

Who keeps a record of every word spoken in a criminal trial, and how has it changed?

[CHRIS SUMMERS](#)

When I started out as a crime reporter in the 1990s all Crown Court trials would have a stenographer in the room, whose job it was to make a transcript of what was said. But nowadays the words are all recorded on a machine which – as it did during the recent trial of Yonas Girma (TY) and Ellis Heather (Rack5) – sometimes breaks down.

In today's Substack I explain why stenographers were phased out in Britain and why they are still thriving in the United States (pictured below).



I sometimes described myself as a “court reporter” because in Britain that is a role which is specifically carried out by a journalist.

But “court reporter” has a totally different meaning in the United States, where it is another term for a stenographer whose job it is to take an accurate note of every moment of a criminal trial.

They are not journalists but employees of the court, someone whose notes have to be

100% accurate.

The National Court Reporters Association (NCRA) represents around 20,000 stenographers in the United States and its president, Cindy Isaacsen, told me: “I have been a court reporter for going on 38 years and I have been told since 1985 when I started school that I was going to be replaced.”

Ms Isaacsen (pictured below) said: “I currently work in a courthouse, working in criminal, civil, and juvenile courts. I just finished up a three-day rape trial. I am always busy.”



“There are numerous accounts of court records captured by digital and other modes such as automated speech recognition failing to stand up as the official record because of technical difficulties and such,” Ms Isaacsen added.

Stenographers in the US are also trying to shake off their image of being a strange leftover from the past.

[Meet Denee](#), the “Stenofluencer” who posts videos on TikTok.

So how does it work?

The stenotype machine is like a mini-typewriter.

But it has a minimal keyboard, which omits key letters like i, m or n, and by hitting a combination of keys - known as chords – the stenographer can produce the missing letters and produce phonetic sounds like “th” or “sh”.

When I interviewed Mary Sorene – a stenographer who started work at the Old Bailey in 1971 – in 2011, she told me: “Stenographers vary greatly. The difference between the best and the rest is like a concert pianist and a pub pianist.”

Mary by the way is still going, [according to her website](#), which said she was training stenographers in Nigeria in 2022.

Sadly stenographers – who worked in British courts for decades – are now just a memory here. They were phased out about 15 years ago – supposedly to save the Ministry of Justice £5m a year - with the last Old Bailey stenographer’s contract running out in March 2012.

Actually, I really miss them because when there was a break in proceedings and the judge and jury had left the courtroom, you used to be able to sidle over to them and check what a witness had said, knowing they would have a verbatim note.

You can’t do that with their replacements – the DARTS (Digital Audio Recording Transcription) machine.

It sits there recording every word that is said, like a hi-tech eavesdropper. The court clerk keeps an eye on it but DARTS is pretty low-maintenance. But on 8 June 2026 – when Yonas Girma (the rapper TY) and Ellis Heather (rapper Rack5) were on trial for the murder of Stephen “Stevo” Morrisson – the court clerk in Court 14 suddenly noticed DARTS had stopped recording.

In case you missed it, [I wrote a Substack about the trial](#) last month. Girma was in the midst of giving his evidence-in-chief to his barrister, Patrick Gibbs KC, when DARTS failed.

Mr Gibbs had to stop his questions. Judge Lickley asked the jury to take a break, and the clerk and a court technician spent the next 20 minutes figuring out how to reset the DARTS machine. And eventually the trial re-started.

The transcript of a criminal trial is an extremely important document. If, for example, Ellis Heather's barrister Ian Henderson KC – or a future legal team – wanted to mount an appeal against conviction they would need to check the transcript.

You cannot just appeal on the basis of “I think the judge said something derogatory about me to the jury but I can't remember the exact words” or “I have a vague recollection that Witness A lied about me.”

There will be a court transcript for [every UK criminal trial](#) and the details on how to obtain one can be found here.

I warn you that they can be very expensive. [Often they charge](#) something like £1.50 “per 72 words” which may not sound a lot but you would be amazed how many words there are in a day's court transcript.

But if you are mounting a legal appeal on the basis of, for example, a judge's directions to the jury, then it is vital that you get an accurate record of *exactly* what was said, so you will pay for it.

