

Nature of the Work

Court reporters usually create verbatim transcripts of speeches, conversations, legal proceedings, meetings, and other events. Sometimes written accounts of spoken words are necessary for correspondence, records, or legal proof, and court reporters provide those accounts. They play a critical role not only in judicial proceedings, but also 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 provide closed-captioning and real-time translating services to the deaf and hard-of-hearing community.

There are several methods of court reporting. The most common method is called stenographic. Using a stenotype machine, stenotypists document all statements made in official proceedings. The machine allows them to press multiple keys at once to record combinations of letters representing sounds, words, or phrases. These symbols are electronically recorded and then translated and displayed as text in a process called computer-aided transcription (CAT). In real-time court reporting, the stenotype machine is linked to computers for real-time captioning, often of television programs. As the reporter keys in the symbols, the spoken word instantly appear as text on the screen.

Another method of court reporting is electronic reporting. This method uses audio equipment to record court proceedings. The court reporter monitors the process, takes notes to identify speakers, and listens to the recording to ensure clarity and quality. The equipment used may include analog tape recorders or digital equipment. Electronic reporters and transcribers often are responsible for producing a written transcript of the recorded proceeding.

Yet another method of court reporting is voice writing. Using the voice-writing method, a court reporter speaks directly into a voice silencer—a hand-held mask containing a

microphone. As the reporter repeats the testimony into the recorder, the mask prevents 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, and prepare transcripts afterwards.

Court reporters are responsible for a number of duties both before and after transcribing events. Stenographic or voice writing reporters must create and maintain the computer dictionary that they use to translate their keystroke codes or voice 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, stenographic reporters must edit the computer-generated translation for correct grammar. All reporters are responsible for accurate identification of proper names and places. Electronic reporters ensure that the record or testimony is discernible. Reporters usually prepare written transcripts, make copies, and provide information from the transcript to courts, counsels, parties, and the public on request. Court reporters also develop procedures for easy storage and retrieval of all stenographic notes, voice files, commonly referred to as "stenograms", or audio recordings in paper or digital format.

Although many court reporters record official proceedings in the courtroom, others work outside the courts. For example, court reporters—called webcasters—capture sales meetings, press conferences, product introductions, and technical training seminars and instantly transmit them to all parties involved via computers. As participants speak into telephones or microphones, the words appear on all of the participants' computer monitors simultaneously. 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 who specialize in captioning live television programming for people with hearing loss are commonly known as broadcast captioners. They work for television networks or cable stations, captioning news, emergency broadcasts, sporting events, and other programming.

A version of the captioning process that allows reporters to provide more personalized services for deaf and hard-of-hearing people is Communication Access Real-time Translation (CART). CART reporters often work with hard-of-hearing students and people who are learning English as a second language, captioning high school and college classes and

providing transcripts at the end of the sessions. CART reporters also accompany deaf clients to events, including conventions, doctor appointments, or wherever communication access is needed. CART providers increasingly furnish this service remotely, as an Internet or phone connection allows for immediate communication access regardless of location. With CART and broadcast captioning, the level of understanding gained by a person with hearing loss depends entirely on the skill of the court reporter. In an emergency, such as a tornado or a hurricane, people's safety may depend on the accuracy of information provided in the form of captioning.

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-enabled voice writers pursue not only court reporting careers, but also careers as closed captioners, CART reporters for hearing-impaired individuals, and Internet streaming text providers or caption providers.

Work environment. 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 strain. Workers also risk repetitive stress 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, and they often work additional hours at home preparing transcripts. Self-employed court reporters, or freelancers, usually work flexible hours, including part time, evenings, and weekends, or they may be on call.

Training, Other Qualifications, and Advancement

The amount of training required to become a court reporter varies by specialization.

Licensure requirements vary by State.

Education and training. 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 novice voice writer, although it takes at least two years to become proficient at realtime voice writing. Electronic reporters and transcribers learn their skills on the job. The average length of time it takes to become a realtime stenotypist is 33 months. Training is offered by about 130 postsecondary vocational and technical schools and colleges. The National Court Reporters Association (NCRA) has certified about 70 programs, all of which offer courses in stenotype computer-aided transcription and real-time reporting. NCRA-certified programs require students to capture a minimum of 225 words per minute, a requirement for Federal Government employment as well.

Electronic court reporters use audio-capture technology and, therefore, usually learn their skills on the job. Students read manuals, review them with their trainers, and observe skilled electronic transcribers perform procedures. Court electronic transcribers generally obtain initial technical training from a vendor when it is placed in service, with further court-specific training provided on the job. If working for a private company or organization, hands-on training occurs under direct supervision of an established practitioner or firm.

