



he skills and written knowledge tests can be a huge trial for many court reporters. But the investment in getting credentialed can pay off for years to come, according to many.

Passing the test

CRR

CBC

RDR

RMR

RPR

By David Ward

ask any group of court reporters to name the more stressful events in their professional careers and some may recall an especially tense and complex deposition or a long, grueling trial. But more than a few will include the NCRA certification exams as high on that list as well.

Though they may seem easy once they've been passed, sitting in a room preparing to take the skills portions of the RPR — or the RMR, CRR, CART, or captioning — test can be about as pressure-packed a moment as you can get in this industry.

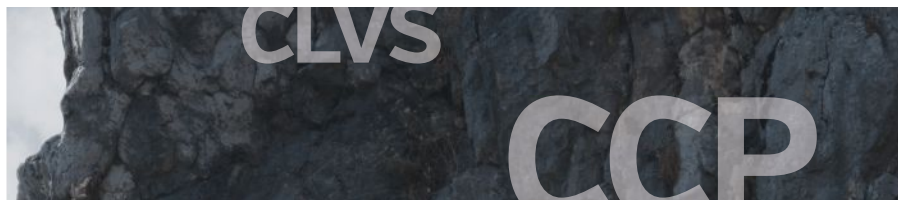
Clay Frazier, RMR, CRR, a freelance court reporter based in Los Angeles, has participated against the best in the court reporting business in the national Speed and Realtime Contests held during the NCRA convention. But he suggests that pressure can't be compared to, for example, taking the CRR test to become realtime-certified. "The big difference is the contests are fun, while the certification is a key part of the job," he says. "I don't know anyone who signed up for \$200 to take a certification test in order to fail. Everyone there is trying to go for it."

"The certification tests mean something in that very often to get a job in the court system, they require you to have an RPR — and in the federal system if you want a 10 percent raise, you have to pass the RMR test," agrees Ed Varallo, RMR, CRR, of Grafton, Mass., who has won both the National Speed and Realtime Contests multiple times over the years.

MIND GAMES

"It's entirely a mind game — and you need to realize you will do as well on test day as you have in practice," notes Varallo, who has given seminars on the best ways to prepare for the skills portion of the certification exams. "You will not do better. So you need to practice so that you'll be able to convince yourself you're going to do well in the test. That will give you peace of mind." That's often easier said than done: Even the fastest reporter in a court reporting school can succumb to nerves when it comes to taking the RPR test for the first time.

But there are ways to improve your chances of passing the test when the big moment comes.



Mary Seal, RDR, CRR, a chief examiner in New Mexico for decades before stepping down a few years ago, notes one good piece of advice is to be a bit of a loner on test day, noting that test-taking anxiety can be almost contagious in the minutes before a certification exam starts.

"I tell people not to buy into the panic that many students foster in each other," Seal explains. As New Mexico's chief examiner, she said she regularly witnessed groups of aspiring reporters almost psyching themselves out by talking about how fast their heart was beating or how little they had slept the night before. "All that does is make it very likely that you're not going to pass the test, so distance yourself from anybody who wants to nervously talk about the test beforehand," she advises.

Diane Sonntag, RDR, CRR, CCP, CPE, an official reporter for Pima County in Tucson, Ariz., agrees that nerves are the major reason why some very good reporters sometimes don't do well on certification tests, especially the realtime exams. Sonntag suggests doing all you can to stay focused and relaxed in the minutes before-

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hand. She suggests, "Do some deep breathing before the test starts to make sure your oxygen level is good, and that will help you feel calmer."

Russell Page, a court reporter in Washington, D.C., since 1978 and owner of Durenberger & Page Reporting, has been involved with the NCRA in certification testing for more than 20 years.

Page advises people not to get discouraged if they don't pass the certification test, especially the RPR, on their initial try. "There are a great number of students in court reporting schools who take the RPR test and sometimes they'll knock off that written knowledge part and get that out of the way," he explains. "But they're generally

not going to finish and pass the RPR skills on their first go around because they don't have the speed."

While no one likes to fail, it's important to bear in mind that making several attempts before you finally get your RPR certification, or even your RMR or CRR, is not going to be detrimental to your long-term career.

"It's good experience to take the test and get familiar with the test environment and know what to expect," he says. "And if you practice on getting your speed up, you should be able to pass at least some of the legs after the first couple of tries."

The good news for those getting into the court reporting profession today is that the rules have been changed to make things a bit easier compared with decades ago. Test takers used to have to pass all three of the skills test legs, including jury charge, Q&A and literary, all at once in order to get their RPR certification.

"Now we allow them to knock them off one at a time," Page explains. "Typically they will sit for all three and try to pass all three, but they get to choose which of the tests should count, so if they mess up on one, you can make sure it doesn't count."

GET READY AND READ THE INSTRUCTIONS

That being said, no one should be taking any certification exam until they have reasonable expectation of success, Seal stresses. "Don't take the test until you're ready," she adds, noting she knew of one woman who took the RPR test more than two dozen times without success. "To me that only teaches you how to fail."

Often it's the little things that make the difference between passing and failing the certification tests.

Donna Kanabay, RMR, CRR, owner of Kanabay Court Reporters in St. Petersburg, Fla., has been a chief examiner and certi-

fied grader in Florida. That role keeps her in regular contact with other chief examiners and when they compare notes, Kanabay says they all see the same mistakes being made by test takers year in and year out.

“The number one mistake we see is candidates that do not read or pay attention to instructions,” Kanabay says. “We feel that, a lot of times, they simply don’t take it

“It’s much easier to get your RMR and work only on your speed and then get your realtime CRR than it is to do it the other way around.”

seriously. It’s amazing how many show up having no idea not only that they’re to take the test in test mode, but have no idea what test mode is or indeed where to find it on their particular steno machine.”

