



# The importance of shorthand: Industry consultation





# 1. Introduction

## 1.1. Background

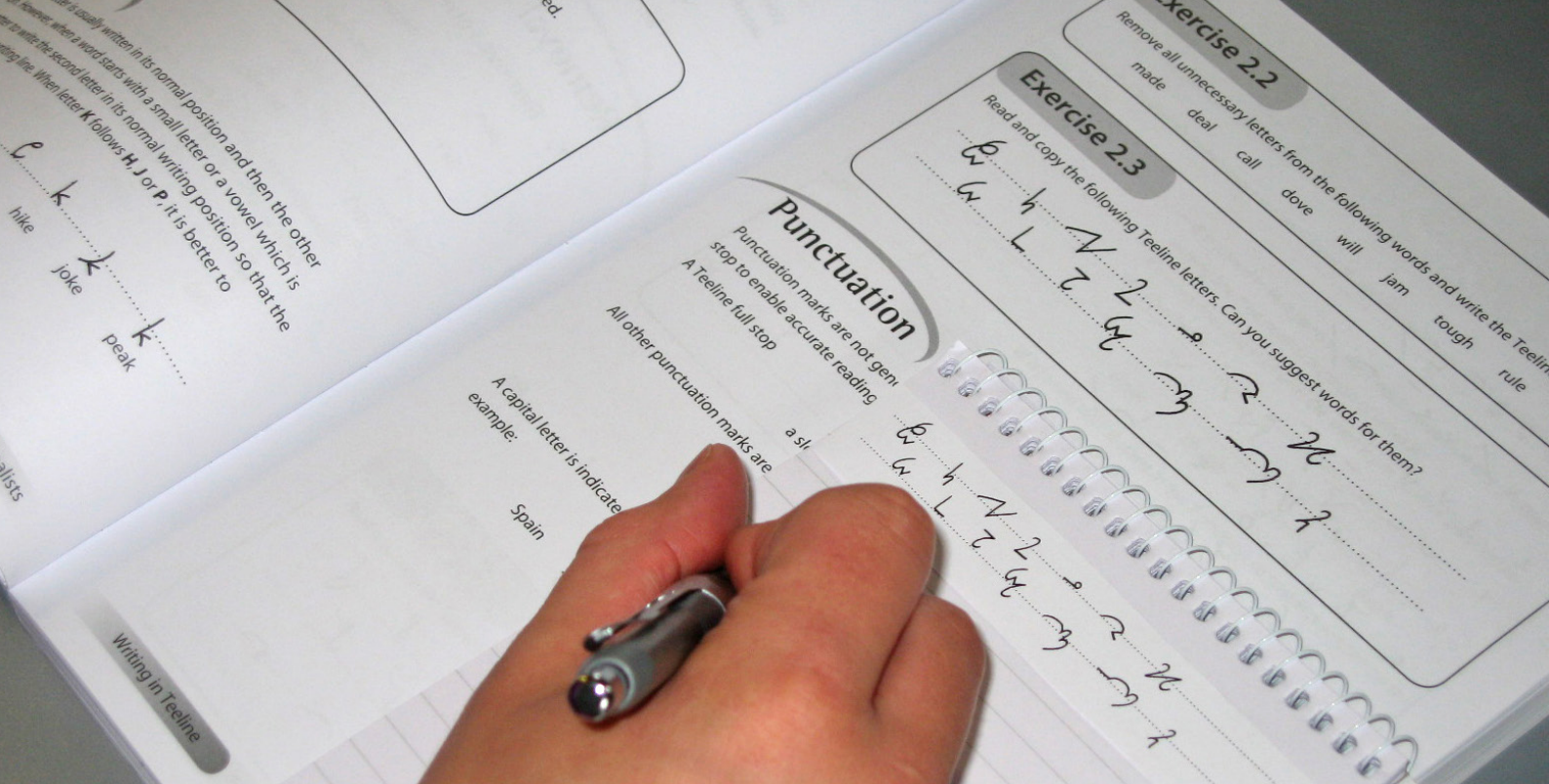
One of the NCTJ's strategic objectives identified in a review of its development strategy is to do more to cater for all types of journalists, not just news journalists. The NCTJ recognises that there are a growing number of roles that require journalistic skills, such as in content creation, PR and digital media. These roles are and continue to be career paths chosen by some NCTJ graduates. To cater for these roles and to facilitate partnerships with a wider range of employers and organisations with these jobs, the NCTJ needs to ensure its products and services are relevant and accessible to a wider range of journalists and the next generation of journalists.

