



STENOGRAPHIC

Institute of Western New York

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Est. 1971

What Do Court Reporters Do and How Much Do They Make?

Court reporters are responsible for making a verbatim record of exactly what was said and by whom for a variety of different proceedings.

The two main categories of reporters (*official and freelance*) derive their income from a salary and/or payment based on the transcript pages they produce.

There are many different types of court reporters, but the main ones are:

Official:

These are the reporters you may see on the 6 o'clock news taking cases in city and county courts, and State Supreme Court who work for the Court System.

Officials are normally assigned to one judge, but some may "float" between judges and/or courts.

Official reporters in New York State are employed under a contract which includes a number of salary steps ranging from \$84,000 to \$130,000 (*for the year 2023*).

Added to this is income from transcripts, which ranges from a few thousand to tens of thousands of dollars per year. The base salary is certain, but the transcript income can vary widely, and so it is impossible to say exactly how much a reporter will earn in a given year.

Official opportunities are also available at the Federal level. The starting salary in 2021 was \$95,000 with transcript income potential in the tens of thousands.



Freelance:

New reporters in freelance normally start with a freelance firm. The firms provide the office space, the clients and the support staff. Freelance reporters most often take legal depositions at law offices, but due to advances in technology there are plenty of reporters handling virtual proceedings from the comfort of their own home.

Although freelance reporters may occasionally receive an appearance fee (*a payment for showing up*), most of their income is based on the number of pages of transcript they produce, how many copies were ordered, the kind of testimony, and how soon the transcript is needed.

Freelance income is more difficult to establish than that of officials. Officials' base salary is in a published contract; there is no equivalent in freelance. The initial beginning income in freelance could be only about two-thirds that of an official. However, there are reasons why graduates may want to start in freelance, in spite of the initial income disparity. Locally, experienced freelance reporters are likely to be in the \$40,000 to \$70,000 range, but can certainly be higher factoring in skill level and caseload.

Freelancing will often have a reporter only writing cases 2-3 days a week, with the remainder of their time being spent editing their work at home and on their own schedule. So although you are likely to make less than an official, some reporters prefer freelance because of the flexibility it offers.



Closed Captioning:

This is the procedure which provides realtime text captioning (*subtitles*) of television programs. The reporter writes from the audio, which is then sent to the TV station where it is encoded in the broadcast signal. Reporters working in closed captioning may be either independent contractors or salaried employees. Income is determined by location and the number of on-air hours. The salary range for national captioning is from \$35,000 to \$100,000. Independent contractor hourly rates range from \$55 to \$100 per hour

CART:

CART (*computer aided realtime transcription*) is similar to the verbatim realtime translation of legal proceedings, but is a service primarily for the hearing impaired. It is used in school and university classrooms, cultural events, live theater, courtrooms – everything from weddings to job interviews. There is very little if any funding for CART in Western New York and, therefore, it is not currently a career opportunity in this area.

How Does A Reporter “Write”?

(Will I have to type?)

The “notes” are written one line at a time, representing part of a word, a complete word, or sometimes several words. The example below is simplified, but gives a general idea of the process. Read the notes across, by sound, not by spelling, a word at a time, a word to a line.

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S		E		
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	A			
	WH	O		L
	W	O	R	D
T		O		
		A		
S	P	A		S

The machine notes are translated into English by the CAT system, therefore, there should be little or no typing of text from the computer keyboard.

How Is The Transcript Produced?



The reporter writes on a machine that is connected to a laptop with CAT (*computer-assisted translation*) software, which translates the electronic “notes” against the reporter’s personal dictionary (*the steno language*) and an English translation is displayed on the laptop.

How Computer Literate Do Reporters Need To Be?

It depends on the area of reporting, but starting off you need little more computer expertise than someone who uses a computer for general office or home purposes such as word processing.



Can Anyone Do It?

Writing on a stenotype machine is very much like translating a language. Instead of German to French, it's English to a strange looking code, but the process is very similar.

