For decades, NCRA offered its skills tests on site, in a brick-and-mortar setting, twice a year on a Saturday morning. If you failed to pass a test, or a leg, at that time you had a six-month wait for the next opportunity to test. No pressure there!

In 2015, those tests were moved online so members could test more frequently and in the comfort of their own homes or offices. Since then, nearly 7,000 skills tests have been administered online, and candidates are experiencing greater success. But why? Are successful test candidates doing anything differently than those who are not successful? Greta Bourgeois passed the CRC and had this to say: “I love using Realtime Coach because it offers practice tests. There’s a one-minute warmup followed by a five-minute dictation with the ‘Ready? Begin’ as if you’re taking the real thing. You can also take as many unproctored practice tests as you’d like, and submit your notes and transcript, so you have it down to a science before the actual test.”

Bourgeois’ success was attributable to her skill set, no doubt, but her preparation also played a vital role in her passage as well. Practice and preparation allow us to fine-tune our skills and gain confidence in the process, whatever that process might be. In Malcolm Gladwell’s 2008 publication, *Outliers*, he claims that greatness requires enormous time practicing, in many cases up to 10,000 hours, and that’s the kind of practice commitment it took to get us all to the level of professional reporter. Certification skills tests...
require additional practice, and practice not only for speed and/or accuracy, but the testing process as well. You may have the speed and transcription skills to pass the RPR or RMR, or the speed and accuracy to pass a realtime test, but if you falter on a step in the process or are unfamiliar with the NCRA “What is an Error?” document, you may well fail a skills test, even many times. That will not only cost you money but cause undue stress as well.

When you register for a skills test through NCRA, you have 30 days in which to take the test, and you have unlimited access to practice tests, one for each test or test leg, on myRealtimeCoach.com. So, if you’ve registered for the RPR Testimony, you should practice the RPR Q&A test again and again and again until you are comfortable with the testing steps. You should know where your CAT software stores files on your computer, and what your steno note and transcript files look like, as well as their extensions. For example, is there a steno note pad or other icon next to a note file? What is the icon or file extension for your transcript files? You want to be so comfortable with the process that it’s second nature.

But your preparation doesn’t stop there. When you’re comfortable with the testing steps through the unproctored practice, schedule a proctored practice so you’re adding the ProctorU component. This will allow you to confirm that adding yet another layer of technology does not affect your internet speed or overload your computer resources. After all, don’t you want to identify and resolve any issues before testing day? If you discover any hiccups in your proctored practice, resolve those issues and schedule a second proctored practice. That’s right, you have up to two proctored practice, after unlimited unproctored practice, before taking your test! That’s all included in your registration fee, so take full advantage of it.

Practice the process
But, first things first: how should you practice? Before you even consider registering for a test, prepare by improving your skills and preparing psychologically. First and foremost, practice in the same location and as close to the same time of day and day of the week as you plan to test. This will allow you to determine if your internet bandwidth is sufficient for online testing with a proctor, what activity typically occurs on that day and around that time, and how you feel at that hour of the day. Do not plan to take a test at 8 a.m. on a Saturday morning if the neighborhood kids are ringing your doorbell or that’s the time your dog expects his walk. You’re setting yourself up for
struggles, if not failure. Choose a time when there’s little in the way of distractions or when no one is around to interrupt you. Keep in mind that internet usage spikes on the weekends and weekday afternoons when kids are out of school, which can affect things like connectivity to the proctor and audio playback. If you practice during those times and find you have challenges, you would be better served choosing a different time, perhaps earlier in the morning or later in the evening. Most people don’t realize that when these types of hiccups occur, especially audio playback issues, that it’s a result of either spotty internet or something on your individual computer, like a virus or malware causing the problem, and not a glitch or malfunction on RealtimeCoach. It just so happens that RTC is the site you’re on for testing when this occurs, but it could happen on any other site, like YouTube or Facebook. The stakes just happen to be much higher when testing than when surfing the Web, which is why practicing the process is so important.

**Practice for speed and accuracy**

As you work on improving your skills, focus on the type of test you plan to take next. If you are preparing for the RPR or RMR, those are transcription tests, so focus on speedbuilding in your practice sessions.

Your goal should be to get something down — anything — for every word that’s said. Let’s say you hear a three-syllable word that you do not have a brief for, and it’s coming at you fast and you can’t get all three syllables without dropping what follows. Get down at least one syllable and move on. By doing so, you’ve given yourself the opportunity to add the entire word during transcription. With at least one syllable, you know where the word belongs in the transcript and that one syllable may be enough to jog your memory for the missing syllables. If you don’t get at least that one syllable, all you know is you dropped a word somewhere, though you may not remember where or what the word was.

You should also practice making up briefs along the way or using the brief prompt in your CAT software, if you’re familiar with and like that feature. Yes, you can use those CAT software features when taking your test, so if you use them daily, include them in your practice sessions as well.

