

# Court Reporters

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## Significant Points

- Court reporters usually need a 2- or 4- year postsecondary school degree.
- Demand for realtime and broadcast captioning and translating will result in employment growth in the occupation.
- Job opportunities should be best for those with certification.

## Nature of the Work

Court reporters typically take verbatim reports of speeches, conversations, legal proceedings, meetings, and other events when written accounts of spoken words are necessary for correspondence, records, or legal proof. Court reporters play a critical role not only in judicial proceedings, but at every meeting where the spoken word must be preserved as a written transcript. They are responsible for ensuring a complete, accurate, and secure legal record. In addition to preparing and protecting the legal record, many court reporters assist judges and trial attorneys in a variety of ways, such as organizing and searching for information in the official record or making suggestions to judges and attorneys regarding courtroom administration and procedure. Increasingly, court reporters are providing closed-captioning and realtime translating services to the deaf and hard-of-hearing community.

There are two main methods of court reporting: Stenotyping and voice writing. Using a stenotype machine, stenotypists document all statements made in official proceedings. The machine allows them to press multiple keys at a time to record combinations of letters representing sounds, words, or phrases. These symbols are then recorded on computer disks or CD-ROM, which are then translated and displayed as text in a process called computer-aided transcription. In all cases, accuracy is crucial because there is only one person creating an official transcript. In a judicial setting, for example, appeals often depend on the court reporter's transcript. Stenotype machines used for realtime captioning are linked directly to the computer. As the reporter keys in the symbols, they instantly appear as text on the screen. This process, called communications access realtime translation (CART), is used in courts, in classrooms, at meetings, and for closed captioning for the hearing-impaired on television.

The other method of court reporting is called voice writing. Using the voice-writing method, a court reporter speaks directly into a stenomask—a hand-held mask containing a microphone with a voice silencer. As the reporter repeats the testimony into the recorder, the mask and silencer prevent the reporter from being heard during testimony. Voice writers record everything that is said by judges, witnesses, attorneys, and other parties to a proceeding, including gestures and emotional reactions.

Some voice writers produce a transcript in real time, using computer speech recognition technology. Other voice writers prefer to translate their voice files after the proceeding is over, or they transcribe the files manually, without using speech recognition at all. In any event, speech recognition technology is allowing voice writers to pursue not only court reporting careers, but also careers as closed captioners, CART reporters for

hearing-impaired individuals, and Internet streaming text or caption providers.

Court reporters that use either method are responsible for a number of duties both before and after transcribing events. First, they must create and maintain the computer dictionary that they use to translate stenographic strokes or voice record files into written text. They may customize the dictionary with parts of words, entire words, or terminology specific to the proceeding, program, or event—such as a religious service—they plan to transcribe. After documenting proceedings, court reporters must edit their CART translation for correct grammar, for accurate identification of proper names and places, and to ensure that the record or testimony is discernible. They usually prepare written transcripts, make copies, and provide information from the transcript to courts, counsels, parties, and the public upon request. Court reporters also develop procedures for easy storage and retrieval of all stenographic notes and files in paper or digital format.

Although many court reporters record official proceedings in the courtroom, others work outside the courtroom. For example, they may take depositions for attorneys in offices and document proceedings of meetings, conventions, and other private activities. Still others capture the proceedings taking place in government agencies at all levels, from the U.S. Congress to State and local governing bodies. Court reporters, both stenotypists and voice writers, who specialize in captioning live television



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programming for people with hearing loss are commonly known as *stenocaptioners*. They work for television networks or cable stations, captioning news, emergency broadcasts, sporting events, and other programming. With CART and broadcast captioning, the level of understanding gained by a person with hearing loss depends entirely on the skill of the stenocaptioner. In an emergency, such as a tornado or a hurricane, people's safety may depend entirely on the accuracy of information provided in the form of captioning.

Medical transcriptionists, discussed elsewhere in the *Handbook*, have similar duties, but with a different focus. They translate and edit recorded dictation by physicians and other health-care providers regarding their assessment and treatment of patients.

### **Working Conditions**

The majority of court reporters work in comfortable settings, such as offices of attorneys, courtrooms, legislatures, and conventions. An increasing number of court reporters work from home-based offices as independent contractors, or freelancers.

Work in this occupation presents few hazards, although sitting in the same position for long periods can be tiring, and workers can suffer wrist, back, neck, or eye problems due to strain. Workers also risk repetitive motion injuries such as carpal tunnel syndrome. In addition, the pressure to be accurate and fast can be stressful.

Many official court reporters work a standard 40-hour week. Self-employed court reporters, or freelancers, usually work flexible hours, including part time, evenings, and weekends, or they can work on an on-call basis.

### **Employment**

Court reporters held about 18,000 jobs in 2002. About 60 percent worked for State and local governments, a reflection of the large number of court reporters working in courts, legislatures, and various agencies. Most of the remaining wage and salary workers worked for court reporting agencies. Eleven percent of court reporters were self-employed.

### **Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement**

The amount of training required to become a court reporter varies with the type of reporting chosen. It usually takes less than a year to become a voice writer. In contrast, the average length of time it takes to become a stenotypist is 33 months. Training is offered by about 160 postsecondary vocational and technical schools and colleges. The National Court Reporters Association (NCRA) has approved about 82 programs, all of which offer courses in stenotype computer-aided transcription and realtime reporting. NCRA-approved programs require students to capture a minimum of 225 words per minute, a Federal Government requirement as well.

