

# A Beginner's Guide to Gurney's *Brachygraph*y

## Welcome

Welcome to our community of Dickens decoders!

If you are new to decoding *Brachygraph*y shorthand, you may find this 'Beginner's Guide' helpful. It is designed to introduce you to the fundamental principles of decoding *Brachygraph*y and familiarise you with the shapes of the shorthand symbols in the *Brachygraph*y manual.<sup>1</sup>

## Background to Gurney's *Brachygraph*y

*Brachygraph*y (meaning 'short writing') was a system of shorthand invented by Thomas Gurney in the eighteenth century, used for parliamentary and law reporting.

Gurney's system was primarily alphabetical. This means that you replace letters, words, and parts of words with dashes, squiggles, and dots.

## How Gurney's *Brachygraph*y works

In common with most shorthand systems, *Brachygraph*y relies on abbreviation to make writing faster. As a result, internal vowels (a, e, i, o, u) and double letters are usually left out. Words are reduced to their 'skeletons':

### Examples

flower → flwr

great → grt

tomorrow → tmrw

Abbreviation saves time and space. However, it can cause problems when you decode the script because the missing internal vowels and duplicate letters need to be filled back in.

<tmrw> is easy to read as 'tomorrow' but how do you fill in a 'skeleton' like <bd>?

bd → bad? bed? bid? bud? bead?

In cases like this, you need to rely on the context to decide which word is the best 'fit'.

## The Gurney alphabet

The Gurney system has 23 symbols standing for letters of the alphabet. These are shown in Table 1 below. The same symbol could also be used to represent particular words or parts of words (far right column).











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<sup>1</sup> To help you decipher Dickens's shorthand specifically visit <https://dickenscode.org/resources/>. You can find out more about the place of shorthand in Dickens's life and work by visiting our online exhibition: <https://dickenscode.omeka.net/exhibits/show/decodingdickens>.

So nearly every symbol stands for more than one thing and you can end up with lots of different possible interpretations!

**Table 1: Alphabet +**

Gurney symbol	Letter(s) represented	Word or part of word represented
	a	
	b	be but
	c k	see
	d	did
	e	he
	f	if
	g	God good
	h	have
	i j	Jesus high
	l	Lord Lordship
	m	him am
	n	in
	o	how
	p	people

Gurney symbol	Letter(s) represented	Word or part of word represented
	q	question
	r	are her here
	long s <sup>2</sup> z	is his
	s	ing ong
	t	it
	u	you
	v w	which
	x	Christ
	y	wi why ye
		& etcetera

When you are decoding shorthand symbols, you may find them written as standalone characters. However, you may also see several alphabet characters joined together, to form a word 'skeleton'.

### Example






The trick here is to try and break the shape up into its separate components.

Look closely and you can see that here there are three alphabet symbols joined together:

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<sup>2</sup> A long s is an old-fashioned form of the lowercase letter 's'. It could be used at the start or the middle of a word, or in a double 's' sequence.

Gurney shapes	Letters
	p
	n
	t

From here, you will need to fill in the internal vowels and any double letters.

pnt → pant? pent? pint? punt? point? pinot? peanut? punnet?

This particular 'skeleton' has generated lots of different possibilities. We recommend writing down all of the possible solutions at first, before homing in on the likeliest possibilities as the context of the sentence becomes clear.

## Vowels at the end of words

In the Gurney system, vowel sounds at the end of words are marked by a dot placed at the top, middle, or bottom of a line.

A dot at the top of a line = a or e

A dot in the middle of a line = i or y

A dot at the bottom of a line = o or u

### Example



In this case, the dot is placed after the Gurney alphabet symbol for 'b', at the top of a line, so we can transcribe this as 'ba' or 'be'.

N.B. The Gurney manual suggests that when vowels occur in the middle of words, users should leave a gap between the consonant symbols, placing the next consonant symbol at the top, middle, or bottom of the line to indicate the vowel.

### Example



The Gurney alphabet symbol for 'long s' or 'z' is followed by a space and then the Gurney alphabet symbol for 'l' (see Table 1), written at the top of the line.