The NCTJ's policy on shorthand is therefore designed to cater for all types of journalistic roles in different media organisations. It has been adapted to ensure that (i) the NCTJ's products and services are relevant and accessible to a wider range of journalists and that (ii) all courses are dealt with fairly and consistently.

The NCTJ's shorthand policy gives clarity to employers, current students, prospective students and training providers. It allows the NCTJ and training providers to give guidance to students, and for training providers to understand how they should be offering shorthand on accredited courses, in that:

- If their students seek to be employed in news journalism roles (particularly in national and regional newspapers) then it should be made clear that shorthand should be studied and that not taking shorthand will lead to a diminished range of opportunities. Therefore, if an accredited course's focus is news journalism, students should be offered shorthand and court reporting as a mandatory part of their training. This is because the employers of news brands (where it is hoped that these students will find jobs) continue to expect their news reporting trainees to have the ability to take an accurate shorthand note up to 100wpm and to have the training and competences required for professional court reporting.
- If students are primarily looking to other areas of employment, such as in broadcast journalism, magazine journalism and sports journalism, shorthand is less of a crucial skill and may not be regarded as an essential skill. Courses with a focus of these types of sectors in the journalism industry will continue to have the flexibility to deliver a combination of elective modules that may not include shorthand, although offering the module on an optional basis will be recommended to give students access to all the key skills required to succeed in the journalism industry.
- If centres are advertising their courses as gateway qualifications for all journalism careers, then those centres should offer shorthand at least as an option to all students should they wish to pursue certain career routes.

To evaluate the approach outlined above, the NCTJ has consulted with journalism and media employers in the UK to determine the relevance of shorthand in their businesses.



## 1.2. Research approach

The NCTJ developed a short online survey tool. Links to this were distributed to:

- the 30 leading media employers in the UK, approved and amended by the NCTJ accreditation board; and
- the NCTJ's editorial contacts at larger companies, who were asked to distribute the survey to other teams in the business.

This allowed for capturing views from different sectors, employers and individuals.

The survey link remained open and was available for three weeks. Sixty responses were received, which we have coded to a sector definition. Over half represent newspaper groups, either regional newspapers (45 per cent) or national newspapers (seven per cent). Just less than a third (32 per cent) represent broadcasting organisations.

A list of the responding companies, with their sector 'allocation' is shown in Annex 1.

**Table 1:** Response by sector

Sector	n		%
National newspapers	4		7
Regional newspapers	27		45
Magazines	2		3
Broadcast	19		32
Other	1		2
News agency	5		8
No answer	2		3
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>		<b>100</b>

Source: NCTJ employer consultation on shorthand

## 2. Requirement for shorthand

The respondents were asked when they recruited whether they consider shorthand to be essential, desirable, essential for some roles but not others or not important.

Thirty per cent regard shorthand as essential, 20 per cent as desirable, 32 per cent as essential for some roles but not others. Eighteen per cent regard shorthand as not being important.

**Table 2:** Requirement for shorthand at recruitment

	<i>n</i>		%
Essential	18		30
Desirable	12		20
Essential for some roles and not others	19		32
Not important	11		18
<b>Total</b>	<b>60</b>		<b>100</b>

Source: NCTJ employer consultation on shorthand

The importance of shorthand for each sector is clear. Of the 18 respondents who believed that shorthand was essential, 12 were from regional newspapers. Similarly, of the 19 who believed that shorthand was essential for some roles, though not others, some 12 were from regional newspapers. Of the 11 who stated that shorthand was not important, eight were broadcast companies.

