

PASS

THE COURT REPORTING EXAM

Techniques, tactics, and hacks that will empower your writing and psychology to conquer your exam

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About the Author



Hey, gang! I'm Cale. It's good to meet you. Please come on in. Excuse the mess.

I decided to write this "about" section in first-person because it's a lot more personal and a lot less big-headed.

A Houston native, I attended and graduated from the Court Reporting Institute of Houston and became a Texas Certified Shorthand Reporter in September of 2007. The school was even nice enough to give me an Associate's in Applied Sciences degree since I helped fix a vending machine in their break room that one time.

After becoming a court reporter, I worked in the wonderful freelance world until more exciting employment opportunities presented themselves. In 2012, I became a proud member of DepoTexas, Inc. and humbly serve as their Production Development and Operations Specialist.

I currently reside in Houston, Texas, with my wonderful girlfriend. And, yes, the humidity here is pretty much unbearable.

I decided to write this book after a recent Christmas party, where a current court reporting student asked me and my brother for some general advice on passing the state certification test. After telling her what worked for me personally, I felt myself having to stop and shut my mouth because I wanted to go on and on and on about other techniques and strategies that I felt could really help her.

So I decided to save her the boredom of hearing me talk for six hours and just write this book instead.

I want to thank you so much for taking part in this book. If at any time you have any questions or feedback, you can always message me at cale@passthecourtreportingexam.com and I'll be glad to speak with you.

Thanks again, and enjoy!

A Quick Note From Cale

I wanted to take a brief moment to thank you very much for taking time to read through this book and to benefit from its content. It is my sincere wish that everything discussed in these chapters quickly enables you to pass your state's court reporting certification exam the very next time you take it.

This book required a good amount of time and effort to make sure that it was the best possible guide you could ever own on this topic, with the goal of being easy to read and even easier to apply to your life. That being said, I respectfully ask that you please not distribute this book to anyone else without my written permission.

If you would like to let others know about this book, please visit passthecourtreportingexam.com/sendtoafriend where you can quickly send them a friendly message and spread the love.

If for some reason you obtained this book from someone else, then you obviously have awesome friends. I hope the material inside boosts your ability to pass the court reporting certification exam with flying colors. After exploring all the juicy content this book has to offer, please consider owning your own copy by going to passthecourtreportingexam.com/purchase. The whole process takes less than three minutes, and then it's yours for life!

Thank you so much again for reading, and please enjoy.

Introduction

I screamed at the top of my lungs until my throat burned with a fiery pain.

Weeks after taking my first Certified Shorthand Reporter (CSR) exam, I came home from a long day of interning at criminal court and immediately hopped onto the family PC, not even taking a moment to remove my shoes or suit jacket. I learned that while I was busy during the day pounding my fingers on the steno-writer to the testimony of a capital murder case, one of my teachers at the court reporting school I attended (the Court Reporting Institute of Houston, at the time) had talked to my brother on the phone and asked that he please let me know it would be a good idea to check the website of the Court Reporter's Certification Board (CRCB).

My brother tells me this first thing as I step through the door and put my heavy writing machine and laptop on the ground, letting go a long breath of exhaustion after the 40-minute drive from downtown Houston. He has a glint in his eye as he relays the information from my teacher, and I can feel in my bones what he's trying to get at. Is he implying that I passed? Me?

How can this be? Did I pass the CSR exam on my very first try? How in the hell...

As soon as the list of passing students opens up on my Internet Explorer, I see my name. I thrust my arms into the air triumphantly and scream until my esophagus burns.

In the following weeks I am asked by a teacher at the Institute to please speak to their class on tips for passing the CSR machine-writing exam, a test so intense and demanding that the Supreme Court of the State of Texas requires 95% accuracy, and all portions of the exam must be passed at the same time – no opportunities for passing the test “in chunks” as with other court reporting certifications. Yeah, it's a pretty rough test, just like most other states.

Aside from speaking to higher-speed classes, I am also approached by students at random as they ask for any advice. At first, I tell them all the same thing that, to me, was the most important aspect of training for the test (the mantra of “get it the first time”, which will be explained in full in just a bit). However, as I am asked more and more by fellow court reporting students – some who seem on the verge of

complete emotional burnout after taking the test multiple times only to be crippled by nerves and/or weak steno writing – I begin to look inside and honestly ask myself, “Wait. How **did** I pass the test the first time?”

The answers come slowly as I reflect on the days I spent in Austin, Texas (the only venue allowed for CSR examinations at the time). I begin to understand that I did things differently than other students who tested with me, those who did not pass. I start to notice certain patterns with students who do pass, and those who do not. I slowly realize that there is a certain correlation with the psychology and writing technique for the students who pass the exam, things that are mostly not present with students who keep trying and keep trying but never experience that breakthrough of passing.

When going back to the initial question of why I passed the test on my first attempt while others were still struggling, I finally realize that it’s not because I was better than the students who didn’t pass the test. I was not a better writer than students who didn’t pass. I was not a better tester than the students who didn’t pass. I wasn’t even a more diligent student than those who didn’t pass.

I just did things differently. Not better, but **differently**.

It was these different methods, which I had seldom heard talked about in school (though I am not faulting any teachers for it), that allowed me to better handle the stress and sharpen my writing technique required for the exam. This opened me up to write with greater accuracy, intensity, and confidence.

Years later, my brother approaches me in dismay after not passing the CSR exam for a third time. He seems almost broken hearted. We begin to talk about my experience with the test, and I begin to emphasize certain principles and methods that I applied for weeks before the test that really worked for me, factors that I believe gave me that breakthrough. I recommend a book for him to read (and more importantly, **apply** to his life) to help with his psychology, and then we go over an idea that we agree will set him over the top with his machine writing.

The very next CSR exam he takes, he passes. He is now a very happy and prosperous court reporter, and he has never looked back.

Not because he was better than other students, and not because he was more

talented (I can safely tell you as his brother that he is **certainly** not very talented), but because he applied certain principles that other students were not.

After many months of finding out what worked for other court reporters and passing their test, it occurred to me that when I was in school I would have loved for someone to teach me these things so that my CSR exam went even smoother. And thus is the book you are reading now – a complete information hub for what gets court reporting students from feeling iffy in their ability to pass their court reporter’s certification exam to a level of confidence and relaxation that almost guarantees their success.

When I was in my higher speeds and after qualifying for the Texas CSR exam, I began to notice many students around me, who had taken the test multiple times already, saying that they were just waiting for “a good test” so that they can pass and move on. Hearing that from any court reporting student breaks my heart.

Waiting for a “good” or “fair” test takes all the power away from the student and gives all the power to the test writer. It leaves the student at the complete mercy of someone else as to whether or not they will eventually become a certified court reporter. This is no way to go about things. This is not a way to live a successful life – by waiting for someone else to meet a certain condition before you can achieve your goals. This book aims to cure the “waiting for a good test” syndrome. It’s about putting all the power with **you**, and giving you the physical and psychological mastery you need to completely annihilate your next certification exam.

To put it frankly, the world needs more professional court reporters – a lot more. You deserve to be one of them. This book is a helpful guide to get you that certification in your hands.

It is my sincere wish and prayer that the techniques and insights discussed in this little book rocket you to the finish line with ease and simplicity. The ideas in here are not complicated at all. Truly **anyone** can apply these principles, ideas, and methods.

And once you find which ones work best for you personally, then you, too, will be looking at the exam test results and scream your throat into painful oblivion.

What This Book Is...and Is Not

I want to take a brief moment to go over in very plain terms what the intentions are for this book, and what you can expect from it. This helps bring in clarity for your personal reading experience, and also lets me blah-blah-blah for a little bit, which is fun for me.

Also, before getting into it hot and heavy, I just want to mention the following: In order to get the maximum use out of this book, I would first go through the entire book (participating in the next chapter is required) from start to finish. Then I would go back and really apply the chapters that are most relevant to you and your situation based on your answers in the next chapter. I find that most self-improvement guides/books are better when done this way. You use the first go-through to take in all the information you can, and then the second go-through to actually apply the teachings and improve your situation.

Okay, let's get to it.

What This Book Is

This book is a guide for helping any and all court reporting students pass their state certification exam (the machine-writing portion, specifically) on their very next attempt. In fact, the principles discussed throughout these chapters can actually be applied to help with most court reporting certification exams, even the non-state certifications that aren't required for you to work as a court reporter (such as the exams for RPR, RMR, etc.). What works for one test generally works for the other, no matter what state you're from.

So how much application is really required to get the most out of this book? If you have a minimum of five weeks and apply certain principles (depending on your current weaknesses, which we'll go over in a moment) consistently for six days a week, you should be able to absolutely crush your next exam.

"Wait, Cale. Did you just say five weeks?"

That's correct, a minimum of five weeks. If you have more time than that, then that's

even better. You want to apply these principles and practice these methodologies as long and consistently as possible. The more you apply them, the less terrifying the exam will be, and the more you will be able to breeze through it.

If for some reason you don't have five weeks, don't worry about it. Start now anyway, and by the time the test comes around, the techniques you're practicing might take you past the threshold into a passing accuracy. If for some reason you don't get the exam, keep applying what works for you for the next one, which should be a cake-walk by the time you get to it after spending so much time applying this material.

In regards to who this book is written for, I will be honest – at first I wrote this book with only Texas CSR hopefuls in mind. However, after contemplating everything that is being taught in these pages, I realized that actually any court reporting student can benefit, no matter which state they hail from. Sure, there are variations between every state test (two-voice testimony versus three-voice testimony; 200 words-per-minute literary test versus 180 words-per-minute literary test), but the principles outlined in this guide affect the student the same no matter which state you are testing for.

This book, while informational, is ultimately about your **application** of the material. The teachings here are only as good as the reader is in actually **applying** the methods that are discussed. As you know, someone else can't take the test for you – it's all up to you. And while reading this guide will be extremely informative (and maybe even delightfully hilarious), you will not be able to reap any benefits until you actually try the principles being discussed here.

As with my brother, whom we discussed just a little bit earlier, I didn't just give him a super encouraging pep talk. I didn't read him a Chicken Soup for the Soul book (although it's very possible that it may have helped him emotionally) and then put him down for a comfort nap. I gave him materials to read, and we talked about a new practicing method for him to try. After he **actually read** the book and **actually practiced** the new method, he passed his very next certification exam.

Again, he wasn't better than the other students. He just tried something **different**.

What This Book Is Not

It might be better to cover this portion in a quick, drive-by-style bullet list.

- This book is not just a long way of telling you to practice harder. Absolutely not. Like with anything in life, mastering this test doesn't require practicing harder, but practicing smarter.
- This book is not and does not contain any sort of dictation material for you to write to (unless one of your teachers decides to convert these chapters into dictate-able material). You'll want to keep using your own practice dictation material, though we will discuss what kind of material you'll want to utilize.
- This book is not a means of just leading you to other material that is somehow necessary for you to benefit. Anything that you need to know is in here. However, I may recommend certain books or other materials that help expand on what is being discussed.
- This book is not written just for students in the higher speeds. Any student at any speed can benefit from these chapters. In fact, if you are able to apply this book's material while still in your lower or middle speeds, that's even better! That gives you plenty of time to really learn what it's like to totally dominate your certification test.
- This book is not an "Easy Button" for your certification test. Yes, the teachings herein are extremely practical and simple (more than you might expect, actually), but none of it really works until you actually put the work in and apply it.
- This book is not, by any means, a replacement for the fine, upstanding people who teach court reporting. Some of my favorite all-time people whom I look up to the most were court reporting teachers. Always listen to them and consider what they are teaching you, and heed any advice they have to give (especially if they are court reporters or were court reporters themselves). Use the methods in this book to supplement and add to what they are teaching you.
- This book is not an encyclopedia on this particular topic of passing your court reporter's certification exam. If you find out about other principles, methodologies, or insights that are not discussed here that really help you,

please let your fellow students know about them (or post them on this book's website so that other readers can benefit, as well). There are always more and better ideas to any given topic. Such is the nature of our infinite universe.

