

CAREER AS A COURT REPORTER

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CAREER AS A

COURT REPORTER

NEW: TV BROADCAST CAPTIONING

THOUSANDS OF JOBS NATIONWIDE

A Trained Reporter Using the Latest Realtime
Computer-Aided Transcription Processes Remains the
Fastest, Most Accurate Way to Turn Spoken
Information Into Readable, Searchable, Permanent Text



THEY SIT IN THE COURTROOM OR THE CORNER OF YOUR LAWYER'S OFFICE, SILENT, unobtrusive but absolutely essential. Who are they, and what are they doing?

Court reporters record the exact wording of speeches, conversations, legal proceedings, meetings and other events when written accounts of these oral events are needed for correspondence, records or legal proof.

They are considered experts at gathering information, then saving it in such a way as to be accessible quickly by anyone who needs it. This ability to capture thoughts that are expressed as speech and to translate them into text is known as *transmodalism*; court reporters are *transmodalists*.

They document all statements made in official proceedings using a special machine which allows them to press multiple keys at the same time to record combinations of letters representing sounds, words or phrases. The machine is called a *stenographic* machine or writer. It has 22 keys and, as the court reporter uses the machine, symbols appear on a narrow strip of paper, representing exactly what has been said. The symbols on this strip of paper are converted into English using either a typewriter/word processor, or a computer with special software, known as *CAT(Computer Aided Transcription)*. The software makes it possible for the computer to create the English transcription at the same time the narrow strip of paper full of symbols is being created.

During the course of a legal or other proceeding at which a court reporter is working, the reporter may have to read aloud portions of what has been transcribed onto the steno machine. The judge or other official will instruct the court reporter to do this, if necessary.

A court reporter will generally also have to prepare an official written transcript of the proceeding and make it available to whomever needs it, in printed and bound form. This may include the prosecuting and defense attorneys in a case, or other interested parties to the proceeding. The court reporter will also have to file the official transcript with the court.

Court reporters are always present at depositions, which are meetings, usually in lawyer's offices, at which parties to a dispute give their version of the facts, under questioning from attorneys representing the opposing side. Attorneys use deposition transcripts to prepare for trial; after trial, the attorney may use trial transcripts to prepare for appeal or other legal action.

In high profile cases, official court reporters play an extremely important role. Criminal trials, celebrity divorces and government hearings

all use court reporters to make the official record of the event, and the transcript becomes the basis for future proceedings.

Because of all this, court reporters are generally considered to be essential legal professionals. They tend to be front and center at headline-grabbing cases that involve everyone from movie stars to corrupt politicians. They are also present through every minor case of small claims court in your local courthouse. Besides recording history, the technology used by a court reporter can keep a court case moving right along and on track.

Court reporters are considered officers of the court, just like a judge or lawyer. As such, they are key to the operation of the court and may make suggestions to judges about courtroom administration and procedures.

Growing Use of Broadcast Captioning Another profession where a court reporter will use the special machine and acquired skills is that of *broadcast captioner*. This individual is responsible for providing the captions of live television programs for the deaf and hard-of-hearing viewers. Realtime technology instantly produces readable text from the captioner's input. The need for skilled broadcast captioners is predicted to increase, since the law requires more media access for those with hearing problems.

Broadcast captioners, also known as stenocaptioners, can work for local television stations and for national channels and networks captioning news, emergency broadcasts, sports events and other programming. The Telecommunications Act of 1996 and FCC rules require that programming be captioned so that people with hearing impairments can be informed through television. This is good news for anyone wishing to get into the field.

This capability of turning steno notes into text almost immediately is sometimes also used in the courtroom. The text can be displayed on a monitor for individual attorneys or even on projection screens when it needs to be viewed by a large group.

Other cross-over fields for people trained as court reporters include *scopist* (someone who uses the narrow strip of tape to produce the transcript on typewriter/word processor), *legal or medical transcriptionist* and *rapid data entry operator*.

Court reporters are also known by the names Digital Operator, Evidence Recorder, Stenographer, Transcriber, Shorthand Reporter or Law Reporter.

One excellent place to receive on-the-job court reporter training is in the military. All branches of the armed forces need and will train court reporters. Although you will need to make a commitment of a minimum number of years of service, some people feel the security of a regular paycheck and the opportunity to learn a marketable skill is worth it.

Another area where a broadcast captioner might work is assisting hearing-impaired people in person. For instance, a deaf college student might use a captioner to produce captioning of lectures using the special machine and a computer right in the classroom.

Professional Ethics Members of the National Court Reporters Association have developed a Code of Professional Ethics to which they require their members to adhere. It is similar in nature to the official codes of ethics which the American Bar Association and the National Association of Legal Assistants have set forth for their members.

The code generally addresses the behavior of court reporters, what is expected of them, and how they are to handle themselves. It includes the court reporter's obligation to be fair and impartial to all parties involved in a proceeding and sensitive to situations where conflict of interest may arise. The code also mandates confidentiality concerning all aspects of the job.

Official reporters are warned not to engage in any freelance reporting that may interfere with official obligations. They must maintain the integrity of the profession and abide by the Association's constitution and bylaws.

Of all the points covered in the Code of Ethics, probably the most important is that of confidentiality. No matter what area of the legal field you work in, you must guarantee clients that what passes between them and their legal representatives will remain strictly private. Judges and lawyers, legal secretaries and paralegals, and court reporters, all have sworn to uphold this important principle.