A certain degree of finger dexterity is required, but this can be developed. In reality, all a student needs is ten digits which function pretty much normally. Writing is primarily a mental process, and becomes almost subconscious. This has to be so, since there are many things to which a reporter needs to respond during a hearing. To use riding a bicycle as an analogy: being able to stay upright is the writing on the machine; navigating through busy traffic on a trip between two points is the functioning as the reporter.



Could you learn a foreign language? Given the time, motivation and commitment, there is no reason why anyone should not be able to do so. The main requirement in learning to write using a machine is consistent practice of at least two hours, preferably longer, a day.

What Are The Pros And Cons Of Becoming A Court Reporter?

Cons

- Completing the program:
Completing the program requires time management, and a great deal of self-discipline and perseverance. And, you have to do at least two hours' homework on each day that you do not come to school.
- Sometimes long hours:
It is not always a nine-to-five schedule. For instance, you may on occasion have to wait for a jury to come back with a verdict. In other words, it can be the kind of schedule associated with most high-income careers.

Pros

- Cost of school:
There is a very low cost-of-education to potential-income ratio when compared to four years of college and most subsequent entry-level salaries. It can lead to a six-figure income, and the independence that that represents.
- Variety of work environments:
This applies particularly to freelance, where you may be in a different location reporting different kinds of cases every day.
- Being on the "inside":
Many of the local news stories involved hearings at which a court reporter had a front seat. Even if they don't take one of the high profile cases of the famous and/or infamous, they are on the "inside" locally. Reporters get to know more of the details than the general public.

- Flexibility in schedule:

An advantage primarily of freelance, but many reporters have very flexible schedules, including working from home. For officials, there is the possibility of sharing a position with another reporter.

- The potential of being an independent freelancer:

Not all the hassles of running a business, yet the independence of being self-employed. You have to provide your own equipment and services, but you keep all the profits. You can operate out of your home.

- The potential of running your own business:

Not everyone has the inclination or ability, but for those that do, there are the rewards of owning the business.

- A way out:

It provides an upward path for someone who did not start or complete college, or who does not have the time or resources to return to school full time. A person in this position tends to be highly motivated to be successful in the program. In some circumstances, this "way out" can prove appealing even to those with a four-year degree.

What About the School?

Stenographic Institute is a private registered business school. The only course offered is an evening court reporting program.

The school was founded by court reporters in 1971. With the exception of the teachers of the English, legal and medical courses, all other personnel - ownership, administration and faculty - are practicing or retired reporters.

Classes begin each March and September. There are normally open houses in December, January and February for the March class, and in June, July and August for the September class. No reservation is needed to attend an open house. Sometimes the February and/or August open houses are cancelled due to classes being full.

Stenographic's structure differs from schools which offer court reporting as one of many programs within a by-semester structure. These schools usually have two class levels: the first and second year. Theory courses constitute the first and part of the second level. During theory, students are advised that speed is not a consideration; a thorough grasp of theory being the object. Testing speed during theory would be pointless, and certainly not helpful.

The remaining levels are speed building. Students progress through these levels on the basis of weekly testing. Progress is to a large extent dependent upon the individual's effort. For those who work full time and/or have family commitments, this multiple class level approach is more flexible and effective.

If for any reason progress were delayed, other systems would require the student to repeat as much as a complete year. Stenographic's system means that a student loses the least amount of time possible as a consequence of any delay.

How Do I Register?

The only prerequisites to registration are a high school diploma or equivalency, and a minimum age of 18. Registration is accepted from the date of the first open house for a class. This would normally be during

December for the March class and June for the September class. Provided space is available, registration is accepted up until the class begins, but classes are sometimes filled shortly after the second open house. Under certain conditions, it is possible to join the program up to two weeks after the start date.

The first month of tuition, the fee for books and media, and the registration fee, a total of \$715, is due at the time of registration. Full payment for books and media is made at the beginning of the program because of the nature of progression through the class levels. Since student movement through these levels occurs practically every week, it would be difficult to keep track of the payment due by a particular individual for instructional materials. However, if for any reason a student withdraws, a refund is made for any materials not received.