- This book is not for mask writers or oral stenographers. That is to say, none of the material in this book about writing on the stenography machine would apply to you at all. However, if for some reason you are a mask writer and are suffering from the psychological pressure of your state's certification test, then this book will still be an extremely helpful guide for you.
- This book is not for helping students pass the written portion of their exam, if their state has a written component. By "written portion," I mean what is usually a multiple-choice exam that covers the ethics, procedures, and other facets of being a court reporter. This book focuses on the machine-writing portion of the exam – the portion that many students greatly struggle with. For help with the written portion of the test, I would recommend students to ask other students (possibly those that have already passed the written exam) if they have any study guides or notes that they can utilize. Also go online and find other court reporters or court reporting students in your area that have any materials that help you pass the written exam. To get started with a free and easy court reporting social network, go to csrnation.com

Okay, so we knocked all that out in record time. Cool.

I want to remind you again that if at any point you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at cale@passthecourtreportingexam.com. Your feedback and questions are always important to me.

Now let's get down to business and put you on the path to crushing your next exam.

Figuring Out Your Weaknesses

Wow. Maybe I shouldn't have started off the chapter with that name. It's a little intimidating on the outset, I admit. However, don't be scared at all. You don't need to do any extensive self-analysis or go to any certified psychologist to accomplish this chapter. It's just a simple exercise that helps you understand where you need the most help.

For instance, if you are a brilliant steno-machine writer, but you are absolutely crippled with fear whenever you think about your state's certification test (and fail every test due to nerves), then it would do you absolutely no good to keep practicing machine-writing while never addressing the psychological issues.

That's what this chapter is for – to see where you need the most help and then apply all the teachings that are most relevant to you and your situation.

This book is broken into two main sections – Physical Enhancements and Psychology Enhancements. The Physical Enhancement chapters deal mainly with how to better your writing to a point where the state certification test seems extremely manageable. The Psychology Enhancements section (the section that probably most everyone will benefit from, in my personal opinion) improves your mental and emotional abilities so that the test is never again considered scary or intimidating, so that you can focus all your energy on accurate writing instead of spending countless mental and emotional energies on trying not to lose your ever-loving mind during the test.

That is just a general description of these sections, mind you. There are much more juicy things in store for you on this journey to being a court reporter testing rock star.

Making a list of your testing problems

This first step can be done in five to ten minutes (don't spend more than fifteen to twenty minutes; after some honest soul-searching it shouldn't take long for you to come up with the answers). Though I would recommend writing down this exercise on paper (feel free to use the blank lines below the questions to write down

your answers) or on some sort of digital medium (like a word processor on your computer, or in a basic notes program on your phone), you can do it mentally and still achieve the same results **as long as you are completely honest with yourself.**

If you just felt a ping of fear when I mentioned you having to be completely honest with yourself, don't worry. That's a natural reaction. Our survival instincts can sometimes mentally block out problems that we don't want to consider as problems, for any number of reasons (fear of failure, laziness, denial, etc.). To be blunt, this exercise is the most important in the entire book, and you need to do it. It will be short and just a little painful – just like getting a flu shot from the doctor. When it's all over, you'll wonder what all the fuss was about.

Answer the following five questions with **absolute honesty**:

1. Whenever I fail a speed test, is it more because of my nerves or because of my writing technique?

2. Whenever I think about the state certification test, what's the first emotion I feel? How does this emotion, whether positive or negative, affect me?

3. Are there certain aspects to my stenography theory that give me a lot of problems when I try to write? What are they?

4. When I take a test of any kind, court reporting or not, what am I feeling while I take it? Am I feeling nervous and uneasy, or do I generally feel more calm and focused?

5. Are there things that I know deep down I should be practicing, working on, or spending time on that I'm not? What are they?

And that's it! All done.

These questions help draw out of you where you feel the most weak when it comes to taking the certification test. You will be referring back to this chapter as you work through the book and decide which areas you need to work on most.

Questions 1, 2, 4, and 5 relate to your psychological state for the test (also depending on how you answer Questions 1 and 5). Questions 1, 3, and 5 relate to your writing technique (also depending on how you answered Questions 1 and 5). Which questions did you answer that seem to be a bigger concern? Does it seem like you need more focus on the psychological aspect, or more focus on the physical (or your writing) aspect?

This is your starting point. Now that you can clearly see where you need the most enhancement, you can immediately begin to apply techniques, tunings, and tweaks that apply most to your situation, and you can begin to greatly improve your testing.

If you're like most people (myself included), you may need to address both sides of the equation, both psychological and physical. That is perfectly okay. It doesn't mean you're worse off for testing; it just means you need a little more help in both arenas.

Next we will focus on all the tricks and techniques you can start doing **today** that will improve your writing and accuracy, all optimized for passing the certification test the next time you take it.

STOP

If you did not do the above exercise, please do it now. As discussed earlier, even if you just do it mentally you will still benefit from its intended goal. Please answer the five questions before moving on any further. It shouldn't take more than ten minutes.

Writing and Practicing Enhancements

You go to court reporting school (whether a physical location or online) to learn everything there is on how to be a court reporter, from how to write on your machine past 200 words-per-minute (from here on out referred to as WPM) to how to put a deposition transcript together. Most teachers are absolutely excellent at helping students achieve command over the steno theory and writing with speed and accuracy. A few teachers give out secret hacks, tips, and tricks on how to take your writing from great to damn-near perfect. That same few focus specifically on how to get your writing to easy test-level precision – which means getting a minimum of 95% accuracy ***the very first time you hear the dictation material.***

But that's okay. Whether your teachers have hammered out test-specific insights or not is not the point. The point is, what questions should you be asking yourself in order to take your writing from where you are to passing the state test?

Questions such as...

- What are my biggest writing weaknesses?
- Where during a dictation test does my accuracy or speed suffer (beginning, middle, end)?
- Am I getting 95% accuracy ***the first time*** I hear any dictation material?
- Do I need to adjust or tune my machine keys or get certain paddings that make my writing more fluid and easy on my strokes? On that note, do I need to be writing on a different machine altogether because the one I'm on is either completely inferior or is actually hurting my writing?
- What do I really need to practice in order to make my writing smoother?
- Are my hands moving in such a way that it's actually hurting my writing (biggest steno-writing crime: dramatically lifting up your fingers at the end of each stroke, which wastes precious milliseconds of motion)?

- Is my writing plenty fast but not clean? Inversely, is my writing clean but not fast enough?

Asking yourself these questions are absolutely crucial to figuring out where you need enhancement in your writing. The following chapters will help if any of these questions apply to you.

Let's get started with what I believe to be the absolute most important principle any court reporting student can learn in order to pass any state certification test.

Getting 95% of Dictation Material the First Time You Hear It

The first time I spoke to fellow students at my court reporting school about what helped me pass the state test, I told them what, to me, was utterly essential:

You must achieve 95% (or whatever percentage your state certification test requires) accuracy the very first time you hear any dictated material.

You will notice I am constantly bolding and otherwise specially highlighting this mantra every time I bring it up throughout the book. This is because I feel it is that important, and I feel it's not emphasized enough in certain court reporter training venues.

If you go to a court reporting school, chances are the speed classes operate essentially the same way at one point or another:

1. You set up your equipment and then write to five straight minutes of dictated material.
2. The teacher goes back to the beginning of the dictated material and then starts doing one-minute sprints of the material, increasing the WPM with every read (for instance, first reading the minute at 140 WPM, then going to 160 WPM, and then finally a third time at 180 WPM).
3. You conclude the material by going through all of it again at the class's target speed.

Now, while going through the material in one-minute sprints can be important for learning new words, inputting new briefs into your software, or otherwise just learning how to handle the same material at different speeds, the actual most important part – the part that you should treat as absolutely sacred – is that very first read-through that lasts at least five minutes.

Why is this so critical? Because at the state test, there is no going back through the material in one-minute sprints. There is no going through the same dictation at different speeds. **You get one shot – and that’s it.** You either get it or you don’t.

Treat your every speed class this way. Let that first five-minute run-through be your absolute best effort. Get that 95% accuracy **the very first time you hear it**, period. Because that’s the way the state test operates – one attempt to get 95% or better. After that, you’re done. If you got it, you got it. If you didn’t, you’ll have to take the test all over again.

I began to notice that some students looked at the state test as sort of a merciless process where someone (who was probably very mean) wrote up a test, contemptuously throws it at CSR hopefuls, and then sees if they’re man or woman enough to get 95% of it accurately. I feel that this viewing of the state test process as cutthroat is because speed classes in school are built around making the day’s dictated material eventually be comfortable for you to write to, which is the polar opposite of how the state test works.

Aside from ensuring your writing is 95% accurate on hearing new material cold (meaning for the very first time), another important aspect of what I call the “get it the first time” philosophy is something that you will want to do every chance you get, which is simulating the certification test experience.

What does that mean, “simulating the certification test experience”? It means, while on your steno machine, pretending that at that very moment you are at the certification test. It means putting the same pressure on yourself that you would be under at the test. It means using your imagination and creative visualization to make yourself believe that this next five minutes of material is all that stands between you and a court reporter’s license. It means taking the dictation material so seriously that you feel that getting 95% of this material **the first time** you hear it means whether you will become a court reporter – or not.

If for some reason your court reporting school does not afford you an opportunity to hear material cold for at least five minutes, then create this experience while you’re practicing at home. Do your best to find material at least 5 minutes long that you have never heard before, and get 95% of that material **the very first time you hear it.** Yes, you can use dictation material that you have not heard in a very

long time, as long as it feels like you are writing to material that seems as cold as possible. The less familiar you are with the dictated material, the better.

That's it. That's the one big secret that got me and others to better position ourselves to dominate the state certification. Get every new material you hear 95% accurate the very first time, period. Nothing else matters.

Of course, if you want to aim for a higher percentage of accuracy (which you are doing anyway) as a rule for yourself, then that helps you prepare for your certification test even more. I know that at my court reporting school, no student could pass a speed test without getting 98% accuracy. This is a technique I call "over-benching," which means practicing for a greater rate of success than is required of you. That way, when you are tested at lower levels, you easily accomplish it since you are so used to practicing at a higher level.

I thought of the term "over-benching" years ago when I attended a gym in my area. I would observe guys working out with hardcore amounts of weight, and I noticed that they would bench-press weights that were way too intense for them so that when they went down to their target weights, it would seem much easier to them. After doing two bench-presses of 200 lbs, benching 150 lbs doesn't seem so bad.

Earlier we discussed my brother and how he passed the exam – giving him one psychological enhancement and one writing enhancement. My brother's writing enhancement was over-benching with his WPM, and it worked for him like a charm.

More on the beauty of over-benching later.

For now, let this one phrase be constantly on your court reporting mind:

Get it the first time. Get it the first time. Get it the first time.

Once you really grasp this concept and begin to apply it to your daily training, words cannot express how much more able you will be to absolutely dominate your state's certification test.

Next let's focus on something so basic that it defies logic how well it can improve your writing for your certification test.

Fixing Problem Strokes

As soon as he said it, I realized that I was guilty of it, too.

“You can’t just practice the strokes and speeds you’re good at,” said my eccentric but incredibly wise 80 WPM teacher. “You gotta work on the stuff that gives you problems.” He then explained that while he was training to be a court reporter, he would spend just 20 to 30 minutes on problem words or strokes, and then they would never bother him again.

I was floored when he mentioned that it only required about half an hour. “That’s all it took? That can’t be right,” I thought to myself.

That night, I went home and tried it. After spending 30 minutes on troublesome strokes I was having at the time, not once did they ever give me problems after that, even while reporting depositions at much higher speeds.

