

Court Reporting Methods Used in Florida's Trial Courts

The technology of what is today called court reporting has evolved through time and continues to change. Throughout most of the 20th century court reporting was conducted by reporters using stenographic machines. Today court reporting in Florida is provided through a combination of technologies. A description of the most commonly used court reporting methods is provided below.



Stenograph Machine

Stenography - The stenograph machine, introduced in 1913, essentially mechanized shorthand, or manual stenography. Using a stenograph machine, a stenographer presses a system of keys, which in turn creates a series of codes on a scrolling paper tape. If a written transcript of a proceeding is needed, a stenographer or transcriptionist transcribes the coded text to produce a readable document. Stenographic machine recording, along with typed transcripts,

became the predominant method of creating a court record in the 20th century.

Computer-Aided Transcription - The emergence of small computers in the late 1970s and 1980s added new capabilities to stenography. Computer-aided transcription, or CAT, became possible when small computers were added to stenograph machines, allowing the keystrokes to be recorded on a disk or in the internal memory of the computer, as well as on the paper tape. This digitized record can then be translated into unedited text by the computer. If a written transcript is needed, a stenographer or transcriptionist edits the text before the official transcript is made available.

Real-Time Court Reporting - As computers became faster and more powerful, CAT systems became capable of translating a digitized record contemporaneously, producing an unedited written document even as the record is captured. The unedited text can be viewed immediately, and later corrected by the stenographer. The speed and quality of this type of system, known as real-time stenography, is familiar to anyone who has followed the closed caption text of a live television program.

Voice Writing - Voice writing involves a court reporter speaking directly into a voice silencer, which is a hand-held mask containing a microphone. The court reporter repeats the testimony into the mask creating an audio record of the proceeding. By speaking into the mask, the voice of the reporter is contained and is not heard by participants in the courtroom. Voice writers record everything verbalized by judges, witnesses, attorneys, and other parties in a proceeding and may also record gestures and emotional reactions.



Analog Audio Cassette Recorder

Analog Audio/Video Recording - The development of analog recording technology in the 20th century made it possible to directly capture and preserve the actual sounds of spoken words. By the 1960s, some courts were using tape recorders. The best technology at the time was magnetic, or analog, tape. It is still

used by some courts today, most commonly in proceedings that are not likely to need transcripts. A more recent method for capturing the proceeding is analog video recording (i.e., VHS). For both video and audio cassette recording, the courtroom must be equipped with a tape recording machine and suitable microphones. While someone must operate the machine, including reloading, marking, and storing the tapes; the skills required are far less than those expected for a stenographer. Tape recorders are often operated by personnel who have other duties in the courtroom, such as clerk of court staff, a bailiff, or even a judge or magistrate. If a written transcript is needed, the audio may be played back and transcribed by a court reporter to produce a written document.

Digital Audio/Video Recording - The current state of the art technology for audio/video recording employs digital recording instead of analog tape. Digital court recording is the audio, and often video, recording of a court proceeding using digital technology that may be saved to a CD, DVD, network drive, or server. If a written transcript is needed, the audio and/or video may be played back and transcribed to produce a written document. With most digital court recording technology, microphones are strategically placed in areas of a courtroom where judges, attorneys, parties, witnesses, and juries are located. Video cameras may also be placed in order to visually capture proceedings.

There are three basic types of digital court recording operating technology. The first type is a portable device such as a lap-top or hand-held device (MP3 player). These devices allow for recording in one location at a time and are typically operated by a digital court reporter, judge, or magistrate. The next type is a non-portable stand-alone system or workstation that is permanently located in a courtroom or hearing room. These systems are typically operated by a digital court reporter.



Central Control Room Monitor Workstation

The third type is a remote system in which the audio/video is recorded to a server and monitored by a digital court reporter via monitor workstation located in a separate room (central control) located on or off-site.

Digital court reporters perform several critical tasks when monitoring proceedings. They “tag” the case number, participant names, and key events of the proceeding. These “tags” are digitally saved with the record and act as an index for the recording and for creating the transcript. The digital court reporter also provides instant playback during a proceeding when directed to do so by the judge.