

TAKING EXAMS IN LOCKDOWN

By Leah Willersdorf



As I write this, here in the United Kingdom I am coming toward the end of week 12 of having had no work due to the pandemic. It is what it is. But what's a girl to do when she knows no worklife other than travelling the world with her passport in one hand and pulling her steno machine (and numerous iPads) along in the other? Why, sit down at home and practice every day, of course. Well, almost every day.

I began by taking down our governmental daily briefings on TV and adding plenty of new words to my dictionary. Then, as COVID-19 well and truly took hold of London, I realized that I had to settle in for the long haul and had to find better ways to practice because, to be honest, I didn't want to hear about COVID day in and day out. And so it was on 28 April I decided to register for the RPR.

I am an Australian reporter who has lived in London for 25 years and have been accredited with the British Institute of Verbatim Reporters for as long as I can remember and have also passed their Qualified Realtime Reporter (QRR) exams at levels 1 and 2. But I have never taken an online exam before in any country and I have to say I was a little worried that the online platforms would be my downfall, not my actual skill. The only exams I have ever taken have been in a room with other stenographers, which isn't exactly a silent affair, but to be able to do it in the comfort of your own home was a novel experience, that's for sure, and, boy, did I have a few experiences!

I bought the SmartPrep package for the exams on Realtime Coach. I was unfamiliar with this platform but soon got used to it. I will say that in some of the pieces, the errors it gives are incorrect, but if you see one, please, please take a screenshot of it and the practice session you're in, and send it to the folks at Realtime Coach so they can correct the text. If they're not told, they will never know. In total, I think I sent five through.

I practiced for varying times each day, except weekends. One day I sat down to do it for an hour, only to look

at the clock and realize that three hours had gone by. It really is quite addictive. And fun! But isn't steno anyway?

I did my exams on three consecutive Fridays during May, which is NCRA's Celebrate Certification month. First up was the jury charge. I had done the proctored practice test, which gives you the exact experience of the examination process. Well, not so exact because I didn't have all those belly butterflies that we get in exam situations. First off, during this situation we are living in, do expect to wait for a technician. On exam day, I waited for just under an hour, which, yes, is prolonging the exam angst, and then I was transferred from technician to technician to technician, which further added to it, but it can't be helped; so please do be prepared that the same may happen to you and that also taking a proctored practice test is highly recommended.

When I finally was assigned a proctor, he didn't verbalize his instructions like the one on the proctored practice did; instead, he used the chat box. I guess it was plausible that could happen, but it hadn't entered my mind because I was expecting the exact process as the proctored practice. Then, at one point, somehow when he was taking control of my computer and doing stuff, my task bar at the bottom of my screen disappeared, as did the chat box. Because I had no task bar, I didn't know how to minimize the screen to see if the chat box was sitting behind it.

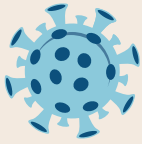
I began to panic a little. All of a sudden, the task bar came back, and the chat box was there so I was able to follow his instructions. Talk about a little extra stress when you've already been waiting for a while. Still, it was time to do the exam, so all of that went by the by.

Moral of this story: Stay calm. Let the proctor do their thing. Keep an eye on that chat box. Breathe.

Outcome: Jury charge passed 99 percent.

Next up was the testimony portion. Now *au fait* with both the Realtime Coach and ProctorU platforms, it was just a matter of practicing until the big day and taking each step of the process as it came. One and a half hours be-





fore I was due to log in to the ProctorU site, I heard a drilling noise in my surroundings. I live in the middle floor of a three-story block of six flats. There's been nobody upstairs during the pandemic as it was being renovated, but exam day, of all days, they decided they needed to pop in and do a few bits and pieces. I went upstairs and politely asked when they would be finished and explained that I was doing an exam. Well, the drilling would be finished but the carpet fitter was due midway through my exam apparently. Thankfully, I didn't hear a peep.

However, I did have a technical issue when uploading my transcript where it seemed to get stuck in a loop; you know the kind when the wheel just goes round and round and round. And round. After last week's loss-of-task-bar panic stations and being a little unnerved by the technician, this surely could not be happening! I found myself wondering if it doesn't correct itself, what's the worst thing that could happen here. I don't pass? Well, I can't pass if I can't upload a transcript, right? I'd just have to resit the exam, so not the end of the world, just a bit of a hassle. Before admitting technical defeat to what turned out to be an issue on my end, unbeknownst to me, I contacted my proctor via the chat box because my instinct was telling me to refresh the page. The proctor said not to, and I absolutely had to be guided by her. Time was ticking by, but I had 54 minutes to go when I first started in the loop de loop, and about 20 minutes had already passed. She went away, made a few enquiries with her manager, and I was able to email my transcript to NCRA, along with my steno notes, all under the guidance and view of the proctor. Phew! I won't have to sit it again after all! Or so I thought.