As a court reporting student, you have a tough learning curve. As soon as you become competent (not masterful, but just **competent**) at one speed, they immediately throw you into a higher speed class. And so begins the process all over again of feeling like you’re never able to keep up with the dictation material with a relaxed confidence. Such is the life of learning court reporting and machine stenography.

Because of this, I began to automatically slip into the terrible habit of going home and practicing only dictation material and word lists that I felt comfortable with. It’s as if subconsciously I was so desperate to feel good about my abilities that I never really challenged myself while practicing, and I certainly never felt brave enough to pull out the old theory book and work on the strokes that gave my fingers hell.

At the time my teacher was talking about practicing what you’re terrible at, I was having difficulty with the final -*NS and final -*NT strokes (which, in my theory, equate to the “-ness” and “-nth” sounds). When I got home, I had to ask myself what strokes or words were giving me problems, and those two came to my mind immediately.

So I went back through those specific lessons and listened to audio that used the words. I also made up my own sentences containing the problem words and just pounded them out over and over on my steno machine as briskly as I could. As I was going through the tedious exercises, I hoped in the back of my mind that this really would work and that I wouldn't have to revisit these stupid lessons.

After 30 minutes, the strokes never gave me a problem again.

It's crucial that when practicing you work on problem strokes or problem words that trip you up every time they come up in dictation, and to practice them until they are no longer a stumbling block. You don't want to take the certification exam and have that one problem stroke mess up your entire rhythm, and spend the rest of the dictation trying to catch up. That just creates more anxiety and allows more opportunities for errors.

Don't get me wrong; practicing speeds or word lists that make you feel good or relaxed about your writing is a great thing. But that can't be your entire practicing session. If certain words, strokes, or speeds bother you, then **that's** what you need to work on.

Your state test will not consist of only the words, strokes, and speeds that you like. The test is not catered to what you feel good at – ***unless you become competent at everything that gives you problems.***

“Practice, practice before the exam. Get out your machine at home and practice.”

—Dawn Tooke, CSR

The next time you practice (which should be tonight), make a quick mental list of the strokes, words, or speeds that really trip you up. Pull out your theory book and start to work on them. Work on every problem stroke for about 30 minutes, and then see how you feel. Chances are those strokes will no longer be problems, and your writing and testing abilities will be much better off for it.

Replacing Theory Components

Going back to when I was having problems with the final -*NS stroke, I remember that even though the stroke was no longer a hindrance to my writing, I still felt like it was an ugly stroke whenever “-ness” words came up. I wanted something that felt better than final -*NS for that sound.

Weeks later I was leafing through an issue of JCR, or the Journal for the Reporting and Captioning Professions. In it there was a little section that had handy briefs for reporters. After a quick glance I noticed that they wrote the suffix “-ness” as N-EZ. I had never heard of that stroke. I thought it was genius, especially since it didn’t conflict with any of my other strokes.

I tried it that night and fell in love. From that point on, even while reporting depositions, I comfortably used N-EZ and never looked back. Sure, it was a second stroke for most “-ness” words, but it felt a hell of a lot better than final -*NS.

If there are words or strokes that give you headaches, even if you are now competent with them after eliminating them from your “problem list,” you may want to consider reaching out to other students, teachers, professionals, or websites/magazines to see if there are alternatives that you can utilize right now.

If you find an alternative stroke or brief for your problem words, make sure it doesn’t conflict with your dictionary already. If for some reason it does, ask yourself which word will be more important or come up more frequently, which will help you determine which word to assign to the new stroke.

For instance, if I had put N-EZ in my dictionary and a warning comes up saying “WARNING: N-EZ is already assigned to the word Nebuchadnezzar,” then I can safely determine that the suffix “-ness” is going to come up a **WHOLE** lot more than the rare Old Testament name “Nebuchadnezzar,” and then assign the stroke N-EZ accordingly.

(Bonus tip: If for some insane reason the word “Nebuchadnezzar” came up in dictation, I would probably stroke it as N-EZ, but hitting it twice).

Determining the Weakest Part of Your Testing

This ties right into the principles of the previous chapter. As we just discussed, putting your attention and practice on the things that give you problems is invaluable, and can be conquered in a shorter amount of time than one would expect. Similarly, it is best if you be honest with yourself and recognize which portion of the test you are weakest at.

Most state certification tests have machine-writing exams that consist of three five-minute dictations: Literary, Jury Charge, and Testimony.

Let's quickly go over these sections one by one.

Literary

- A single-voice dictation on any (and I mean **any**) topic.
- Usually tested at the lowest WPM speed in comparison to the other two testing portions.
- **How to dominate Literary:** Having a strong and expansive dictionary (so that you don't have numerous "untranned" portions of your transcript for all the irregular words that come up during the dictation), being able to quickly sound-out irregular words phonetically on your machine, being familiar with enough briefs and phrases to keep you on top of the dictation.

Jury Charge

- A single-voice dictation of legal instructions a judge would read to their jury panel.
- Usually tested at the middle WPM speed in comparison to the other two testing portions.
- **How to dominate Jury Charge:** Briefs, phrases, briefs, phrases, briefs, and phrases. Every jury charge dictation contains so many of the same words and

phrases that it's almost silly how easy it is to keep up with it. Learn all the most popular briefs and phrases for jury-charge-related material. If there are certain words, phrases, or terms that you would just love to brief somehow, consult your theory book, the Internet, or fellow students/professionals to see how they would write it. You can never, ever, ever have too many briefs, for any kind of dictation.

Testimony

- A two-voice minimum dictation in question-and-answer format.
- Usually tested at the top WPM speed in comparison to the other two testing portions.
- **How to dominate Testimony:** This portion can be fast and furious, especially if the subject matter is more dense than something like a car accident. Staying right on top of the dictation is the name of the game – no falling behind more than five to six words at any given time. Learn the important briefs and phrases that help you catch up, such as “A. Yes, sir” or “Do you know” or “Have you ever”. You want to tackle this test portion in one of two ways: 1) Write with a steady, relaxed rhythm that never falls too far behind, or 2) Write with a focused intensity and use as many great catch-up briefs and phrases as possible as you stay right on top of every word (this was my method for the exam I passed).

You may have noticed that each “How to Dominate” portion contained a common element of utilizing as many briefs and phrases as possible to stay on top of the dictation. This is because it is just that crucial. The chapter “Be a Brief-a-holic” will expand on this.

Of course, these are very general strategies on how to pass each portion of the test. There is still a boat-load of content coming your way that helps you dive even further into winning strategies. I just wanted to take a moment to briefly outline each section of the machine-writing test.

You probably already know without me asking which one (or more) of these three sections you are weakest at. If you don't know, quickly ask yourself mentally:

Can I get 95% accuracy for each portion of the test the first time I hear it?

Whichever portion of the test you cannot confidently answer “Yes” to, that is the section you need to practice the most.

Before my exam, I knew I was weakest at both literary and testimony. I never, not once, spent time at home practicing jury charge. That would have been a complete waste of my time (unless I needed to write to something easy to boost my confidence). I was either writing to literary or testimony until they steadily got better and better and better.

Decide right now which portions of the test you need to put most of your focus on so that you can be ready for your certification exam. Whenever you practice in your own time, make that portion the one you focus on the most. Whenever you take your weakest test portion at school (such as your testimony class, etc.), treat that first five-minute dictation or any five-minute test as absolutely sacred. Pretend that you are at the state test at that very moment and write with your best intensity and focus ***so that you can get 95% accuracy the first time you hear it.***

Next we will cover an incredibly valuable strategy that will help you both with your writing and with your exam psychology at the same time.

Practicing Above the Test Speed

“I made 240 wpm my base speed and built up to almost 300.”

—Casandra Clark, CSR

Over-benching can be a beautiful thing. I know several people who benefitted from over-benching for weeks and passed their exams. However, over-benching your writing speed must be done correctly and with a certain understanding. If you do nothing but practice at incredibly high speeds without a grasp on **why** you’re doing it, it can actually hurt your writing more than help.

What I call “over-benching” (a term I came up with when I noticed guys at the gym bench-pressing way over their goal weight so that their lower target weight seemed easier) is essentially practicing writing to dictated material that is faster than your target speed. Let’s say, just by way of example, that your state certification exam requires that you take five minutes of testimony at 225 WPM. You would practice over-benching the testimony by consistently writing to long stretches of testimony material that is dictated at 240, 260, or even 280 WPM. Mark Kislingbury, one of the

“Practicing and listening to speeds (even in the car or at the gym) higher than the test speed can also help students pass the oral portion of the exam.”

—Jodi Cardenas, RPR, CPE,
TCRR, CSR

fastest court reporters in the world, believes that properly over-benching is to take your target speed and add 25%. So, for 225 WPM, 25% faster would be 280 WPM.

Now, most court reporting schools utilize this method already by doing one-minute sprints of dictated material at several speeds, the last speed being usually 20 WPM above your target speed. For me, though, one truly benefits from over-benching by not doing just a minute sprint

of dictated material one time, but to do that one-minute dictation 20, 40, or even 60 WPM above your target speed ***over and over again until you get every word.*** And yes, this might take a while to achieve - up to an hour. You can even break it into 10-15 second runs until you get each chunk perfectly. Then combine all of your successful “chunks” until you are able to do the entire minute one time straight through with perfection.

The reason why it’s beneficial to write for longer than just one minute is because listening to those speeds and mentally processing the words from your brain to your fingers ***helps train your brain to handle those higher speeds.*** Doing one minute of insane speed dictation is scary. Doing that one high-speed minute over and over until you get it perfectly is not scary – it’s something you will just have to adapt to, because you’re going to keep going until it’s achieved. At that point, your brain just has to suck it up and adapt.

You need to give your brain time to get used to the higher speeds so that your fingers will react and write accordingly.

Once you perfect one minute or so of testimony at 240 WPM or 260 WPM, writing it at your target speed of 225 WPM isn’t so bad. In fact, it now probably seems incredibly manageable.

On top of making your target speed less scary, over-benching also helps you master lower speeds. If you become competent (not masterful, just competent) at 240 WPM, then 225 WPM will seem just that much easier. For any target speed you may be trying to accomplish, I would recommend over-benching at least once a day to one minute of material that is one or two speeds above. If you feel comfortable practicing the faster material for longer than one minute, then go for it. The more your brain can get accustomed to processing dictation that fast, the more competent you become at that speed and any speeds that are lower automatically.

“I used a couple of different techniques that I believe helped me pass the certification exam. The first strategy was practicing at higher speeds. I purchased dictation CDs at up to 260 words per minute. By the time I did a practice dictation test at 225 words per minute, the test sounded much slower, so it felt easier.”

—Karen Goh, CSR

As I said earlier, over-benching must be done right, and with a certain understanding. Here’s a quick breakdown of the do’s and do-not’s of over-benching:

Over-benching should:

- Involve you practicing at perfecting a minute or so of dictation 20, 40, or 60 WPM higher than your target speed
- Be done with the understanding that you are just trying to get used to this speed mentally so that your finger speed can adjust *in their own time*
- Always feel a little uncomfortable at first
- Help you feel less intimidated of your target speed
- Raise your confidence with your target speed
- Be done by *continually writing with clean, accurate strokes, just like you always do*

Over-benching should not:

- Take up all of your practice time
- Destroy your clean and accurate writing
- Make your fingers or hands move more dramatically between strokes

- Damage your confidence in your overall writing abilities (it's just a training exercise, not a testing exercise)
- Convince you that higher speeds are the only way to pass a certification test

Writing to much higher speeds is not to benefit your fingers (at least, not at first); it is to benefit **your brain and its processing capability**. Once your brain becomes accustomed to the higher speeds, your fingers can more naturally keep up with the fast dictation. In court reporting school, you are never training your fingers; you're training your brain to move your fingers in a certain way. It's the mind that's in control, not your digits.