Don’t forget to also practice the transcription side, and time yourself when you do it. You have 75 minutes to clean up your transcript, which is plenty of time to tidy up a lot of mess, but time yourself nonetheless. You are preparing yourself physically and mentally for the entire testing process. Grading your finished transcript is also imperative; otherwise, you have no idea how close to ready you really are. Many reporters focus primarily on the translation rate offered by their CAT software at the end of a job. While the number can be fun to look at, it does not paint a true picture of your writing accuracy. Keep in mind that the number is simply telling you what percentage of what you wrote translated to English, but not what percentage is accurate when compared to what was said. You could actually have a translation rate of 100 percent but have 0 percent accuracy if what translated was not what was said. Knowing what you got wrong is how you improve and pass tests.

If, on the other hand, a realtime test is your next goal, accuracy is your primary concern. The speeds for realtime tests are slower than transcription tests at 200 wpm. That’s a speed most working reporters and captioners can write falling out of bed, so you likely have the speed already. Your realtime practice should focus on accuracy, though, so grade your work. If you are practicing with Realtime Coach, you receive an immediate grade, so focus on your errors, which are categorized. Start with the category with the highest number of errors and work them down. Depending on your accuracy score and how close you are to 96 percent, you may have to only resolve errors in one category to reach your goal. Since you have no time to edit, there’s no need to time yourself for this test.

**Practice your mental game**

Lastly, let’s look at the psychological aspect of testing. How do you react to the phrase: “Ready? Begin”? If you just gasped and sucked in some air, you have some issues with test anxiety. Don’t worry, you are not alone. Many reporters and reporting students react adversely to that phrase, so let’s look at some ways to change that behavior. You can do two things to improve your anxiety associated with that phrase, so add these to your practice routine. When you hear the phrase “Ready? Begin,” repeat something positive to yourself — “Let’s go!” “I rock!” and “Let’s do this!” are
some good choices. Whatever positive phrase you like is fine, and you can change it up if you’d like. The important thing is that it’s positive and it’s short. You only have about three seconds before the test or your practice exercise begins, so no time for a full paragraph of affirmation.

The second thing to do is control your breathing, and this will take a bit more practice for it to gel. When you hear “Ready?” inhale and when you hear “Begin” exhale. The reason for this is that your body cannot hold an exhale, though you can hold your breath. When you hold your breath, you only add to the anxiety as your body will react negatively to the lack of oxygen. Try holding your breath right now, without the added anxiety of a looming test. You’ll find your body starts to tense up, your shoulders get tight, your jaw begins to clench, and you lose your focus. If this occurs during a skills test, it’s unlikely you will power through it and perform well enough to pass.

So, practice breathing and the positive reinforcement together: Inhale after “Ready?”; exhale after “Begin”; and repeat your positive phrase. Then start writing and breathing.

If you are practicing on Realtime Coach, you’ll find that “Ready? Begin” is spoken at the start of every single exercise, whether it’s an exercise created by us, by you, or any other RTC member, so it’s built in for you. If you are practicing to something else, repeat “Ready? Begin” to yourself, while employing the two suggestions above. Diana Osberg, RMR, had this to say about her practice experience with Realtime Coach: “My Texas CSR expired. To qualify to sit for the California CSR, I joined myRealtimeCoach and passed my RPR. This is by far the most technologically advanced testing system today! I encourage all court reporters and students to sign up today for passing tests, increasing your speed skills, and staying on top of our unique profession.”

**Taking final steps**

So, if you’re about ready to register for a skills test, what steps should you follow to prepare? First, go to Youtube.com and search for NCRA online testing. You’ll find nine very short videos, one for each step of the process, from registering for tests to receiving results, and every step in between.

Second, familiarize yourself with the “What is an Error?” document for the test you plan to take. That’s right, there are two different versions, one for transcription tests and one for realtime tests, so know how your particular test will be graded and plan accordingly. Did you know that you can create a separate format in your CAT software to align with NCRA grading? For instance, you may want to set up your numbers to translate according to the grading criteria, so you get the result you want for testing without modifying your work format.

Third, familiarize yourself with the Detailed Instructions file found on myRealtimeCoach.com, under the Prepare section of testing. In that document, you’ll find instructions for all the various types of writers available, whether your writer has a test mode and, if so, how to place it in test mode. You’ll also find information for each CAT software that will be helpful while practicing and testing.

Fourth, once you register for the test, start practicing. As previously mentioned, you have unlimited practice, so get started and practice the testing process many, many times, until you know how to and can complete the steps without hesitation.

Fifth, practice with the same equipment you plan to use for testing. It’s surprising how many reporters will introduce a new piece of equipment on test day. While new toys are fun and exciting to try, test day is not the day to play with something new. The old tried-and-true equipment is your best bet for a test.

Finally, schedule and take a proctored practice. If all runs smoothly, schedule your actual test. If you experience any issues, resolve those and schedule a second proctored practice. Do not schedule your actual test until you have successfully completed a proctored practice.

We’ve all heard the phrase, “Practice makes perfect.” I happen to have a different take on that for testing, and that is: “Practice makes passable.” If you practice the process, prepare for the specific test you are taking, and take control of “Ready? Begin,” you’ll stand yourself in good stead for a passing grade on your next NCRA certification skills test.

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