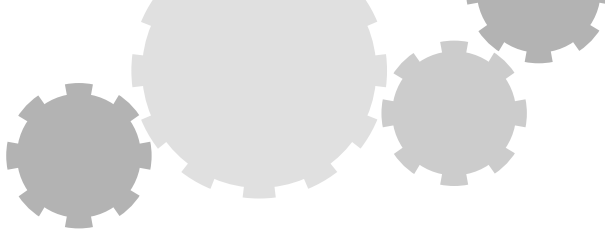


Practice with a purpose

Every teacher has a different way to help students practice. Whether it's quotes, stories, or practical ways to tackle the obstacles, these teachers give a lot of good advice to students or anyone who wants to take their practice up to the next level.



WHILE IT MAY SEEM THAT “PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT” IS INGRAINED ON THE BRAINS OF COURT REPORTING TEACHERS, the teachers here were quick to point out that there is an important difference between effective and ineffective ways to practice. Additionally, for many court reporting students, some methods of practicing can help at one stage but not create improvements at another. It’s important to first determine specific goals, plan for the obstacles, and — most importantly — practice, practice, practice.



WHAT'S YOUR MOTIVATION?

When court reporting students who move through speed quickly and graduate in record times are asked how they got through school, many of them relate stories about motivation — often that someone was depending on them to get out of school quickly. Motivation seems to play a deep role in the teachers' advice to students.

"What always worked best for me was to practice as though I were reporting an actual job and responsible to read anything and everything back. This forced me to get in the zone, focus on every word, write as accurately as possible, and hang on to every word to avoid dropping. So I would say, 'Practice like it's the real thing,'" says Jean M. Melone, CRI, of the Stenotech Career Institute in Piscataway, N.J.

"If you're sloppy when you practice, you'll be a sloppy writer. If you practice excellence, you'll be an excellent writer. Practice like a professional," agrees Clara Casey, CRI, who works with Everest College in Henderson, Nev.

Visualizing the goal is one of the techniques that many teachers use to help get and keep students motivated. While for some people, it can be a personal reminder — a picture of a car that symbolizes success or a copy of a CSR or RPR certificate taped to the write — Anoka Tech uses visualization as a metaphor and asks the students to choose a theme each semester.

"Some recent themes were 'Climbing Mount Everest' and 'Winter Olympics.' Students visualize the training needed to attain such high goals and also the tremendous joy and feeling of accomplishment when reaching that goal. Students bring in motivational pictures of our theme, and we hang them up," says Jennifer Sati, RMR, CRR, CBC, CCP, CRI, of Anoka Technical College in Anoka, Minn.

While having an overarching goal in place, such as graduating or getting a job, is one way to think about goals, it is also important to set small goals in between — for the semester, the month, the week, or even the practice session. "Each and every time you practice, set a goal to accomplish during that session," says Lisa Morton, CRI, of the College of Court Reporting in Hobart, Ind. "Imagine a pendulum swinging. You have to push for speed and slow down for

accuracy. Find a balance between the two."

Court reporting teachers often hold up musicians and athletes as examples for court reporting students. In learning something that is a physical skill, such as golf or playing an instrument, people must not only acquire the knowledge they need but be able to put it into practice and build that motion into muscle memory.

In this way, Sharon Kandt, CRI, of Macomb Community College in Macomb, Mich., advises: "Practice like an Olympian! Someone who is practicing for the Olympics practices every day religiously and gives it their all."

LaTherese Cooke, who works at South Suburban College in South Holland, Ill., takes the idea a step further: "Athletes must consider their entire body, their mental state, diet, and so on. Speak positively to yourself in a few words to get motivated. Athletes get themselves pumped up before the event."

Similarly, Kathleen M. Saunders, CRI, of St. Louis Community College in St. Louis, Mo., tells her students that they "should practice as though he or she aspired to be a virtuoso in a metropolitan symphony orchestra while fluently speaking a foreign language."

In learning something that is a physical skill, people must not only acquire the knowledge they need but be able

to put it into practice and build that motion into muscle memory. "Practice with a goal in mind. If the goal is accuracy, with every attempt, force your fingers to move accurately attempt after attempt after attempt. This helps to build muscle memory," says Cooke.

"I tell students to think of their brains as the commander of the army and their fingers are the soldiers. In other words, their fingers are only as good as the commander's orders and to win the war, the commander must know what to do. Students must know the rules of their theory in order for their fingers to execute the strokes with accuracy," says Jen Krueger, RMR, CRI, CPE, a teacher at Cuyahoga Community College in Cleveland, Ohio.

WHAT ARE YOUR OBSTACLES?

Motivation is simply not enough to get a person through school, though. Visualizing something is great fun, but court reporting students need to practice the skill to get to that goal. Unfortunately, some may not plan for or work to remove the obstacles that are bound to pop up. One of the consistent themes in teachers' advice to students is to find the stumbling blocks that are preventing progress. Often, teachers will suggest that court reporting students (and court reporters) review their notes to see if there is shadowing or missing letters in words that create problems — and then, once those problems are uncovered, setting a way to practice those difficult words or phrases.

