



STENOGRAPHER



STENOMASK

MULTICHANNEL
AUDIO CAPTURE

Why Certification Matters for Court Reporters to Safeguard Justice



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Capturing the record in a legal proceeding is far more than a technical exercise. It is a duty that directly impacts access to justice. The transcript serves as the official record of every word spoken and every action taken in a proceeding. It is the foundation for appeals, the arbiter of truth in disputes, and the lifeline of the justice system. Without an accurate, reliable record, litigants lose their voice in court, and the system risks losing its integrity.

Certification protects against that risk. Whether the record is created through stenography, voice writing, or digital reporting, what ensures accuracy and reliability is not the technology but the training, judgment, and professional accountability of the reporter. Certification is the safeguard that reassures courts,

litigants, and the public that the record will be complete, impartial, and accurate. Unfortunately, as the shortage of trained professionals intensifies, too many proceedings across the country are being delayed or robbed of a record. Every time a certified professional is absent, access to justice is compromised.

CERTIFICATION: THE FOUNDATION OF EVERY METHOD

There are three certified methods of capturing the record: stenographic reporting, voice writing, and digital reporting. While the tools and technology vary, the common thread is that each requires a highly trained, certified professional

actively engaged in the proceeding to safeguard the integrity of the record.

Stenographic reporters utilize a stenotype machine to capture proceedings in shorthand, which is then translated into text, often in real time as the proceeding unfolds. Certification through the National Court Reporters Association demands mastery of speed, accuracy, and legal knowledge, with credentials earned only after rigorous examination. Stenographers have long been trusted for their precision, but it is their professional training, ethical standards, and certification that make their work reliable.

Voice writing uses different tools but fulfills the same essential functions. Voice reporters repeat every spoken word into a stenomask with advanced speech recognition software that converts it into text. Certification through the National Verbatim Reporters Association requires accuracy, mastery of legal procedure, proper transcript formatting, and compliance with ethical standards. The methodology may look different from stenography, but the mission remains to ensure that no word is lost and the transcript is complete. Notably, voice writing is not the only method that employs automatic speech recognition (ASR). Stenographers' software integrates ASR to increase efficiency and precision, enhancing speed and accuracy in transcript production. Digital reporters also harness this technology as an integral part of their workflows, firmly establishing them as the third certified method of capturing the record.

Digital reporting employs multichannel audio capture, specialized software, and real-time annotations. Certification through the American Association of Electronic Reporters and Transcribers requires passing written knowledge and skills examinations. Certified digital reporters are trained to identify speakers, monitor audio quality, troubleshoot technical issues, annotate proceedings as they unfold, and read back portions of the record when requested. With this training and certification, digital reporters carry the same professional responsibility as their counterparts in creating an accurate, certified record of the proceedings. Just as stenographers and voice writers often rely on scopists and proofreaders to finalize transcripts, digital reporters may collaborate with certified transcribers to produce a final written record that is accurate and complete. Despite misconceptions, digital reporting is not passive recording. It is an active, professional discipline held to the same rigorous standards as stenography and voice writing.

Across all three methods, the common denominator is certification. Each path requires training, accountability, and a demonstrated commitment to accuracy and ethics. The difference lies in the technology they use, not the standards they uphold.

AN IMPORTANT DISTINCTION: DIGITAL REPORTING VS. ELECTRONIC RECORDING

One of the most persistent misunderstandings in the field is the conflation of digital reporting with electronic recording. While they both involve audio equipment, the difference between them is fundamental. Electronic recording occurs when microphones are installed in a courtroom to capture audio without a trained professional overseeing the process. No one identifies speakers, monitors audio quality, or intervenes if multiple voices overlap. When equipment fails without a professional present to respond, the integrity of the record is

compromised, often leaving it incomplete, unintelligible, or lacking the critical context required for accuracy and reliability.