THE BASICS OF COURT REPORTING

THERE ARE FIVE PHASES TO PRODUCING A TRANSCRIPT OF A LEGAL PROCEEDING OR other official event:

- The actual reporting at the time of the event
- The translation
- A process known as scoping, which includes a computer operation
- The proofreading of the final transcription
- The printing

The work which a court reporter does at the actual event being recorded comprises from one-half to one-third of the total time needed to prepare a final transcript.

The reporting phase of the process requires that the court reporter be present at the event to be recorded. The most common method of recording is to use a stenographic writer. The reporter must be present for the entire event, even if it lasts weeks or even months, as in the case of some court cases. In some states, the reporter is required to swear in the various witnesses. The reporter will sometimes also be responsible for any exhibits which are introduced, and must mark and catalog these before leaving.

The translation phase renders the notes, which are useless to almost anyone except the reporter who made them, into readable text. Manual shorthand machines produce a tape, which then must be read and retyped using conventional means, using a typewriter or word processing typewriter. Most machines today, however, produce a disk which is computer-compatible; the computer then uses CAT software to translate the notes into English. These translations are considered by experts to be about 90% accurate.

Scoping, the third phase of the process, turns the rough translation into a finished transcript. The CAT program can perform this function very efficiently, but the reporter must still review the text of what has been spoken and clear up any questionable areas.

The fourth phase is proofreading. The reporter must read through the transcript once more before it is in final form, noting errors and correcting them using the original material and other resources.

Finally, the entire transcript will be printed and bound and circulated to all interested parties. These may include judges, attorneys, plaintiffs, defendants, and others.

The keyboard of a steno machine is completely different from that of a conventional typewriter or computer keyboard, and demands special training to use. It is divided into several major groupings of keys: Number Bar, Upper Bank, Lower Bank and Vowel Keys.

The Number Bar is a single key across the width of the machine and it changes the definition of the keys just below it, contained in the Upper Bank. In essence, it performs similar to the shift key on a typewriter or computer keyboard.

The Upper and Lower Banks are broken down into the initial, asterisk and final keys. The initial and final keys produce symbols that stand for consonants, while the vowel keys produce vowels. The asterisk keys place actual asterisks into the text to indicate a correction.

The software used in the process, CAT or Computer Aided Transcription, link the steno machine to a computer electronically; the symbols are recorded on both the paper tape and the CD at the same time. Then the software reads the disk and translates it into English text. The reporter reads through the text, correcting any "untranslates" or words that the program could not translate.

The most obvious advantage to the computer program is its speed, which allows hundreds of pages of notes to be translated very quickly. Also, attorneys and judges can access the transcript from their computers, searching for key words and phrases to cross check witnesses' testimony for inconsistencies. If the transcript is sent to the courtwide database, it can help in the management of the courthouse.

HISTORY OF COURT REPORTING

THE VERY FIRST “COURT REPORTER” WAS A SLAVE, MARCUS TULLIUS TIRO. HE LIVED IN the first century BC and was the chief secretary to the great orator and writer, Cicero. Tiro used a system of shorthand to record the speeches and other writings of Cicero and, sometimes, other Roman orators and leaders. One of his shorthand devices, the ampersand or & symbol, is still used today. He did such a fine job for Cicero that he was rewarded with his freedom.

The system Tiro designed became so popular that it was soon taught in Roman schools and used to record the speeches of other statesmen like Cato and Julius Caesar, the proceedings of the Senate and, later, those of early Christian church councils. It was used widely for about 1000 years, or until about 900 AD, when it fell into disrepute because secret writing became associated with witchcraft.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, writing in general fell into decline. People were more concerned with keeping themselves alive than recording anything anyone said, even in cases involving the law. Some rudimentary records were kept of land ownership and such, but they were minimal. Books were scarce and handwritten by monks in elaborate script with detailed and beautiful illuminations to illustrate them. And this was practically the only writing that was done.

The first system approaching fully phonetic writing, which is what handwritten shorthand is all about, was devised by Timothe Bright, who published a shorthand treatise in 1588 and dedicated it to Queen Elizabeth I of England. It and some other similar systems became popular with scholars and ministers for writing letters and sermons. The famous diary of Samuel Pepys was written in shorthand to keep it safe from prying eyes.

After that, more than a dozen different shorthand systems followed. There are four which are most notable:

- 1602 system of John Willis, who is also known as the father of shorthand
- 1626 system developed by writer and translator Thomas Shelton
- 1672 system of writing master William Mason
- 1786 system of stenographer Samuel Taylor, which was eventually adapted to many European languages.

Most of these systems followed the principles of the Willis system, with geometric characters that had straight lines, segments of circles and

so on. They were basically alphabetic and used normal spellings widely accepted at the time.

In 1750, the shorthand system of Thomas Gurney was published; he was the first official reporter of parliamentary debates in England. Before becoming famous as a writer, Charles Dickens practiced as a parliamentary reporter. One of the subplots in the novel *David Copperfield* was based on the struggles Dickens himself had learning shorthand.

It was William Mason's system that was to dominate British legal and parliamentary reporting for two hundred years, after it was modified by the reporting firm of Gurney. But the Gurney version was hard to learn, extraordinarily fast and a jealously guarded secret. As such, it was not available to the ordinary person in the street as a viable system for recording words verbatim.

The Pitman system of shorthand was introduced in England in 1837 by British educator and spelling reformer, Sir Isaac Pitman. For this system, lined paper was required, since positioning a sign above or below the line indicates omitted vowels. This system was introduced in the United States by Benn Pitman, the developer's brother, in 1852. By 1889 almost all American shorthand writers were using the system.