Some States require court reporters to be notary publics. Others require the certified court reporter (CCR) designation, for which a reporter must pass a State certification test administered by a board of examiners. The NCRA confers the entry-level designation "registered professional reporter" (RPR) upon those who pass a four-part examination and participate in mandatory continuing education programs. Although voluntary, the designation is recognized as a mark of distinction in the field. A reporter may obtain additional certifications that demonstrate higher levels of competency, such as "registered merit reporter" (RMR) or "registered diplomate reporter" (RDR). The RDR is the highest level of certification available to court reporters. In

order to receive the designation, a court reporter must either have 5 consecutive years of experience as an RMR or be an RMR and hold a 4-year baccalaureate degree.

The NCRA also offers the designations "certified realtime reporter" (CRR), "certified broadcast captioner" (CBC), and "certified CART provider" (CCP). These designations promote and recognize competence in the specialized skill of converting the spoken word into the written word instantaneously.

Some States require voice writers to pass a test and to earn State licensure. As a substitute for State certification, the National Verbatim Reporters Association offers three national certifications to voice writers: "certified verbatim reporter" (CVR), the certificate of merit (CM), and "real-time verbatim reporter" (RVR). Earning these certifications may be sufficient to get licensed in the State. In order to get the CM or RVR, one must first earn the CVR. Candidates for the CVR must pass a written test covering punctuation, spelling, grammar, legal terminology, definitions, and more and also must pass, three five-minute dictation and transcription examinations that test for speed as well as accuracy. Passing the CM exam requires a higher level of speed and accuracy. The RVR measures the candidate's skill at realtime transcription. In order to retain these certifications, the voice writer must obtain continuing education credits. Credits are given for voice writer education courses, continuing legal education courses, and college courses.

In addition to possessing speed and accuracy, court reporters must have excellent listening skills, as well as good English grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation skills. Voice writers must learn to listen and speak simultaneously and very quickly, while also identifying speakers and describing peripheral activities in the courtroom or deposition room. They must be aware of business practices and current events as well as the correct spelling of names of people, places, and events that may be mentioned in a broadcast or in court proceedings. For those who work in courtrooms, an expert knowledge of legal terminology and criminal and appellate procedure is essential. Because capturing proceedings requires the use of computerized stenography or speech recognition equipment, court reporters must be knowledgeable about computer hardware and software applications.

With experience and education, court reporters can advance to administrative and management positions, consulting, or teaching.

### **Job Outlook**

Employment of court reporters is projected to grow about as fast as the average for all occupations through 2012. Demand for court reporter services will be spurred by the continuing need for accurate transcription of proceedings in courts and in pre-trial depositions and by the growing need to create captions for live or prerecorded television and to provide other realtime translating services for the deaf and hard-of-hearing community. Despite the good job prospects, fewer people are going into this profession, creating a shortage of court reporters—particularly stenographic typists—and making job opportunities very good to excellent. Because of this shortage, voice writers have become more widely accepted as speech recognition technology improves and error rates decline. Still, many courts hire only stenotypists to perform court reporting duties, and because of this practice, demand for these highly skilled reporters will remain high.

Federal legislation mandates that, by 2006, all new television programming must be captioned for the deaf and hard-of-hearing. In addition, the Americans with Disabilities Act gives

deaf and hard-of-hearing students in colleges and universities the right to request access to realtime translation in their classes. Both of these factors are expected to increase demand for court reporters to provide realtime captioning and CART services. Although these services forgo transcripts and differ from traditional court reporting, which uses computer-aided transcription to turn spoken words into permanent text, they require the same skills that court reporters learn in their training.

Despite increasing numbers of civil and criminal cases, budget constraints are expected to limit the ability of Federal, State, and local courts to expand, thereby also limiting the demand for traditional court reporting services in courtrooms and other legal venues. Further, in efforts to keep costs down, many courtrooms have installed tape recorders to maintain records of proceedings. Some jurisdictions have found the error rates associated with tape recorders to be unacceptable, bringing court reporters back to their courtrooms despite budgetary issues. Still, despite the use of audiotape and videotape technology, court reporters can quickly turn spoken words into readable, searchable, permanent text, so they will continue to be needed to produce written legal transcripts and proceedings for publication.

### **Earnings**

Court reporters had median annual earnings of \$41,550 in 2002. The middle 50 percent earned between \$29,770 and \$55,360. The lowest paid 10 percent earned less than \$23,120, and the highest paid 10 percent earned more than \$73,440. Median annual earnings in 2002 were \$40,720 for court reporters working in local government.

Both compensation and compensation methods for court reporters vary with the type of reporting job, the experience of the individual reporter, the level of certification achieved, and the region of the country the reporter works in. Official court reporters earn a salary and a per-page fee for transcripts. Many salaried court reporters supplement their income by doing additional freelance work. Freelance court reporters are paid per job and receive a per-page fee for transcripts. Communication access realtime translation providers are paid hourly. Stenocaptioners receive a salary and benefits if they work as employees of a captioning company; stenocaptioners working as independent contractors are paid hourly.

### **Related Occupations**

A number of other workers type, record information, and process paperwork. Among these are secretaries and administrative assistants, medical transcriptionists, receptionists and information clerks, and human resources assistants, except payroll and timekeeping. Other workers who provide legal support include paralegals and legal assistants.

### **Sources of Additional Information**

State employment service offices can provide information about job openings for court reporters. For information about careers, training, and certification in court reporting, contact any of the following sources:

- ▶ National Court Reporters Association, 8224 Old Courthouse Rd., Vienna, VA 22182. Internet: <http://www.ncraonline.org>
- ▶ United States Court Reporters Association, P.O. Box 465, Chicago, IL 60690-0465. Internet: <http://www.uscra.org>
- ▶ National Verbatim Reporters Association, 207 Third Avenue, Hattiesburg, MS 39401. Internet: <http://www.nvra.org>