

How to be Brief

By Keith Rowan II

I am a briefer. Always have been, always will. I will never write something in five strokes that I can accurately and easily write in one. Why would you? The person with fewer strokes will be more accurate and have better realtime, in addition to a much easier life. Many people would do well to increase their level of briefing. What follows are my suggestions on how to achieve this.

To brief or not to brief? We all vary in how much we use briefs, but I think every reporter or student will admit they brief at least a little. Some people say that you should never change your theory or that you will mess it up or have conflicts. This is quite possibly the worst advice you will ever hear! Your theory should be what works for you, and everyone is different. Sten Ed may work great for Kelli but not for Tami. Phoenix may work for Susan but not for Rick. Who's right? They all are!

All successful reporters are always changing at least a little of how they write, especially those who do realtime. With electronic reporting threatening our extinction, realtime is a necessity. It will also make you a lot more money, either in court or depositions (and it's a must in captioning obviously). So let's say you want to increase your use of briefs and learn to remember them easily. How is this possible?

The best briefs come from you, yourself. I know many students and reporters who say that they cannot remember or learn briefs. Do not give up! You are capable! Often, it is because it is difficult to remember a brief someone else gives you. However, if you came up with the brief on your own naturally, you will think of it again. Your fingers will go there automatically. These "natural" briefs are the ones that stick, often with little or no practice.

So how do you come up with briefs? The best way is to clear your mind, and say, "Okay. When I hear this word or phrase, what is the first thought that comes to my mind of how to one-stroke it?" Recently, I wanted a brief for redirect, and DRAOEK immediately came to mind. It works, and I have no problems remembering it at all. I often come up with similar briefs on the fly, and you can too, with practice.

Another good way to get the natural way to write something is to sit at your machine and say the word to yourself and just stroke it. Sounds too easy to work, but trust me. Tell yourself it is a matter of life and death and you have to quickly think of a one-stroke brief. Then, simply write whatever your subconscious directs your fingers to hit. Do not think! Whatever you hit is the natural way for you and therefore easy to remember. It is better and easier to think of briefs as hand positions than English letters anyway. The more you use this technique and the more briefing concepts floating in your subconscious, the easier this becomes.

If these methods don't work, the next step is to try to think of a good brief consciously. Here are a few general points to keep in mind when you begin briefing.

1) Keep briefs in consistent families. If you can remember one, you will remember them all, if they flow from each other. For example, inform is N-F, informant is N-FT, and information is N-FGS. I always think of every word I can in that family, so that I can make sure my method works for the entire family. If one conflicts with another word that I could easily make something else, I change that other word. The consistency of the family is more important!

2) Short theory principles and phrases help much more than individual briefs for random words. For example, learn how to do the English letters –MP and –RCH on the right side, rather than learn a brief for a random word. You will get many "briefs" by learning one theory principle.

3) Always or nearly always do inflected endings on the same stroke. I recommend (–D) for “ed,” (–G) for “ing,” and (–Z) for plurals. The (–Z) instead of (–S) keeps your briefs more conflict-free and frees the (–S) up for other briefs. However, when the word ends in (–T), you will have to use (–S). You can’t reach the (–Z) on those. This also allows me to use (–S) for possessives. I can even do a few in one stroke, such as (PLF-S) = plaintiff’s, (J-S) = judge’s, (DR-S) = doctor’s.

4) Keep briefs as short and simple as possible. If they are too hard to stroke accurately, they are useless. Shorter ones are easier to remember, anyway.

Now, let’s go over some specific briefing techniques that I use.

1) Squeeze the word -- Try to say it really fast and see what comes out, or try to use the main beginning and ending consonants of the word.

Examples (these use some letter combos you can frequently squeeze, like DM-, KM-, DL-):

DLAOENT = delinquent DLAOENS = delinquency

DMOET = demote DMOEGS = demotion

KMOEGS = commotion KMARNND = commander

HAOIFL = hypothetical HAOIFS = hypothesis

You can also simply take the beginning syllable or first few letters and add the last syllable, leaving out the middle.

SKRAOUVR = screwdriver

FIPZ = Phillips

This can work for phrases too.

GLOX = glove box

GLARMT = glove compartment

2) Change the vowels. The “OI” and “AE” steno vowels are frequently unused in words. Many people brief their “way” family (freeway, roadway, etc) as FROI, ROI or FRAE, RAE, etc. These vowels are great for lots of other briefs though.

Some examples:

MOIK = motorcycle, BOIK = bicycle, LOISD = like I said, LOIS = like I say (Lois can have the asterisk)

WAE = weigh, BAE or BOIT= by the way, SAERN = ascertain

If switching the vowels doesn’t work, leave all vowels out. The brief will usually be readable. I brief many words without any vowels, such as:

K-RJ = charge, PR-NT = precedent, PR-V = prove, STR-N = restrain, ST-V = substantive, ST-D = standard

Often, this method makes the word much easier to stroke and helps avoid conflicts.