Beginning with the second month of the program, tuition of \$375 is paid on a monthly basis.

When Are Classes Held?

The beginning class levels are on Tuesdays and Thursdays; the upper class levels on Mondays and Wednesdays. Classes are held from 7 to 9 p.m. The school is in session continuously throughout the year, with the exception of Presidents' Day, Labor Day, Memorial Day, Columbus Day, Fourth of July and Thanksgiving.

There is a recess of about ten days for Christmas/New Year, and another of one week which includes the Fourth of July holiday

Do I Need A Machine?

A stenotype machine is required from the first night of the program. Machines either have a manual or an electric keyboard. The school offers manual rental machines at \$30 per month, plus a \$50 refundable deposit, on a first-come basis. The need for a rental machine is a factor that might contribute to a decision to register earlier rather than later. The first month rental and the deposit are payable at registration. Thereafter, the rental is payable monthly, and can be terminated at any time. Renting a machine increases the amount due at registration from \$840 to \$920.

How Do I Get One?



The machine manufacturer also rents electric machines. The touch of an electric writer is very light, and most students prefer electric machine.

The school can at times refer students to third parties having machines for sale, but makes no representation as to their condition. Sometimes machines are available from upper-class level students when these students purchase computer writers in preparation for sitting in and/or taking a job. It is suggested that a machine be brought into the school for an inspection before purchase. Recently, some students have purchased machines "blind" on the Internet, and some of these machines have been less than perfect. It is a student's responsibility to have a properly functioning machine with an extended keyboard, either purchased or rented, by the first night of class.

A new or used student model machine may be rented or purchased directly from the manufacturer. The company usually gives a trade-in allowance toward the cost of a reporter model, provided the purchase is made within a specified time. Most students prefer this option, as the machines are paperless and the touch is significantly lighter than on the manual machines.

A typical scenario might be to rent a machine for the first month or two (just in case, and to get to know what a machine is supposed to feel like), then purchase or rent a student model to go through most of the program, then in the 200 or 225 class (the two highest



class levels), trade in the student model and buy a new or used reporter model for sitting-in and subsequent employment.

Most machine service can be done through the school, as well as the purchase of consumable supplies such as paper, ink, and ribbons.

The dress code: casual.

Is There Any Financial Aid?

Since the program involves only four class hours per week, it does not qualify for most loans and/or grants. However, some students receive tuition assistance funded by company plans, some New York State agencies, and Workforce Development agencies. It is also qualified for the NYS employees' tuition reimbursement program.

Although this situation requires some creative budgeting for some students, there is the advantage that graduates do not begin their careers with a large student loan to repay.

What Happens When I Graduate?

Placement assistance would be available if ever asked for, but in the 52 years the school has been in existence, it is rarely necessary. Unless they specifically declined, all of our students during the last 20 years or so were able to start working before graduating. There has been a shortage of reporters for at least that long.

Can Anything Happen Before I Graduate?

When a student enters the 200 words-per-minute class, it is time to think about sitting in. This involves going to either a freelance firm or one of the courts and sitting in with the reporter taking the case. This provides experience which it is not possible to simulate in a classroom setting. It also introduces the student to potential places of employment. If a manual writer is still being used, it is time to think about getting a reporter model. Even if a student wants to graduate before starting to work, sitting-in gives great experience.

When the student enters the 225 words-per-minute class it is time to think about where they want to work. Historically, many firms have been happy to sign on an about-to-graduate student.

There are institutions which give a "certificate" to students with a speed of as little as 160 words per minute. These students will not be hired. If they were to try to take a case by themselves, they would not be able to produce a transcript, which is likely to put an end to that person's plans for a career in reporting. Students at 200 can benefit from sitting-in, and perhaps even be able to take selected, easy cases. However, 225 is required for a new reporter to handle a full range of hearings and produce accurate transcripts of those hearings. This of course means being able to pass a new-material test at 225, not a practiced test, which regrettably is the policy of some schools.

Where Is The School?

The school is located in Snyder, which is part of Amherst. It is close to the I-290 and I-90, and about eight miles from downtown Buffalo.

