Are you pursuing your first certification or going after an advanced one? No matter where you are, you have the confidence of the members of NCRA’s Veterans Liaison Committee for the New Professionals Committee, who are cheering you on. To help you pass your next exam, they have offered a number of tips to help you pass your next test.

Remember how powerful your brain is and get yourself in the right mind-set on test day, because the way you’re thinking tends to play a big part in the results. That’s one reason why we always warm up with faster testimony than the test speed. It’s not because that five-minute warm-up will make you a faster writer in the minutes before the test; it’s because the test speed then seems slower in comparison, making us feel like we can more easily write that speed.

Some folks have superstitious test-day rituals they go through. Obviously, these things don’t have an actual impact on our writing; they just trick our minds into believing that they do.

Recently we made a visit to our fabulous court reporting school in Minneapolis, Anoka Technical College, on their last testing day before summer break. I was accompanied by Merilee Johnson, RDR, CRR, CRC, and together we basically gave the students a pep talk on steroids. That day, the passing percentage was off the charts. We received emails and social media posts thanking us for our tips and our encouragement to “help them pass.” We, of course, had nothing to do with their ability to pass the test. It was there all along. We assisted in their mind-set, in getting them in a positive place, and getting them fired up to pass.

When we realize how powerful the mind is and we understand how much influence it has in our lives, we can learn to leverage it to help us succeed. And yes, that includes passing speed tests!

Think right to test right

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Jan Ballman FAPR, RPR, CMRS
Minneapolis, Minn.
Practice, practice, practice

Practice test-taking from start to finish, from turning off your audio, naming a file with your test number, saving your file in the proper format and with initial caps/all caps, uploading the file, and deleting the file off your hard drive (and the backup file in your CAT software — yes, you have one of those), as well as deleting the file(s) off your writer.

Dress the part. Casual dress *may* get you casual results. If I dress up, I seem to take the situation more seriously in the moment and am somehow more "business-minded" when I have the "work to do" of passing a test.

Michelle Kirkpatrick, RDR, CRR, CRC
Breckenridge, Colo.

You can do it!

For a skills test or contest, I’d suggest not practicing immediately before, like in the test/contest room. Practice maybe an hour or so ahead of going to the site. I’ve found if I practice along with the others in the room and I’m not doing well, then, I get overly worried that I can’t do it.

I do enough of a warm-up in the room so that I see everything is working and that’s all. This next one is much easier said than done: Try to relax and pretend it’s a regular job and work the way you always do.

And remember to take breaths, keep breathing! I say that because I do tend to hold my breath when writing difficult and/or fast material.

Lisa Conley Yungblut, RMR, CRR, CRC
Dayton, Ohio

Cover the basics

I want to offer a few generic tips:

1) Be sure all batteries are sufficiently charged on all accessories.
2) Remember to maintain normal breathing techniques.
3) Work on overcoming the test nerves and do not freak out when the words “Ready, Begin” are said.
4) Be sure to proofread your test transcript for grammar and punctuation before turning it in.

Rick E. Levy, RPR
Miami, Fla.
Envision your success

Below is the hands-down best tip that I used — and I was able to complete my court reporting school and passed my 225s in 14½ months!

In the weeks before the test, incorporate visualization techniques. You will be amazed at how effective this tool is. If you are testing at 225, practice at 240. How do you do this when you can barely write 225? Listen to your practice materials the first time with your eyes closed, hands at the machine, but not writing. Just visualize yourself writing. Now play the practice material again. This time write it. You will be amazed at what a difference it makes. Later, do the same technique first visualizing writing at 225 as you listen to your practice audio file. Then the second time, actually write it. Boom! You will probably surprise yourself by nailing it.

When visualizing yourself, always visualize yourself feeling calm, cool, collected, and confident. Nerves of steel. Focus. Concentrate. Breathe deeply. Make sure you are hydrated and comfortable. Carry that with you right to the test. I swear it works. I learned this in 1979, long before The Secret was ever written. I had a visionary teacher at our local community college. I was lucky I tried it, felt an immediate impact, and adopted it. I still use visualization techniques to help me get through difficult situations. You can, too!

Phylis Craver-Lykken, RPR
Seattle, Wash.

Find your rhythm

My feelings on passing tests comes down to what I learned from my father years ago. What it entails is sitting on the edge of your seat and literally fighting for each and every word. It’s a battle. It’s you vs. the steno machine.

