

Writing systems are codes.

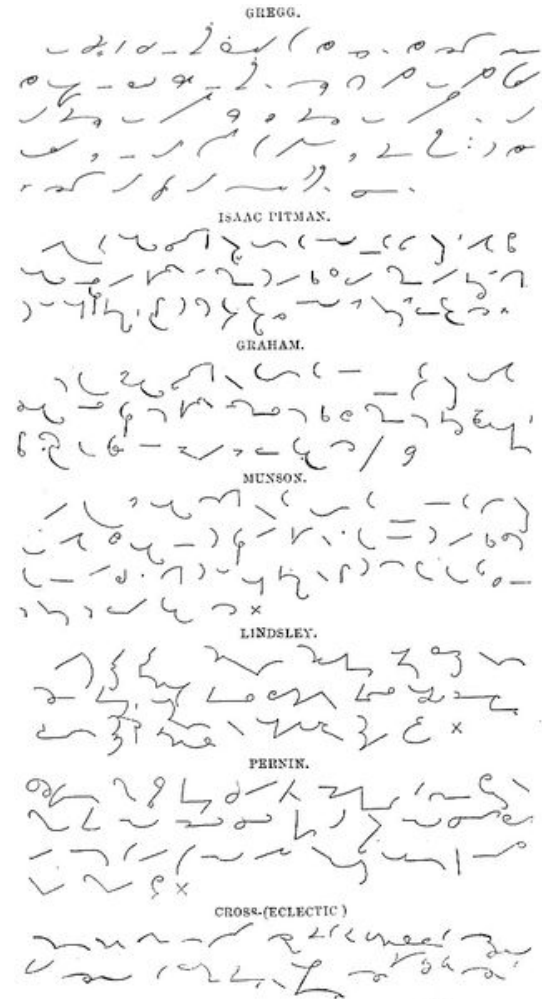
In order to understand writing, readers must “crack the code.” Readers must decipher or figure out what the written symbols stand for.

Let's get some more insight into codes and writing by looking at shorthand. Shorthand is a code because it is a system of specific symbols that represents something else. In shorthand, symbols represent words so that words can be written quickly. □□□ □□□□□ □□□□

Shorthand and Symbols

Look at these diagrams. The scribbled lines are symbols. Do you understand what the scribbles are saying? To understand this, you would have to know what the symbols mean, for the symbols themselves mean nothing unless you attach them to what they represent.

A symbol is something visible that stands for something else: it is a picture representing an invisible idea. Therefore, the symbol only has meaning when you know what it represents.



Symbols have meaning.

Now, what if you knew that one scribbled line meant "cats," another scribbled line meant "dogs," and another scribbled line meant "chase"? Now you can understand the sentence.

Symbols only have meaning when you understand what they stand for. They only have meaning when you know what they represent.

The English writing system is a code consisting of symbols called letters.

In shorthand, symbols represent words; but in our writing system, symbols stand for sounds.

The Alphabet is a system of symbols: it is a series of drawings that represents sounds. The creators of our alphabetic system of writing simply took each of the speech sounds and encoded them as symbols.

A B C D E F G H I
J K L M N O P Q
R S T U V W X Y Z
abcdefghijklmnop
qrstuvwxyz

Since writing systems are codes, readers must crack the code to understand what the writer is trying to communicate.

We use 26 symbols called letters to represent the 44 speech sounds in our language. To decode our writing system, we must understand what each symbol represents.

Each letter or combination of letters represents a specific speech sound. Alphabetic letters have no significance except that they stand for speech sounds. Until students recognize that each letter stands for a sound, the symbols themselves have no meaning. It's like trying to decode or read shorthand without knowing what the characters stand for.

Reading means decoding the written code.

Since our writing system is a written code of alphabetical symbols that stands for sounds, "decoding" them means turning those symbols back into sounds.

Reading is decoding written words by converting printed alphabetical symbols back into speech sounds.

Summary

The English writing system is a code. English uses a system of alphabetical symbols called letters to express spoken words as written words. Each letter or combination of letters represents a specific speech sound. Alphabetic letters have no significance except that they stand for speech sounds. Until students recognize that each letter stands for a sound, the symbols themselves have no meaning. It's like trying to decode or read shorthand without knowing what the characters stand for.

English consists of 44 speech sounds. We call these sounds phonemes because the Greek root *phono* means sound. Each phoneme represents a specific and distinct sound that can combine with other sounds to make spoken words.

In English, 26 letters represent 44 sounds. This means that some letters had to be combined with others to stretch those 26 symbols to match 44 sounds.

Summary

Since our alphabetic system is a written code of symbols that stands for sounds, "decoding" them means turning those symbols back into sounds. Reading is decoding the written alphabet by converting the symbols back into speech sounds.

And how does the brain do that? How does the brain decode written symbols?