Possible readings here are 'sal', 'sel', 'zal', and 'zel'.

However, most Gurney writers don't use gaps and join their symbols together. It's quicker.





















## More arbitrary characters




















In addition to the alphabet symbols, the Gurney system has a range of arbitrary characters, which mostly stand for grammatical words, parts of words, or phrases.

Many of these characters refer to legal and parliamentary matters, which the Gurney system was designed to report on.

**Table 2: Arbitrary characters for prepositions and terminations**

Gurney symbol	Word, part of word, or phrase represented
	ab ob observe ance ation
	able ible
	ch such
	chr church charge
	sh she
	sab sub subject
	th that thed
	ver ever
	vl wl will would
	ward word
	vad ved vid with

Gurney symbol	Word, part of word, or phrase represented
	thou
	after
	had hath
	might
	may
	been
	doth
	the thee they thy of
	consequence
	particular particularly
	could
	I
	it is
	it is not
	is it
	to the
	and the
	by the
	shall should
	said side

Gurney symbol	Word, part of word, or phrase represented
 (Two separate symbols; either one can be used)	not
	above
	below
	behind
	covetous
	foundation
	and hand
	magnify
	even heaven
	ought
	between betwixt
	about
	advance advantage
	plaintiff
	defendant
	the world
	this world
	the other world
	from one end of the world to the other

**Table 3: Alphabetical arbitrary characters**

Gurney symbol	Word, part of word, or phrase represented
<i>a</i> (drawn larger than the 'a' that follows)	administrator administration
<i>a</i>	accord according accordingly
<i>b</i>	bankrupt bankruptcy
<i>c</i>	circum circumstance circumstances
<i>d</i>	demonstrate demonstration
<i>d</i>	evident evidently evidence
<i>e</i>	establish established establishment
<i>E</i>	ecclesiastic ecclesiastical
<i>f</i>	fraud fraudulent fraudulency
<i>g</i>	govern governing government
<i>h</i>	hereditary hereditaments
<i>i</i>	justify justifying justifiable justification
<i>l</i>	legislator legislature legislative legislation
<i>m</i>	multitude multiply multiplied multiplication



Gurney symbol	Word, part of word, or phrase represented
	notwithstanding
 (drawn larger than the 'o' that follows)	origin originate original originally
	ord order ordering
	precedent precedency president
	represent represented representative representation
	statute spirit spirited spiritual
	trespas [ <i>sic</i> ] transport transportation
	unlawful unlawfully unlawfulness
	witness witnesses witnessing
	extraordinary extraordinarily

## Additional Gurney rules

- When the letter 'r' does not begin a word, it is expressed by a stroke upwards.
- The 'long s' is only used at the beginning and end of words.
- The circle 's' symbol is not to be used at the beginning of a word, except for when it is followed by 't'. The circle 's' should never be used at the end of a word because in this position it indicates 'ing' or 'ong'.
- Punctuation is not usually marked in the Gurney system. The ends of sentences are sometimes marked with an extended oblique line.

The Gurney manual includes a number of additional rules designed to save time. You can check these out here.<sup>3</sup> However, we recommend focusing on the basics first.

## Decoding tips

To help get you started, here are some tips from past Dickens decoders.

1. Keep a personal glossary of frequent symbols.
2. Before deciphering a word, try to guess its meaning from the context.
3. Work particularly hard on the first part of a symbol.
4. It's normal if you can't decipher something; when you are stuck, ask a friend or move on to the next symbol, or just walk away and come back later!
5. Try not to get frustrated – most sentences will contain at least one symbol which is undecipherable due to the complex nature of the system and the adaptations made by Gurney users.

Good luck and happy decoding!

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<sup>3</sup> See 'Abbreviating Rules' in *Brachygraphy, or, an Easy and Compendious System of Shorthand, Sixteenth Edition* (London: W. B. Gurney, 1835), available via Archive.org: <https://archive.org/details/brachygraphyorea00gurniala/brachygraphyorea00gurniala/page/4/mode/2up>