



The Most Valuable Class I Ever Took

By Curtis Jerry Smothers

The Class I Took to Avoid Chemistry

Mrs. Digby was my high school typing teacher way back in 1959, and I owe her a lot. I took her typing class for three reasons: 1) I didn't want to take Chemistry; 2) I loved to write, but my penmanship was really bad; and 3) it was an easy way for a nerdy guy with glasses—me—to socialize with girls, who made up the overwhelming majority of the class.

What I remember most about Mrs. Digby was that, despite her small stature—barely over five feet—she was as tough as any drill sergeant. She insisted that her students learn the keyboard by touch. If she caught you looking at your hands, she would sear the flesh off you with her acid tongue.

We had to rest our fingers on the home keys of our Royal manual typewriters and wait for the drill cadence:

"j u j, space; don't watch your hands, space... Curt! Eyes on the textbook. You keep watching those hands, and I'm going to make you wear my dog's funnel the vet put on him to keep him from licking his wormy hind end!"

The girls all laughed. So much for my romantic dreams.

A Typing Test Changed My Navy Career

Nevertheless, what was kind of a fun semester in a class with no homework turned out to be the most valuable skill I learned in high school.

I enlisted in the Navy shortly after graduating and promptly ignored my dad's advice about volunteering. About five days into recruit training, the company commander announced that the battalion office was looking for a typist.

I reported to the battalion commander's office and demonstrated that I could type, *"Now is the time for all good men to come to the aid of their country,"* at top speed on the oldest manual typewriter I have ever seen. I think it was an Olivetti, and it was to a shiny Royal as a beat-up Volkswagen was to a Mercedes-Benz.

I became the battalion yeoman and spent my nine weeks of recruit training as a clerk typist and messenger while my fellow recruits marched, exercised on the drill field, and marched some more.

I typed Mrs. Digby a thank-you letter, and she wrote back:

"Don't forget: keep your eyes away from your hands! And keep writing! You always were a very good writer."

From Typing Class to London

After boot camp, the Navy sent me to Yeoman School in Bainbridge, Maryland. Mrs. Digby was proud when I told her I had graduated first in my class, and I was rewarded with a three-year tour of duty at Navy Headquarters in London, where everyone wore civilian clothes and received extra pay for living on the local economy.

Ah, three years in the heart of London during the early 1960s was about as good as it gets.

There I had much better luck with the girls than I did in Mrs. Digby's typing class (probably because her story about the butt-licking dog hadn't reached Great Britain yet). Just a few months into my tour, I met the woman who would share the next fifty years of her life with me.

The Gift That Kept Giving

A half-century and a twenty-five-year Navy career have passed, and my English rose and I are still together. We have grandchildren and wonderful memories, and I would never have met her had it not been for Mrs. Digby's typing class and her dedication as a teacher.

Fast forward to 2012. By then I had retired from the Navy, but I had never lost my love of writing. I discovered a number of online content-writing gigs for pay and eventually wrote hundreds of articles and blog posts for businesses and websites across a wide range of subjects. The work kept me intellectually engaged, provided an enjoyable retirement activity, and generated a welcome stream of extra income—although I never really did it for the money. I did it because I loved to write.

From Royal Typewriters to Smartphones

There really is a connection between Mrs. Digby's iron Royals and today's QWERTY keyboards—even the ones on smartphones, which really aren't all that smart because you have to use—and watch—your thumbs.

With all due respect to Mrs. Digby, I finally had to abandon typing two spaces after every period. I also have to glance at the keyboard now and then to find the Escape or Function keys.

Even today, whenever my eyes drift toward the keyboard, I can almost hear Mrs. Digby barking, "Eyes on the copy, Curt!" Some lessons really do last a lifetime. I wonder what she would think about the flying thumbs over smartphones virtual keyboards.