Some broadcast companies (six) did state that shorthand was desirable. But of the 19 broadcast companies responding only one believed shorthand to be essential, with another four stating that it was essential for some roles but not others.

**Table 3:** Requirement for shorthand at recruitment

	Essential	Desirable	Essential for some roles and not others	Not important
	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>	<i>n</i>
National newspapers	2	3	0	0
Regional newspapers	12	2	12	0
Magazines	0	0	1	1
Broadcast	1	6	4	8
Other	0	0	0	1
News agency	1	1	2	1
No answer	2	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>18</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>

Source: NCTJ employer consultation on shorthand

Note: two respondents did not specify sector

The respondents gave qualitative statements which give a greater understanding of the responses above. In the first instance there are those that emphasise that shorthand is still essential:

**'Shorthand remains an essential skill in modern journalism.'**

Regional newspaper

**'An essential skill for both journalists and managers.'**

Regional newspaper

**'Shorthand remains a critical skill for our journalists.'**

Regional newspaper

**'Shorthand continues to be essential for our business and reporters are not considered for roles unless they have it.'**

Regional newspaper

The reasons underpinning these attitudes relate to the nature of coverage that is required of their journalists, most frequently the need to cover court cases, inquests and council meetings:

**'Shorthand is vital for covering court hearings, inquests and other public hearings where recording is prohibited.'**

National newspaper

**'A shorthand contemporaneous note of a court case is still accepted as a true representation of what happened by Scottish courts and judges.'**

**Until that changes, shorthand is essential.'**

Regional newspaper

**'I wouldn't recruit a senior reporter who didn't have shorthand. We cannot have staff relying on recording equipment which is also obviously no good for court.'**

Regional newspaper

**'Shorthand remains a key skill in news reporting for us, particularly for court.'**

News agency

**'Shorthand is part of a professional qualification, like maths is to accountancy. Until there is an acceptable technological alternative that is recognised by the courts and is also not time consuming to transcribe notes then it will remain an essential recruitment tool.'**

Regional newspaper

'I can't stress how important I think it is for text (online) reporters in particular to have good shorthand. Without this skill, it's difficult for a reporter to get the level of detail required/verbatim quotes when covering court cases, inquests etc.'

Broadcast

'It is a very important skill. I would not send anyone to court or an inquest if they could not do shorthand. I would not feel happy that they could compile comprehensive notes and therefore be accurate.'

Regional newspaper

'Shorthand is vital for covering court hearings, inquests and other public hearings where recording is prohibited.'

National newspaper

'We cannot have staff relying on recording equipment which is also obviously no good for court.'

Regional newspaper

But for some respondents, the need is wider than that:

'In an increasingly litigious world (inc IPSO), the need for absolute accuracy and in NCTJ training the teaching of this skill is a line in the sand that drives home the importance of a correct record and the consequences of an incorrect one. To suggest only court reporters require shorthand is wrong and to even hint that it is unnecessary or optional to any of the written roles mentioned is dangerous.'

Regional newspaper

'There's nothing quicker or more reliable than a good shorthand note when covering news.'

News agency

'I think editors value the NCTJ qualifications generally rather than shorthand specifically. I think some editors in broadcast like it when journalists have worked on newspapers where they have shorthand and have developed an understanding of what a story is – rather than shorthand itself. I still use my shorthand today, but it's not essential in the day job of a broadcast journalist.'

