



# **SPEED** **VS** **ACCURACY**

*The question of what is more important for steno writers – speed or accuracy – has been hotly debated for years. The JCR asked contestants in NCRA’s Speed and Realtime Contests where they fall in the debate and collected the answers.*



The questions were:

**Which is more important: speed or accuracy?**

**How do you achieve or maintain \_\_\_\_\_?**

**If you realtime, does that affect your choice, or do you think that realtining makes no difference to your answer?**

**Some people believe that it's important to build your speed before you build accuracy. Do you agree with that assessment? Why or why not?**

## SPEED COMES FIRST

That's the age-old question for reporters, especially for students: speed or accuracy?

As shorthand reporters, we have nothing if we cannot write at high speed. I believe that one of the greatest failings of schools today is that they focus on realtime accuracy at the expense of building speed. And you cannot effectively attain high speed without hard work and pushing beyond your comfort zone. That necessarily means pushing beyond the point of writing accurately.

I believe that it is much more important for students and new reporters to push to gain speed than it is for them to hold back so as to retain accuracy. Once a reporter has reached the merit level, exceptional accuracy at lower speeds is more easily within his or her grasp. And once a reporter has reached speeds above merit level, accuracy at merit level is more easily within his or her grasp. But without pushing beyond the point of accurate writing to attain those gains in speed, it is extremely difficult to make those advances to the higher skill levels.

Of course accuracy is important, but accuracy is irrelevant without the ability to write at high speed.

*Laura P. Brewer, RDR, CRR, CBC, CCP  
Los Altos, Calif.*

## SPEED BEFORE ACCURACY

Both are important, but I give more weight to speed. Reporters can read through their finger faults, but you need some kind of steno to begin with!

To maintain or achieve speed, I still try to regularly practice on tapes and also brainstorm with reporters on creating briefs, which I believe naturally promotes accuracy and speed. And it makes our job fun!

Both qualities are important in a realtining situation. I agree with building speed before accuracy. Get those fingers flapping and then work on soaring and crafting those outlines.

*Rita Gee, RMR, CRR  
San Diego, Calif.*

## SPEED COUNTS

I would say my forte is accuracy, but I think if I had to pick the more important between speed and accuracy, I would say speed. I can write letter perfect, but if I hit a snag, I tend to drop. Dropping is not a good thing. If you have the speed and can sloop through the tough spots, you usually can make out what it is that was so sloppy.

I maintain (and improve) both speed and accuracy by practicing at high speeds and working on shortening my writing. I would guess that I have reduced my stroke count by 20-25 percent in the last 10 years. By writing shorter, I find that there is less that can go wrong. In a realtime contest several years ago, the word *faculty* came up, and I wrote it almost flawlessly in three strokes – until the last stroke. I wrote TPABG/UL/TI. Unfortunately, instead of writing TI for the last stroke, I shadowed the initial P, and it came out TPI, or TPABG/UL/TPI, translating to *fact, you will, if I*, for a whopping five errors for one teeny tiny shadow!

I do realtime regularly, and I absolutely think the best thing you can do is practice both speed and writing shorter, and I can't think of a better example than the *faculty* example above. I used to be very proud of the fact that I wrote almost everything out, but when I realized how much more accurate I could be and how much less chance there is for errors, it was a no-brainer that I needed to start writing shorter.

As for the last question, I think accuracy naturally comes with building speed. My theory is that if you can write at 240, you'll be a cleaner writer than if you were at 225. Likewise, if you write 260, you'll be a cleaner writer than if you were at 240. In addition, the more speed you have, the more opportunity (time) you have to be working on writing shorter while you're both working and practicing.

One other unsolicited thought: I believe that you can actually "air practice" without your machine. If you listen to talk radio (my preference is sports talk), say, while driving, you can listen for words and phrases that you're just beginning to try and incorporate. For example, I decided I wanted to try to write GOI for *going to*, but it wasn't catching on during depositions. I started listening for *going to*, and I was amazed at how much that phrase is used, and it helped me to hear *going to* in depositions. At first I wouldn't catch it till the words had come and gone, but then I steadily got better at it. When you realize that you can add *go, want, need, that, this, etc.*, it's a wonderful brief!

