



How stenographers help create the Senate record in record time

Senate stenographers – also called parliamentary reporters – record the words senators say in committee or in the Chamber. With every key stroke, stenographers create closed captions on broadcasts, live captions for accessibility and the first version of Senate transcripts.

Heidi Archer, a parliamentary reporter who joined the Senate in 2022, shares the secret behind stenographers' speed and discusses why this work is a crucial part of supporting the parliamentary process.



Senate stenographer Heidi Archer.

The average person types at 40 words per minute, which is far slower than most people talk. How do stenographers write so quickly?

Your QWERTY keyboard requires you to type every letter, but my steno machine is all about sounds. Steno is a shorthand language written using key combinations that represent sounds instead of letters. There are up to 8 million combinations, and they are incredibly efficient, allowing me to write (stenos don't call it typing) at 250 words per minute and higher. To turn my steno into English, I feed it into software that

scans my steno dictionary to create 98% accurate live captions. You can watch this [video on how stenography works](#) if you want to know more.

How do you prepare to write during a committee meeting or Chamber sitting?

As we all know, each day is an adventure at the Senate, and I need to be prepared for anything. When captioning a committee or the Chamber, I review the agenda, witness lists and any speeches or documents provided. Then I create steno outlines (dictionary entries) for the meeting or sitting. For example, if the topic is climate change and the Chignecto Isthmus (a strip of land connecting New Brunswick and Nova Scotia), I will create a steno stroke for “Chignecto Isthmus” – saving me 5+ strokes on the steno machine.

After that, I verify all connections to the Senate servers, confirm Zoom links, review emails and coordinate with my steno writing partner (we work in teams because you should only write for so long without a break). When I am not writing, I’m prepping for the next meeting or scoping (a highly specialized form of editing) captions in transcript form.

The Debates and Publications team works hard to ensure every public committee meeting and Chamber sitting is captioned live, scoped, edited, translated, and ready for posting the next day – and I love every minute of it.



A stenography machine with the words "Hello from a Senate steno" in English and steno displayed on screen.

How does your work support accessibility for persons with disability?

I am also proud to be employed by an institution that deeply values accessibility, an issue that affects disabled folks across Canada, including my partner. The writing I do as a stenographer produces the closed captioning on Senate broadcasts that viewers can use to follow Senate proceedings.

It also populates the Senate's Communication Access Real-Time Translation (CART) system. CART is a tool that puts live captioning on a laptop or phone so users can participate in an event (where there is no broadcast) or meeting with the support of live captions. The new Senate CART application being tested right now is incredible – and it was built in-house!

People who want captions deserve the highest quality captions the Senate can deliver. I am excited to see this initiative roll out, providing low-barrier, easy-to-access live captions for all Senate public committee meetings and Chamber sittings.

What's the best part about your job?

Captioning and scoping can be a lonely gig at times, but I feel so privileged and energized to be part of such an incredible team here at the Senate. I am consistently impressed by everyone I work with – interpreters, fellow reporters, scopists, editors, senators, clerks, pages, managers, techs from the Information Services Directorate – I mean everyone! I learn something new every day in my role, and that is the best thing I could ask of a career.