Moral of this story: Don't get flustered if you experience a technical issue. Stop and think. Listen to your proctor's advice. Breathe.

Outcome: Found out on 8 June that my exam was not able to be graded because, in my haste, I uploaded a practice test.

Moral of the outcome: Don't get flustered. Don't kick yourself. Just accept you'll have to sit it again. You know

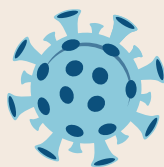
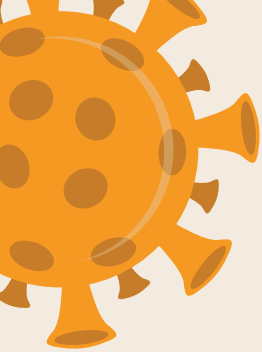


you can do it!

And, finally, the last Friday of May 2020 saw me take the literary leg. I was due to log into ProctorU at 1:20 p.m., and so I spent my morning practicing, using the Internet Explorer browser, and running equipment tests. All was A-OK. Well, it was from about 8.30 a.m. to 10.29 a.m., but at 10.30 I figured I'd open up RTC in Chrome using my NCRA credentials. I couldn't navigate in Chrome and so I went back to IE. Nothing. Got out my second laptop and tried the same thing. Nope. The internet at large was playing games with me. I knew something had to happen today because of the last two exams, but I got through those and I would get through this. So I then tried my desktop and it was the same. I couldn't

even get onto the NCRA website nor RTC's. I messaged a friend and asked her if she could get on because maybe, just maybe, this wasn't a Leah issue but an issue with their websites. Ha! Of course I didn't really believe that. I turned the WiFi off on my phone and was able to use the 4G, so I then knew it had to be my fiber optic broadband. I turned everything off, put the kettle on to make a cuppa, and then set up my mobile router I take to depositions (just in case the law firm's WiFi is miserable). I straightaway tested

**Don't get flustered
if you experience
a technical issue.
Stop and think.
Listen to your
proctor's advice.
Breathe.**



my equipment on ProctorU. MiFi to the rescue! I kept the home router off, as well as all but one computer, in order to do the exam. Potential disaster #1 diverted. Breathe.

But then — what, there’s more? — at midday the gardeners turned up with their trimmers to trim the hedges. Okay, fine, I have one hour and 20 minutes until I need to log on. Surely they’ll be done in time. Oh, but then they had to get the blower out to blow the trimmings. And so it was with three minutes 30 seconds to spare, the trimmers stopped, the blowers blew out, and potential disaster #2 was also averted. I took one last sip of water, put my machine in test mode, and as I watched that counter go down to start my session, I imagined hearing the words “Ready. Begin,” with all my internet/gardening issues now well and truly behind me.

Moral of this story: Take each obstacle which comes your way one at a time. Have a backup for your internet because you may just have to reschedule the exam if you don’t. Thank your gardeners.

Outcome: Literary passed 99 percent.

To anybody taking exams soon or in future, I found Realtime Coach and ProctorU easy-to-use platforms. In the exam process, take your time and don’t rush. Easier said than done, I know. I took big, deep breaths before pressing Play. There’s no time limit before pressing that Play button, not that I could see anyway. Relax, breathe, and focus. Close your eyes if you have to. I did.

I do wish they graded these transcription exams with a decimal point; after all, that’s what we are looking at every day if we have our stats up on our software screen. For example, say you got 94.8 percent, and the pass is 95 percent, a decimal point grading gives you an exact idea of where you are on that spectrum between 94 and 95, i.e., sooo close, and that in itself can be a huge boost to your confidence.



UPDATE 08/24/20: As we enter Week 24 of the pandemic here, I am delighted to say that not only did I pass the testimony leg in mid-July at 98 percent — *and* it was free of any incidents — but two days after that, I traveled into central London for the first time in months (an eerie feeling) where I sat and passed the WKT. I honestly did not think I was successful. As I walked toward the man on reception, I was shaking my head and giving a thumbs down, but even behind his mask I could tell he was smiling.

My tips for the WKT: Get a good night’s sleep. Read the questions and the answers. Sounds obvious, I know.

Before all of this, the only kind of long haul I’d experienced was flights, but in a way I have to thank the London lockdown for getting me well on the way to my RPR. The CRR is already booked for September!

Leah Willersdorf is a freelance court reporter and captioner based in London. She can be reached at courtreporterlondon@gmail.com.