The Way I Write

by Marie-France Bru

Being almost entirely paralyzed and unable to speak, the only way to express myself is by typing with SwitchXS switch-access software and a muscular switch attached to my cheek, which I activate with little jaw movements. I am not patient, so writing letter by letter with a scanning system is unimaginable: thus, I have created an alternative writing method that lets me type three times faster.

Using the panel editor LayoutKitchen, I have customized my scan panel with a minimum of keys, which is less fatiguing since reaching and selecting each key requires two or three switch clicks. To speed up typing, I also use KeyStrokes, as it allows me to define abbreviations for text, which expand after typing a space. Also, its word prediction is very convenient for words without abbreviations and frequently used word groups.

With a scan panel, keys are typically arranged in blocks organized in rows. The time it takes to reach a key depends on its position within the block, the position of the block within the row, and finally the row order. Knowing this, I order my scan panel so that the most frequently used keys appear early on it. Of course, if you prefer simplicity to efficiency, you can simply order the keys alphabetically.

To avoid mistakes, I color code the keys on my scan panel, using the same color for all keys of the same type.

Having entered hundreds of abbreviations into KeyStrokes, I have incorporated a technique to facilitate abbreviation expansion by defining additional keys on my scan panel that type a letter followed by a space. For example, the regular “h” and “1” keys just type “h” and “1” respectively, but when I select the regular “h” key and then the special “1” key that includes a space, KeyStrokes will expand the shortcut “h1” to “I have ”. This means that with two keys I am able to type 7 characters. Similarly, “h2” is expanded to “you have ”, and so forth. By defining these kinds of shortcuts and using regular keys and those that also type a space, I have considerably increased my typing speed. Because this method requires many abbreviations, it is impossible to memorize them all; therefore, I have developed ways to organize and find them. It would take too long to explain them here, all the more since they change with the language. In a few months, I hope to explain them in English on my web site www.als-testimony.org.

Additionally, my writing keyboard has letter combinations that are often used, such as “th”, “sh”, “oo”, and “ea”. Also, it features groups of letters found at the end of words like “ing”, “ed”, “able”, and “tion”. Finally, to make an abbreviated word plural, I have a button that backspaces,

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removes the space at the end of a word, and then types the letter "s" followed by a space. You can use similar tricks to change, for example, "have " to "having ".

I use a rather complex and thorough system for my writing method, of which I have only explained the basics; however, you can make things as simple or intricate as you want. Even a small set of frequently used abbreviations can speed up typing, and combined with KeyStrokes' word prediction makes an efficient writing system that saves effort and increases productivity. ❑

To see how I continue to play "A pivotal role in the household" thanks to my Mac and assistive technology, please check out Episode 1 of the video podcast, *Exploring the Frontiers of Assistive Technology*.

This PDF and audio podcast is created by Mac users with physical, speech, or vision impairments. Featuring their experiences, it seeks to inform, inspire, and provide a platform for new ideas. Twice a year, some of the articles appear in a PDF of the AssistiveWare Newsletter, found at www.assistiveware.com/newsletter.php. A video podcast titled "Exploring the Frontiers of Assistive Technology" that features some of the contributors is also available.

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