*Ronald L. Cook, RDR, CRR  
Seattle, Wash.*

## IT'S A FALSE CHOICE

It's not a contest between one or the other; it's a false dichotomy, and the endless debates over this aspect drive me nuts because they are intertwined when it comes to the actual job. For example, you need sufficient accuracy to make a qualifying transcript

in the speed contest, and you need reserve speed to keep up in the realtime contest.

If I had to choose whether to practice speed or accuracy for the rest of my life, I would pick speed. When I practice speed, my accuracy naturally improves. But if I practice accuracy, I don't gain speed at all. Teachers, attorneys, news or sports commentators, and judges speak faster and faster, and reserve speed is absolutely necessary. If you're writing sloppy at higher speeds, you don't truly have that particular speed yet.

I provide CART captioning, and this definitely affects my choice to practice speed rather than accuracy. When I was training for the Guinness speed record attempt a few years ago, I was practicing at speeds of 500 WPM and higher, which resulted in my CART output being the cleanest and most accurate that it had ever been before. Yes, there's the counterargument that "Practice doesn't make perfect; only perfect practice makes perfect," but we don't have the luxury to slow down speakers until they speak at our preferred 100 percent accuracy rate, and rarely do we have the opportunity to practice verbatim what is going to be said — even if we get a copy of the speech beforehand.

When I practice speed, my accuracy improves. But I can practice accuracy all day long and never gain any speed.

*Kathryn A. Thomas, RDR, CRR, CCP  
Caseyville, Ill.*

## THEY ARE OF EQUAL IMPORTANCE

Speed and accuracy are of equal importance as a working reporter. What I write on my steno machine should never be a puzzle, an anagram, or a game to figure out later when making the transcript.

My accuracy and speed are maintained by continually developing a short and logical writing theory.

Although I realtime on a regular basis, I do not feel that it makes a difference in my answer. When I am on an assignment that is not realtime, I'm writing just as though my translation is on display. My speed and accuracy allow me to finish an assignment knowing that I have completely captured the record with my steno machine, and I should have no doubts when transcribing.

When I was in school in 1990, the teacher would always say to the class "write neat notes." Writing neat notes as I was progressing through school was difficult because of the long theory I was learning and the manual machine I was writing on. Reflecting back, had I learned the theory that I have developed myself throughout my career and had one of the technologically advanced steno machines with a short stroke, maybe my accuracy, or neat notes, would have been right there with my speed as I was progressing through school.

*Deanna "Dee" Boenau, RDR, CRR, CBC, CCP  
Sarasota, Fla.*

## ACCURACY FIRST, BUT SPEED'S A CLOSE SECOND

For the work I do, accuracy is the most important, though speed is a very close second. I was always taught to not shatter my notes, to drop instead. I think that has helped create clean notes and make my realtime strong. Since I write for either one-on-one or projected CART captioning most every day, I think it is very important to write for accuracy.

I think I achieved accuracy by learning from the beginning to not shatter my notes and to write for accuracy. I think I maintain it by writing every day. I rarely have a day completely off the machine.

I'm in the camp that believes that you write for accuracy and the speed will come because that's what has worked for me. But everyone is different and what works for one may not work for someone else.

*Karyn D. Menck, RDR, CRR, CBC, CCP  
Nashville, Tenn.*

## WITHOUT ACCURACY, THERE IS NO SPEED

Without accuracy, you can't have speed. A reporter who writes short and precise can actually write faster because there are more keystroke combinations available when that reporter is not writing sloppily with drags and shadows. A simple example is *gather*/GAER and *gear*/GAOER or *normal*/NORL and *abnormal*/NAORL; if the reporter is not writing cleanly and can't trust herself to write the two differently one from the other, then, of necessity, what could be a one-stroke word becomes two, and conflicts abound.

Short, precise strokes equal fewer strokes; fewer strokes equal more time. Short, precise strokes equal control, not being all over the keyboard with more opportunities to misstroke.

Another aspect of speed vs. realtime is the amount of time one spends editing when notes are conflict-laden, sloppy, and requiring replacing and word grouping. By writing realtime all the time, you can see your problem areas, then think about what you're writing, and come up with a stroke that works better for you.

*Donna M. Urlaub, RMR, CRR  
Chicago, Ill.*

## HOW ACCURATE CAN YOU GET AT HIGH SPEEDS?

I believe building speed and/or accuracy is different with each person, depending on how their brain is wired.

