

# The Future of Court Reporting

## **Is court reporting or broadcast captioning a career choice with growth potential?**

Court Reporting/Broadcast Captioning is one of the fifty best careers of 2010 according to U.S. News and World Report. It is estimated that jobs in this field will grow more than 18 percent between 2008 and 2018, which is a significantly faster than the average growth for all occupations. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the median annual earnings for wage and salary court reporters were \$49,710 in 2008. Those on the low end earned less than \$25,360. The most highly compensated, however, earned more than \$83,500 annually.

## **So, why should you consider a career in court reporting?**

If you love words and have a drive to succeed, stenography may be the right choice for you. There are many avenues to explore with a degree in court reporting or broadcast captioning. The versatility and flexibility that the field provides can make working infinitely more doable even for those who find themselves quickly losing interest in their jobs. Whether you prefer working in a freelance, courtroom, classroom or captioning setting, choosing a career in court reporting guarantees that boredom will never be an issue! Every day brings new adventures, challenges and triumphs.

Whether you prefer to be at the center of the excitement working as an official court reporter in a courtroom, or love the idea of working somewhere different every day as a freelance reporter taking down depositions, court reporting affords that opportunity. Do you want to work from home as a broadcast captioner? We have career for that!

## **How do you become a stenographer?**

Most stenographers enter the field by first enrolling in an Associate Degree program. This generally translates into attending college for at least two years if you are a full-time student. Bear in mind, however, that stenography is a speed-dependent profession. How quickly you complete your education will depend in large part on how much you practice.

When looking for a stenography program in which to enroll, make sure that you ask a few questions. Avoid enrolling in a program that has a high drop rate. In higher education, this is referred to as a "retention rate." The retention rate measures how many of a college's students remain enrolled from year to year. Retention rates can vary from 0% to 100%. I recommend that you choose a college whose retention rate exceeds 50%. A retention rate less than 50% means that one out of every two students does not continue from year to year. Less than 50%, and you are more likely than not to drop from the program. The higher the retention rate, the more likely students are to graduate. The lower the retention rate, the more students who withdraw without completing their degrees—meaning that they have effectively wasted both their time and their money.

It is, however, possible for a retention rate to be artificially high in a steno program. This happens when students who are not passing tests are permitted to remain in the program even if it is not in their best

interests. To avoid such programs, be certain to ask whether a program has a requirement for the number of tests passed each term and whether the requirement is enforced. The program you choose should have a minimum standard for the number of tests passed each quarter or semester. A minimum standard is a form of tough love; it ensures that students invest themselves and give consistent effort to mastering their speeds. Without it, it is possible to stay at the same speed for years at a time, getting further in debt and no closer to graduating and practicing as a stenographer. This is called “plateauing”—that is, getting stuck at a single speed and not moving forward in the program.

You should also investigate carefully program class sizes and how many speeds are combined in a single classroom. Look for a program that is intimate. The greater the number of speeds or students in a single classroom, the more difficult it can be to focus and master your skills. Quality programs will offer at least three classroom divisions: beginning (or theory) students; students who write between 140 and 180 words per minute; and those who write between 180 and 225 words per minute.

Be sure to inquire about individualized attention and extra assistance. Every steno student faces times when he or she struggles to hit the next speed test. I cannot emphasize enough how important it is to have access to an Instructor trained to diagnose weaknesses in writing and to coach a student past those hurdles. Be sure to ask each college about whether it offers such assistance and whether it charges extra for individualized attention. The best programs will include it free of charge.

The best programs train their students in writing in what is called “real time” from the first day they sit as a student. Stenography is technology-dependent; whether you wish to become a court reporter or a captioner, you will only be as good and as efficient as you are competent at using the technologies that are the underpinnings of the field. So, be sure to find a program that offers extensive training in the software you will use as a practitioner and one that requires you to use it daily. The ideal situation is where a program requires you to purchase a laptop at the beginning of your program so that you can practice your real time skills both at school and at home. Better to learn those skills in college than on the job!

Finally, explore whether your chosen program offers an Internship or Externship working with practicing reporters on the job. These capstone experiences give steno students valuable feedback and a last chance at polishing their skills before graduation. Many of these experiences can also result in a job offer, ensuring the maximum likelihood that a student will graduate already ensured of a career.

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