

How Does it All Work?
Broadcast Captioning Equipment

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Okay, you probably know all about the work that goes into changing your writing for captioning and the endless hours of dictionary building and purging, but what about the technical end of it? You might ask, Do I need to hire a geeky computer guy to come connect the doohingy to the whatchamajingy? And how do I know what hoozamacallit to buy in the first place? Oh, not to mention where to buy it? And how much is this all gonna cost me?! Well, don't panic. Although it can get a little overwhelming, it's not entirely impossible to do on your own...with a little help from the "cable guy." Let's just say me and my cable guy are on a first-name basis. I even heard from a court reporting student who resides in my town that he was talking about me when he found out she had one of those "little machines."

Okay, okay, enough about the gossip mill in New Jersey. So where to start. The good news is you already have some of the equipment you'll need:

Steno machine. I have two. Always good to have a backup.

Computer. Ditto.

TV. I have two, one with captions on and one with captions off so I can see the graphics and Chyrons. Make sure it has a headphone jack and RCA jack for video input. And make sure it has closed captioning. I prefer 13" because I can fit two side by side along with my receivers, but you can use any size. It's a good idea to have them set up in front of you at eye level so you do not strain your neck.

VCR or DVD recorder. This is not required, just convenient to be able to record programming for review and/or to archive your work.

Now, the other bit of good news is, regarding the equipment you will need to purchase, it is not necessary to buy everything at once in order to caption. Of course, the more you have, the more marketable you are to captioning companies because you will be capable of captioning more programming. Let me elaborate on that point. If you work for a company captioning local news outside of your viewing market, you will not even need a TV to caption that show. You will simply listen to the broadcast through your phone line. On the other hand, if you have a big satellite dish, as I do, you will be able to caption a syndicated show that someone without a dish will not be able to see. It is usually a requirement that you can see a syndicated show.

So with that said, here are the basics to get you started:

Captioning Software. By far the most expensive item you will purchase. You may be able to save money by adding on to your current CAT software. Check with your vendor to see if they offer captioning software. Offhand, I am aware of the following that do:

**Eclipse AccuCAP
Cheetah Captivator
ProCat CaptiVision
RapidText Rapid Caption
CATalyst BCS for caseCATalyst4**

USRobotics 33,600 bps External Modem or comparable *slower, older* modem. The modem is what communicates with the encoder, which is at the station or network of the show you will be captioning. Unfortunately, the encoders communicate best with slower, older modems and, therefore, the 56k or faster modem that came with your computer may cause problems. Forget about cable and DSL for captioning. For webcasting, yes, but that's another article. No matter what speed modem you get, you will have to bump the baud rate down to 1200 in order to communicate with the encoders. I have used USRobotics (now owned by 3Com) for years and have had good luck with them. However, they are not easy to find. I recently picked up a couple on eBay for under \$25 apiece. It is important to have many backup modems on hand, especially since they are becoming harder and harder to find. I also recommend using an external modem because you can see the lights flashing while you are writing, and you can easily see if the modem hangs up, in which case time is of the essence to redial and get back on-air. And obviously, if something goes wrong with your internal modem, you will not be able to switch it out with another one quickly.

Telephone and audio system. Shop around carefully and don't skimp on quality; your captions are only as good as you can hear. Some options include:

CircuitWerkes TelTap and audio amplifier.

Gentner Hybrid Coupler and audio amplifier. Unfortunately, this item is no longer manufactured. Again, if you can find one on eBay or elsewhere, grab it.

Phone with Headset (not cordless). You are not going to get the best quality sound with this setup.

Phone amplifying system such as HelloDirect or Plantronics.

Marantz PMD201 Cassette Recorder. A captioner recently recommended this to me, and I purchased one – you got it – on eBay for significantly less than a new one. It works very well.

Belkin USB Serial Port or comparable, unless your computer comes with an extra serial port. Some of the newer computers do not come with any serial ports! For captioning, you need two, one for the external modem and one for the steno machine.

UPS Backup Power Supply. Basically, it is a good idea to have a backup power supply in case of power outage. You will need enough time to allow somebody to

find a replacement for you as opposed to the entire time left on your program. So anything over 30 minutes is workable.

DSS Satellite Receiver & Dish, DirecTV or DISH Network. Now, my biggest beef with DSS is there is a several-second delay; most captioning companies require use of audio line in conjunction with DSS, which means the sound quality drops AND you are hearing the action before you are seeing it, which can be confusing and definitely more difficult to caption.

Big Satellite Dish. Ah, the mother of all...oops, sorry, gotta keep it clean☺ If you can afford the investment (about \$3,000 for the dish and installation), go for it. You will not experience a delay and you will increase your value as a captioner if you have one. Of course, my neighbors might not see it that way!

Finally, there is a bunch of miscellaneous items you will need to connect it all together, such as power strips, steno cables, modem cables, surge protectors, audio patch cable with two phono plugs (if using Gentner hybrid coupler), audio patch cable with four phono plugs (if using Gentner hybrid coupler), good quality headphones, mini to ¼ jacks for headphones (or vice versa – depending on audio system and/or amplifier), steno machine chargers, audio plugs & cables (depending on audio system and/or amplifier), videotapes or DVDs, floppy diskettes or writable CDs, external speakers (depending on audio system and/or amplifier), and a partridge in a pear tree! No, no, seriously, and a **BIG GIANT CALENDAR** with different color markers to keep your work straight. Oh, okay, that's not equipment but sure makes the room bright☺

Now, once you get all the equipment in place, call the cable guy and have him figure out how to make it all work. Just kidding. But you will need to order some subscription services depending on what equipment you have chosen (cable, DSS, big dish). And be sure and take advantage of the cable guy and the satellite guy, because they have to connect your existing equipment to the new receivers and cable boxes that they install. Telephone service is probably the costliest ongoing expense captioners have. You will need a minimum of three lines; four is even better, plus a cell phone. The first line is for your home number. The second line is for your audio; third, modem; and fourth can be for a fax machine or backup modem. My cell phone acts as an emergency line; some companies require an emergency on-air line in the event they need to reach you while you are on the air. Some companies require it to be a land line.

Although your monthly phone bill may cause your family members to check for 900 numbers, there are a number of reasonable long-distance plans available. They vary greatly, including unlimited calling plans, which I recently switched to, but they are not available in certain areas. Shop around and do not assume all plans are created equal. Be careful when using dial-around numbers (10-10 numbers). Some may lease lines from other companies, and it could result in garbled captions.

I promised I would give you some information on where to buy and how much it will cost you. Most of the items listed can be found in a computer store, Radio Shack, electronics stores, and on the internet. Captioning software as an add-on will cost in the range of \$3,000 to \$5,000. If you do not have the CAT software, it will cost another \$3,000 to \$5,000. An approximation of the total cost of the other items is in the range of \$1,000 to \$2,000, excluding the steno machine and computer. Subscription services are

relatively inexpensive, basically \$50 to \$200 a month depending on how many movie channels you order (which may have nothing to do with captioning!). Expect your phone bill to rise quite a bit, anywhere from \$200 to \$600 per month, but as I mentioned, with an unlimited calling plan, I pay as little as \$200 per month, and that includes all four lines and my personal calls.

Well, you are all set. Good luck! And as always, I am available through email if you have questions or need assistance with getting your equipment up and running.