3) Learn as many different theory principles as you can. Here are some combinations I use on the left hand.

(SF) = inf, inv, enf, env..... SFAOER = inferior SFAOIT = invite (this one is my own creation)

(KB) = emp, emb, imp, imb..... KBROR = emperor KBANL = impanel

(SPW) = int, ent, ind, end..... SPW = interest SPWENT = intent

(SD) = dis, des..... SDORT = distort SDERT = desert

(S*) = Z..... SAO* = zoo SAOIFL* = xylophone (ha, ha)

(DW) = div, dev, dif, def..... DWORS = divorce DWAOUZ = diffuse

(KW) = conv, conf..... KWERGS = conversion KWAOID = confide

And here are some right-hand combos.

(-FRP) = mp..... DAFRP = damp KLUFRP = clump

(-FRPBLG) = nch..... IFRPBLG = inch KWIFRPBLG = quench (again, finger position, not English! Use the first three fingers.)

(AUFP) = arch..... STAUF = starch PAUFMT = parchment (“Dracula” pronunciation)

(OIFP) = rch..... (except arch) LOIFP = lurch BOIFP = birch POIFP = porch (I call this the “Brooklynese” method – speak like you’re from the Big Apple)

(-LGTS) = tleSHULGTS = shuttle TAOILGTS = title

(-LGDZ) = dle..... MILGDZ = middle HURLGDZ = hurdle

(*S) = st..... BUS* = bust KAS* = cast
(*T) = th..... BAT* = bath YAOUT* = youth

4) Tuck common endings. It's out of the sequence of the word but becomes second nature with a little practice. You can tuck the "V" (*F) for "ive" endings. You form the stroke for the root word first, then simply reach up for the "V" before you let go of the keys. It gets faster over time. Examples: DEVK = detective, SUVJ = subjective, N-V = informative (using DEK, SUJ, and N-F for the root words)

You can also tuck (-L) for "ly." For example, PRENL = presently. To avoid confusion and dragging in the (-L) when you mean to just hit PRENT, you can usually drop the (-T) for the "ly" form. Examples: PRENL = presently, SKWENL = subsequently

Also, tuck (-R) for "er." Since mast is MAS* then master is MARS*. PAIRNT = painter. You can also add (E) for "er" if (-R) is already in the word. So WOERK is worker, and PAERK is Parker.

The (E) can also be used to tuck the -ly or -y endings, such as STAERBL for substantially, KAER for carry, and WOER for worry.

Tuck (-T) for "ed" when you already have (-D). So KHAOITD is chided, KLAOITD is collided. The main conflict to resolve is RORTD for reported/recorded.

Tuck (-N) for "en." So TAOINT = tighten, BAOENT = beaten

When a word begins with "a", tuck it into the outline. Examples: BAED = abide, BAORT = abort, LAON = alone, LAON* = loon, BRAER = arbitrary

Tuck (-F) for "s" in words (they have the same sound almost). This works for words ending in "sm" or "sk" or "sten" and also for adding "ing." Examples: KHAFM = chasm, DUFK = dusk, HAIFN = hasten, SKUFG = discussing.

5) Use the asterisk as more than an accursed deletion tool. It is your friend. This is yet another way that can be used for endings like "ly" when you already have the (-L) in the word, or just "y" endings. Examples: SUN* = sunny, LEG* = leggy, KARBL* = casually, PARBL* = partially

You can also use the asterisk for "ing" when you can't fit it. Example: -KT is account, *KT is accounting.

Of course, the asterisk is also used to differentiate the lesser common word or phrase of a conflict pair. An official might write MERJ for "members of the jury" and MERJ* for "merge." I also use it for things like LAURNS for "Lawrence" and LAURNS* for "Lawrence Expressway."

6) Make good use of your (-S) and (-Z). Examples: PALS = palace, PALZ = pals; MENS = menace, MENZ = men's; GLASZ = glasses, SGLASZ = sunglasses; SIRSZ = scissors.

7) Finally, if none of these work or don't work quickly and automatically, use the tried and true method of double-stroking the first syllable. This is great for proper names. It's best for names that come up repeatedly that you will for sure remember or figure out later.

Sometimes we simply can't think of a brief for a word by ourselves. Don't despair; there are many great resources for briefs. Besides friends and online forums, I have used the following resources: "Brief Encounters" by Laurie Boucke, "The Brief Machine" on www.stenolife.com, the "StenoMaster Theory" and "Magnum Steno" books and online club managed by Mark Kislingbury, and of course, the Brief-It feature of Case Catalyst. Other software has similar features. All of these are incredible!

What is much more helpful than briefing words is briefing phrases, especially for those going into court or depositions. There are thousands of two- and three-word phrases that are so common that almost every question or answer you ever hear will contain at least one of them and usually several. The single best way to become an expert briefer is to learn the phrases.