Kanabay notes that every Florida examiner sends out a very detailed pretest email to every candidate to let them know they need to take the test in test mode — and that knowing their equipment is part of the test. “We also let them know they’re required to bring printers to our sites for the RPR and RMR tests, yet we all often get emails back asking, in effect, if printers are provided,” she says.

Because your equipment is so important to passing, Sonntag stresses that a certification test is not the time to break in a new machine or printer, noting that regardless of which certification test you’re taking, it’s important to be comfortable with your equipment.

“Sometimes people will show up with a new printer and they haven’t loaded the drivers,” Sonntag says, adding, “It’s important to know how to print your notes if you are writing paperless and to know how to read the file into your CAT system. So many of us write realtime on a daily basis, but when it comes time to take the RMR certification test, you forget how to read the file in. The Diamante requires a utility program for non-Stenograph CAT software. You need that file on your system and know how to use it!”

Several people said that while it’s important to get familiar with things like jury charges before taking either the RPR or RMR test, most noted you really can’t build

a dictionary specifically to help you on any of the skills legs.

While not disagreeing, Sonntag explains, “My advice is to make corrections and additions to your dictionary on a regular basis so you have a really good dictionary that will handle word boundary problems as well as untranslates. Also make sure you have a delete space and a force space in your dictionary and know the steno to write those.”

Varallo says that taking the certification test requires a different strategy than doing day-to-day deposition or trial work. A reporter can scramble to catch up if they get a few words behind during their work, counting on things like pauses in between questions and answers to get back on track, he explains.

But in the test, Varallo says, “People get nervous and they fall behind during the test

the tests, but advises that picking the right time to take the RMR test can make more of a difference.

“A lot of people that I know who have passed the RMR test said that the Q&As were so fast, but many did well on it anyway because they’d just been doing a lot of heavy court work,” he explains. “So go ahead and take that court case where you’re writing all day for two or three weeks because that will help get your speed up and maintained — and if you’re not taking all day depositions five days a week, you need to practice, and practice a lot, to get your speed up.”

That practice should begin well before the test day. “Have a regular practice schedule,” Sonntag says. “Try to get at least 30 minutes five or six times a week. Practicing first thing in the morning is good because that will be the time you will probably be taking the test.”

And when practicing, Frazier suggests

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— and falling behind is a disaster because then you have to write faster than the people are dictating in order to catch up — and that’s not going to happen.”

Because of that, Varallo’s biggest piece of advice — which he admits is a bit radical to do in your day-to-day job — if you feel like you’re falling behind, drop words and catch back up to the dictation.

“You won’t know if you’ve dropped two or three, but it will only be a couple and it will be worth it to take those couple of errors in order to get caught up,” he says. “You can even do that two or three times during a five minute test and you’re still going to pass.”

RAISING THE BAR TO THE MERIT

One area that generates some debate among those who monitor the tests concerns how much preparation outside of work is needed for advanced certification like the RMR. Page is a huge advocate of practicing for all

using tapes that are faster than the speeds you’ll hear on the certification tests, so that each leg on exam day will seem easy in comparison.

Brenda Fauber, RDR, CRR, CPE, an official court reporter for the U.S. District Court in Omaha, Neb., and a past chief examiner, says that if you plan on getting both the Merit and Realtime certification, work on the RMR first. “It’s much easier to get your RMR and work only on your speed and then get your CRR than it is to do it the other way around,” she explains. She says she had to modify the way she wrote to pass the CRR. “Once you start focusing on realtime, you’re never going to have the speed that you need for the Merit.”

FOCUSING ON REALTIME

Along with perhaps the captioning certification, the CRR test seems to stand apart in terms of challenges. Described as the easiest test you'll ever fail, it often takes even very good reporters multiple attempts to get realtime-certified.

"Most reporters, even those who have the skill, find the CRR test really hard," says Page. "You have to be on top of your game, but it's a good test and it's a fair test. The advice I give people is make sure you transcribe it all in capital letters, because you get marked off if something isn't capped properly — or if you didn't get that period in the right place, that next word is not going to be capitalized. But if you have it all in caps, you'll save that error."

When talking about certification tests, most people will devote the vast majority of their practice time and attention to the skills portion, often giving little or no thought to the written knowledge section.

"There are a lot of people who think they can just walk in take the written knowledge test and it's going to be a slam dunk without having to study," says Fauber, adding she knows of plenty of people who have failed that section as a result.

"You need to figure out how the written knowledge test is made up and then you need to go study for it," she advises. "You also need to realize that it's a test that covers the entire profession and not just what was in one book or study guide."

Over the years, the certification tests have been tweaked and adjusted to reflect the changes that have happened in the court reporting profession. For example, the questions in the written knowledge portion now reflect the increased use of technology in all parts of the legal process.

NEW TESTING OPPORTUNITIES

In recent months, NCRA has made even more changes, allowing for more online and remote test taking.

But while these changes are designed to both make it easier to take the test and to make each test a more accurate gauge of a reporter's skills and knowledge, the tests themselves remain very challenging — as they should be.

"I am opposed to ever relaxing the certification rules," explains Fauber. "I think we have to have those standards in place because those are the professional markers that both the Bar Associations and the judicial system rely on when deciding who they will hire, whether that's an RPR, RMR, or realtime-certified reporter. It is imperative

for our Association to provide those certifications — and maintain their standards — because we rely on them so much in the field."

David Ward is a freelance journalist in Ramona, Calif. Comments on this article can be sent to jcrfeedback@ncra.org.