Fifty years after Pitman was introduced, in 1887, the Gregg shorthand system was introduced. It was developed by the Irish stenographer John Robert Gregg and is phonetic and cursive, with characters designed for easy execution. About 90 percent of the shorthand taught in today's schools is in the Gregg system. In fact, Gregg has become more universal than any other system, having been adapted for use in Hebrew, Tagalog, Thai, Chinese and other languages.

The chances are good that a person who is using shorthand to take dictation today is using the Gregg system. It is still used in some areas for uses other than official court reporting, such as dictation of business letters. Attorneys often require their secretaries to be able to take written shorthand.

Machines For Recording Speech The first machines which were designed to write at the speed of speech were introduced in the late 19th century. The most popular were the Stenograph and the Stenotype.

Modern court reporting began in 1913, with the introduction of the stenotype machine. It was the most reliable and flexible means of creating a verbatim record to date. By pressing one or more keys at a time, reporters captured the sound of words in a phonetic code, with each line of characters usually representing one sound syllable. Today, the notes are printed on a narrow paper tape and simultaneously captured in computer format.

In the meantime, handwritten shorthand was being taught in most high schools throughout the United States. For the past 60 years or so, it has been an absolute necessity for any student hoping to become a secretary. In fact, the standard courses for those looking to work in an office environment were typing and shorthand.

The work of court reporters has been computerized for more than 20 years, long before most of the court systems and attorneys they serve. This is due to the conservative nature of the legal professional, and the desire of court officials and lawyers to have paper hard copies of all documents. With advances in technology, today's court reporters function more as information managers than just recorders of official proceedings.

The future looks bright for those who pursue a career in court reporting. Some people say that computers will soon do the entire job; in other words, people who are giving depositions will simply speak into the microphone attached to the computer and the words will appear on the screen.

However, computer voice recognition software is still very imperfect and can only be adapted to a single voice at this time, so the software that will enable a computer to recognize unlimited voices would seem to be far in the future. Even if computers could recognize every voice they heard and transcribe without making a single error, the conservative legal profession will likely be the last one to incorporate such technology.

WHERE COURT REPORTERS WORK

COURT REPORTERS WORK INDOORS IN OFFICES AND COURTS. THEY MAY BE REQUIRED to travel to district courts or to outlying towns to take depositions. They need to sit, type and/or write for long periods. They work to deadlines and the work can be stressful. The court reporter's equipment includes a fax machine, a printer, a telephone and a computer for word processing and a dictaphone.

Court reporters are a regular feature in courtrooms, but many choose to freelance outside of the courtroom, recording out-of-court depositions for attorneys or proceedings of meetings and conventions. Court reporters are also hired by government agencies to take notes for the official government record.

Most court reporters are self-employed, so you will need some sort of office, at home or in a regular business location. You need some space to work which is apart from the site(s) where you report, a fax machine, possible additional phone lines to accommodate the fax, computer and business calls. A pager and/or cellular phone are necessities for the independent court reporter who may travel to various locations for depositions and other events.

Because the court reporter's transcript is frequently the only record of sworn testimony which is given in a trial, accuracy and speed are absolutely essential. Skilled court reporters can work from home on everything but the recording of the event itself, and an increasing number are choosing to establish offices as subcontractors for law firms, hospitals and transcription services. Experts estimate that nearly one-fifth of the more than 100,000 court reporters in the United States today are self-employed freelancers or work part time. Of those who receive regular salaries, one-third work for federal and state governments.

Although many court reporters sit in the courtroom to record official proceedings, the majority of court reporters work outside the courtroom. Freelance court reporters or independent contractors, for instance, take depositions for attorneys in various offices. They also document the proceedings of meetings, conventions and other private activities. Others are responsible for documenting the proceedings in government agencies of all levels, from the US Congress to State and local governing bodies.

Court reporters who specialize in closed-captioning live television programs, sometimes known as stenocaptioners, work for major or local television networks, or cable stations, captioning daily news programs, emergency broadcasts, sports events and other programming.

A version of the captioning process called Communications Access Realtime Translation (CART) allows court reporters to provide more personalized services for the deaf and hard of hearing. Most deaf people tend to lose their hearing after acquiring reading and speaking skills, and many of them never become as proficient in sign language as they are in reading text. CART reporters go with deaf clients whenever and wherever needed, for instance to college lectures, to provide an instantaneous translation of spoken words to text using a stenotype machine which has been linked to a laptop computer. The text appears on the screen almost as fast as the professor states the words.

One of the most beneficial advances resulting from emerging technology in the last decade is that distance is no longer a barrier to access. Regardless of where you are located, as long as you have access to telephone lines, you can provide this service; at the same time, wherever you are, no matter how remote a location, you can receive this service.

If you decide to pursue a court reporter career in military service, you will work wherever you are stationed, which could be in the United States or overseas. This means you could enjoy the experience of learning about a new culture while working as a court reporter for the United States.

In addition, if your services are needed in other locations around the country or the world, you will travel to wherever you are ordered to go. Depending on whether you enjoy traveling while you are also working, this could be a good or bad experience for you.

"It goes without saying that working out of my home has been great for my family. I can be available to them so much more than if I went into a remote office every day. And they've slowly learned to respect my work time. There are many days when I really feel like I have it all."

YOUR WORK DUTIES

COURT REPORTERS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR MAKING VERBATIM (WORD-FOR-WORD) records of proceedings in courts of law or other official events by using a stenotype machine and computer. Court reporters may be known by a variety of titles, including shorthand reporter and stenographer.

As a working court reporter, you will have very specific duties. However, first and foremost should be your professional attitude. Always treat your colleagues and others with respect and sensitivity. Be on time for meetings and especially the beginning of the court session; if you have freelance clients, don't keep them waiting. Most important of all, always uphold the ethical requirement of confidentiality; that means not telling the details of your work to anyone, not even your spouse.

