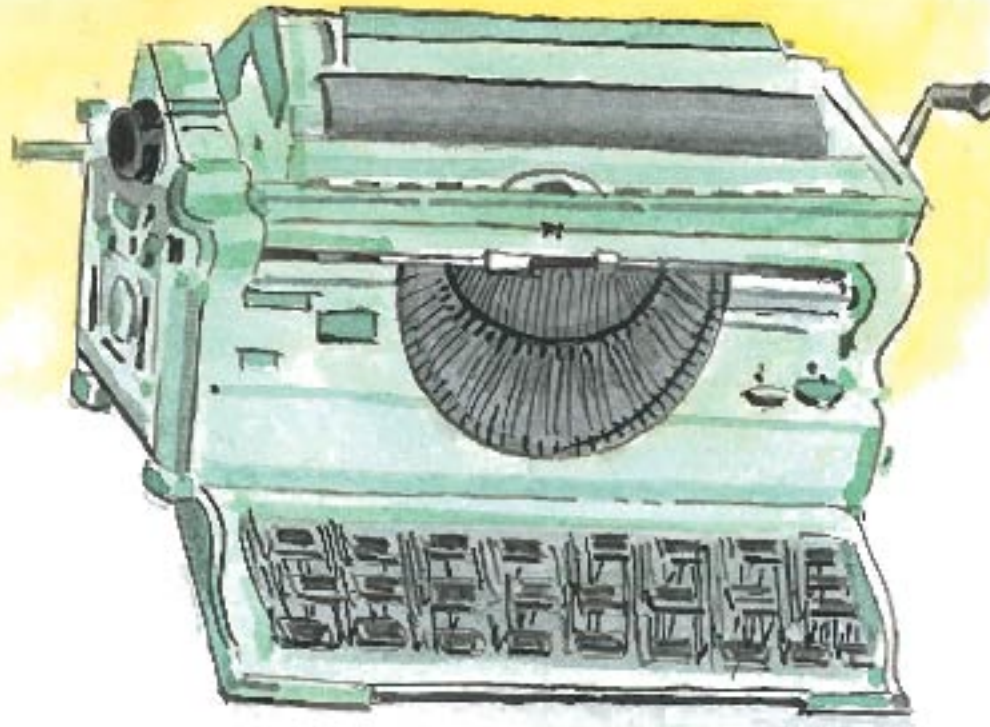


Slow Down to Speed Up



Look at the keyboard of any standard typewriter or computer. Q,W,E,R,T and Y are the first six letters, followed by other alphabets in what appears to be a random order. Who decided on this arrangement of the letters? And why?

The first practical typewriter was patented in the United States in 1868 by Christopher Latham Sholes. It had a movable carriage, a lever for turning paper from line to line, and a keyboard on which the letters were arranged in alphabetical order.

But Sholes had a problem. On his first model, the "ABC" key arrangement caused the keys to jam when the typist worked quickly. Sholes didn't know how to keep the keys from 'sticking', so his solution was to keep the typist from typing too fast.

Using a study of letter-pair frequency prepared by educator Amos Densmore, Sholes devised a new arrangement, the "QWERTY" arrangement that typists use even today. The QWERTY keyboard itself was determined by the existing

mechanical linkages of the typebars inside the machine to the keys on the outside. QWERTY's effect, by reducing the annoying clashes of typebars and sticking of keys, was to speed up typing rather than slow it down. Though Sholes claimed that the new arrangement was scientific and would add speed and efficiency, his solution did not eliminate the problem completely, but it was greatly reduced. The only efficiency it added was to slow the typist down, since almost any word in the English language required the typist's fingers to cover more distance on the keyboard.

The keyboard arrangement was considered important enough to be included on Sholes' patent granted in 1878, some years after the machine was into production. The advantages of the typewriter, however, outweighed the disadvantages of the keyboard. Typists memorised the crazy letter arrangement, and the typewriter became a huge success. The QWERTY keyboard continues as its legacy in the modern-day computers.

Do not fear to be eccentric in opinion, for every opinion now accepted was once eccentric.

– Bertrand Russell