

Decoding Dickens's Shorthand: Our 8-step Guide

Step 1: Get ready

You will need:

- The original shorthand text.
- The **Dickens Code (DC) Annotator** for the text.
- The **DC Alphabet List**, which shows symbols that represent **letters** or **words**.
- The **DC Lexicon**, which shows the most frequent symbols representing **words** or **parts of words**.

Step 2: Look at the whole text

Examine the text and try to get as much information as possible from it. How is it laid out? Are there any clues as to when or where it was written?

Tabistock House.
Tabistock Square, London W.C.

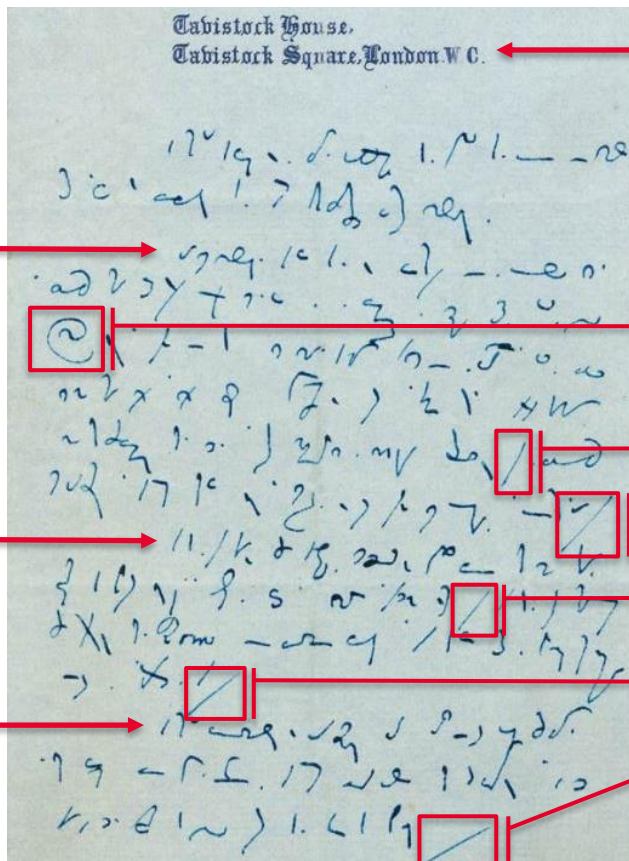
This is Dickens's home address.

Notice the **paragraph breaks**. It looks like the structure of a letter.

Highlight the symbols that you already know.

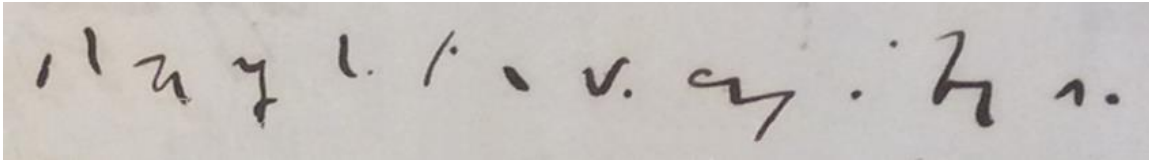
Highlight the **sentence breaks**.

Dickens usually marks the end of a sentence with a **long diagonal line**.



Step 3: Do one line at a time

Below is the first line of another one of Dickens's shorthand letters:



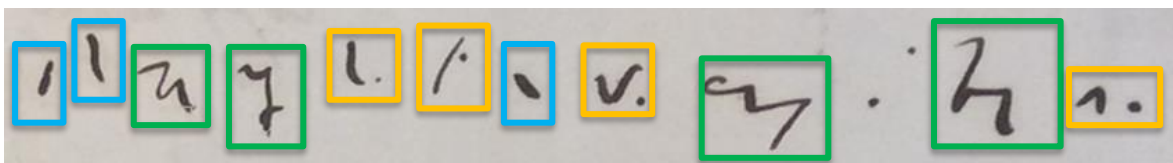
- Analyse one line at a time.
- What you see is a line of symbols with some gaps between them.
- The symbols represent **letters** or **words** or **parts of words**.
- A space is usually either a space between two words (as in longhand writing) or a space between two letters.
- Write your hypotheses directly underneath the shorthand symbols.

Step 4: Distinguish the types of symbol

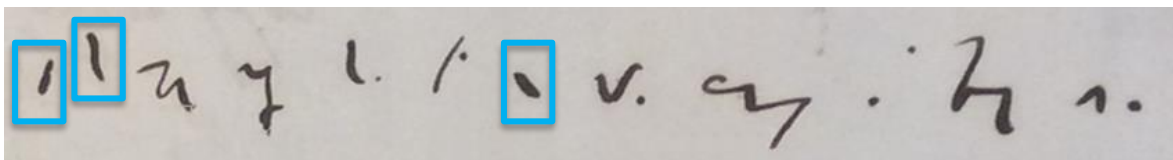
Visually there are three types of symbol. Look at **each symbol** in the line and identify it as:

- A **simple symbol** with one basic shape.
- A **complex symbol** with several shapes.
- A **symbol with a dot on the right**.