Digital reporting, in contrast, places a certified professional in the room who monitors the proceedings in real time, distinguishes speakers, flags interruptions, identifies the marking of exhibits, and ensures that the record remains accurate and complete. Digital reporters are trained to anticipate issues, resolve them as they arise, and safeguard the credibility of the transcript. The distinction cannot be overstated. Digital reporting is not a shortcut or a substitute. It is a certified method on par with stenography and voice writing due to the irreplaceable expertise of the professional.

WHY CERTIFICATION IS ESSENTIAL

Certification carries significance for several reasons. It proves competence by ensuring that a reporter, regardless of method, has demonstrated mastery of the skills required to produce an accurate record. These skills range from ensuring transcription accuracy and understanding legal procedures to using proper formatting, upholding ethical standards, and demonstrating technical expertise in managing complex audio systems. Certification also creates accountability. Certified reporters are bound by codes of professional conduct, and their credentials require them to meet defined standards. If they fail to meet those standards, they can lose their certification. That level of accountability does not exist with uncertified personnel or automated systems. Further, certification provides consistency. Courts and litigants need assurance that transcripts will meet the same standard in every jurisdiction, regardless of method. Certification creates that baseline, whether the record is produced by a stenographer in Texas, a voice writer in Georgia, or a digital reporter in Tennessee.

Finally, certification strengthens public trust. The justice system depends on assurance that the record is impartial, accurate, and complete. Certification assures litigants, attorneys, and judges that the person responsible for preserving the record is qualified, accountable, and compliant with rigorous national standards. When certified reporters are unavailable, the impact is profound. Proceedings may be delayed, litigants may face longer waits for resolution, and appeals may be jeopardized. When testimony is lost or misidentified, overlapping voices render portions of the record unintelligible, or technical failures go unnoticed, the consequences can directly impact the outcome of a case. The absence of certified professionals does more than inconvenience the courts. It erodes trust in the system. Inaccurate or incomplete transcripts cast doubt on the fairness of proceedings, undermining confidence in the institutions designed to protect justice.

THE SHORTAGE AND THE SOLUTION

The nationwide shortage of stenographers has been widely acknowledged. Retirement of stenographic reporters has outpaced the number of new entrants to the field, leaving gaps that continue to widen. However, the solution is not to lower standards or abandon certification. It is to recognize and license all certified methods of capture. Voice writing and digital reporting are not second-rate options. Both require rigorous training, certification, and adherence to professional standards. Both produce transcripts that meet the demands of the courts. Yet in jurisdictions such as California, digital reporters remain unlicensed, even as countless litigants wait for proceedings that cannot move forward without a professional

to capture the record. The result is a denial of justice—not because of unqualified professionals, but because of outdated laws that refuse to acknowledge their legitimacy.

Expanding recognition to include all three certified methods is practical and ethical. Justice delayed is justice denied, and refusing to license trained, certified professionals directly harms those who rely on the courts for resolution. The path forward does not require abandoning tradition. Stenographers will always play a vital role in the legal system. What it requires is a broader definition of professionalism that includes the tools and talents already in use. Whether the record is created with a stenotype machine, a voice mask, or multichannel audio, reporters are the certified professionals who safeguard the record. Certification proves competence, ensures accountability, and upholds the reliability of the transcript. It is the reporter, not the machine, who protects access to justice.

CERTIFICATION AS THE SAFEGUARD OF JUSTICE

The backbone of justice is the written record and the guarantee that every word spoken can be relied upon when the stakes are

highest. Without it, there is no accountability, transparency, or guarantee of fairness. Certification is the safeguard that ensures the record is accurate, complete, and reliable, no matter the method used to capture it. Stenographers, voice writers, and digital reporters may employ different technology, but they share the same foundation of training, ethics, and certification. For a justice system to ensure the legitimacy of the record, all certified methods of capture must be recognized and valued. Justice does not depend on technology but on the certified professionals who preserve the integrity of the record. Without them, access to justice is lost.



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