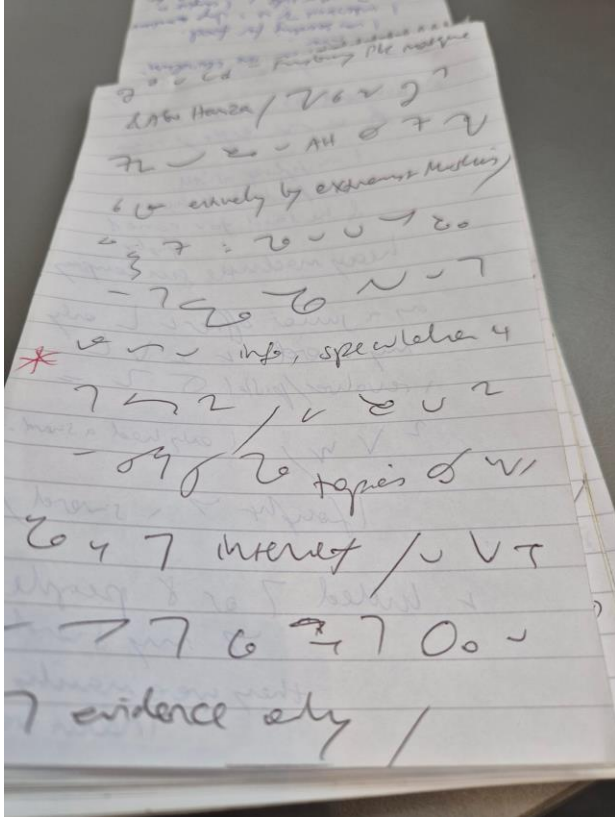
[Different rules](#), and costs, apply in the US, of course.

Since DARTS came into being around 2011, it has recorded thousands of trials, creating 600 terabytes of audio data – equivalent to nearly one million CDs (if you remember them). Earlier this year His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service (HMCTS) announced they had finished modernising the system - transferring it onto the cloud - and allowing court staff to access historic records of trials “without juggling multiple passwords”.

Susan Goss from transcription company Escribers [said](#): “DARTS is a platform we rely on heavily as part of the administration of justice. The improvements and time saved waiting for audio are proving very great indeed.”

In 2011, just before UK courts did away with them, [I wrote this article](#) about the dying art of the stenographer.

I explain that the standard “speed of speech” is often defined as 180 words per minute (wpm). That speed is embedded in my mind from journalism college, where I learned the skill of shorthand (pictured below).



I passed my 100wpm shorthand test. What good is that, I hear you ask, if people speak at 180wpm?

Well, you often find that people slow down when they are speaking in a court of law. And if they don't, the judge will often ask them to slow down.

I also find that my brain will manage to speed up when there is a "killer quote" or a crucial fact being told by a witness, and I will be able to take a note of it, even if I miss the entire sentence.

In case you were wondering – it is illegal for journalists or anyone (other than the DARTS machine itself) to make a video or audio recording of a UK criminal trial.

Which is why we hacks need shorthand.

But while 100wpm in shorthand is good enough for most journalists, it's not fast enough for legal purposes.



They need to know EVERY word that was said.

Hence the stenotype machine, which can record up to 225 words per minute.

In fact Texas-based stenographer Mark Kislingbury holds the world record – an astonishing 360 words per minute.

But the Ministry of Justice – during the age of "austerity" under David Cameron – decided to dispense with stenographers and replace them with DARTS.

They were convinced that high-quality audio recordings and digital storage meant stenographers

were no longer needed.

I believe the DARTS recordings from trials are stored and then, if someone does need a transcript, a touch typist is brought in to type up what appears on the audio.

It is rarely the full trial that is required. It will just be a key section, which is being challenged by a defence team, or occasionally a prosecutor.

Sally Lines, who was one of the last Old Bailey stenographers, was convinced the new digital system was not a match for her and her colleagues' skill.

"The strength of stenography is that if you are listening to something on a tape it's hard to distinguish tiny nuances," she told me. "Sometimes you need to almost lip-read. Sometimes there is patois or slang or you need to know the context of the case," Ms Lines said.

Chris Grzesik, another stenographer, told me: "The primary reason I'm a stenographer is that I like being at the Old Bailey. It's the best theatre in the world."

I agree with him there.

There have of course been a handful of cases when human "court reporters" were found to be fallible.

One was a guy called Daniel Kochanski who turned up to work drunk and was fired after being found to have repeatedly typed: "I hate my job", instead of the actual trial's dialogue. Kochanski's shoddy work affected 30 court cases, including a mortgage fraud trial in which a man was convicted of trying to hire a hitman to take out a witness.

When a stenography expert examined Kochanski's work on the trial they described it as "gibberish".

Then in 2024 Lorna M. Martin, a stenographer at the Municipal Circuit Trial Court in Santa Ignacia in the Philippines, was [found guilty of gross misconduct and gross insubordination](#). Among the claims made against her were that she barged into a judge's office and screamed abuse at him for correcting her draft orders.

But Kochanski and Martin are just bad apples and many countries, including the United States, have kept faith with stenographers.

[In NCRA is holding its national conference](#) in Bellevue, Washington state, later this month.

Ms Isaacsen told me: "Due process reflects the spirit of America and the importance that we place on keeping the integrity of the judicial system intact."

"That means that having an accurate, secured, and protected record created by a human court reporter is vital for maintaining fair and just legal proceedings. Our courts recognise this," she said.