Day-to-day duties include recording legal proceedings in person, reading portions of the transcript during a trial at a judge's request to emphasize or clarify a point, asking speakers to repeat themselves in order to clarify inaudible statements, and operating a computer to transcribe recorded material or dictated material into a recording machine for transcription by a typist.

Once the court session is over, you will take your notes and computer disk back to your office and begin the rough transcript of the proceeding. From there you will proceed to make the final, official transcript, proofreading several times for accuracy.

You will also be responsible for the security of all your materials, placing all completed and partial records in a secure location in the office, filing the official and legible transcript of the court case with the court clerk's office, preparing court orders and other legal documents, and providing a transcript of the court records to any authorized party on request. Not all court cases need to be transcribed; judges will sometimes waive the need for a transcript.

Essentially, the court reporter lives through the deposition or day in court at least three times: during the actual event, when scoping the job (turning the rough translation into a transcript), and when proofing the final transcript.

A court reporter is an official witness to a legal proceeding of any type who can accurately relate what was said by all of the people present. The reporter has no interest in the matter at hand, so is unbiased, a neutral observer whose recording and transcription of the proceeding becomes the official legal record of what was spoken at a deposition, hearing, trial

or any other proceeding. As such, you should remain unmoved and emotionally uninvolved by whatever you hear during a proceeding, even if it involves gruesome murders or child abuse. This detachment is essential; it is demanded by the job and essential to your peace of mind. Just concentrate on the words you hear. You can react later, if you feel you have to.

Court reporters are also Notaries Public in many states, in order to emphasize the position of the court reporter as official witness. A Notary Public can witness the appropriate signatures on official documents, then stamp and sign the document as its official witness.

At a deposition done outside of the courtroom, you will swear in the witness; this means putting the witness under penalty of perjury for false testimony. The witness can then be arrested and prosecuted if the court finds that the witness did not tell the truth.

Certification In some states reporters must be certified, so they must pass a state certification exam. Where certification is not required, you can take special tests to pass levels set by the National Court Reporters Association in order to designate a reporter as having attained a certain level of expertise.

Taking the tests and receiving the designation is a good way to enhance your own prestige as a court reporter. It may earn you a promotion and pay raise. Your employer may also make it mandatory to take and pass one of these tests before you receive a raise.

Your employer may also make it one of your work duties to pursue continuing education courses as well, meaning you will need to participate in seminars on new developments in your field. Even if your employer does not require it, you should take these seminars in order to be fully aware of what is going on in your profession.

Self-Employed Have Extra Duties Court reporters who are self-employed have another set of duties altogether besides those of a professional court reporter: that of small business owner. As such, you will be responsible for keeping track of and paying quarterly taxes to the government. You must perform payroll functions if you employ others, as well as other regular bookkeeping tasks; you must pay the rent on your office and the phone bill if you wish to stay in business. If you are a solo practitioner, you will be responsible for answering the phones and arranging your schedule.

You will also be responsible for generating the business that keeps you in business. In other words, you must function as your own marketing manager. That means making contacts with attorneys within your community in order to get them to hire you. You might decide to send out a series of flyers to keep your name in front of attorneys. Attending meetings of the local Bar Association is a good way to make personal contacts. When you are awaiting your first assignments, you must make yourself as available as possible, taking whatever work you can get. After a while, when your name is more well-known, the work will come to you and you can pick and choose which assignments you accept.

Military Careers If you are pursuing a career as a court reporter in the military, a major portion of your duties will relate to the protocols of the armed forces of which you are a part. These may involve how to treat those of superior and inferior rank, how to follow orders, physical training sessions, organized mealtimes and others.

As a court reporter in the military, you will perform many of the same duties as a civilian court reporter. You will attend depositions, trials, meetings and other live events, where you will be expected to record all that is said. Military courts are similar to civilian courts, but they do have different procedures that you will need to learn and follow.

After recording the event, you will need to transcribe it just like any other court reporter. Once the official record is created, you will circulate it according to your commander's or other officer's orders.

Work of a Stenocaptioner

As a stenocaptioner, you will watch and listen to a live television broadcast and key in the symbols in order to create the captioning on the television screen. You will be responsible for communicating important public service information to people who have hearing difficulties or who may even be completely deaf.

As a freelance stenocaptioner who serves the community of deaf and hearing-impaired people, you will go with a specific individual to a live event, such as a class lecture, and key in the symbols which will then appear as English text on a computer monitor for that individual. You may be contracted to serve this individual throughout the course of a school term.

One of the most important duties you can perform in your capacity as a stenocaptioner is to be punctual. You must not leave clients waiting for you to appear, and you must not make them late to their class or other commitment. How would you feel being kept waiting by someone you had hired to help you?

Possible Job Injuries One of your duties to yourself, in order to keep working as a court reporter, is to make sure you minimize the risk of injury, specifically carpal tunnel syndrome, which tends to affect people who perform the same motions over and over throughout the course of a day. Carpal tunnel is debilitating, but there are ways to reduce the risk to yourself of this and other difficulties.

To aid your vision, use a large monitor, a screen-magnifying lens, anti-glare screen or different colors. To aid communication and hearing faculties, adjust volume on office equipment and use headsets, replace auditory signals with flashing screen or icons, and use personal communication devices which filter out background noise.

To facilitate the mobility of the lower half of your body, use adjustable machine stands and tables, as well as large work areas. Use various aids to transport items, such as transport carts or dollies. Use chairs that are upright or forward sitting with postural supports.

