

Marking and Dictating Material

Methods of Marking Dictation Material

The first thing you need to know about dictating your own material is that there are three commonly accepted ways to count and mark your material.

1. Straight word count - each whole word counts as one, whether it's "it" or "hyperthyroidism."
2. Syllabic density - material is counted off by syllables, with 1.4 syllables commonly being equivalent to one word. I.e., 14 syllables equal 10 words.
3. Combination of straight word and syllabic. Each marked section has a set number of words and syllables. For example, each group of 10 actual words would have 14 syllables.

Method #1 is how most schools have their practice and test material marked off since this is the easiest method for marking. There can be a great deal of variance in the number of syllables in each take making this the least desirable method for true standardized testing.

Method #2 makes all takes equal in syllabic density but is labor-intensive when marking large quantities of material. Some teachers will say that people don't speak at a fixed syllabic density so practicing and testing at a fixed syllabic density is not "real world" and they feel it isn't best for students. I disagree with this! I think there is merit to practicing both actual word and syllabically marked material, but tests should ALWAYS be syllabic density or marked by method #3. All tests should be relatively equal measures of ability and should not have as much fluctuation as straight word count produces. Marking tests by straight word count is similar to giving a typing test on Monday that has 1,000 characters, then giving a test on Tuesday that has 1,400 characters, yet saying they are the same measure of ability.

Method #3 is how most national and state tests are marked. Actual word groups are marked, then the syllables within each group are counted and words are adjusted until the desired syllabic count within the section is acquired. For example, if you were going to mark 20-word sections with a 1.4 syllabic density, each section would have 20 actual words and exactly 28 syllables.

So, what method should you use for your own practice? I'd suggest picking between #1 or #2.

Marking the Material

Grab your pencil and let's begin! If you're going with Method #1, count off 20 words and pencil in a slash mark after the 20th word. Keep counting to 20 and placing slash marks until you have marked the entire piece of material or a sufficient amount for the length of the take you want to dictate. More about that in a minute.

If you want to mark material off syllabically, first you determine what density you want. 1.4 is most common. Next, figure out how many syllables for 10 words ($1.4 \times 10 = 14$ syllables), then multiply that by two to know how many syllables are equal to 20 words ($2 \times 14 = 28$ syllables). You can use that same formula, but substitute another syllabic density such as 1.6 if you like. Now the fun part: marking the material. I find it easiest to verbalize, and a general rule of thumb is each time your chin moves while speaking, it's a syllable. I've actually seen some teachers sitting at their desk with their chin resting on

their hand while they mark off material. Silly, but it works! If you're marking material at 1.4 syllabic density, place a slash mark after every 28th syllable.

How Much Material to Mark

Simple math will help you determine how many sections of 20 words you need. If you're going to dictate at 60 wpm for 5 minutes, you will need a total of 300 words (60 x 5). Divide that by groups of 20 and it comes out to 15 groups consisting of 20 words each.

Dictating the Material

You'll need a dictation timing chart, your material, and a watch with seconds on it. The chart indicates when you will need to reach each of the slash marks while dictating. For example, when dictating at 60 wpm, the chart will indicate you're to reach the first slash at the 20 second mark, the second slash at the 40 second mark, and the third slash at the 60 second mark. It takes a bit of practice to be able to dictate the material evenly; the more you do it, the easier it gets. So, take a practice run through the material, turn on the recorder, and go for it!

Additional Suggestions for Dictating

Low-speed dictation: do not draw out the pronunciation of words to fill the time. Pronounce a word and then wait before pronouncing the next. At low speeds it can be helpful to group words that are phrased as you speak. This helps you remember that you are to write the two or three words in one stroke, plus it avoids the whole situation of having stroked the first word, then upon hearing the second word realizing that they belonged together as a phrase. Discontinue this practice around 100-120 wpm. The dictation flows more conversationally at that point and you want to teach your brain to hear and put together phrases as you'll hear them in testing dictation and on the job.

Dictate your material in short bursts and long takes, and at varying speeds. For instance, you might dictate a 60 wpm five-minute take like this: first minute at 50 wpm, first minute again at 60 wpm, first minute again at 70 wpm. Second minute at 50 wpm, second minute again at 60 wpm, second minute again at 70 wpm. Continue in this manner with the third, fourth and fifth minutes. Now dictate the whole thing at 50 wpm, again at 60 wpm, and again at 70 wpm. If you have variable speed capability in your computer software, you can use that instead of dictating at multiple speeds. With the exception of the original recording, you won't know at what speeds it's playing, but you can slow it down to work on accuracy, or speed it up to push for more speed.

Dictate new phrases and briefs you're trying to incorporate into your writing. Dictate the words individually and dictate the words in sentences you've made up.

Dictate from the phone book. "James McClintock, M-C-C-L-I-N-T-O-C-K, 342 Westchester Street. Phone number 631 878-5989."

Dictate the top stories from the newspaper or the Internet; News of Medicine and Word Power from Reader's Digest; articles from magazines of all sorts, or almost anything you can get your hands on!

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