If you are nervous to try over-benching or don't really know how to really get started, here's a good trick: When you turn on the fast dictation, just sit and listen to it for the first run-through. Don't write a word on your machine. Just let your brain sit and listen to the fast dictation. Let your brain get accustomed to the speedy material, without adding the stress of coordinating your fingers to match the speed. Once you are done just sitting and listening to the higher-speed dictation, restart it and then write to it.

If you want to take that tactic even further, alternate between sitting and listening to the material and actually writing the material. Start by listening to the dictation. Then restart the audio and write to it. Then restart and just listen to it. Then restart and write to it. Do this as many times as you want until your brain feels more comfortable with processing the higher speeds.

Is writing to higher-than-target speeds uncomfortable? Oh my goodness yes. It's **supposed** to be uncomfortable. That discomfort is simply your brain trying to process the speed it's hearing. If your brain did not struggle, it would not be able to eventually **learn** the speed. The brain is like any muscle in your body: You can train it and make it stronger **over time**.

Take the discomfort as a good sign, and keep at it. Remember, this is a long-haul strategy. It does you no good to over-bench two times in your life and then never revisit again. You did not give your brain enough time to get accustomed to the higher speeds. It's an exercise that slowly cooks the good results into your writing.

Some schools don't over-bench on speed but rather accuracy. I know that my

school required speed tests to be passed at 98%. Other working court reporters benefitted from that aspect of over-benching, as well.

“Make sure you’re ready for the test. If you’re squeaking by on 225s at 95%, you’re only going to pass if you’re very lucky. My school required prospective testers to pass 225s at 98% before sending us to [the state test], so most people that went pass on their first try.”

—Michael E. Miller, CSR, FAPR, RDR, CRR

One more thing: No matter what speed you are listening to or attempting to write, **remain calm**. Writing to a fast speed will not kill you; it won’t even hurt you. It’s just a higher speed. That’s all it is. If you remain calm and just do your best (not perfect, just your best) to maintain clean writing as you write to the faster dictations, and do this exercise consistently throughout the weeks, then your brain will eventually adapt to speeds higher than your target speed, and you will be even more ready to crush your certification test.

Next, we’ll look at a tactic that is over-benching’s cousin: endurance writing.

Endurance Writing

I can feel that probably a lot of you may be vehemently opposed to over-benching practices, which I completely understand. It's a kind of renegade way to go about your steno-machine practice. If you don't want to even step foot near over-benching methods, don't worry. It doesn't hurt my feelings at all (well, maybe a little bit). Everyone is different, and certain methods work better for some but not others.

Let me propose a healthier, less hardcore method of practicing that can still give you great results: endurance writing.

The purpose of endurance writing, which is simply writing to very long dictations, is the same as over-benching – it helps your brain adjust to certain speeds.

Whereas over-benching helps you achieve your target speed by practicing over it in healthy-sized sprints, endurance writing helps you achieve your target speed by ***constantly staying in it*** over great amounts of time.

I will never forget the first deposition I interned on, because by the end of its four hours I was praying to God in Heaven to please not let my arms, deadened with complete numbness, fall off my body and into the parking lot's ditch as I huffed my way back to the car.

You see, at that point in time I had been training in school for two and a half years. And in school, you're rarely ever writing for more than five minutes at a time. There are always ample opportunities for you to take your hands off the machine briefly to get the blood going back through your arms and into your hands. It's always nice, comfortable writing.

Then you get thrown into a deposition, where attorneys, witnesses, and even more attorneys are talking non-stop (and many times over each other). They break maybe once every hour, if that. Sometimes they work through lunch. Either way, your writing goes from five-minute stints to all-day marathons. At first, it's absolutely exhausting, and your arms are experiencing a great deal of discomfort, even pain.

If I had only done more endurance writing, I would have not been a complete cry-

baby after my first deposition experience (don't even get me started on writing all-day testimony in the courtroom for the first time).

Whether you practice over-benching methods or not, endurance writing **at your target speed** (not above, and not below) for long periods of time, at least 30 minutes, help your brain and your fingers/arms to adjust to writing the speed with competence. Your body can't help but adjust to your target speed because you are doing nothing but exposing yourself to it for hours at a time!

At this point you might be thinking, "But, Cale, if you write for an hour at your target speed, won't your body get tired and not write as fast by the end of the hour?" It's true. Your writing will probably not be as pretty and shiny in your last 15 minutes as your first 15 minutes when writing for an hour and a half straight. But the point isn't to write with perfection all the way through the marathon dictation (though that's a fantastic goal to strive for); the goal is to, once again, train your mind into competently processing your target speed.

Whatever your practice regimen is, I would recommend that every other day you either start your practicing session with or ending your practicing session with endurance writing at your target speed. Obtain any dictation material you can that has endurance content. Alternatively, buy a small USB digital audio recorder that you can use to record your speed teacher. Ask your teacher to please do an endurance dictation once or twice a week at the class's target speed. It's okay, you can always ask. The worst they can do is say, "No." And that's totally fine. No harm done.

Endurance writing is enormously beneficial when you practice it at your target speed. Combine it with over-benching exercises to double your writing progress so that your next certification exam is an absolute cake walk.

Next, we'll **briefly** (there's a pun here; you'll see) go over something that should be taught in your school already, but it can never be emphasized enough.

Be a Brief-a-holic

Right now you probably read the chapter name and had a quaint chuckle to yourself. “Oh, Cale. You’re so pleasantly hysterical.” But you shouldn’t laugh. Brief-a-holics are real. They’re out there right now. They could even be in your neighborhood. They’re definitely in your school. Tread very carefully. The next time you say a long or rare word, one of them may grab you by the throat, reveal their razor-sharp teeth, and shriek into your face, “Oh! I have a brief for that word! Let me tell you about it!”

Okay, so obviously there isn’t a mutant race of court reporting students out there offering briefs for any sentence you utter. But brief-a-holics **are** out there. They’re the ones that after every one-minute sprint of dictation raise their hand and ask the teacher/class, “Hey, do you guys have a brief for _____?” They’re the ones who carry around several brief-and-phrases guides, real-time theory books, and reverse steno dictionaries.

Now, whether their intention to obtain as many briefs as possible helps their personal writing style or not, I cannot say because I have not personally observed them. But I cannot agree more with their desire to learn as many tasty briefs as possible so that they are not writing harder, they’re writing **smarter**.

Allow me a moment to shove a cold, hard truth in your face: Obtaining briefs as a court reporter will never, ever end. You will always want to pursue more briefs as you come into more terms, words, and phrases that become new to you. The process will never stop.

When I worked at my first court reporting firm as a Litigation Support Associate, one of the owners of the firm, who was still reporting, would come to me at least once a week and say, “Hey, Calemeister. How do you write _____?” I would offer a brief off the top of my head, and he would counter it with an even better brief. It was like clockwork. Even after 30 years of reporting, he never stopped acquiring new briefs and phrases to make his life easier.

Diagnosing what you need briefs for is quite easy. The next time you encounter a word or phrase and think to yourself, “Man. I wish there was a brief for that.” Ding ding ding! Find or create a brief for it. Don’t ever NOT create a brief for a word or phrase that is giving you trouble. If the brief you would love to do for it conflicts with another word in your dictionary, tweak the brief until you find something that does not conflict. Take out the vowels. Throw in an asterisk. Do SOMETHING that will make your brief a reality.

This chapter seems like a no-brainer, but I, too, fell victim to laziness every once in a while by hearing a word I would love to have a brief for, but never following up to obtain one. It’s important to write down troublesome words or phrases as soon as you hear them in order to remember to obtain a brief for them later. Most court reporting students keep a pad and pencil next to them to briefly jot down the troublesome word/phrase as soon as they get a spare second. Some students use their writing to put in a reminder. As soon as they hear a word/phrase in a dictation that they would like to find a brief for, they will write “BRIEF BRIEF” so that they can later search for the previous word/phrase that they want to learn a shortcut for.

Some people get ahead in life by working harder. They achieve more but have less energy or time. The really successful people learn how to work smarter. They achieve more but have the same amount of time and energy they had before, sometimes more. I prefer the latter. I want to learn as many handy briefs and phrases as possible so that my writing becomes easier, which makes my testing easier.

You can’t deny the rush of learning a good brief. Sometimes you hear a brief or phrase so good it’s almost a religious experience. When I learned the one-stroke brief for “ladies and gentlemen of the jury,” I felt as though I had just been baptized.

Don’t stop obtaining more briefs and phrases. Using just one brief in a state certification exam may set you over from 94% accuracy to 95%. You never know. And you don’t want to take that chance.

Learn the shortcuts. Reap the rewards.

Psychological Enhancements

One of my all-time favorite movie quotes comes from the 1997 film *The Devil's Advocate*. In one scene, Al Pacino uses 9 words to state a great universal truth:

“Some people, you squeeze them, they focus. Others fold.”

If you were to put yourself into one of those two categories, are you a person who focuses when they have great amount of pressure put on them? Or are you someone who “folds” and becomes emotionally rattled whenever the pressure is on?

Chances are, you fold. Just like I do.

Performance-based tests are always incredibly more stressful than strictly knowledge-based tests. In my mind, 75% of passing a court reporting certification exam is about knowing how to properly handle your emotions and mental clarity during the test. I do not feel this to be an exaggeration by any means.

As you well know, your thoughts and emotions directly correlate to your performance when writing to dictation. If you feel emotionally unstable or worried, your writing abilities go straight down the drain. If you feel relaxed, confident, and willing to accept whatever dictation is coming your way, your writing is at its absolute sharpest because your mind is clear and at ease.

All that being said: How you feel and what you think during the exam is almost **everything**.

If you are someone who tends to focus your energies and efforts when put under great amounts of stress, then these talents will greatly put you ahead of the curve for passing the state test. You would just need to ensure that your writing is able to execute **95% accuracy for any dictation you hear the very first time**. The rest is taken care of.

If you are like me, and like most people who tend to get nervous while testing, then you will need to find methods and techniques that reduce stress, raise moment-to-moment acceptance, and to raise confidence. The following chapters will help you accomplish **all** of that.

If you have tried taking your certification exam multiple times and did not pass due to emotions, nerves, or anything else unrelated to your writing skills, then now is not the time to be unwilling to try new things. Trying something different, even if it sounds a little strange, is exactly what you need.

Some say that the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different outcome. If you have failed the state exam multiple times, and are not trying something new or different in order to pass, then you are a crazy person. By definition. That's not my personal opinion. I swear.

So please read the following chapters with an open mind; that's all I ask. Actually try the methods that are discussed here. You have absolutely nothing to lose and everything to gain by utilizing techniques and exercises that force your mind and emotions into gentle, relaxed submission.

To start this whole process off, we are going to determine what kind of tester you are emotionally/psychologically. Let the fun begin.

Determining What Kind of Tester You Are

In order to properly understand which exercises will enhance your psychological wellness for the exam, it's important to know first **what kind** of tester you are, generally speaking. After you learn your testing strengths and weaknesses, you can properly work on multiplying your strengths while simultaneously working on your weaknesses to get yourself exam-ready.

For the sake of keeping this book under 3,000 pages (and without busting out the DSM-IV Psychology Manual) and also for the sake of just understanding the essence of how you test, I will condense and summarize the general psychological profiles of testers, starting with least amount of anxiety and going up to most anxiety.

Please note that these are my **personal observations and terminologies**, and specific to the performance-based testing that is required for court reporting certification exams. If you wish to know whether or not you are diagnosable as having "test anxiety," please consult with a mental health professional.