These three different types of symbols are marked up using the colour-coded boxes below:

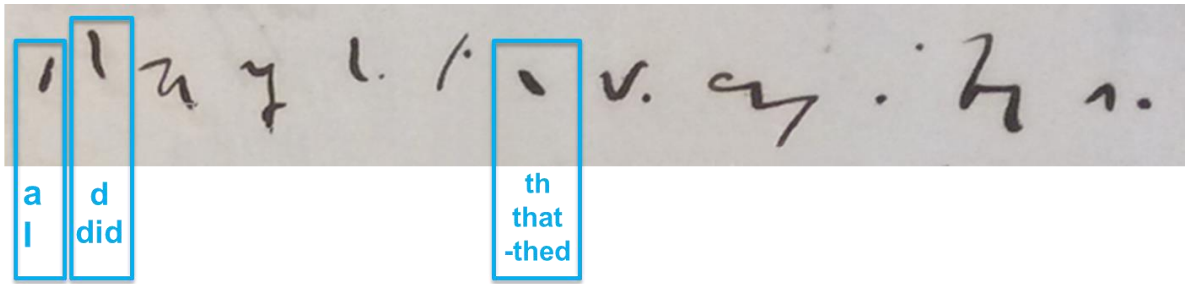


Step 5: Analyse the simple symbols

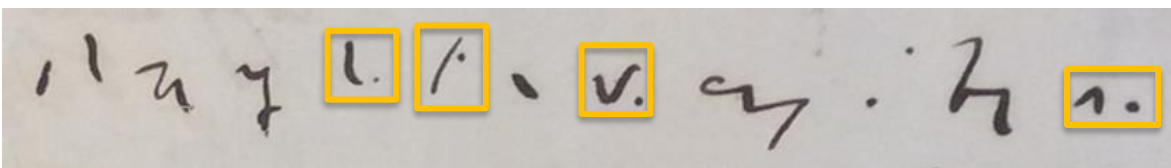


Is the symbol a letter or a word? It could be either. A simple symbol either represents a **single letter** (like <a> or <t>), a **whole word** (like *station*), or **part of a word** (like *-tion*).

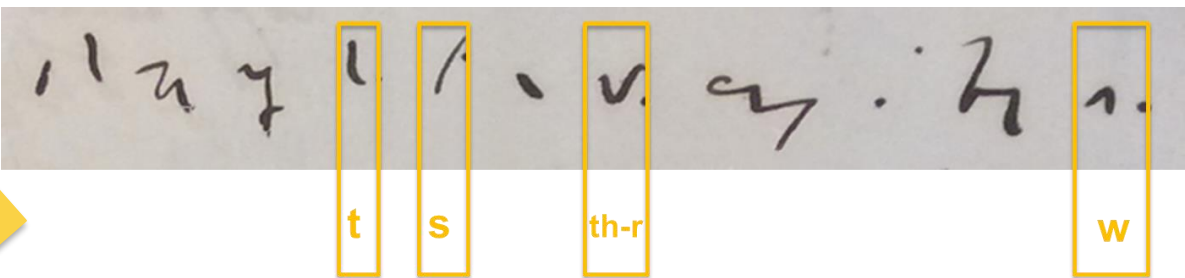
- Check the **DC Alphabet List** to see if the symbol represents a letter or a word.
- Check the **DC Lexicon** to see if it represents a word or part of a word.
- Remember to write down all of hypotheses under the character.



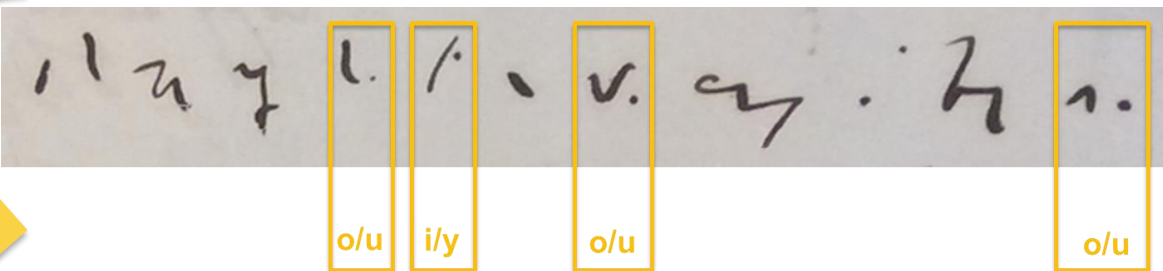
Step 6: Analyse the symbols with a dot on the right



