

# MIND PERFORMANCE HACKS™

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O'REILLY®

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HACK  
**#53**

## Learn Morse Code Like an Efficiency Expert

Learn the Morse code alphabet and numbers painlessly and efficiently in an hour or less—starting now!

Frank Gilbreth, the industrial psychologist who pioneered efficiency and time-motion studies in the early 20th century, invented a quick and simple way to learn Morse code. Only the first four letters of his Morse alphabet have survived, but this hack reconstructs the rest.

In their book, *Cheaper by the Dozen*, two of Gilbreth’s children, now grown, describe how they learned Morse code:

For the next three days Dad was busy with his paint brush, writing code over the whitewash in every room... On the ceiling in the dormitory bedrooms, he wrote the alphabet together with key words, whose accents were a reminder of the code for the various letters... When you lay on your back, dozing, the words kept going through your head, and you’d find yourself saying, “DAN-ger-ous, dash-dot-dot, DAN-ger-ous.”<sup>1</sup>

This might not be the *best* way to learn Morse code—and understanding it when it is sent to you will certainly take practice—but it is the quickest and simplest method I know of. My family members picked up roughly half the alphabet just by hearing me describe this hack while I was writing it.

### In Action

Briefly, the mnemonic for each Morse code letter is a word or phrase beginning with that letter. In Table 6-1, unaccented (unstressed) syllables represent dots in Morse code, and accented (stressed) syllables represent dashes.

**Letters.** To use Table 6-1, first learn the alphabetic mnemonic associated with each letter, and then reproduce the Morse code for that letter by sounding out the stress in the mnemonic.

Table 6-1. Mnemonics for letters in Morse code

Letter	Morse code	Mnemonic	Notes
A	. -	a-BOUT	
B	- . . .	BOIS-ter-ous-ly	
C	- . - .	CARE-less CHILD-ren	
D	- . .	DAN-ger-ous	Gilbreth’s list ends here.
E	.	eh?	
F	. . - .	fe-ne-STRA-tion	
G	- - .	GOOD GRA-vy!	
H	. . . .	hee hee hee hee	

Table 6-1. Mnemonics for letters in Morse code (continued)

Letter	Morse code	Mnemonic	Notes
I	..	aye aye	Cheating a little, but a good mnemonic.
J	.---	ju-LY'S JANE JONES!	Exclamation upon learning that the famous Jane Jones will be a center-fold. Substitute "JOE JONES" if you prefer.
K	--	KET-tle KORN	
L	.-..	li-NO-le-um	See <i>A Dictionary of Mnemonics</i> . <sup>2</sup>
M	--	MORE MILK!	
N	-.	NA-vy	
O	---	OH! MY! GOD!	Said in your best Valley accent.
P	.-..	pa-RADE PAN-el	The people who review the parade.
Q	--.-	QUEEN's WED-ding DAY	The rhythm is the same as the opening of the familiar Wedding March, also known as "Here Comes the Bride."
R	.-.	ro-TA-tion	
S	...	si si si	Casual assent from a Spanish speaker.
T	-	THRUST	
U	..-	un-der WHERE?!	Exclamation of surprise upon learning where underwear is worn.
V	...-	va-va-va-VOOM!	Remark upon seeing the July pictorial.
W	.-.-	with WHITE WHALE	How Captain Ahab left this world.
X	-.-.	EX-tra ex-PENSE	See <i>A Dictionary of Mnemonics</i> . <sup>2</sup>
Y	-.--	YEL-low YO-YO	
Z	---.	ZINC ZOO-keep-er	

For example, the mnemonic for R is *ro-TA-tion*. This is the English word *rotation* with the stress on the second syllable indicated by capital letters. Because the stresses in this word run unstressed-stressed-unstressed, you know that the Morse for R is *.-.* (dot-dash-dot).

**Numbers.** Numbers must be learned somewhat differently, but because they are extremely regular, they are also relatively easy. All numbers in Morse code are five symbols (dots and/or dashes) long, and the number of dots corresponds to the numeral that is being transmitted, as shown in Table 6-2.

Table 6-2. Mnemonics for numbers in Morse code

Number	Morse code	Mnemonic notes
0	-----	0 dots

Table 6-2. Mnemonics for numbers in Morse code (continued)

Number	Morse code	Mnemonic notes
1	.----	1 dot on the left
2	..---	2 dots on the left
3	...--	3 dots on the left
4	....-	4 dots on the left
5	.....	5 dots
6	-....	(10-6) dots on the right
7	---...	(10-7) dots on the right
8	---..	(10-8) dots on the right
9	----.	(10-9) dots on the right

## How It Works

This hack is yet another example of the power of mnemonics (your dear, dear friend). Remembering the dry and abstract dots and dashes of Morse code is like having to remember an arbitrary and cryptic series of commands to a computer's command-line interface. Creating English mnemonics, however, is like adding a graphical user interface on top of the command line. Simply put, it's like the difference between Windows and DOS.

## In Real Life

Why would you want to learn Morse code, anyway? After all, haven't telephones and email made Morse obsolete? Not at all. Morse code is still useful in a variety of situations ranging from technological breakdown during emergencies to interfacing with the latest technology, such as texting devices.

**Emergencies.** You can flash Morse code with a mirror, tap it with two kinds of rock, or use many other methods to send a message far, with few resources.

**Assistive technology.** Anyone with minimal motor control can send Morse by using whatever they can manage—by tapping a finger or blinking, for example.

**Secret communication.** You can communicate via hand signals where there might be an audio bug, or by quietly tapping in a room where spoken conversation might be noticed.

**Rapid communication.** In 2005, the Powerhouse Museum of Sydney, Australia, held a contest between two elderly telegraph operators using Morse code and two teenagers using text messaging on their mobile phones. The telegraph operators beat them handily, despite their not using any texting abbreviations—and being 93 years old.<sup>3</sup> *The Tonight Show* duplicated the stunt on American television.<sup>4</sup>

After these contests occurred, one clever hacker wrote a free (open source) application for Nokia phones that accepts input in Morse code but sends ordinary text messages, thus allowing users to take advantage of Morse speed, even if the recipient of the message cannot understand Morse.<sup>5</sup>

## End Notes

1. Gilbreth, Frank B., Jr., and Ernestine Gilbreth Carey. 2002. *Cheaper by the Dozen*. HarperCollins Publishers.
2. Anonymous. 1972. *A Dictionary of Mnemonics*. Eyre Methuen. The mnemonics for L and X came from this book, which contributor James Crook made me aware of after I solicited replacements for my own, fairly unimpressive L and X mnemonics. As it's a rare British book, I haven't seen it yet myself.
3. Dybwad, Barb. 2005. "Morse code trumps SMS in head-to-head speed texting combat." <http://www.engadget.com/entry/1234000463042528>.
4. Video clip from *The Tonight Show*; [http://www.makezine.com/blog/archive/2005/05/video\\_morse\\_cod.html](http://www.makezine.com/blog/archive/2005/05/video_morse_cod.html).
5. "Morse Texter." 2005. [http://laivakoira.typepad.com/blog/2005/05/morse\\_texter.html](http://laivakoira.typepad.com/blog/2005/05/morse_texter.html).

## See Also

- See the excellent Morse code page in the Wikipedia for information on niceties such as word and sentence spacing and timing, punctuation, special symbols, accented letters, abbreviations, and so on: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse\\_code](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Morse_code).