I’ve always thought that the best way to improve your speed was for the student and/or working reporter to develop a rhythm to our writing(s).

When I was in school, before I would sit for a speed test, I would listen to music, whether it be big band, show tunes, rock-n-roll, jazz. Listening to those types of music helped me develop a rhythm in my writings and helped me to pass exams.

Focus is also the issue. Someone who’s taking an exam needs to focus on either an object or a person or even within themselves and hold onto it during the testing. That sole focus will help one’s ability to concentrate their energies on the task at hand to help to avoid any distractions.

Adam Alweis, RPR
Dewitt, N.Y.
WHY CERTIFICATIONS ARE IMPORTANT

If you are interested in earning an NCRA certification, official reporter Cindy Shearman, RDR, CRR, CRC, of Vail, Ariz., advises: “Keep on keeping on. You only fail when you quit trying to earn the certification.”

People have many different reasons for earning NCRA certifications — from it being required in their state to the increased pay it brings to the confidence and sense of accomplishment they feel about earning a new set of letters behind their names. The JCR reached out to several NCRA members to learn more about why they earned their certifications and what the benefits are.

“I wanted to continue to improve my skills and qualifications and, on some of my jobs, there was a pay increase associated with an additional certification,” says Shearman. “I feel the certifications help my self-confidence and also have helped in obtaining employment and salary increases. I always feel a sense of accomplishment when I earn another certification.”

While I was a court reporting student at MacCormac College, we were encouraged — no, expected — to achieve the RPR in addition to the required CSR. After I passed my RPR, I wanted to continue to distinguish myself and earn the respect of my family, mentors, and peers,” says Sabrina Lewis, RDR, CRR, who works as an official court reporter in Birmingham, Ala.

Freelancer Marvie Votaw, RPR, CRR, of San Diego, Calif., said that she earned her NCRA certifications “to become more employable and later on [to receive] higher pay.” She says that earning her certifications gave her everything she was hoping for — better opportunities and higher pay – and that she is proud of her accomplishments.

“Having credibility behind my name was always important to me, so I sat for the RPR WKT when I started high speed classes in court reporting school,” says captioner and freelance court reporter Donna Karoscik, FAPR, RDR, CRR, CRC, of Lancaster, Ohio. “After graduating, I took the skills portion and passed. At the time my employer did not require certifications and, being a new reporter with student loans, I let the RPR lapse for financial reasons. Wouldn’t you know it, a few months later the firm I worked for set a policy that all reporters needed to obtain any and all certifications we could, with the RPR being the required base-level certification? I took it the next time it was offered, passed all four legs, and will never let it lapse again.”

“One of the key benefits I have experienced is my certification credentials help me stand out from a sea of reporters. I’ve also worked for employers who paid more for higher certifications – both freelance and court,” says official reporter and captioner Allison Kimmel, FAPR, RDR, CRR, CRC, of Marysville, Ohio.

Captioner Kathryn Thomas, RDR, CRR, CRC, of Caseyville, Ill., shared that she earned her certifications “to show to others (and myself) that I’m always working on upgrading my skills.” In addition, she points out that the credentials increased her confidence in her skills. “It’s something specific and concrete I can point to, to say, ‘I’ve achieved this goal.’”

The many benefits of certification

Lewis went on to list all the ways that credentials were worth the time and effort: “First, your credentials speak for you. For example, attorneys or reporting agencies utilizing the NCRA Sourcebook are able to search for reporters by type of credential; i.e., RPR, CRR, etc. I have gotten countless referrals this way. Second, when a position needed to be filled on the state licensing board, my national certifications brought me to the attention of the nominating committee; I was appointed to the Alabama Board of Court Reporting. That service then led to a position on the board of the Alabama Court Reporters Association. Last, but not least, because of my credentials, I am at the top of the pay scale as a federal official court reporter.”

“I gained a new level of confidence with each credential I earned. That confidence increased my love for and commitment to the profession. I became more active in and encouraged others to get more involved in the court reporting and legal communities,” says Lewis. “Your credentials show the world that you believe in yourself and you believe in the importance of your profession.”

Karoscik agreed that both the recognition and the financial benefits were important benefits. However, she said: “I have always felt it is important to stay current on technology and information within the court reporting and captioning professions, even if they don’t directly apply to my current position. If I am asked questions about why we do this or why we don’t do that, I want to know the answer. It makes us more credible members of the business world. In my opinion, knowledge is invaluable, especially when marketing yourself, your business, and your skills as a reporter.”