



Resources for students  
from The American  
Occupational Therapy Association

# Your career in Occupational Therapy

## Life on the Job as an Occupational Therapy Assistant Recent Graduates Talk About Their Work

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### ■ Wide involvement and a varied caseload

Sarah Black, BA, COTA/L

*Graduate of Mountain State University, Beckley,  
West Virginia*

Medical rehabilitation hospital, inpatient facility

I am responsible for continuation of care for patients who have been evaluated by an occupational therapist. The patient caseload varies in diagnosis, including stroke, brain injury, spinal cord injury, multiple sclerosis, amputations, motor vehicle accidents, falls, or deconditioning (overall weakness). Patient ages range from 15 to 100 years.

An average day might consist of a maximum of eight patients, most typically seen for 90 minutes each. In addition to treatment, family training, family conferences with the interdisciplinary team, and working with occasional students for their Level II fieldwork, I contribute to two committees, the stroke committee and wheelchair track and field. I also run separate groups on scheduled days, such as the constraint-induced therapy “CIT” group, and safety and fall education “SAFE” group. I assist with an eating group as well. Salary for a position such as mine can range from \$22,000 to \$28,000 a year, depending upon experience.

Outside of work, I am secretary of the West Virginia Occupational Therapy Association and I am currently attending West Virginia University’s COTA/L to MOT (Master’s of Occupational Therapy) program.

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## ■ A career for a returning student

Valerie Presley, COTA/L

*Graduate of Greenville Technical College, Greer, South Carolina*

### Skilled nursing facility

I was a returning adult student, starting my education part-time at 28 years old because I have two children. I finished the occupational therapy assistant program at age 32. I have been working at a 39-bed facility for 2 years with some experience at larger facilities as I am needed. I have treated a variety of patients with diagnoses including, but not limited to, stroke, hip replacement, dementia, quadriplegia, fractures, organic brain disorder, psychological disorders, learning disabilities, deafness, blindness, multiple sclerosis, and diabetes. My patients have ranged in age from 42 to 100. I work PRN (working on an as-needed basis), this allows me to work a very flexible schedule of 20 to 30 hours per week. The average starting salary in my area for PRN work is \$15 to \$18 an hour, with some companies including continuing education, medical benefits, and paid time off.

A typical day for me involves addressing the goals set by the supervising occupational therapist. I keep a balance of routine daily skills as well as new activities to keep the patient interested and challenged. The patients may complete exercises; manipulate buttons, zippers, or snaps; make a piñata; make a collage; water plants around the facility; or fold towels. In the activities I may be addressing a skill that needs strengthening such as hand-eye coordination, endurance, functional standing balance, depth perception, fine-motor coordination, or other areas. We either send the patient back to their home, to a family member's home, to an assisted-living facility, or help them become as independent as possible within our facility. I enjoy my work.

## ■ Finding rewards in the classroom

Kara Kightlinger, COTA

*Graduate of Pennsylvania College of Technology, Williamsport, Pennsylvania*

### Franklin Elementary School in Littleton, Colorado

My position as an occupational therapy assistant is part of a team in the special education department of an elementary school. Here I have the rewarding opportunity to work with students in kindergarten through fifth grade, of varying disabilities, to achieve and access their grade-level curriculum to the best of their abilities. I work with students who have been diagnosed with autism, Down syndrome, developmental delay, ADD/ADHD, Angelman's syndrome, and other severe

needs disorders, along with many learning disabilities. There is nothing more fulfilling than when the students achieve milestones, whether it be taking their first step or writing their name for the first time and knowing that together, you and the student have achieved something that is very meaningful to them.

A typical day in the life of an elementary school occupational therapy assistant consists of working with all of the children, either individually or in small groups, on fine-motor and gross-motor skills in such a multisensory way that the students feel that they are having fun but also working towards an educational goal. One student may be practicing handwriting skills by forming letters in shaving cream while another student is engaged in a beanbag-toss game with a partner to work on eye-hand coordination and turn-taking skills.

Every day is new and exciting in this career, and looking forward to each day is how I know I have chosen the perfect match for me. The best part of being an occupational therapy assistant is that you can be as creative and inventive as you wish as long as you know what you want, and get it!

If you have specific questions about a career in occupational therapy, please contact [educate@aota.org](mailto:educate@aota.org).

Visit [www.aota.org](http://www.aota.org) for more information about the profession and the activities of the American Occupational Therapy Association.



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