To facilitate the mobility of the upper half of your body, use speaker phones and voice recognition systems. Use keyboard guards for all office machines, including calculators, typewriters and computer keyboards. Use wrist rests or armrests. Use pens and pencils with special grips, automatic electric staplers and table mounted scissors.

COURT REPORTERS TELL ABOUT THEIR CAREERS

I Am a Court Reporter “Pursuing a career as a court reporter is probably the best decision I ever made. I love sitting in the courtroom every day, taking down what everyone says word-for-word. It’s an exciting and challenging career and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.

Part of the excitement is that you never know how the different court cases will turn out. Will the accused shoplifter be convicted or acquitted? What will the punishment be, if convicted? Will the lawyer be able to convince the jury that the killing was self-defense?

And the lawyers are really fascinating to watch. I know that a lot of people have bad feelings about lawyers, but when you sit and watch them in action, it’s a little like an elaborate ballet. One lawyer stands up and speaks, using passionate words and gestures. The other lawyer stands up and speaks, using quiet words and understated gestures. The jury is usually mesmerized by both of them.

Of course, my time in court is only a small part of what it takes to put together an official transcript. I start by using the computer to produce a rough of the transcript. Then I go back over it and compare it to the original material; this is called scoping in the profession. Then I run the nearly-final transcript, check it one last time, and print out the final. I also arrange to distribute copies to anyone the judge instructs me to.

Like anyplace else you might end up working, the courthouse has its good points and bad points. You have to interact with just about the same people every day, and you get to know their likes and dislikes. You know what judge is hard on which crime, and you get to know which lawyer will come in depending on the type of crime. For instance, some lawyers specialize in personal injury law, while others deal strictly with family law.

I won’t kid you, there are some lawyers that look down at court reporters and legal secretaries, but they’re really few and far

between. Most lawyers feel we're just part of the same legal team, and that we all work together for the same result, the resolution of the case.

The secretaries and the other people who work in the building are all quite nice, and we are all on a first name basis. Some of us get together now and then and go out to lunch, although that can be difficult with my schedule. The court doesn't always recess at the same time everyday.

It's true that the hours can be long. You must sit quietly in the courtroom, and concentrate on what's being said, for hours at a stretch. And that can go on, day after day, until a case is concluded. You just never know how long a case will last. Luckily, the court doesn't stay in session through the night, otherwise I might never get to see my family!

Still, you have to accept that there will be aspects of any job that you won't like no matter what the job is. No job is perfect. But all in all, I'd rather be a court reporter than anything else."



I Am a Stenocaptioner “I am a stenocaptioner, and I work out of my home office to provide text service for live television programming. It’s a great job, because not only do I get to work for any television network or channel in the country, but I also get to watch some pretty interesting programming while I’m working. What other job actually pays you to watch TV?

I also enjoy the flexibility of setting my own schedule. When I find out what programs need to be captioned, I can decide which I would like to do, and then arrange the rest of my life around my work. I do this the way other people schedule meetings. If you have a board meeting from two to four in the afternoon, no one would dare bother you, and that’s the rule I live by.

I’ve also done some work as a stenocaptioner for people with hearing problems, specifically students. That involves using your skills so the student can read a text of the lecture rather than having to listen to it and try to understand. I enjoy going with them to their classes, even if the class is about something I’m not at all interested in. The reward is seeing my clients react to what they’re reading on the screen. To see them exhibit sudden understanding of an important point makes it worthwhile.

You can develop relationships with your clients. If the class meets once or twice a week, you get to the point where you’re actually looking forward to seeing that person each week. I’ve often had coffee with them after class.

One thing I have learned through experience, if you try to pursue stenocaptioning for television as your exclusive source of income, you can get pretty lonely, even if you have a family. Staring at the monitor, typing what you’re listening to on the television, can be boring as well as exhausting. Sometimes, you just want to hear someone speak who’s actually talking to you. And cooped up in the house all the time, you get cabin fever pretty quick, even if you make time to run errands during the day.

That’s why it’s important to maintain a balance of work and social time. I try to maintain contact with my friends, and I stenocaption for people with hearing problems. That’s what keeps me part of the human world.”

PERSONAL QUALIFICATIONS

SOME PERSONAL QUALIFICATIONS YOU SHOULD HAVE IN ORDER TO SUCCEED AS A court reporter are the ability to be focused, self-disciplined and efficient. You may want to rethink being a court reporter if you are inclined to be creative, talkative, restless and disorganized. According to the experts, these are qualities that will severely hamper your effectiveness as a court reporter.

Because the events being recorded are the spoken word, the reporter must be highly skilled at recording live speech using the equipment. The steno machine demands a high level of manual dexterity, the ability to put your fingers in the right place every time at a very fast rate. Listening is a key quality which many people think they know how to do, but really do not. Listening means keeping your own mouth shut and paying strict attention to what the other person is saying. Because this job demands accuracy, you will not be able to afford misunderstanding what anyone says.

However, the best reporters in the business have other skills, also highly developed. Court reporters need to have excellent keyboarding and touch typing skills. You will also need to have a good command of the English language, including good spelling and comprehension skills, good communication and computer skills, an eye for detail and a good memory.

You need exceptionally good hearing and clear speech in order to record and read aloud court proceedings. Because you will also be interviewing clients and witnesses during depositions, you will need to be articulate in order to ask the right questions.

As a court reporter you will also need to know everything you can about court procedures, and you should have an excellent knowledge of spelling, grammar, vocabulary and safe work practices in order to prevent Occupational Overuse Syndrome (OOS).

