



*Handwriting and Hand Printing
Identification
Basic concepts for investigators*

Five Principles of Handwriting Identification

Ronald N. Morris and Associates, Inc.
Ronald N. Morris
Forensic Document Examiner
Certified Forensic Document Examiner

Five Principles of Handwriting and Hand Printing Identification

- I. The significance of any combination of characteristics, qualities, and features as evidence to establish the identity of a writer is, other things being equal:
 - A. Directly proportional to the speed, spontaneity, and naturalness with which the writing is written, and
 - B. The frequency of occurrence in random writings of the combination of those particular characteristics, qualities and features.

- II. The examined writing, questioned and known, must be suitable and sufficient in quantity and quality to conduct a meaningful examination and comparison. In some instances, either the questioned or known writing or both, is so limited or lacks sufficient individuality that a meaningful examination and comparison to determine authorship is not possible. Some letters and letter combinations, written singularly or in a limited combination, such as “eo,” “ee,” “ion,” a name like “Lee,” repetitive garland or arcade movements that are suppose to represent letters and letter combinations, etc., or numerals, such as a “1,” may not contain sufficient individuality for a meaningful examination and comparison. Initials are frequently unidentifiable because by themselves they may not be sufficient to identify their writer. When any of these factors are present, either singularly or in some combination:
 - A. It may not be possible to reach any conclusion concerning the identity of the writer of that material. The examiner began the examination from a position of neutrality and the observable evidence in the writing is not sufficient or significant enough to move him from that starting position.
 - B. In some situations there may be sufficient observable evidence within the examined writing to reach a very qualified conclusion, such as ...evidence was noted to indicate or suggest that..., and no higher. As in every case, the opinion is based only on the examination and comparison of the examined writings.

- III. The comparison process can become more difficult because of the adverse influence of one or more factors on either or both the questioned and known writing. Two examples are:
 - A. Unnatural writing resulting from a transitory factor affecting the writer at the time he is writing, i.e., stroke, drugs, alcohol, a cold writing hand, writing surface imperfections, etc.
 - B. When the writer attempts to conceal his normal handwriting habits by deliberately disguising his writing.

When examining writing affected by one or more of these factors, it may not be possible to accurately determine the significance that should be attached to the combination of characteristics, qualities, and features of the writing necessary to unequivocally identify or eliminate a writer. In such cases it may be possible to reach a qualified conclusion.

- IV. Based on the collective experiences and writings of forensic document examiners over the years no two writers have been found to write **exactly** the same way, incorporating in their writing **exactly** the same combination of characteristics, qualities, and features as another writer.
 - A. There is the possibility that two limited writings may be so close in characteristics, qualities, and features, that the individual writers of each cannot be determined
 - B. In like manner, no single writer has been found who can write exactly the same way each, and every time. Some normal range of variation in writing is expected in everyone’s writing. The extent of that range of variation is dependent upon that individual writer’s level of graphic maturity, as demonstrated by his relative speed of writing, pressure habits, and a multitude of additional factors outside the scope of this paper.

V. In simulating or tracing another person's writing, the imitator's goal is to copy or draw those characteristics, qualities, and features of the model writing that strike his eye most forcibly.

Typically, in a simulation, the simulator many times disregards those characteristics, qualities, and features of the model writing that are less conspicuous, or that he knows he cannot write. There may also be numerous other characteristics, qualities, and features of the model writing that he may never notice.

Are there writers who can simulate a writing so successfully that what they write cannot be distinguished from the model writing they used? Yes, but thankfully the number of writers having this skill and ability are rare.

It is virtually impossible to find any writer who can imitate exactly all of the characteristics, qualities, and features of another person's handwriting while simultaneously suppressing his own. This does not mean the simulator can be identified as the writer of the simulation based on the presence of their handwriting characteristics in the simulation.

Depending upon his success at simulating the model writing, he may incorporate some of his writing characteristics, qualities, and features in the attempted simulation. When this occurs, it may or may not be possible to reach some qualified conclusion concerning the probability of his writing the simulation. By definition, if the writing is a simulation, the writer is copying a model that is either in front of him at the time he is writing, or he is writing the simulation from memory. It is virtually impossible to find sufficient evidence in a simulation to identify the writer of the simulation.

The following is a universally accepted truth or axiom, although not a principle of handwriting and hand printing identification.

The result or opinion rendered in all examinations and comparisons performed by any forensic document examiner are based only on the evidence present in the actual document or documents examined.

All conclusions concerning authorship of writing on original documents is based on the examination and consideration of the evidence on the examined original. A conclusion reached based on the examination and comparison of a copy, photocopy, fax, microfilm, carbonless paper, etc., purportedly of the original document can not be extrapolated back to the original the copy purports to represent.

Making the assumption that the examined copy is an accurate representation of the original document the copy purports to represent, and the original is not a fabricated document, is not sufficient or supportable. There will always be evidence on the original document that will not be present on the copy. The examiner has an ethical obligation to advise the submitter of this fact.

There are several reasons why this is a universal truth or axiom. First, the process of photocopying and/or faxing documents introduces into the copies defects and distortion. Therefore, the writing on the copy can not be exactly the same as the original document that is being copied. The most recent and accurate work in this area was done by Mr. Robert Gervais.¹ His work demonstrates the introduction of defects and distortion in photocopies when the controlled original is written with blue and black ink, for both slow and rapid writing, and at different degrees of copy darkness.

In some situations, the examined copy may actually be a first, second, third, etc., generation copy, all of which were produced on different photocopiers. In some instances, a photocopy and not an original was placed in the fax machine for transmission. In this situation the problematic nature of the received fax is compounded. If the copy submitted for examination is a fax of a fax, the submitted document is even more problematic for a meaningful examination and comparison. In every case the original document is the best evidence. A first generation photocopy of an original is second best.

¹ Gervais, Robert, "A Study of Photocopier Distortion Through Interactive Animations." An unpublished paper presented at The American Society of Questioned Document Examiners annual conference in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, 2005.