Open Tester

This is someone who is generally open to most life experiences, accepting of whatever happens in the moment, and offers little to no resistance in any given situation. When they are tested, they accept the fact that their success will be measured or even scrutinized. They may pass or they may fail, but they don't let the testing situation alter their psychological state. After all, it's just a test. If they need to take it again, then they'll brush up on what kept them from passing and make sure it goes better the next time. Because of their laid-back nature, they study and practice when they want.

Strengths:

- Usually in a state of calm and relaxation
- Does not let testing situations scare them or alter their mood
- Accepting of failure

Weaknesses:

- Their relaxed nature means they don't practice/study regularly but whenever they generally feel like it
- Will rarely put pressure on themselves to help them focus and perform with intensity
- Their mood and feelings come first; performance and success come second

Focused Tester

Generally described as testing “realists,” these people understand that upcoming exams are important and are worth focusing on. They use their feelings of anxiety, whether conscious or subconscious, and direct that energy to prepare for their exam. They feel nervous, but they channel that emotion into concentration. By banking off that anxious energy, they are able to create more intensity while they perform. They accept being nervous – they just don't let themselves be dominated by it. Instead, they use it to their advantage.

“Then I just went in test day and literally stared at the floor the whole entire time just focusing on the words that were being said. The adrenaline was pumping, so I just had to stay focused.”

—Casandra Clark, CSR

Strengths:

- Take a nervous situation and let that natural influx of energy put their performance over the top
- Practice and study regularly, or as needed, until they feel confident for the upcoming exam
- They know a test is important, so they prepare for it accordingly and don't let themselves be overcome with nervousness

Weaknesses:

- Can succumb to anxiety if they don't properly channel their natural nervousness
- Tend to be over-thinkers when their mind is not being used to focus on something

Nervous Tester

This is the profile where most people generally fall under. They can feel any degree nervousness or confidence dependent upon how much they prepared for the exam. Instead of using their anxiety to boost performance and focus, they can only control the nervousness by studying and practicing. The only difference between a Nervous Tester and a Focused Tester is that Nervous Testers do not know how to channel those negative feelings into focus. For Nervous Testers, anxiety only goes down if they study or prepare accordingly, but the feelings of nervousness never really leave totally. If a Nervous Tester does not study, practice, or prepare at all for an exam, then they are prone to letting anxiety take over while testing.

Strengths:

- Can lessen anxiety by practicing and studying accordingly
- Treat exams with a degree of seriousness (which is better than not taking it seriously at all)
- Can perform very well if they react to their anxiety by practicing and studying more

Weaknesses:

- They really feel that the test is important, so they let nervousness dictate their performance instead of the other way around
- They are less able to control mind-chatter while testing
- Lack the ability to use their nervous energy instead of letting it dominate their emotions

Anxious Tester

No matter what this person does to prepare for an exam, they are always crippled by nerves. To them, a test isn't just considered to be a test – it feels like the deciding factor of their entire life. They take exams much too seriously and put too much weight on whether or not they will pass. To them, the test becomes a much scarier thing in their mind, and they create deep feelings of nervousness that they feel they can't control. When testing, they have a tendency to lock up, freeze, or otherwise mentally blank even though they know how to pass the test. It has nothing to do with how skilled they are; it's simply a lack of control over their emotions.

Strengths:

- They know that tests are important
- Can summon incredible amounts of emotional energy, which can be focused if they so choose

Weaknesses:

- Allow emotions to completely dominate their entire point of view
- Freeze, lock up, or blank during performance-based tests even though they already know how to perform successfully
- Allow mind-chatter to dominate their thinking while testing

So, what kind of tester do you feel you are, based on these four very general profiles?

For me, personally, I hover between being a Nervous Tester and Focused Tester in my everyday life. On the day of my first CSR exam, I chose to be an Open Tester, until the Testimony portion of the test came. When that part of the exam arrived, I went right into being a Focused Tester, and it paid off brilliantly. I knew that because I was weakest at the Testimony portion of the test, I would need to summon my nervous energy (thoughts of “Oh man, I hope I get Testimony. This is my weakest part”) and focus it into concentration and writing intensity.

So now that you have a general understanding of how you test, you can place on yourself a simple goal: Move up one category of tester.

If you are an Anxious Tester, your goal would be to move up to Nervous Tester. If you are a Nervous Tester, your goal would be to move up to Focused Tester. If you are a Focused Tester, you can either stay right where you are or learn the traits of an Open Tester.

The only testing profile that would need to go down would probably be Open Tester. If you are an Open Tester (which is rare type of person), then I would advise learning how to be a Focused Tester so that you can apply just a little more pressure on yourself. Doing so will increase your level of performance by the time you take the exam.

Why is the Focused Tester sort of the “ideal” profile? Because it’s the most realistic. The fact is that **everyone** gets nervous. Experiencing anxiety or worry for a test is completely normal. You will want to feel a little nervousness, so that you can channel that energy into **focus and intensity**. That’s where the real magic is, and that is what can help you easily dominate your certification exam.

Let’s begin with the first and probably most important Psychology Enhancement, removing the fear of the test.

How to Remove the Fear of the Test

Go into any high-speed class and ask the students how they feel about the upcoming certification test. You will get a range of answers, but most will statistically fall under feelings of fear or worry. Depending on the state's requirements for passing the court reporting certification exam, some students may consider it impossible. If you would ask them how, then, are they are going to pass it, they might tell you, "Just practice more, I guess." They might even flat-out admit, "I don't know."

This isn't good enough. You have decided to make court reporting your next career. Not a job, a career. There has to be a better way of emotionally approaching this big bad test than just shrugging your shoulders or remaining in a state of fear. Fortunately, there is a better way.

It's just a test.

You can pass it.

You will pass it the very next time you take it.

The test is easy.

If you've passed a test in school, you can pass the state test.

You have everything you need to pass the test.

You are smart, capable, and more than talented enough to pass the test.

You have all the power to dominate this test, no matter what your situation is.

How did those statements feel to you? Did they feel refreshing? Did they feel encouraging? Did they feel ridiculous? Did they feel unrealistic?

It's important to know how you feel when presented with the idea that you CAN pass this test. How you reacted to those positive statements will show you how much true confidence you have in passing the exam.

If you scoffed at those statements, then you don't fully believe in the idea that you can be successful, for whatever reason.

If you felt that you **want** to believe those statements, but feel fear cover up that desire, then you need to practice methods that reduce fear and worry.

If you agreed with those statements or felt refreshed by them, then your acceptance of the idea of being successful with the test is exactly where it needs to be.

You need to accept the idea that you CAN, in fact, pass the test and be a certified court reporter very soon.

It may be that you subconsciously think that passing the state test is actually unrealistic, or even impossible. For your benefit, those attitudes need to be turned around immediately. Why would you take a test that you don't even believe you can pass? That's like buying a \$1,500 set of golf clubs even though you absolutely loathe the idea of practicing and getting good at golf. Why would you even bother if you knew you won't do it anyway?

So, no matter your emotional situation with the certification exam, consider yourself a near-future success.

Let's explore several methods that can help you immediately turn negative emotions towards the state test into neutral or even positive ones (when I took the state test, I felt neutral about it; so feeling positive about it isn't necessarily required, though it is recommended).

As discussed earlier, it's important that you **actually try** these exercises. Once you find what works for you, apply it to your daily routine, or as much as possible.

Affirmative Thinking

Mentally or verbally using affirmations is a tried-and-true technique, and it's remarkably simple. Essentially, you take a sentence, or a brief series of sentences, and say them over and over again either verbally or in your mind (though verbally saying them has a tendency to cut through any subconscious garbage that opposes your statement). Stating these sentences over and over again **with consistency and persistence** slowly convinces your subconscious and conscious

mind into really believing the statements.

Once you get to that point, your emotional outlook on the topic of your affirmation will dramatically shift into a positive state. You may even notice your physical reality beginning to bend to your new affirmative “truth,” and you will see your circumstances change for the better.

Remember, any truth is only as “true” as you feel it to be. Do you feel that the state test will be impossible? Well then it will be. Do you feel that the test could go either way in regards to you passing? Then that will be true. Do you feel deep in your core that you are more than capable of passing? Then make room on your wall for your court reporter’s license, because it’s coming.

The beauty of affirmations is that you can make an affirmation in any topic of your life, and you can customize it to your liking – whatever makes you feel the best about yourself and your situation.

Let’s take the statements that I listed above. In order to make them into affirmative statements, simply change the perspective of the sentences from second-person to first-person.

It’s just a test, and I pass tests all the time.

I can pass the state test.

I will pass the exam the very next time I take it.

The test is easy for me.

Because I’ve passed tests in school, I will pass the state test.

I have everything I need to pass the test.

I am smart, capable, and more than talented enough to pass the test.

I have all the power to dominate this test, no matter what my situation is.

How do those sentences feel when you say them about yourself? They probably feel pretty good to you, even if deep down you might be a little hesitant to believe them.

Take one of the above affirmations, or even create your own, and repeat it to

yourself **constantly** throughout the day. Tens, dozens, or hundreds of times per day repeat your affirmation. You will notice that over several days the affirmation will feel better and better, and you'll really begin to believe it. Your confidence will rise, your peace of mind will become more constant, and your ability to take any test with a clear focus will become more prominent.

“First and foremost, I’m a big believer in the power of prayer and positive thinking.”

Try it. Don’t make any excuses. Just try it. You need to do something different that will guarantee your success for the exam. This is a sure-shot way to do just that.

—Jodi Cardenas, RPR, CPE,
TCRR, CSR

KNOWING Your Goal As If It’s Real

By taking the concept affirmative statements and confidence level even further, you get to an emotional state so incredibly powerful that you can accomplish things you might have in the past thought near impossible. It’s simply the idea of knowing you will pass. You just know you can easily pass that exam and be a court reporter. It’s about treating this idea like a fact to the point where you believe it as much as the idea that you have two eyes.

Instead of considering yourself being a court reporter sometime in the future, consider yourself a court reporter right now. How does being a court reporter right now make you feel? How does it make you act? How does it make you think? Court reporters that have passed the certification exam do not have the same thoughts and feelings as court reporting students who are afraid of the exam.

Don’t know that you are a fearful student. Know that you are a **court reporter** who will easily pass that exam.

Switch what you believe you “know” deep in your mind and your heart. If you want to be a court reporter, then **know** it, **own** it, **be** it. This level of confidence mixed with determination can enable you to be emotionally unstoppable. The CSR exam

will then feel like a little stepping stone on your way to being a court reporter, as opposed to being a big scary event in your life.

“While inevitably only a percentage of those who take a certification exam pass, the fact is that 100% are QUALIFIED to take it. So what separates the successes from the failures? I emphatically believe it’s the mind-set that one goes into the exam with. I have taught many students who I emphatically believe were more than qualified to be excellent reporters. Unfortunately, they go into the examination room just “knowing” they are going to fail. And they do.”

—Kerrie Bond, CSR and former court reporting instructor

Association Adjustment

Whenever you think about a particular topic in your life, chances are a default feeling will immediately manifest if you feel more positive or negative about it. It’s called association. If you want to see association in action, you can play a little game that ends up being startlingly revealing about your own psychology.

Have someone make a list of words. Then have them read that list of words to you. With every word that is read, you have to blurt out the **very first thing** that comes to your mind, even if it doesn’t make any sense. Remove all of your mental filters, and do not let your mind reject any of your split-second answers.

The other person could read you words such as *marriage, sweater, macaroni, Asia, childhood*, etc. In order to really get you in the rhythm and to see how you really feel about important topics in your life, have the first word be a random thing or concept that is inconsequential (such as “sweater” or “macaroni” in the previous example list) and then have the next word be something meaningful to your life (such as “marriage” or “childhood” in the previous example list).

Alternate between a meaningful word and non-meaningful word. Analyze what your answers were for the meaningful words to see how you really feel about those topics.

