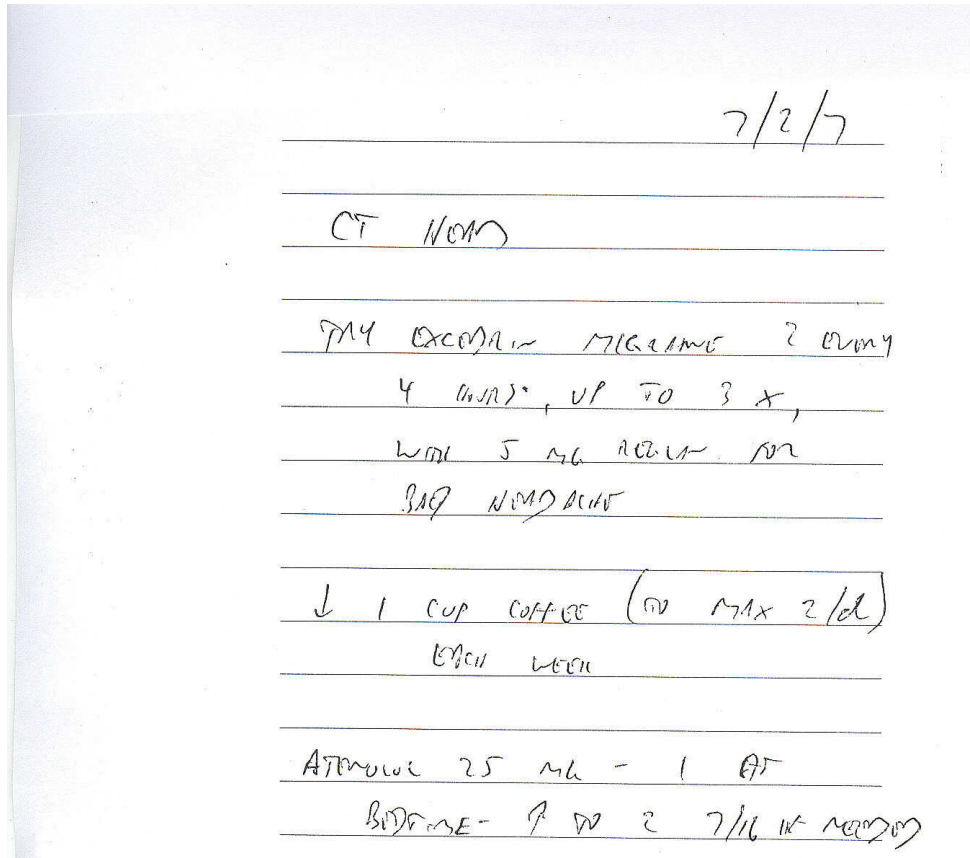
the proprioception necessary to hit the keys correctly is an important acquired skill. It can be learned in a reasonably short time but it takes motivation, and practice. The Internet has done one thing for today's youngsters. The vast majority of them are terrific typists because they play games on the computer that require typing. By the time they are in High School they are quite fast.

Don't get me wrong. It is true that handwriting is convenient. Grab a pen, a pencil, or get out your favorite writing implement and go to it. It is very convenient. We get used to it from our earliest days in school. There is nothing like a clean sheet of 24 lb bond and a good pen. What we need to remind ourselves of, however is that we are not in business for aesthetic reasons. We are there to get our records done in an efficient manner and concentrate on the other matters of our practice. We need efficiency and handwriting just can't provide what is needed with the volume of work we have to do. Leave aesthetics for another time and place.

It is surprising how much better people can type with practice. After a month or two of daily typing their error rate goes down and their speed goes up. After three months they halve their error rate and double their speed. Before they know it they are sailing through clinical charts and turning them out with great dispatch.

Another characteristic of typed notes is their legibility. This is crucial. It does no good whatsoever to have illegible notes. Typed notes, even if misspelled are much better than handwriting. Not only do you have to read your notes, but others may have to read them as well. All too often handwriting is illegible which defeats the purpose for which you are keeping notes.

Please observe a note that came from a physician recently. Parts of it are readable with difficulty but the medication the patient was to take in addition to Excedrin Migraine is illegible. It was illegible in the original document just as much as it is in this scan of it. Please note how he has dropped off the details of many letters, and slurred things over. This is a typical example of what happens to physicians over time. Under the press of trying to do more with less time, their handwriting deteriorates. I maintain that the reason doctor's handwriting is so universally bad is that it is the result of years of trying to go faster and do more with less time.



How much nicer to have a simple template that can be called upon to clearly state what you are trying to communicate. It even takes less time to create that handwriting.

Your Letterhead here
Medication Directions:
Date:
Name:
Directions: Take Excedrin Migraine 2 tablets every four hours up to 3 times with 5mg xxxxxx for bad migraine.
Etc.

While this is an example involving medications, it could just as well have been about any aspect of a person's case. Illegible is Illegible. It could be homework, directions about something, informational sheets, or communication between practitioners about someone's care. It could be your notes about important features of the documentation for that patient. A defense attorney could retire on what he could extract from a case with notes like this. Let's not make it easy for them!

You can try an interesting experiment to illustrate this for yourself. Write a sentence slowly and legibly. Then write the same sentence 40% faster. Then for the coup de grace, double your speed and write the sentence for a third time. Please note what happens to your handwriting. Your writing will get slurred, letters get rounded over, and illegible. It is astounding what pressure to go fast can do to your handwriting let alone your stress level.

The pressures on clinicians are substantial. People who are emotionally distressed require a lot of effort and care. We want to be able to approach them with good energy and respond to their needs. We want to be alive to the nuances of therapy. We don't want to be preoccupied with record keeping. So clinicians need a rapid, easy-to-use, legible method to get their notes down and typing offers the promise of much greater efficiency than handwriting.

Dictation through software like Dragon Naturally Speaking Preferred is even faster. I estimate that I dictate at about 100 words per minute. That is considerably faster than even my typing. It is also less stressful than typing. Some editing needs to be done. I am using an older version of Dragon but the newer version (#9) is even more accurate. For longer reports or a series of letters done in one sitting there is nothing like the efficiency that can be gained by using a dictation program. (I recently saw a new unused copy of Dragon Naturally Speaking Version 9 available on E-bay for \$55).

One last idea. Templates, that can be used over and over again are very useful and lend themselves to the record keeping process. If you type your records, you can use templates. That gets us into another realm which I will address in another article but suffice it to say that typing opens the door to the use of templates and this adds greatly to your efficiency.

**In summary:** Clinicians need all the help they can get in their record keeping. Handwriting is simply an inefficient method of record keeping with the volume of work we have to do. It does not have the characteristics we need for record keeping. It is often illegible, and can't be edited, or copied easily in volume. Typing is a method that is suited for the creation of your clinical records that is much more efficient and less tiring on the clinician. Typing can be learned and with daily use you can easily outdistance the clinician who uses handwriting within 1-2 months even if you are keeping short notes that aren't particularly involved. Typing makes it possible for you to get your records done quickly, and legibly leaving you with more time and energy for the rest of your life.

Web sites: [www.clinicalrecordkeeper.com](http://www.clinicalrecordkeeper.com) PC programs

[www.clinicalrecordkeeper-mac.com](http://www.clinicalrecordkeeper-mac.com) Mac programs

[www.emailforclinicians.com](http://www.emailforclinicians.com) Secure e-mail



Charles M. Stewart, MD

Charles M. Stewart, M.D.