As a student, we were taught speed and accuracy simultaneously, obviously not moving up to the next level until we could put out an excellent transcript of our test. At the same time, our instructors dictated up to 300 wpm in order for us to become proficient in our speed.

As a practicing reporter, I love to see how accurate I can get at high speeds! I have been working lately on improving my briefs through slower dictation in order to concentrate on the briefs and make them more automatic. This seems to be working extremely well.

It doesn't matter if I'm realtimesting or not as to how much I strive for accuracy. My whole goal is to spend the least time editing afterward, thereby converting to quicker transcript turnaround for my clients and higher hourly pay for me.

*Dana Hayden, RMR, CRR  
Huntsville, Ark.*

## ACCURACY WINS

That is a very difficult question to answer. Both are incredibly important for me as a captioner. My first reaction is to go with accuracy. However, if you don't have the speed to keep up, then what you are giving the viewer (or consumer in the case of CART captioning) is not accurate at all, is it?

Actually, captioners just starting out tend to focus on accuracy and work speed into their skill set. We are taught to drop insignificant words or phrases so we can be more accurate with the significant words or phrases. For example, it is not uncommon to drop words like *okay* or *you know*, and banter between co-anchors such as *Thanks, Sally* or *Reporting live from Baghdad*.

But often we may have to leave out a lot more than that! As our skills improve, we can weave those things back in, and it results in a more complete and verbatim product, which requires both speed and accuracy.

With that said, if you've got speed but not accuracy, your captions will be terrible. I guess I answered the question after all! Accuracy wins.

Every time you put your fingers to that machine with a focus on improving, you are building the skill sets of speed and accuracy. I have been writing on a steno machine for 33 years. When I was a court reporter (before realtime, CART, or captioning), I just wrote. I didn't worry too much about how it would translate because I knew I could edit it later.

As I began to dabble in realtime, I became increasingly obsessed with improving my translation. I would spend hours upon hours thinking (when I was away from the machine) about how I could write things and how to resolve conflicts.

Now that I provide CART captioning and broadcast captioning, I don't have much time to practice, but I think it's important for new writers (out of school) to continue practicing. I think it's effective to practice speed and accuracy separately (do a take at high speeds without regard for accuracy several times; then do a take at manageable speeds with a focus on accuracy, even deliberately dropping if necessary to obtain a near perfect output).

I actually have one regular job that is not outputting captioning to any viewers, and I still try to write it as perfectly as possible even though I know I will have an opportunity to edit the final product.

I don't know about the importance of the order with which you build the two skill sets, but I think it may be easier to get speed under your belt first and then focus on accuracy. It is extremely difficult, in my experience, to throw accuracy (or the realtime mentality, which is to write as perfectly as possible) out the window and just "get it" even if it's terribly sloppy. Once your brain has adapted to realtime, it is painfully unnatural to write any other way.

*Jennifer M. Bonfilio, RMR, CRR, CBC, CCP  
Hamilton Twp., N.J.*

## SPEED TAKES A BACKSEAT TO ACCURACY

Just ask yourself, which has value: speed with no accuracy, or accuracy with no speed? Clearly speed without accuracy is a worthless skill. Accuracy without speed can have value in the right setting. Obviously you need both accuracy and speed to be a reporter, and where realtime and captioning are concerned, accuracy is king. The jobs where I come home and feel like I've had a bad day are all about my lack of accurate writing. That can happen on a fast job or a slow job. Speed is great, but it has to take a backseat to accuracy.

To be a quality realtime writer, you have to write all your punctuation, and I was fortunate to have attended a school where writing punctuation was stressed from day one. Some of my classmates chose to take shortcuts and leave out the punctuation while writing, just to get through the speeds, but by creating good writing habits in the low speeds, it served me the rest of my career.

How have I maintained my speed and accuracy over four decades? By shortening the way I write, every day. Follow the teachings of whichever writing guru most fits your writing style, and keep their teaching manuals close by so it is not a chore to look up the brief du jour you need. Once you're out on the job as a working reporter, the most efficient way to gain speed and accuracy is to shorten the way you write.

Finally, as a working reporter, nothing can improve the quality of your realtime like prep. Be aggressive and invest the time and effort to get pleadings, etc., before the job whenever possible. One to two hours of prep the night before a big job can result in quality that brings future requests on jobs at the higher end of the pay scale.

*Kevin Wm. Daniel, RDR, CRR, CBC, CCP  
Las Vegas, Nev.*