Broadcaster

The employers who require it to cover these functions need to have staff in order that they can meet the business needs:

**'Trying to run a news rota which includes reporters without shorthand can be challenging as you can't always guarantee you'll have the person with the right skills on shift at the time you need them. With newsrooms now increasingly asking broadcast reporters to provide court copy for online text reports, it's also important for those staff to have shorthand, in addition to the dedicated online journalists.'**

Broadcast

**'Increasingly we are taking on recruits without shorthand but we now have a situation where we struggle to cover court and inquests as so few reporters have shorthand. We need to make it a priority.'**

Regional newspaper

**'Shorthand remains very important to our business, given our commitment to covering courts, inquest and public hearings.'**

Regional newspaper

The alternative view is, of course, that shorthand is not needed, mainly because the development of various recording technology makes it unnecessary:

**'Most journalists now record interviews on their phones and use shorthand to take basic notes. Precise quotes will be checked against their phone recordings.'**

Broadcast

**'Reporters routinely record conversations so that there is a full record in the event of post-publication complaints.'**

National newspaper

**'Technology/apps seem to be widely in use among those who need to record/transcribe quotes accurately.'**

Broadcast

**'With the advent of auto-transcription tools I think it'll soon be largely obsolete.'**

Broadcast

**'For the majority of our journalism roles we don't require it, and I don't think that's likely to change.'**

Regional newspaper

A 'middle' view is that although there is recording technology available, shorthand still remains a useful (if not essential) skill for journalists to develop:

**'Technology has replaced the need for shorthand in many ways but it is still useful for some reporting so is an added bonus.'**

Broadcaster

**'It feels like a useful skill for a journalist to have but now you can record memos etc on your phone, not so essential anymore.'**

Broadcaster

**'Is not a requirement at all, at most a nice to have.'**

Magazine publisher

A further view is that whilst the shorthand is not important per se, the training in it is part of the development of an individual as a journalist and is indicative of other skills and qualities. In this sense, shorthand itself is not essential but the presence of it on an individual's CV suggests that there will be quality difference:

**'If a reporter joins having not done an NCTJ we can really tell the difference, and shorthand is a major part of that. I would not be able to trust a reporter in court, on the phone, or in any situation if they did not have shorthand.'** National newspaper

**'Shorthand helped reinforce the importance of note-taking for journalists and therefore felt like an important skill to learn.'**

Broadcaster

**'Shorthand is still admired by many journalism employers. Those coming into the industry should realise that the hard graft needed to achieve a gold-standard speed of 100 words per minute, results in a transferrable skill relevant to many roles in the sector. The skill also sets them apart and demonstrates trainees' commitment and determination to be successful.'** Broadcaster

**'Shorthand may no longer be mandatory due to the shifting requirements of the role of a writer but the confidence it brings reporters and the options it offers them when out on the road remains essential. It is a skill that works well when speaking to members of the public on the phone or face-to-face and of course in the courtroom.'**

Regional newspaper



**'Although not an essential skill for most roles in our newsroom, it is certainly a useful skill for reporters to have in their armoury.'**

Broadcaster

**'I would always say 'yes' when a student asks me if they should take shorthand – it shows commitment.'**

Regional newspaper

**'It also enables us to see demonstrable commitment to learning and training.'**

Regional newspaper

Some respondents point out that not having shorthand would limit the range of jobs that could be applied for:

**'It's an additional skill that means you have greater flexibility in your career direction.'** Regional newspaper

**'I still question the number of applicants who come to us with journalism qualifications that just don't fit with today's newsrooms. These include graduates. Studying journalism for three years and leaving with shorthand of 60wpm is ridiculous and can really hold talented youngsters back.'**

Regional newspaper

**'There appear to be a remarkable number of university courses that let their students stop shorthand, either after the first year, or at 60wpm. I do not understand this. Universities should be candid with students that employers still value shorthand. I feel the NCTJ and universities do prospective students and the industry a disservice by allowing this situation.'** Regional newspaper

**'The fact they are allowed to graduate with just 60 to 80wpm leaves them in a bind when it comes to fully qualifying. They should be encouraged to complete 100wpm – I'm surprised courses of three years still have people only completing part way through the necessary speed.'** Regional newspaper

**'In my view, those expecting a career in journalism should have the skill.'** National newspaper

**'Even if shorthand is not essential for a role, I would never discourage anyone from acquiring the skill as it gives flexibility, allowing someone to switch to a reporting role if they wish.'**