If you continually feel something negative when you think about the state test or whenever it comes up in conversation, then it's easy to conclude that you have a negative emotional association with that topic. Whenever you think of the court reporter certification exam, what's the first emotion you feel? Is it fear? Anxiety? Despair? Stress? Or is it neutrality? Excitement? Ease?

If you have any negative emotion associated with the exam, then you need an exercise that turns the feeling around so that you can either associate your emotions to it neutrally or positively. While affirmations are very successful, they act as slow but very deep fix. If you want to adjust your association quickly, then the next technique is perfect for you.

This wonderful technique comes from "The American Monk," Burt Goldman. In one of his free [instructional videos](#), he states, "We all have a certain *rhythm*." He then goes on to explain how to change the way you feel about any given topic, because every topic you reflect on has a certain rhythm associated with it. It's a rhythm that you can literally tap out with your hand or fingers.

As Goldman illustrates this surprisingly effective technique, he suggests to first try it with foods. Think of a food you absolutely love. I mean the food that you go crazy for, the food you love to just pig out on or treat yourself to. It can be anything. Now, while holding the thought of that favorite food, tap your body – like your chest, thigh, arm, or any part of your body that is easy to reach – according to how you feel **at this very moment** while holding that thought in your mind. Chances are you will tap a rhythm that is steadily fast, one that feels pleasant. Do this for about 10 seconds to really observe what the rhythm is like for your favorite food.

Okay, stop tapping. Let's now switch. Next think of a food you would never even go near, a food you really hate, that food that makes you go "Oh yuck!" Now, while holding the thought of this disgusting food, tap your body according to how you feel at this very moment while holding that thought in your mind. Chances are you will tap a rhythm that is steadily slow or lethargic, one that feels unpleasant or uncaring. Do this for about 10 seconds to really observe what the rhythm is like for your most hated food.

You have literally just tapped out your personal rhythm for these topics. You will notice that your favorite food (associated with a very positive feeling) is a much different rhythm than your hated food (associated with a very negative feeling).

Now let's apply this technique to the subject at hand. Hold the thought in your mind of successfully passing a speed test in court reporting school. While holding that thought in your mind, tap out the rhythm on your body. Do this for 10 seconds to observe what your rhythm is for this subject.

Now hold the thought in your mind of your court reporting certification test, no matter how it feels. While holding that thought in your mind, tap out the rhythm on your body. Do this for 10 seconds to observe what your rhythm is for this subject.

Probably different rhythms between these two topics, yes?

This is where the magic can begin.

Now we are going to literally **switch** rhythms so that whenever you think of the certification exam, it's associated with a positive and good-feeling rhythm.

All you have to do is hold in your mind the thought of the court reporting certification test, and then proceed to deliberately tap out on your body the rhythm you had for passing a speed test. Do this for 30 seconds straight.

That's it. You just deliberately tap out the positive-feeling rhythm on your body while thinking of the certification exam for 30 seconds straight. Do this two or three times a day. That's a minute-and-a-half for what could equate the deciding factor in passing your exam the very next time you take it. How simple is that?

This exercise works with really anything, since every thought you think has a certain emotion attached to it in one form or another. For instance, let's go back to food. Let's say you hate eating broccoli, but you'd like to enjoy it and eat more of it in your life.

Switching your mental association with broccoli works just the same. Think of a food you love, and tap out the rhythm for at least 10 seconds. Now think of broccoli and tap out that rhythm for at least 10 seconds to observe the difference.

Now you simply hold the thought of broccoli in your mind but instead deliberately

tap out the rhythm of the food you love. Hold this tapping and thinking for 30 seconds. Do it twice or three times a day.

You may be eating and enjoying broccoli sooner than you think.

Even though this whole exercise might sound way too simple, maybe even a little strange, just try it. You have absolutely nothing to lose and everything to gain. This exercise costs you nothing, and can be done in private at any time of your choosing. This one technique can actually remove your fear and anxiety about taking the state test. To be no longer burdened by that fear will liberate your mind and emotions so that when you take the test, you are feeling good and on your way to passing it with ease.

If I had known about this technique while I was in school, I would have showed my entire class and have all of us do it together for just 30 seconds every day in class before we begin dictation. It's just too effective for all its simplicity, and 30 seconds is a miniscule investment if it means making me permanently unafraid of the test that will enable me to be a professional court reporter.

Try it.

Going back to the association game we discussed earlier, where someone reads to you a list of words and you react to them with the first thought that comes to your mind, you can also use this game to adjust how you feel about your certification exam.

Have someone read you a random list of words, with every other word being "the state test," or whatever the exam is called for you. The difference here is that with the random words, you can say whatever you like. But every time the phrase "the state test" is read to you, make yourself say something positive, such as "easy" or "I pass it" or "successful" or "conquered." If you do this game long enough, you will switch your association with the certification exam from something negative to something very positive or encouraging.

Some people have an easier time with psychological adjustment when it can be done with games. So after trying the rhythm technique, do this exercise, as well, with a fellow student or a friend to see which one works better for you.

Mental Simulation

I had already qualified for the Texas CSR exam, and the weeks were counting down to when I would travel to Austin and see what I was made of. While in class one day, a teacher asked one of my fellow students how she felt about the upcoming test. She said she felt fine. All of the students became curious. She felt “fine”? How could this be?

She then explained that in order to help her prepare, she treats every five-minute dictation or speed test like she’s **right there** at the actual certification exam. She lets her mind visualize and see the testing venue, imagining all the people around her testing, feeling that pressure, feeling that rush of intense writing, feeling like her passing this **one test** will enable to work forever as a court reporter. That’s all she did to help her emotionally prepare – getting used to the feeling of the state test before it even came.

She passed the same CSR exam that I did.

Was she a better writer? She didn’t seem to think so. She just did things a little differently than the other students.

Along the same lines of the “get it the first time” philosophy, simulating your testing experience can be incredibly beneficial. You won’t have to experience the tension and pressure of the certification exam on the day you take it **if you already practice how it would feel beforehand.**

The mind is such an incredibly powerful machine. Convincing your conscious or subconscious mind of something makes it almost real. When you really hold the thought in your mind of, “Okay, this is it. I’m at the state test right now,” eventually your mind will perfectly simulate exactly how you will feel and act as if you were actually there.

Every time you take a speed test, every time you take a five-minute dictation, treat it as though you are **right now** at the state test. Explore what it’s like to really feel that. Do it now while it doesn’t count. Do it now and understand what it’s like to be in that situation before it is too late. The more you can get used to that situation, the more it won’t be such a nerve-wracking experience for you when the day actually comes.

Maybe it would help to have the experience described since you may have never been to the test before. Allow me to illustrate my personal CSR exam experience with as much detail as possible. You can then use that experience as a quick reference to visualize yourself taking the test and see what it feels like.

In 2007, I was qualified to take the CSR exam at the University of Texas in Austin, Texas. On the afternoon of the test, I was walking around the university to find my way to the correct testing location. The sprawling campus never seems to end, building after building full of classrooms, hallways, and lecture halls. It's massive, and the layout of the facilities and correlating parking lots are almost confusing. This feeling of being a little lost pings inside me a sense of nervousness. But I choose to accept the feeling and let it go away in its own time. I'm just here to take the test; that's all.

Once I find my group of classmates outside one of the college buildings, we all step inside to a vast hallway lined up with at least 75 oral- and machine-stenography students, all anxiously waiting to get inside and get this over with already. I set my machine bag and laptop bag down and just wait. I do breathing exercises to keep myself calm. I can feel the tension in the air. Everyone is waiting for this test that will either set them free to their new career or force them back into school for another four and a half months. I converse with my teachers who are present, trying to laugh as much as possible so I can loosen up and ignore the nervousness that seems to be all around me.

Finally the double doors open and testers begin filing in to grab their seats. The lecture hall is almost the size of a small opera house. Rows and rows of seats are being filled up by students. Everyone quickly sets up their stenography machine (or mask writer), their laptop, and their printer, wanting the damn test to start already.

A classmate and I place ourselves in some center seats in the second row from the front of the lecture hall. Directly ahead of me on the stage is a long table full of the CRCB officers and administrators. Whenever they're not shuffling random paperwork around, their faces are all business, ready to facilitate this very serious test. I'm almost intimidated.

A test “helper” comes around to every student, me included, and checks to see that our audio-recording capabilities on our laptops are completely shut down and makes sure our court reporting software is completely disabled for audio-sync. I show her how all of those functions are completely disabled for my laptop, and at first she seems doubtful. I have to show her my software again to explain how my audio-sync is truly inoperative. She finally accepts and moves on. It’s like she didn’t believe me. Man, they really don’t joke around here at the test.

One of the CRCB officers, an older gentleman, walks up on stage and speaks to everyone casually, trying hard to lighten the mood. He makes a few jokes, goes over some rules and regulations, and then says we will start with some warm-up material to write to.

Over a large two-speaker PA system, they play three five-minute RPR test dictation audio; one literary, one jury charge, and one testimony. The dictations are extremely dense syllabically (as the RPR is famous for), and I can feel the frustration of my classmate next to me. After the dense literary dictation, my neighbor turns to me and whispers, “Well I didn’t get any of that.” I don’t react. I choose not to entertain any thoughts or emotions that make me feel negative about my abilities. Yes, the warm-up material kicked my ass, but I didn’t want to affirm that to myself. I just let the hard material be what it was, and I move on. Now is not the time for me to be negative or stressed.

It’s time for the CSR testing material to be played. I can sense all the students lean forward in their chairs and mentally strap on their seat belts. It’s go-time.

I breathe and relax as much as possible. I choose only to feel good, loose. Like a good Open Tester, I vow to offer no resistance, no matter what the dictation throws at me.

The literary portion of the exam feels like it’s a pretty steady pace, but strange words are thrown in here and there since it’s about the Boy Scouts of America, and there are several proper names of professional and national associations. These proper names are nasty, thick words, but I just have to plow through them best I can. If a word is just too esoteric or insane for me to spend time sounding-out, I just drop it and hope that the context of the surrounding words will help me remember what it was. For at least two of my dropped portions of the test, it works; I am able to

remember what the terms were supposed to go there between the other words that I did write.

Now the jury charge dictation is played. Brief, phrase, brief, phrase – nothing new. The dictation material was so run-of-the-mill that I can't even remember what it was about. Whatever. I know enough briefs and phrases to stay right on top of every word. Boom. Done.

Then testimony is played. Even though I was as relaxed as possible for the previous two portions, I straighten my back and shift forward in my chair. This is it, the one part of the test I really need to focus on. I feel nervousness, but I take that emotional energy and let it make me write faster, more intensely. I stay on top of every word and try my best to never fall behind more than four or five words.

The longer this part of the test goes, the more my mind-chatter begins to surface, saying things like, "Oh my God. I'm actually getting this." I readjust my mind-chatter and focus on the dictation. My strokes are strong, fast, and as clean as possible. I notice that my hands and fingers are shaking in between strokes. That's normal; it's just nerves. I accept the fact that I'm nervous. That's just more energy I can use to make me write faster and harder.

The testimony ends and I almost wake up from a daze. It's over? I had such an overabundance of emotional energy and was so focused on writing intensely that I almost forgot where I was.

I then begin to transcribe and edit all of my notes. Since I am using court reporting software (the free student version, thank God), I am able to simply dump my notes into the program and just read through the English translation and edit on-the-go.

I pore over every sentence and try my best to make sure my punctuation is executed with ninja-like accuracy. Three semesters of Court Reporting English is really coming in handy right now, and I am grateful.

In one hour I am finished editing and raise my hand. The test helper comes around and gives me clearance to print my test. My printer, as it turns out, is extremely loud. The student in front of me turns around while I'm printing and gives me a look. I quietly mouth "I'm so sorry." I feel terrible that my

little printer is right now being the mechanical equivalent to a one-month-old newborn.