You will need to be efficient and reliable; you cannot afford to waste time being sloppy, and lack of punctuality could cost you your position. You need to be calm, alert, confident and able to keep information private. Lawyers, clients and others will take it for granted that you will not divulge sensitive material which you may hear while reporting. In fact, in the future you may be bound by the same type of confidentiality oath which is used by lawyers and legal assistants.

Because a court reporter is reporting on an event in an unbiased manner, you should never express an opinion or even feel strong emotions

about what you are hearing. If descriptions of violent crimes or other wrongdoing distresses you, you will need to practice keeping your feelings to yourself or perhaps court reporting is not the best career choice for you.

You also need to be able to work as part of a team. Although a court reporter works alone when reporting, there are always other people involved in the event you are reporting. Judges, lawyers, clients, government officials, all will interact with you at one time or another. A professional, helpful and confident demeanor will go a long way toward establishing a good working relationship with the other professionals in your sphere.

Experience in computer work or word processing, or work in a legal office, will be useful for beginning court reporters.

ATTRACTIVE FEATURES

TWO OF THE BEST ASPECTS OF BEING A COURT REPORTER INCLUDE THE OPPORTUNITY to travel and to be involved in high profile court cases. You will most likely hear volatile or privileged information during the course of your daily duties. Because of this, court reporters must be scrupulous as well as extremely efficient, but you will be the first to know many of the details of important cases, before you see them in the news.

As a court reporter, you could think of yourself as the proverbial “fly on the wall,” especially when you are working on high profile cases. When you are working such a case, the press will rely on your hundred-page-a-day reports to let them know the latest courtroom dramas from which they are often barred.

Only the best in the field are awarded these assignments, and you must usually be able to type 225 words a minute or better. The pay can be quite rewarding to those who build strong reputations, and the benefit of flexible hours once you are established will keep you in the business.

Court reporting is a field that a person with a good liberal arts background can find challenging and rewarding. Because reporters take testimony of people from all walks of life, reporters should be versed in popular culture, medical terminology and technical terms. Practice is the key to advancement, just like a musician. Therefore, you should be willing to practice at your craft, even if it means reporting what is being said on television every evening.

Going behind the scenes is a major perk of the job, since you will get to hear what few get to hear. You will be there when history is being made, so to speak. Just think of being involved in some of the major court cases of the last 30 years or so, how exciting it must have been to sit in the courtroom every day, hearing the facts unfold, watching the lawyers use all their skill to make a case.

You can derive a great deal of satisfaction in knowing what an important part you play in the legal process. Without you, there would not be a verbatim record of any court case. Lawyers will pore over every word of every transcription you make, and these transcriptions will become part of the United States legal system forever.

As a broadcast captioner, you will be recording to help people with hearing difficulties to learn vital information about the news of the day, the way their government works or even an emergency situation. If you decide to serve people with hearing impairments in person, you will be helping them to work their way through school or understand a matter vital to their lives.

Beside the fact that you are making a living at something you enjoy doing, you can enjoy the additional satisfaction of helping people who need it. Without you, a hearing impaired person might have a more difficult time attending school or some other crucial event.

One of the most attractive features about pursuing a court reporter career in the military is the on-the-job training. You will be learning a valuable skill and working at it, while serving your country and getting paid to do so. When you leave military service, you will have a very marketable skill which experts say will be in demand for many years to come.

UNATTRACTIVE FEATURES

BEING A COURT REPORTER IS NOT THE IDEAL JOB FOR EVERYONE. THERE IS A CERTAIN amount of physical strain associated with the job, as well as some very long hours depending on where you work.

So much importance is placed on the word-for-word accuracy of legal transcripts that the pressure and stress can be intense. If stress is already a negative factor in your life, you should probably consider a job with less deadline pressure.

You must be able to work consistently for up to 10 hours straight, without letting your concentration lapse. If you have trouble concentrating for long periods of time, or you need frequent breaks from a project on which you are working, court reporting might not be the right match for you. If you are unable to work for many hours straight right now, that will probably not change.

Another hazard is work-related physical strain, the worst of which is probably carpal tunnel syndrome, a debilitating inflammation of the tendons. People who suffer from severe carpal tunnel syndrome can hardly work at all! There are things you can do to minimize strain, but not much you can do about the number of hours you are required to work, especially if you have been assigned to a major case.

Camaraderie among your colleagues is rare in this field, because you will usually work alone, whether in the courtroom or out. In fact, you may be discouraged from spending time with other court personnel because of the sensitive information you hear when reporting. In any event, you will be bound by a code of confidentiality, so you will not be able to enjoy chatting about cases with anyone, even members of your family.

Court reporters in the litigation field complain that they spend many hours on the job and have time for little else in their lives. One reporter noted that travel ate up 300 days a year. This could present a problem to someone who wants to have a home and family, and place them first.

Court reporters must dress in businesslike attire, rarely having the opportunity for a “casual Friday.” If you prefer jeans and other casual dress and absolutely hate wearing anything more formal, you might try practicing wearing dressy clothes every day to see if you can get used to it. Otherwise, reconsider your career options.

Sometimes, the machines and computer equipment break down, which means the reporters must cover the machine’s duties in any way they can. One reporter complained that when there is an equipment

failure, the reporters tend to run around like crazy trying to “keep the job going, keep it all together.”

Not everyone involved with the legal system will treat you with appropriate respect. Judges, lawyers, even clients may sometimes exhibit a condescending attitude toward you as “only the court reporter.” There is currently a move by the federal government to classify court reporters within the legal profession. Legal assistants have been fighting for years to maintain a professional standing, distinguished from legal secretaries, but that’s still not clear in many people’s minds.

