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# Capturing the Courtroom Word for Word

By [SARAH E. NEEDLEMAN](#)

**The job:** Court reporter

**Nature of the work:** Court reporters are employed by federal, state and local courts, as well as private court-reporting agencies, to record verbatim the words spoken during depositions, hearings, trials and other legal proceedings. Others are hired by captioning companies, hospitals and schools to assist the deaf and hard of hearing. Court reporters typically record words in a unique shorthand language using a machine called a stenograph. Their notes are translated into plain English through specialized computer software or instantly converted using real-time technology and then checked for accuracy.

**The pay:** Most court reporters work on a free-lance basis and earn starting annual incomes between \$30,000 and \$50,000, says Kathy DiLorenzo, immediate past president and a board member of the National Court Reporters Association. Recent job postings for official reporters, who typically earn a flat annual salary, show base salaries starting at \$76,000, though pay varies according to location. Official and free-lance reporters with more experience may earn annual salaries upwards of \$100,000.

**The hours:** Depositions typically take place during weekdays and can last anywhere from 30 minutes to eight hours or longer, says Cindy Brown, who works as a free-lance court reporter for Alexander Gallo Holdings LLC, a court-reporting agency in Atlanta. Transcribing depositions often takes as long as it does to record the information, "so there's a lot of evening and weekend work," she says. Free-lance court reporters can turn down jobs, adds Rich Germosen, a 36-year-old free-lance court reporter in North Brunswick, N.J., who is able to attend many of his sons' soccer games because of this.

**Benefits:** Free-lancers are responsible for their own health-care and retirement-savings plans. Official court reporters receive standard benefits. Most court reporters must buy their own equipment, including stenograph machines, which can cost \$5,000 or more, laptop computers and transcription technology. Many also buy insurance for these items. Some court reporters pay for technical support—about \$500 a year—since the equipment and programs they depend on are unique to their profession. "Even if you're very computer literate, sometimes you need help," says Marge Teilhaber, a free-lance court reporter in New York who has been in the profession since 1977.

**Other incentives:** The job also may lend exposure to celebrities and other interesting characters. "Court reporters were there for the OJ Simpson trial and other high-profile cases," says Ms. DiLorenzo. Mr. Germosen says he once took a statement from baseball legend Willie Mays.

**Best part of the job:** The subject matter is often intriguing, says Joseph A. Millikan, an official court reporter employed by a federal court in Miami. In particular, he says he enjoys working on patent, trademark and copyright infringement cases. "They're technical and they're challenging," he explains.

**Worst part of the job:** Esther Sternlicht, an official court reporter for the Kings County Supreme Court in Brooklyn, N.Y., says the job can be emotionally stressful. "I do a lot of criminal work, and it can be extremely depressing at times," she says. "There are tragic stories." Having to carry equipment to every assignment is another downside for free-lancers since the steno machine and other items can weigh as much as 60 pounds.

**Career path:** To practice in most states, court reporters must obtain a certification or license through a professional trade association or state licensing board. They may also be required to pass a test. There are about 60 certified court-reporting schools throughout the U.S. Training programs take two to three years to complete on average, and to graduate, students must be able to type 225 words per minute at about 97% accuracy, Ms. DiLorenzo says. Just 10% of students succeed, which is why demand for qualified court reporters is "extraordinary," she adds.

**Hiring:** Many court-reporting schools help place graduates into jobs. Members of the National Court Reporters Association can find employment opportunities listed at the trade group's Web site, [www.ncraonline.org](http://www.ncraonline.org). The site also features a directory of court-reporting agencies.

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