The tester tells me that I am free to leave and come back for my equipment once the next two hours are finished. I leave and hang out in the hallway with my teachers. I tell them I feel good about the test. I don't **know** if I got it, but I sure do feel good about it.

Now, that is just my testing experience. Every state's test is different. Hell, even in my state things are done differently with each passing year. But the emotions, the mental back-and-forth, the reactions to dictation, all of that will be the same no matter where you are testing. If you apply the techniques in this book that really work for you, your testing experience will be hundreds of times smoother than the above experience you just read.

Take anything out of the above story that stands out to you and apply those emotions into your mental simulation of your state test. Prepare now for what it will be like later. Do not underestimate the power of the mind's ability to visualize. Simulate the test experience as much as you can, every day. That way, the real certification exam will be just another day. You've been through it before (in your mind), so it's no big deal.

That's what the purpose of this technique is and what you're striving for – for the court reporting certification exam to be **no big deal**.

Next, let's get into your specific bad habits during testing and how to conquer each one.

Bad Habits During Testing

There are so many things that can happen during a dictation test, most of them unhelpful to your chances of success. I can't count how many bad testing habits I had to drop in order to be even close to ready for higher-speed exams. If any of these bad habits apply to you, use the following techniques to conquer them. Your test scores will thank you for it.

Reacting to the Dictation

This one seems a little obvious, but it's just as internal as it is external. We all know the students that hear a hard test and then make a big deal out of it. Some might dramatically throw up their arms and go "Oh my GOD. What the heck was that?!" Some may shake their head with disapproval or with disgust for the person who wrote that awful test. Some may talk to the person next to them and affirm how bad it was.

These are the **external** reactors. They're simply acting out what they're feeling inside.

And then there is everyone else, who may be reacting **internally** (like I did for the longest time). Both forms are just as destructive to your ease of mind; it's just that one form is louder than the other.

The problem with reacting to any difficult dictation is what you are affirming to yourself behind the scenes of your thoughts and feelings. If you react negatively to material, you are reinforcing the idea that you did not get it, that your abilities were not enough to accurately record all the words, or even 95% of it. This is to be avoided. You don't need those kinds of thoughts running through your system. Why? ***Because these thoughts and feelings are not helpful to you and do not make you a better writer.***

HOW TO DROP THIS HABIT

In any situation, if you are taking a super-hard or super-fast dictation, just let it be. Acknowledge and accept that it was hard. Acknowledge and accept that you did not get it all, or

95% of it the first time you heard it. It's okay. It's just one dictation. There will always be more. Don't let a random string of words that lasted five minutes convince you that are not good enough to get it all. You are in charge of your success, not the dictation. Non-resistance and non-reaction is the name of the game. Pay attention to the good; ignore the bad that is out of your control.

“...and most importantly, don't start thinking about how well you're doing as that's a sure fire way to lose it and crash and burn. Just write the words as you hear them, tune everything else out, and stop writing when you don't hear any more words.”

Michael E. Miller, CSR, FAPR,
RDR, CRR

Mind-Chatter

This problem seems to be ubiquitous with all court reporting students, myself included. Mind-chatter is not a problem, just a symptom of the nature of the human brain. The mind is a thought mega-factory. It doesn't often stay quiet. The mind always needs new problems to solve, recollections to savor, things to imagine, or things to ponder. It loves to be on and the center of attention at all times. That's just its nature.

But, as with the reaction habit we just discussed, **you** are ultimately the one in control. The mind is **your** tool to be used however you see fit, not the other way around.

Mind-chatter during dictation can happen for any reason and at any point. Some people pay attention to their mind-chatter in the beginning of a test. Thoughts could be something like, “Okay, here we go. I can do this. Well, I hope I do this. I need to pass this test so bad. Oh shoot. What word was that just now?”

Some people pay attention to their mind-chatter in the middle of the test. Thoughts could be something like, “Oh my goodness, I think I'm really getting this. This is so exciting! If I could get this test, I could move on to the next speed. I wonder what

the students are like in that class. Oh shoot. What word was that just now?”

Some people pay attention to mind-chatter at the end of the test. Thoughts could be something like, “I just have to finish strong. Come on, I can do it! I can’t let my writing suck at the end of this test. I’ve got too much of the words already. I really hope I can get the rest of this. Oh shoot. What word was that just now?”

Even working court reporters find themselves mentally drifting during depositions or courtroom proceedings. If staying distracted hurts their writing more than help, then they have to refocus on what’s being said and stop the mental merry-go-round.

Take a breath of relief. The solution to this habit is remarkably simple.

HOW TO DROP THIS HABIT

If the mind’s nature is to think and talk and think and talk and think and talk non-stop, then the first solution isn’t necessarily to **stop** the thinking. That would be fighting the mind’s nature, and fighting your internal nature costs a lot of energy and focus – the same energy and focus that should be used for your test. Notice throughout this chapter I have used the phrase “pay attention” to mind-chatter. Whenever you notice your mind-chatter, that’s exactly what you’re doing – **noticing** it. You don’t have to shut the thoughts off. You just have to put your attention back on your testing, back on that feeling of focus and intensity. Simply readjust your focus every time you notice it wandering off. Pay attention to the test instead of paying attention to the mind-chatter. It’s just a simple matter of gently guiding your attention to something else. Asking to turn off your thoughts is like asking you to NOT think of a pink elephant. You just thought of a pink elephant, didn’t you? The mind is an inclusive device. Throw a suggestion at it, and it thinks about it, even if it’s NOT to think about something or not think at all. And if you command it to focus on something different, it does just that. Telling your brain to NOT think of something makes it...well, think of

something. But, if you truly want to shut off the thinking process (students of meditation should already be good at this) and completely eliminate any possibility of mind-chatter, then you'll have to be more assertive than just gently redirecting thought to the moment at hand, as we just discussed. In order to turn off the brain and its obnoxious stream of distracting thoughts, command it. Think with strength "BRAIN, SHUT OFF NOW." You can even say it out loud or whisper it to yourself quietly. Be assertive, be certain, be confident. Your brain is **your** tool, and can be under **your** control if you really want it to be. Keep commanding it to shut off every time mind-chatter bubbles up in your mind, and it will eventually stay quiet. This method takes some persistence, so don't give up if you really want to shut down thought for your test.

Giving Up

We've all seen it – a student was just so close to getting the test. But then they get so angry and frustrated with how much they fell behind the dictation that they just take their hands off their machine. Yes, they're pissed off – and they have every right to be. But what they may not realize is that continuing to write, even after the realization that they failed, helps them more than hurts them.

It's hard to ignore strong emotions, especially since they can dramatically alter your physical state. For instance, if you get extremely angry, your heart-rate quickens, your blood pressure rises, and your muscles become tense. If you get very relaxed, your heart-rate decreases and normalizes, your blood-pressure lowers, and your muscles become loose. Something as simple as an emotional outlook can completely change how your body functions. This phenomenon makes ignoring strong emotions almost impossible.

We've all been there. Any court reporter can completely sympathize with the anger, disappointment, and despair of failing a dictation test – especially when you really need it.

So, when you get flustered that you blew a dictation test, your first reaction is to probably totally give up and quit writing. What's the point, anyway? In this instance, the point is to keep writing because that's what court reporters do. They keep writing. It's time to emulate what actual court reporters do, because that is what you are striving for – to be an actual court reporter. Court reporters don't throw up their arms when proceedings are getting tough, whether they're achieving 95% accuracy at that moment or not.

Why not do what court reporters do now? That's what you want to be, isn't it?

I know this sounds harsh, but it's really just blunt. You have to keep writing. You just have to. Giving up and then continuing to pout, fume, or stay angry about the dictation doesn't help you at all – continuing to write **does**.

“I've also learned to be confident in my writing and trust my steno notes. If a word or phrase gets dropped during dictation, it's so important to keep going...try not to let that small drop ruin the entire test.”

—Jodi Cardenas, RPR, CPE, TCRR, CSR

HOW TO DROP THIS HABIT

Keep writing. I don't care how mad you are. Just keep going. You are training to be a professional machine writer, and professional machine writers don't just stop writing when it gets tough. If you want, slow down your writing pace/rhythm so that you won't feel as pressured to finish off the test that you did not pass. Make the situation a little easier for yourself so that you're not angry and stressed. But whatever happens, don't stop writing. Ever.

Underperforming on a Certain Part of the Test

While in my middle speed classes, I remember one day a student commenting after the end of a dictation test, “I always crash at the end.” Other students around her started nodding in agreement. Whether it was due to nerves or mind-chatter, she felt that the end of her tests suffered the most.

Do you notice that you tend to wreck on the first two minutes of a speed test? Perhaps your writing suffers right in the middle two minutes of the exam? Or maybe your writing suffers on the last two minutes of the test? For me personally, I had difficulties with maintaining in the middle of the test. I realized that I put the necessary pressure on myself in the beginning and end to write sufficiently but tended to relax during the middle.

If you feel unable to tell which part the test you are weakest at, the next five tests you transcribe, notice which section has the most errors, drops, or bad strokes. Is it the first third of your transcript, the middle third, or the last third? Five tests should give you a good-enough average to clearly see which part of the test you are underperforming on, if any.

HOW TO DROP THIS HABIT

The quickest way to eliminate this problem is to bring your awareness to it. As was just discussed, transcribing five tests and then looking through all the errors will help you see which part of the test is weakest. However, you may already know if it’s the beginning, middle, or end that suffers the most just by noticing how you write and/or feel during that portion. Once your weakest part of the exam is in your awareness, you can begin to focus on whatever solutions you need for that part. If you are relaxing too much at a certain point, begin to apply a healthy amount of pressure on yourself when that part of the test comes up to keep your writing sharp and intense. If you are suddenly flooded with mind-chatter at a certain point, begin to practice the attention shift or brain-shut-off techniques discussed earlier to keep your focus where it needs to be.

If you are overcome with nerves on a certain portion of the exam, apply the calming techniques that are taught in the next chapters as needed during testing. The student in my class who brought up always crashing at the end of the test was already 90% there to solving her problem – she was already aware of when her performance suffered during that five-minute dictation. All she had to do from there was find the technique that helped her raise her performance, depending on the problem.

Treating the Test Differently Than Any Other Five-Minute Dictation

After learning the “get it the first time” philosophy and the mental simulation technique, this one seems obvious. But this problem still persists if you treat any dictation test differently than any other five-minute dictation. If you notice yourself putting more pressure on yourself or applying more intensity and focus for a dictation test, yet you are not doing these things for any five-minute dictation you hear, then it’s time to change that.

You want to get used to writing to every five-minute dictation like your life depends on it. This kind of mental conditioning is the absolute fastest and simplest way to reduce all intimidation of the certification exam, which significantly and automatically raises your performance when the time comes to test for your license.

HOW TO DROP THIS HABIT

Any five-minute dictation (a test or not), whether it’s in class, in your practicing session, or in any other situation, must be considered in your mind as critical. Treat this five-minute dictation as if it’s the state certification exam, and strive for 95% accuracy the very first time you hear it. Picture yourself at the state test at that very moment; get used to that feeling. If you condition yourself to this kind of pressure now, your actual certification exam will feel like just another day. It is said that it takes 21 days (three weeks) to learn or drop habits with consistent, conscious

adjustment. I would agree with that, just as a very general rule. However, it's important to adjust your habits in baby steps. Taking extreme action to drop or learn new habits won't last long since that size of adjustment is more uncomfortable.

It's easier to accomplish any goal (or learn/drop habits) in tiny, manageable steps. If any of these solutions to dropping bad testing habits seem like massive feats to you, break them up into more manageable, bite-sized portions. Then scale up your efforts as the baby steps become easier and easier.