Licensure. Some States require voice writers to pass a test and to earn State licensure. As a substitute for State licensure, the National Verbatim Reporters Association offers three national certifications to voice writers: Certified Verbatim Reporter (CVR), Certificate of Merit (CM), and Real-Time Verbatim Reporter (RVR). Earning these certifications is sufficient to be licensed in States where the voice method of court reporting is permitted. Candidates for the first certification—the CVR—must pass a written test of spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, legal and medical terminology and three 5-minute dictation and transcription examinations that test for speed, accuracy, and silence. The second certification, the CM, requires additional levels of speed, knowledge, and accuracy. The RVR certification measures the candidate's skill at real-time transcription, judicial reporting, CART provision, and captioning, including Webcasting. 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.

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 test administered by a board of examiners.

Other qualifications. In addition to possessing speed and accuracy, court reporters must have excellent listening skills and hearing, good English grammar and vocabulary, and punctuation skills. 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. Voice writers must learn to listen and speak simultaneously and very quickly and quietly, while also identifying speakers and describing peripheral activities in the courtroom or deposition room.

Certification and advancement. Certifications can help court reporters get jobs and advance in their careers. Several associations offer certifications for different types of reporters.

The National Court Reporters Association 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 court reporter may obtain additional certifications that demonstrate higher levels of experience and competency, such as Registered Merit Reporter (RMR) or Registered Diplomate Reporter (RDR). The NCRA also offers the designations Certified Realtime Reporter (CRR), Certified Broadcast Captioner (CBC), and Certified CART Provider (CCP), designed primarily for those who caption media programs or assist people who are deaf.

With experience and education, court reporters can also receive certification in administrative and management, consulting, or teaching positions.

The United States Court Reporters Association offers another voluntary certification designation, the Federal Certified Realtime Reporter (FCRR), for court reporters working in Federal courts. The exam is designed to test the basic real-time skills of Federal court reporters and is recognized by the Administrative Office for the United States District Courts for purposes of real-time certification.

The American Association of Electronic Reporters and Transcribers (AAERT) certifies electronic court reporters. Certification is voluntary and includes a written and a practical examination. To be eligible to take the exams, candidates must have at least 2 years of court reporting or transcribing experience, must be eligible for notary public commissions in their States, and must have completed high school. AAERT offers three types of certificates—Certified Electronic Court Reporter (CER), Certified Electronic Court Transcriber (CET), and Certified Electronic Court Reporter and Transcriber (CERT). Some employers may require electronic court reporters and transcribers to obtain certificates once they are eligible.

Employment

Court reporters held about 19,000 jobs in 2006. More than half 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 were employed by court reporting agencies. Around 8 percent of court reporters were self-employed.

Job Outlook

Employment is projected to grow much faster than the average, reflecting the demand for real-time broadcast captioning and translating. Job opportunities should be excellent, especially for those with certification.

Employment change. Employment of court reporters is projected to grow 25 percent, much faster than the average for all occupations between 2006 and 2016. Demand for court reporter services will be spurred by the continuing need for accurate transcription of proceedings in courts and in pretrial depositions, by the growing need to create captions for live television, and by the need to provide other real-time broadcast captioning and translating services for the deaf and hard-of-hearing.

Increasing numbers of civil and criminal cases are expected to create new jobs for court reporters, but budget constraints are expected to limit the ability of Federal, State, and local courts to expand, and thereby also limit the demand for traditional court reporting services in courtrooms and other legal venues. Further, because of the difficulty in attracting court reporters and in efforts to control costs, many courtrooms have installed tape recorders that are maintained by electronic court reporters and transcribers to record court proceedings. However, because courts use electronic reporters and transcribers only in a limited capacity traditional stenographic court reporters will continue to be used in felony trials and other proceedings. Despite the use of audiotape and videotape technology, court reporters can quickly turn spoken words into readable, searchable, permanent text, and they will continue to be needed to produce written legal transcripts and proceedings for publication.

Voice writers have become more widely accepted as the accuracy of speech recognition technology improves. Still, many courts allow only stenotypists to perform court reporting duties.

In addition, more court reporters will be needed to caption outside of legal proceedings. Not only is there Federal legislation mandating that all new television programming be captioned for the deaf and hard-of-hearing, all new Spanish-language programming likewise must be captioned by 2010. In addition, the Americans with Disabilities Act gives deaf and hard-of-hearing students in colleges and universities the right to request access to real-time translation in their classes. These factors are expected to continue to increase the demand for court reporters who provide CART services. Although these services forgo transcripts and

differ from traditional court reporting, they require the same skills that court reporters learn in their training.

Job prospects. Job opportunities for court reporters are expected to be excellent as job openings continue to outnumber jobseekers in some areas. Court reporters with certification and those who choose to specialize in providing CART, broadcast captioning, and or webcasting services should have the best job opportunities. The favorable job market reflects the fact that fewer people are entering this profession, particularly as stenographic typists.