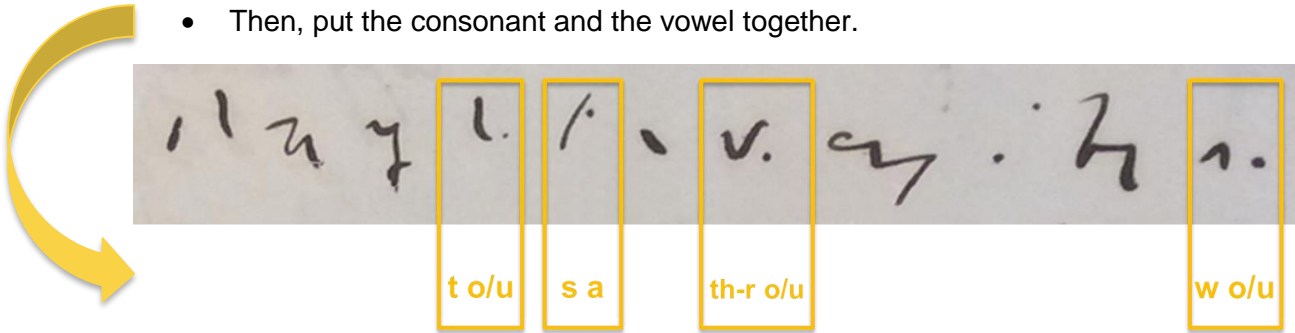
- Look at the shape of the symbol before the dot – this is usually a consonant letter.
- Check the **DC Alphabet List** to see which consonant it is.
- Write the consonant letter under the character.



- The dot after the symbol is usually a **vowel**.
- To identify the vowel you need to look at the position of the dot (top, middle, or bottom).
 - A dot at the **top** = 'a' or 'e'
 - A dot in the **middle** = 'i' or 'y'
 - A dot at the **bottom** = 'o' or 'u'
- Write down your hypotheses under the character.

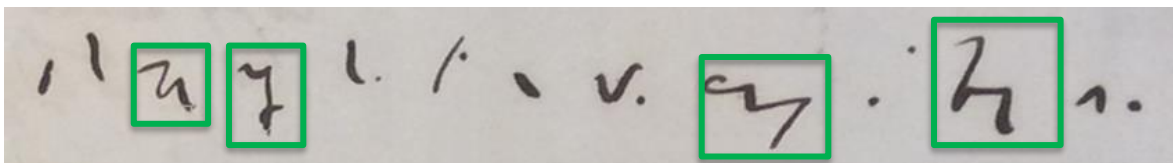


- Then, put the consonant and the vowel together.

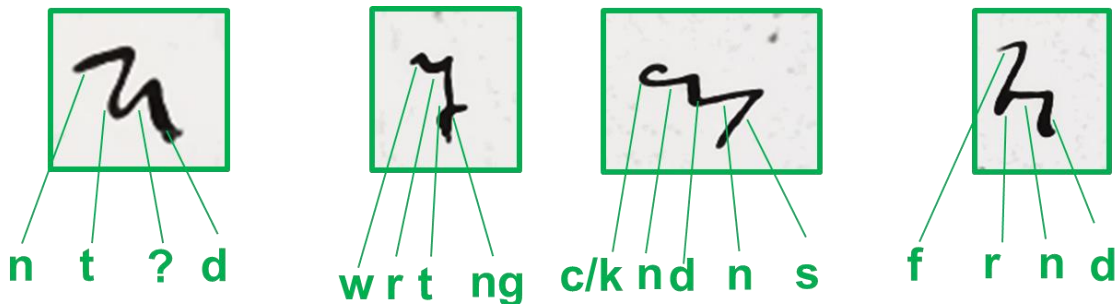


Step 7: Analyse the complex symbols

Look at the complex symbols.

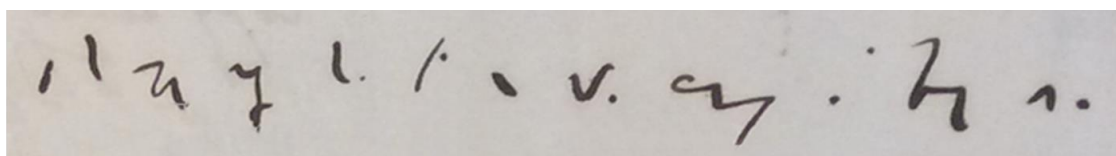


- A complex symbol is a set of different component shapes stuck together to make a single word.
- Use the **DC Alphabet List** and the **DC Lexicon** to divide the complex symbol into its component shapes.



Step 8: Put your hypotheses together

When you have written down every hypothesis for every symbol underneath the character, try to string them together into words. Remember that a **space between two consonant letters** needs to be filled by a **vowel**.



a	d																		
l	did	nt?d	wrtng	t o/u	s a	th	that	th-r o/u	c/kndns	frnd	w o/u								
	l	did	writing	to	say	that	through	kindness		friend	who								

What Dickens actually wrote in longhand:

I did **intend** writing to say that through **the** kindness **of a** friend who...

Now it's time to have a go!

5 solving tips from past workshop participants

1. Keep a personal glossary of frequent symbols (*I, that*).
2. Before deciphering a word guess its meaning from the context (*the ... of a friend*).
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; any sentence will contain at least one symbol which is undecipherable because Dickens wrote shorthand quickly and messily.

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Images

- The Tavistock Letter is © [The Morgan Library & Museum](http://www.morganlib.org/)
- The line of shorthand text that features on pp. 2-4 of this guide is a copy of a letter to Richard Bentley, dated 14 July 1837. The image appears courtesy of the V&A Museum, London.



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