Using Calming Methods

“Nerves getting in the way seems to be one of the top reasons preventing students from passing the CSR exam. One can practice as much as possible, but when it comes time to take the actual exam, I truly believe that staying as relaxed as possible is key. I believe that...getting a good night’s rest before exam day, and staying as calm as possible are the best ways to guarantee success with passing the CSR exam!”

—Karen Goh, CSR

Many of the techniques described here in earlier chapters have already addressed how to drastically reduce nerves, test intimidation, and unhealthy distractions in order to achieve a perfect emotional state to pass any certification exam. However, I completely sympathize with people who still need something more to calm them down in testing situations. For whatever reason, some need heavy-hitting techniques to keep the anxiety under control and out of the way.

If you are one of those people, you are not alone. Here are some techniques you can employ to keep your mind at rest and your nerves to a minimum.

Breath Control

Any physician will tell you the necessity of oxygen flow in your body to keep yourself in homeostasis. Breathing is not only essential to living; it’s also the key to keeping your mind and body at ease no matter how much stress you are experiencing in the moment. What’s so ironic is that so many of us, myself included, do not understand how to properly breathe and control our breath.

The more oxygen you flow into your system with a slow, steady pace, the more relaxed you feel. There are also breathing exercises that take your high levels of tension and release it. Your breathing is crucial to your sense of balance and well-

being. Learning how to properly breathe or control your breath can make all the difference in how you feel.

Steady Breathing: If you find yourself holding your breath during dictation – which is a HUGE no-no – then practice steady breathing until it becomes habitual. As you’re listening to dictation, think to yourself the words “Breathe in,” which will cause you automatically to inhale (remember, the brain loves to take suggestions and just go with it). As you feel properly filled up with air, now think the words “Breathe out.” Doing so will cause you to release your breath. All you have to do is think those thoughts of breathing in and out – the rest is taken care of for you by your mind as it turns the suggestion into a reflexive action.

Develop a slow rhythm between your “breathe in” and “breathe out” thoughts. Experiment between breathing in through the nose or mouth and breathing out through the nose or mouth. For most people, breathing in through the nose and breathing out through the mouth is most effective for maintaining proper air flow.

Focusing on your breathing during any dictation is monumentally helpful to you. While I was in my speed classes, I had such a terrible habit of holding my breath during tests. This just creates more stress as your body is not getting the steady flow of air it needs to maintain balance. By prioritizing your breathing, you guarantee your mind and body a state of ease that is necessary for passing any intense exam.

Relaxed Breathing: If you are looking for a breathing exercise that specifically helps your entire body relax, then this can be accomplished just as easily as maintaining your breathing rhythm.

Whenever you feel high tension, stress, or just want to release thoughts that are making you feel uncomfortable, do this simple exercise. All you do is take a **very deep** breath in (through your nose, preferably) and then hold that air for a few seconds. After holding in the air, let it all out **very slowly** (preferably through your mouth). You will notice a wave of relaxation wash over you, and you may feel your extremities tingle a little. Keep doing this technique until you feel as relaxed as you want to (just shy of falling off your chair and going to sleep).

Some people like to think a certain thought as they slowly exhale, such as “Let it all

go,” or “Let the thoughts go,” or “Just relax.” If you find that thinking certain phrases during the slow exhale enhances your experience, then by all means do so.

Try not to do this relaxation exercise while driving or operating any heavy machinery. It's important to pay attention to your surroundings in those situations, and relaxing too much may make you unaware of what's going on around you. In all other situations, though, go for it. Use your breathing to calm you down, as often as you want, throughout your day.

Self-hypnosis

When my brother and I discussed techniques that helped me with the CSR exam, I mentioned to him how I used self-hypnosis to keep me calm, auto-suggest myself into successful situations, and to generally program my brain into ways that benefit me. He became intrigued and asked if he could borrow my book. After applying the techniques in the book for a few months, he passed his very next exam.

I asked him what specifically he did to use hypnosis to help him. He explained that he set up a “trigger word” that he would use whenever he wanted to instantly relax and be at peace. He used self-hypnosis to set up this trigger word to work with his subconscious. Afterwards, whenever he was out in the world or taking any sort of test, he would just have to say the trigger word to himself and then experience a calm sensation wash all over him. It kept him at ease during uneasy situations, such as the Certified Shorthand Reporter certification exam.

Using hypnosis to set up “trigger words” like these is just one of many incredible uses. Self-hypnosis is completely safe and all natural. Nothing is required to safely practice hypnosis except for a place to lie down (or anywhere the body can be generally relaxed) and at least 10 minutes. Don't let the concept of hypnosis scare you. Once I educated myself on the subject, it actually turned out to be very interesting and whole lot of fun.

The book that I personally recommend is *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Hypnosis* by Roberta Temes. Even if you know absolutely nothing about hypnosis, this book takes you through the whole process and gives you a very well-rounded explanation on the topic in its entirety. This is the very same book I had lent to my brother.

You can use self-hypnosis to suggest to yourself your success with the certification exam. You can use self-hypnosis to set up trigger words or trigger situations that then enable you to feel or experience certain things. You can use self-hypnosis to convert your subconscious from fear-based thinking into success-based thinking. All this and more can be safely done with self-hypnosis.

I know this idea may sound strange, but it's incredibly effective.

Tension Relief

While I was in my middle speed classes, I started to notice that my neck became more and more stiff with every passing day. I even had little protrusions surfacing on the back of my neck. It turns out I was carrying my tension and stress in my neck (these days I tend to carry it in my jaw).

Training for court reporting is tough. Eventually you will experience stress and tension as you move up your speed and begin to train for the state certification exam. This is natural. If court reporting were easy, everyone would be doing it.

Become aware of where you carry your tension or stress. Become aware of how you act when you are perpetually stressed out. Do you tend to eat more when stressed? Do you get angry when stressed? Do you become destructive when stressed? Do you get stiff in certain parts of the body when stressed? Do you experience pain or discomfort in certain parts of your body when stressed?

Becoming aware of how you carry your tension is the first step to getting that tension fixed. I would recommend a receiving a professional full-body massage every three to six months while training to be a court reporter (and even more often when you actually are a court reporter). If you are uncomfortable getting a full-body massage, then just have the part of your body that carries tension massaged. In my case, I would have gone and gotten my neck and shoulders massaged to relieve that tension. I would have also gotten my hands massaged since those are my main tools for court reporting.

Be good to yourself. Find ways to relax and relieve the tension. Earlier in the book I said that the techniques in this book should be applied six days a week. That is because you should always have one day to yourself to do whatever you please. It's

important to separate yourself from the grind for at least one full day. Even health trainers recommend having one “cheat day” while maintaining a nutritional regimen.

Next we’ll explore a topic that can mean a world of difference for your emotions.

It’s easier to accomplish any goal (or learn/drop habits) in tiny, manageable steps. If any of these solutions to dropping bad testing habits seem like massive feats to you, break them up into more manageable, bite-sized portions. Then scale up your efforts as the baby steps become easier and easier.

Interacting With Your Inner Child

Just go with me on this one, and please keep an open mind.

Would you agree with me that, all things being considered, human beings have basic needs? Would you agree with me that your current level of happiness can be measured by the distance between what you want and what you have? Ignoring the more “complicated” issues of life, would you agree that deep inside every individual is a very basic person who simply wants what it wants?

Those questions are pointing to the concept of a person’s “inner child.” This inner child has straightforward wants, needs, and ideas of what would make it happy. This inner child is never complicated – it usually either feels bad or good, and it’s easy to tell which at any given moment when a person is honest with themselves.

What if you could tend to that “inner child” to dramatically increase your confidence and happiness?

Let’s try exploring this concept from another angle. Let’s say a young child was trying to learn a skill equivalent to court reporting, something that takes performance-based ability and coordination. If that child failed a test based on this skill, how would you treat that child? Would you scold it, berate it, and make it feel very bad for failing? Or would you take care of it, comfort it, and encourage it to keep trying? Your answer is probably the latter.

Well, if that’s the case, then why do you treat yourself so badly when you are not achieving your goals?

Every time you insult yourself, beat yourself up, or express the lack of faith in your own abilities, you are doing so to your inner-most child, your most basic self, that little soul inside you that just wants love and approval. I know this may sound a little too simple, but it’s true if you really think about it. Observe how you really treat yourself, what you really think about yourself, and how you react to your successes and failures alike.

Being good to your inner child, or “inner self”, is NOT an excuse to put yourself in a constant state of denial. It’s not about pretending there are unicorns and rainbows outside when it’s actually raining. It’s a matter of being honest with yourself about your situation, and then encouraging your inner being. When you regularly communicate with yourself and give yourself support, faith, and positive attention, you boost your confidence, you increase happiness, and you reinforce ease of mind into your daily living.

Let’s say you totally blow a speed test. I mean really just **fail hard** at a test. If you had to immediately sit yourself in front of a mirror and talk to yourself about this failed exam, what would you say? What’s your first reaction on how to communicate with **you**?

Think about that.

Don’t make yourself your own worst enemy. Don’t make every speed test an exhibition fight against yourself. Don’t tell other people that if you were only talented enough, only fast enough, only good enough, only THEN could you be successful. Don’t look at your performance and say that you are the problem.

You are not the problem when it comes to passing any court reporting certification exam. You just need to raise your level of performance to a passing rate – and all the chapters in this book explain how to do just that. You may need to boost a part of yourself, either your physical aspect (writing abilities) and/or psychological aspect. It’s just a matter of strengthening what’s weak and building off your strengths wherever you can. None of that equates to you not being “good enough.” It’s just a matter of **persistent application** of techniques and strategies that raise your level of performance. And anyone can persistently apply something – especially you.

That last paragraph sure sounds a lot different than things you may say to yourself, such as:

“I need to just write faster.”

“I don’t think I can do this.”

“The test is just too hard.”

“I’m not as talented as people who passed.”

“Why do I always sabotage myself?”

“Of course I failed that test.”

Pay attention to what you say to yourself, what you think about yourself. Pay attention to how you feel about yourself, what your inner child may be craving that you are not giving it (encouragement, affection, forgiveness, etc.). Emotions are real. Psychology is real. Your inner child is real. If you can change the thoughts and emotions you feed yourself about your own abilities, you can easily and quickly boost your confidence and natural talents.

Be good to yourself. The most important opinion about you in the entire world is your own.

Final Thoughts

I hope this journey towards getting yourself more-than-ready for your state certification exam was surprising and enjoyable. I whole-heartedly believe in all the techniques and applications discussed in these chapters, and I encourage you to the fullest in actually trying them.

I want to thank you personally for keeping an open mind, and thank you even more for actually **applying** these exercises and techniques. I am excited to hear your success story.

Speaking of which...

In regards to all the material in this book, your feedback is incredibly important. Now I want to hear from you. Please e-mail me at [**success@passthecourtreportingexam.com**](mailto:success@passthecourtreportingexam.com) and tell me your success story or anything that really helped you after applying anything from this book (or even if it wasn't from the book). Your personal experience can benefit others. One of the quickest, most effective methods of encouragement is sharing and reading others' success stories.

But there will always be more winning strategies, hacks, and tips to unlocking your God-given ability to become a certified court reporter. I want to hear from those of you who were bold enough to try something different or unconventional and benefitted from it. Please e-mail me your story at [**success@passthecourtreportingexam.com**](mailto:success@passthecourtreportingexam.com)

Future editions of this book will include your success stories and strategies. I can't overstate how important it is to hear from you. Together we can build a positive community of successful court reporting students so that others can prosper from it.

If you ever have any questions or feedback, please send me a message at [**cale@passthecourtreportingexam.com**](mailto:cale@passthecourtreportingexam.com) and I'll be glad to speak with you as soon as I can.

I wish you great amounts of success and happiness, no matter what your endeavor may be. You deserve it.

- ***Cale McCabe, CSR, AAS***

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Many blessings and wild success be with you.

-Cale