"Students should be specific about what they want to accomplish during a practice session to make the most of their time and energy: building speed; working on straight copy for clean outlines; drilling on numbers, briefs and phrases, contractions, etc.; theory review; reading back steno outlines to analyze hesitation areas. All of these are essential elements in developing speed, skill, and accuracy," says Janet Noel, CRI, CPE, an instructor with the College of Court Reporting in Hobart, Ind.

Many court reporting teachers will turn

Each and every time you practice, set a goal to accomplish during that session.

to drills to help students with specific problems in their writing. "I advise students to 'practice with structure,'" says Linda Bland, RMR, CPE, owner of Court Reporting and Captioning at Home. "If you just practice one new take after another after another, simply writing the easy words and dropping the rest of it, you are only writing the easy words you can already write. You must focus on what you cannot write. Building speed is all about how well you know your theory. Use a practice regimen that allows you to recognize what theory concepts you do not know well enough, so you may focus on those areas of weakness."

"When you practice and fall behind — i.e., hesitate — it is vital to locate the word or phrase you stumbled on and work on



that fingering. When you take the time to master that fingering, and for me it sometimes was hours, that work creates lifelong skill. That's truly doing the work," says Anita Johnston, RPR, CRR, CBC, CCP, CRI, CPE (Ret.), the realtime and court reporter trainer who founded Anita Paul International.

One of the important things about tackling obstacles is to take it in small portions. "If you have too many dragons to slay, find a lizard," says Jenny Dunn, RDR, CRR, CBC, CRI, of Prince Institute Southeast based in Montgomery, Ala.

"Building speed is like eating an elephant: Just take one bite at a time," says Krueger. "It is a very big, very daunting task to go from never writing a single word on a steno machine to achieving a writing speed of 225 words per minute. Just take it step by step, taking one bite, chewing — learning — it well and then moving on to the next. You will attain your goal of becoming a court reporter if you take it one bite at a time."

Another bit of advice is to practice numbers and fingerspelling to improve output. "Typically, the first 15 to 20 minutes with witnesses and expert witnesses

Desensitizing nerves about testing is important, and developing a mindset that every word you write is as important to you as it will be on test day can help get you there.

for all freelance and judicial reporters is numbers," says Monette Benoit, CRI, CPE, a court reporting tutor and career coach based in New Braunfels, Texas. "When students and reporters master their numbers, [the first few minutes of a deposition are] a breeze."

Sometimes, students will tell teachers that the testing makes them nervous and on edge. Getting around testing anxiety can be problematic even after students graduate, but employing some strategies to deal with testing anxiety as an obstacle can help bring it down to size.

"I tell students that if they treat each

practice session as though it were a test, testing will seem normal to them. In practice sessions, they gain the knowledge of identifying problem areas that need addressing inclusive of mis-

strokes as well as English and punctuation. This means warm up, practice, transcribe, self-grade — the same steps as testing," says Geanell C. Adams, RMR, CRR, CRI, a teacher at Hinds Community College in Jackson, Miss.

"Desensitizing nerves about testing is important, and developing a mindset that every word you write is as important to you as it will be on test day can help get you there," says Deborah L. DuBuc, RPR, CRI, CPE, a teacher at AIB College of Business in Des Moines, Iowa.

ARE YOU MAKING PROGRESS?

The pressure from passing a speed and then moving to a new speed that is now more difficult can take its toll on a student's motivation. It's helpful in those cases to have students chart their progress over time, which many court reporting programs do. While this is useful for short-time projects

like getting up to the next speed bump, it can also help students reflect on how far they have come since they started the program. Taking some time

to recognize how far a student has already come can help create new motivation to face the next step.

"Remember, it is not about passing and failing a test. It is always about improving your skill and learning from the experience," says Morton.

"Practice with the intent to master the game of steno shorthand," says Michelle Roberts, CRI, who works with Gadsden State Community College in Gadsden, Ala. She offers the three P's of practice: practice, patience, and perseverance.

"'You play like you practice' is what I tell my students," says Aurora Joslyn, an

instructor with Sheridan Technical College in Hollywood, Fla. "If you want to perform strongly in any area (from steno to busi-

Excellence is not a skill. It is an attitude.

ness), you can't slack off in your practice because what you do most of the time is what you get used to."

"I just tell it to my students in plain terms: The more they practice, the easier it will get," says Melissa J. Blake, CRI, CPE, an instructor at Alfred State University in Alfred, N.Y. "It's just like typing your name on the computer keyboard. You've done it so many times that you don't even have to think about it when you do it. That's how it is with steno: The more you practice, the more automatic it will become and the easier it will be for your fingers to find the right keys."

But balancing practice with rest is also important, Blake notes: "I also tell my students that there's a balance in how much to practice. My church organist was my mentor when I was a student. She used to tell me that my brain needed some time off and that my brain was still processing what I was learning, even when I wasn't practicing."

FINAL WORDS OF ADVICE

Motivation, planning practice sessions, and plotting individual progress are important, but there are many things that go into helping a court reporting student become a success that are not covered here. What works for one court reporting student may not work for another — or even for the same student at a different time in his or her schooling.

Robyn M. Hennigan, RPR, CRI, of Clark State Community College in Springfield, Ohio, quotes football player Ralph Marston to her students: "Excellence is not a skill. It is an attitude." She continues: "Therefore, your attitude toward your own excellence will determine how you build your skill. Success is your choice!"

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