Regional newspaper

**'I would always recommend students study shorthand as it could be the additional skill that gets their CV into the interview pile or sets them ahead of other candidates. A role they apply for initially may not need shorthand, but ones they apply for further on in their career may. It shows another level of attainment.'** Regional newspaper

**'We would always recommend trainees or aspiring journalists learn shorthand and see it as an important factor when recruiting.'**

Regional newspaper

**'Shorthand is still a hugely valuable part of the industry and gives the candidate a wider pool of opportunities if this is achieved.'**

Regional newspaper

**'I think if they don't have shorthand, they can limit their opportunities.'**

Regional newspaper

**'It is a huge bonus for any journalist to have shorthand and shows a candidate has discipline and commitment which we always look for in new staff. It will always tip the balance on two similar candidates applying for a job on my team.'**

Regional newspaper

**'Shorthand remains a desirable qualification for news reporters. A good applicant with shorthand would always have the edge on a good candidate without shorthand. We have previously appointed exceptional candidates without shorthand, and trainees without shorthand, but would always insist that they take classes to achieve 100wpm.'** Regional newspaper

**'It's so vital to traditional reporting and really lets some decent candidates down.'** Regional newspaper

There are evidently different views across different sectors, but some regard there to be a need to reconcile these obvious differences:

**'I think there needs to be consistency across the industry. Many local paper roles that involve reporting say shorthand is essential to the point people are threatened with termination if they can't get 100wpm. Yet other roles in e.g. TV news where a reporter eg also goes to court to report, do not make this essential. If the reporting is the same (albeit verbal not written), why is there such disparity?'** Broadcaster

An issue raised by some employers is the impact that the need for it (amongst some employers) has upon diversity:

**'A lack of shorthand should not be a barrier to entering journalism. There is a slight snobbery from those of us who endured the training to those who haven't qualified or studied – or had the opportunity to. Insisting on shorthand also closes off non-conventional routes into journalism which may provide candidates from more diverse socio-economic backgrounds.'** Regional newspaper

**'Unnecessary and old-fashioned requirements for shorthand freeze out a lot of disabled journalists.'** Broadcaster

**'I think it should be recognised how expensive it is to learn shorthand after your NCTJ course ends, when you are earning little more than minimum wage for many local paper jobs. A scheme to help those on low income continue to learn in order to reach 100wpm should exist, to ensure equal access regardless of income.'** Broadcaster

Some commented that shorthand may end up being a waste of time and energy for those who find themselves in a job where it is not regularly used:

**'It's a useful skill but I think it's so infrequently used by radio staff that they soon lose their speed and accuracy and then if they ever used it in the first place they stop doing so.'** Broadcaster

**'I learnt shorthand to the required speed for my journalism postgraduate. I rarely used it – the huge amount of time it took on the syllabus would have been far better spent developing craft skills and honing writing skills.'** Broadcaster

### 3. Validation of shorthand qualification

The respondents were asked when they recruited whether they consider shorthand to be essential. Those respondents who stated that shorthand was essential (either 'essential' or 'essential for some roles') were asked whether they asked for their candidate's NCTJ qualification to validate that they do have shorthand at the required speed. There was a fairly even split between the respondents, with 51 per cent stating that they do ask for the qualifications and 49 per cent not doing so.

**Table 4:** Whether employers ask for a candidate's NCTJ qualification to determine whether they have shorthand at the required speed

	<i>n</i>	%
Yes	19	51
No	18	49
<b>Total</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: NCTJ employer consultation on shorthand

This suggests that the NCTJ needs to advise employers recruiting NCTJ graduates that it would be beneficial to check the NCTJ diploma certificate for the modules studied and the shorthand speed attained, as it will not always be the case that if candidates have achieved the NCTJ diploma they automatically will have studied shorthand.



## 4. Shorthand requirement in different roles

The employers were asked which journalistic roles in their organisations required shorthand. In their responses, some employers stated that shorthand was essential in some roles and advantageous, desirable or helpful in others, so we have split these out in the table below.

