The 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.
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 RPR, on their initial try.

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.

Page advises people not to get discouraged if they don’t pass the certification test, especially the RPR, on their initial try.

“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 examin-
ers 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 atten-
tion to instructions,” Kanabay says. “We feel
that, a lot of times, they simply don’t take it
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 ex-
aminer sends out a very detailed pretest
e-mail 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 impor-
tant to passing, Sonntag stresses that a cer-
tification test is not the time to break in a
new machine or printer, noting that regard-
less 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 impor-
tant 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 pro-
gram 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 im-
portant 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 ex-
plains, “My advice is to make corrections
and additions to your dictionary on a regu-
lar basis so you have a really good diction-
ary that will handle word boundary prob-
lems as well as untranslated. 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 deposi-
tion 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
catch back up, he explains.

But in the test, Varallo says, “People get
nervous and they fall behind during the test
— and falling behind is a disaster because
then you have to write faster than the peo-
ple 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
then you have to write faster than the peo-
ple are dictating in order to catch up — and
that’s not going to happen.”

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.

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 need-
ed for advanced certification like the RMR.
Page is a huge advocate of practicing for all
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 any-
way 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 be-
cause 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 sched-
ule,” 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
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 real-
time, 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.”

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