It cannot be minimized that society as a whole sees the lawyers and judges as the stars of the legal process, while anyone else connected with the legal system is merely a bit player. Lawyers may question your accuracy, and clients may even question your right to be present to do the job you are hired to do!

EDUCATION

THE FIRST STEP TO BECOMING A COURT REPORTER IS TO ENROLL AT A SPECIAL COURT reporting school. These are actually private business schools, and the National Court Reporters Association maintains a list of approved schools. When you are first looking at schools, make sure they are accredited; going to an unaccredited school may severely hamper your job prospects after you graduate. Most people go to school for two years to complete the training and practice, but some take up to four years.

You will start off slowly, learning to use the machine and becoming comfortable with it. Your ability will increase with time and practice, and soon your speed, accuracy and stamina will allow you to take down hours of rapid speech.

In most cases, you will need your own equipment. You cannot begin training without a steno machine. Some students rent or buy a used manual machine for their early training. However, when you begin working, you will need production quality equipment. This means an electronic steno writer, a desk top computer, a laser printer, a notebook computer and the CAT software. Your employer will provide these for you, but if you are self-employed you will need to buy them yourself.

Basic manual stenography skills can be acquired in high school, vocational school or community college, so a four year college degree is not necessarily required if you will only be taking dictation. It is not a bad idea to learn manual dictation; if you are on a job and your equipment

breaks down, you will be able to switch to the manual system and hardly skip a beat.

However, to become a court reporter, you will need to learn to use the special equipment to be effective, and that requires additional schooling after high school. This means you need your high school diploma or GED before you can learn to be a court reporter.

Some schools offer two to four year training programs, but not all of them are accredited. In order to join the National Court Reporters Association, you must attend an accredited school. Some states require a court reporter who stenotypes depositions to be a notary public, and you will need to take a test to become one.

Currently, 18 states require each court reporter to be a Certified Court Reporter (CCR). A certification test is administered by a court of examiners in each state that has a CCR law.

The National Court Reporters Association confers the designation Registered Professional Reporter (RPR) on those who pass a two part examination and participate in continuing education programs. Although voluntary, the RPR designation is recognized as a mark of distinction in the profession. More importantly, the extra education adds to your knowledge of your chosen field.

Continuing education courses are essential to staying at the top of your field. Technology is evolving so rapidly that people in most professions cannot afford to lag behind in their knowledge. This is especially true of court reporters. As the relationship between steno machines and computers becomes tighter and more complex, the savvy court reporter will stay up-to-date in order to continue working in the field.

Other continuing education courses revolve around changes to court procedures and laws. You will want to keep abreast of the latest developments. The Bar Association in your area of the country will probably sponsor such education programs for a reasonable fee.

EARNINGS

THE EARNINGS WHICH A COURT REPORTER MAKES IN THE UNITED STATES VARY according to where you work and who you work for. If you work for a government agency, whether local, state or federal, you will probably be classified as a civil service employee. This means that your salary depends on the salary range assigned to the court reporter category and on your level within that category. You are generally entitled to cost-of-living increases and sometimes merit increases.

Freelance court reporters, or independent contractors, are more masters of their own income than those who are salaried employees. You can charge what the market will bear, or less if you want to be more competitive. You will not receive merit or cost-of-living increases, but you can periodically increase what you charge and explain that your prices go up due to the increased cost of doing business. Most of your clients will understand.

Stenocaptioners who work for specific networks or cable stations make whatever the organization dictates is appropriate for that type of job. As an employee, you will be entitled to cost-of-living increases and sometimes merit increases.

Stenocaptioners who work independently for individuals can also charge what the market will bear but, depending on the clients you serve, you may have to charge according to what the client can pay. Here again, you will not automatically receive cost-of-living increases or merit increases.

A survey of members of the National Court Reporters Association indicates that the average annual income is about \$65,000. However, reporters' earnings depend on location and other factors. In court reporting, earning potential often is limited only by the amount of time a reporter is willing to devote to the profession; in other words, the more hours you work, the more money you make.

For a 40-hour work week, the annual salary for an entry level court reporter runs about \$30,000. Of course, this figure depends on what part of the country you will be working in, and whether you are located in a major metropolitan area or a more rural locale.

In many areas, official court reporters earn a salary and a per-page fee for preparing transcripts; the salary ranges between \$27,500 and \$40,000 per year. The salary is directly related to the reporter's speed, accuracy and experience. Freelance reporters are paid per job and receive a per-page fee

for transcripts; freelancers can set competitive rates depending on their level of experience and expertise, as well as the rates of others doing the same work in the same location.

Salaried positions for stenocaptioners can range from \$50,000 to \$75,000. Independent contractor stenocaptioners can earn from \$35,000 to more than twice that amount, depending on the number of on-air hours.

Compensation for court reporters employed within the military is controlled strictly by military standards. You are classified according to your profession and your level within that profession. There is no room for negotiation and you cannot expect to get merit raises or cost-of-living increases.

OPPORTUNITIES

THERE ARE AN ESTIMATED 100,000 COURT, DEPOSITION AND CAPTIONING REPORTERS in the United States. Only about 30 per cent of the court reporters in the United States actually work in court. Most of the rest are freelancers hired by attorneys to report depositions of potential trial witnesses.

The National Court Reporters Association expects the need for reporters to remain strong for the foreseeable future. A trained reporter using the latest realtime computer-aided transcription processes remains the fastest, most accurate way to turn spoken information into readable, searchable, permanent text.