As can be seen, in terms of roles, the most common are 'reporter' and 'journalist' roles, covering a wide spectrum of reporting roles. Some respondents specifically refer to job roles, be this court or inquest reporting or covering council meetings.

**Table 5:** Journalistic roles and responsibilities which require shorthand

Essential		Advantageous, desirable or helpful
<b>Editors</b>		
News editors	News editor	Editors
Content editors		
<b>Reporters</b>		
All reporting roles	All reporter roles	Reporters
General reporters	All news reporters	Reporting roles
All reporters	Reporters	Reporters
Trainee reporter	All reporter roles	Reporters
Senior reporter	Reporters	Reporter
Text (ie. online) reporters	Reporter	Some reporters
Specialist Reporters	News reporters	Reporter/correspondent
All reporting roles	News reporters	
General news reporters	Reporter	
Specialist reporting roles (crime, politics, investigations etc)	General news reporting	
Senior reporting roles	General news reporter	
All reporting roles	Senior reporters	
News and politics reporters	News reporter	
District reporters	Politics reporters	
<b>Journalists</b>		
Online journalists	Those on the news desk	Journalist writing roles
Trainee multimedia journalists	All journalists	
Magazines with strong news content	Newsdesk	
<b>Writers</b>		
Life writer	What's On writer	

Essential		Advantageous, desirable or helpful
<b>Producers</b>		
		Producing roles
		Field producers
		Producer
		Graphics producers
<b>Planners</b>		
Planner		
<b>Court reporting</b>		
Regular court reporting	Court reporter	Court reporting
Court reporters	Anyone covering inquests	
Court	Court reporters	
Covering court	Court reporting	
Covering inquests	Court reporting	
News reporters covering court	Court reporters	
Court reporter	Court reporting	
Covering court	Court and inquests	
Court	Court reporting	
Court or embargoed briefings where recording devices are not permitted		
<b>Council meetings</b>		
Attending council meetings	Council reporters	
Local democracy reporter	Covering council meetings	
Covering council, inquests etc	Council reporting	
Attending council	Court reporters	
Local democracy reporters		

Source: NCTJ employer consultation on shorthand

The respondents were also asked which jobs did not require shorthand, listed in Table 6 below. Whilst there is some degree of overlap with those jobs that are thought to need shorthand – particularly reporting roles – there are also notable differences. Jobs not requiring shorthand are more senior, management-related jobs and editing jobs. Where writing, journalists and reporting jobs are specified, they frequently refer to specific areas – sports reporters, features writers, etc – or to relatively newer forms of writing – social media, digital trends, video journalism, etc. The jobs listed also tend to relate to production and to photographic roles.

**Table 6:** Journalistic roles and responsibilities which do not require shorthand

<b>All</b>	
All	All of them in local radio
All of them	Majority
All	Most
Pretty much all of them these days no roles require shorthand	None of them
All	Most
<b>Management</b>	
Management roles	The office manager
Director	Head of social
Management roles	
<b>Editors</b>	
Editing	Assistant editors
Video editing	Content editor
Editor	Editorial assistants
Content editor	Social media editors
<b>Writers, journalists and reporters</b>	
Features writers	Photo/video writer
What's on writers	News writers
Trends writers	Sports roles
Video journalists	Watson, 'life writers' etc
Reporters	Social media roles
Patch reporters	Video journalists
Live reporters	Visual and photo journalist
Sports reporters	Social media leads
Digital writers	Feature-type writers, such as shopping, trends, gaming etc
Production journalist	Reviewers
Sports writer	Feature writers
Sports journalists	Sports writers
Politics reporters	Sport
Feature writers	Social
Social media journalists	Video
Social media journalists	Journalists
Social media writers	Social media roles
Broadcast journalist	Social media journalists
Life/what's on writer	Commercial writers
Digital trend-style writers	Video and picture writers
Breaking news blogger	Life writers (What's On-focused content)