Here are some of my most indispensable testimony phrases that I have written thousands of times. YO = I don't, YA = I can't, YU = I couldn't, YI = I didn't (to these, you add phrase parts that I will touch on briefly next, such as (-RL) for "recall" and (-RM) for "remember"), THART = that is right, THAKT = that is correct, THAEKT = that's correct, THAERT = that's right, YAEKT = yes, that's correct, YAERT = yes, that's right, STHAR = is that right (I leave off the (-T) to avoid confusing it with "that is right"), STHARK = is that correct (again, I avoid the (-T)), YITD = yes, I did, YIFS = yes, I was, NOINT = no, I didn't, NAONT = no, I do not, NOENT = no, I don't.

To be a true phrase master, you must use phrase parts, not just random phrases. You have these on the left hand for the words that begin phrases and then on the right hand for the ends of phrases. When you keep them consistent and practice them, they are easy to remember and stroke. Here are some of the many that I use.

Left hand –

If (F-)examples: FUTD = if you did, FIFS = if I was, FIFL = If I feel

In (TPH-)..... examples: N-T = in the, NAK = in that case, NIRM = in this matter

Now that you sort of see the pattern, I'll just put the phrase parts without the examples. First, some left hand phrase parts --

Is = (S), As = (S*), It = (T), This = (TH), That = (THA), There = (THR), Are = (R), Did = (D), Do = (DAO), Can = (K), Could = (KAO), Would = (WAO), Should = (SHAO), Will = (L), And = (SKP -), About = (B), Ask = (SK), Go = (GO), What = (WA), Where = (WR), Why = (KWR), Who = (WHO), Which = (KH), Before = (BR), I do = (AO), Too = (TAO), For = (FR), From = (FRO), Some = (SM)

And here are some of the right-hand phrase parts to add on the end of the ones we just used on the left

hand.

Was = (-FS), Were = (-RP), The = (-T), It = (*T), Of = (-F), Much = (-FP), Had = (-D), Did = (-TD),
Want = (-FRPB), Want to = (-FRPBT), Say = (-S), Says = (-SZ), Said = (-SD), See = (-Z), Saw = (-FZ),
Ask = (-*FK), Think = (NG*), Thought = (-LGT), Know = (-N), Believe = (-BL), Recall = (-RL),
Remember = (-RM), Explain = (-X), Accident = (-X, also), Be = (-B), Agree = (-RG), Feel = (-FL), Felt = (-FLT),
Go = (-G), Find = (-FD), Can = (-K), Could = (-KD), Should = (-RBD), Would = (-LD), Will = (-L), Did = (-TD),
Side = (-DZ), Little = (-LGTS), That = (-LGTS also), This = (-TSDZ), Her = (ER), His = (IZ), Him = (IM),
Your = (UR), Me = (-M), My = (*M), Guys = (-GZ)

So simply take the phrase parts from the left hand, add the ones from the right, and voila, thousands of everyday phrases that come up repeatedly! I write most of the above words the same when they stand alone, but not all. To add the human pronouns, I use (I), (U), (WE), (THE) for they, (E) for he (less conflicts than HE), and (SHE) for she, or (-RB) if she is the ending word.

Not all of the above phrases make sense looking at the English, but remember, it's about finger positioning. Try them and you will probably like most! Also, there are a few conflicts here and there but largely, the words these conflict with are not common (you'll write "will you go" much more than "lug"). Use the asterisk to stroke the other words. Again, nearly every question and answer you ever write will use multiple of these above phrases, so master them.

Finally, for those of you who are advanced brief whizzes, do you employ extended questions and answers? This is where you write part of the question or answer in with the designation stroke. So you could write Y-FRPBLGTS for (A)Yes or STKPWHR-RT for (Q)Right.

This is a bit tricky, and I am still trying to master it, but it can be very helpful. I only feel it to be helpful in certain circumstances. If it is unnatural to hit, or if you are breaking up natural briefs that follow, it isn't worth it.

For example, the question is "did you go there"

I would write Q/DUG/THR- (Q = STKPWHR)

If I tried to do the extension, it would be Q-TD/UG/THR

Since "did you go" is so much more natural than "did," "you go" -- it's not worth it.

So for questions, I mainly use the extension concept for "filler words." As you may have found, many attorneys put words like "right," "all right," "okay," and "so" in front of nearly every single question. You can drag these into the (Q) stroke naturally and not break up the phrases that follow.

Q-LT = (Q)All right.

Q-RT = (Q)Right.

Q-S = (Q) So

Q-OK or Q-K = (Q)Okay.

Q-ND = (Q)And

For answers, I mostly do it for “yes” and “no.” These are so common, thankfully.

Y-ANS = (A)Yes (ANS = -FRPBLGTS)

N-ANS = (A)No

I found a way to increase the effectiveness of these. When I throw in my asterisk, it brings the next question symbol in. So when the answer is a one-word, yes-or-no answer, I now have gotten three separate strokes down to one.

Y*ANS = (A)Yes.(Q)

N*ANS = (A)No.(Q)

With nervous or demure witnesses who always say “yes” or “no” only, you can breeze right through.

Good luck and be brief!