This ability will continue to have applications in all types of courts and in pretrial depositions, where most reporters currently work. Some guidance counselors fail to recognize the ongoing need for court reporters due to the introduction of “voice recognition” software. However, the voice and speech systems in use today have a notoriously high error rate. Also, experts agree that systems which can capture normal speech and serve multiple speakers are too far in the future to predict.

Increasingly, there is a huge need for court reporters to work in the specialized areas of creating captions of live television programming and providing CART services for deaf and hard of hearing college students.

There is no clearly defined career ladder for court reporters. One industry report identifies four separate job levels:

- **Entry level reporter who takes and transcribes records under supervision**

- Skilled reporter who can take complex cases accurately at good speed
- Experienced reporter who can report and assist court officials in organizing and using the information
- Seasoned reporter, who uses the information in the record as well as personal experience to assist court officials, including judges.

The recognition of these levels is not universal, so it is best to keep in mind that each court reporter job situation is unique. Advancement may come as pay raises and promotions to higher grades. The title chief court reporter is sometimes given as an honor without financial award. Advancement may also mean appointment from a lower to a higher court. Some shorthand reporters become freelance reporters, operating their own independent reporting firms.

With the Federal Telecommunications Act of 1996 has come very specific mandates for closed captioning of local programs around the country. What this means for the reporting community is an enormous increase in the demand for realtime captioners to cover local news broadcasts all around the country, mornings, afternoons and evenings.

There is already a shortage of qualified people in certain areas of the country, so technology has been developed to enable people to do the job from a remote site. In other words, a captioner in Atlanta can transmit captions via modem to a television station in Lexington, Kentucky. This need for remote site captioning talent is only going to increase as more and more stations meet the deadlines for implementation set by the Federal Communications Division.

This also means that more trained broadcast captioners will have the opportunity to work out of their homes, which is a key goal for many young people hoping to earn a good living while staying home after they become parents.

GETTING STARTED

IN ORDER TO SEE IF YOU WISH TO BECOME A COURT REPORTER, YOU CAN OBSERVE them at work by attending civil or criminal court cases. If you know a lawyer or other court official, ask to talk to a court reporter or even spend the day observing all aspects of the job, not just in the courtroom.

In school, concentrate on business courses. Take manual stenography if it is offered, as well as typing. Learn to type as fast and accurately as you can; this is essential to becoming a court reporter. Just like being a musician, being a court reporter demands practice. The more you practice, the better you will get. If you can already type 200 words a minute on a conventional keyboard, you will probably be able to reach that speed or higher on a steno machine.

When you are in school and deep into the court reporting courses, check out the opportunities for internships with local government offices. There is nothing so beneficial as being able to work in a profession while not having to worry about getting paid for it. You can learn a great deal about the court system and the people you might be working with.

If you are thinking about becoming a freelance court reporter, try to take courses related to starting your own business. Besides high school and vocational school, many independent adult education programs offer good courses in starting a small business. Some may even be located on the Internet, so you can learn at your own pace.

Once you are ready to set up your own business, remember that there are several major areas in which to concentrate to ensure success. First, you may have to hire and supervise support personnel to handle phones and clerical tasks. You will need to oversee and monitor the purchase of supplies and equipment. You must also balance your own workload by realizing how long it takes to produce a quality transcript. Finally, start by establishing good bookkeeping practices and sticking to them.

If you like the idea of court reporting as a profession, but you have also been thinking about military service as an alternative after high school, you can do both. You can join a branch of the armed forces, and they will train you to be a court reporter. You will get on the job training and experience and, if you elect to leave the armed forces at the end of your tour of duty, you will have the skill you need to obtain a court reporter's job in the private sector.

Of course, taking manual steno and typing is a must in high school even if you are thinking about the military. Every skill you can acquire

before you leave high school will someday come in handy, even if you don't think so now.

There is little uniformity in the methods by which court reporting positions are filled in federal, state and local courts and agencies. Such positions can be found under the heading of civil service. Official court reporters are usually appointed by judges.

Further assistance in locating a job may be obtained from school placement offices and from the National Shorthand Reporters Association.

ASSOCIATIONS

- **National Court Reporters Association**
www.NCRAonline.org
- **United States Court Reporters Association**
uscra@planetkc.com
- **Iowa Court Reporters Association**
www.netins.net/showcase/icra
- **Florida Court Reporters Association**
www.machineshorthand.com/fcra.htm
- **Missouri Court Reporters Association**
www.mocra.org
- **Texas Court Reporters Association**
www.depoman.com/tcra
- **Pennsylvania Court Reporters Association**
www.pcra.com
- **Oklahoma Court Reporters Association**
www.machineshorthand.com/OCRA.htm
- **Oregon Court Reporters Association**
www.harborside.com/ocra
- **Bay Area Court Reporters Association of Texas**
www.bacrat.com
- **Michigan Association of Professional Court Reporters**
www.machineshorthand.com/MAPCRA.htm
- **Arizona Court Reporters Association**
www.machineshorthand.com/ACRA.htm
- **Tennessee Court Reporters Association**
www.tncra.com

- **Ohio Court Reporters Association**
www.ocraonline.com
- **California Court Reporters Association**
www.calccra.org
- **West Louisiana Professional Court Reporters Association**
www.wlpcra.com
- **Association for the Advancement of CAT Technology**
www.taact.org

INTERNET RESOURCES

- **Court Reporting Store Directory**
www.thecourtreportingstore.com
Provides a directory, information and resources dedicated to serving the needs of court reporters.
- **LegalSync**
www.legalsync.com
Provides software, forms and other materials used by court reporters and other legal professionals.
- **Court Reporter Net**
<http://www.courtreporternet.com/>
Provides court reporter job listings and referral service nationwide