Football writer	Video journalists
Video journalist	
<b>Production</b>	
Subbing	Chief subs
Sub editor	Deal editors
Sub-editors	Social media editors
Sub-editors	News editors
Production roles	Subbing/production
Producers	Designers
Sub editor	Video shoot-edits
Digital producers	Engagement producers
Technical staff	Engagement producers
Producers	Graphic artists
Digital producers	
<b>TV, photo and video</b>	
Video roles	Photographers
TV and photo journalists	Photographers
Video and photo teams	Videographers
Digital video reporters	Photographers
Photographers	Photographers
Photographer	Photographer
<b>Broadcast</b>	
Broadcast-only reporters	Broadcast journalist
News reader	
<b>SEO</b>	
SEO specialists	SEO writer
SEO writer/trends writer	SEO specialists
<b>Audience engagement</b>	
Audience roles	Audience team
Audience engagement	Audience engagement specialists
<b>Other</b>	
Content curator	Any digital roles
Trending team	Community content curators
Trainee roles	Trending
Trends and more digital focused role	Journalist-coders

Source: NCTJ employer consultation on shorthand



## 5. Discussion and conclusions

The responses above clearly show a divergence of views between sectors, organisations and individuals. Some see shorthand as an essential skill and wouldn't recruit a reporter without it, others like their reporters to have it but recognise that many roles do not use it, and a third group do not believe that their reporters need it at all. In broad terms, this divergence runs on a sectoral basis: employers in regional and local newspapers have a requirement for their journalists to have shorthand (mainly court, inquest and council reporting), whilst broadcasters do not have this requirement for many roles and believe that transcription tools or recording devices are sufficient.

In conclusion, there is no single consistency across all journalism sectors at the moment regarding the relevance of shorthand. Much depends on the sector and the roles which journalists have within those sectors as to whether shorthand is or isn't required.

Having said that, there is a view which permeates across sectors that shorthand, whilst possibly not essential for everyone, remains a useful skill for individuals to learn: it contributes and underpins other journalistic skills, it demonstrates commitment. And whilst there is such a divergence in employers' requirements, an individual who does not have shorthand will restrict the range of employment opportunities available to them.

**Eighty-two per cent of employers who completed the survey consider shorthand to be essential, desirable or essential for some roles within their organisations. Only 18 per cent regard shorthand as not being important.**

The NCTJ's policy on shorthand should cater for all types of journalistic roles in different media organisations, taking into account the discrepancy in views across the media, and sometimes within the same organisation. The NCTJ also recognises that other roles that require journalistic skills, such as in content creation and PR and communications, have not been included in this survey but are routes for some NCTJ graduates.

In order to try and cater for all the different views mentioned above, the NCTJ would like to see clarity in the communications that educational institutions deliver to their students, in that:

- If their students seek to be employed in news journalism roles (mainly in national and regional newspapers) then it should be made clear that shorthand should be studied and that not taking shorthand will lead to a diminished range of opportunities; and
- if students are primarily looking to other areas, such as in broadcast journalism, magazine journalism and sports journalism, shorthand is less of a crucial skill and may not be regarded as an essential skill;
- if centres are advertising their courses as gateway qualifications for all journalism careers, then those centres should offer shorthand at least as an option to all students should they wish to pursue certain career routes.



# Annex 1: Respondents

The table below shows the organisations responding to the survey. Some organisations had more than one response, so the number below does not total to 60.

**Table A1:** Response organisation

<b>National newspapers</b>
Daily Mail
Independent
The Mail on Sunday
<b>Regional newspapers</b>
Archant
DC Thomson Media
Iiffe Media
JPI Media
MNA Media
Newsquest
Reach PLC
<b>Magazines</b>
Future PLC
Mark Allen Group
<b>Broadcast</b>
BBC East Midlands
BBC News
BBC North West
BBC Radio Solent
BBC Scotland
Channel 4
Sky News
Sky Sports News
<b>Other</b>
HuffPost
<b>News Agency</b>
PA Media
Specialist News Services (SNS)
Thomson Reuters



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