Chapter 11

Introduction to Forensic Document Examination

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1. INTRODUCTION

Picture this scenario: the patrolman notices an abandoned automobile in the parking lot of a Las Vegas store. It matches the description of a missing person’s vehicle. The detectives respond and question the store manager about the missing victim. Checking the previous week’s videotape of the in-store camera covering the slot machines, they notice the missing female is on camera during the early morning hours. On the next sweep of the slot machines, the woman has disappeared. The store manager wonders if the message scrawled on the women’s restroom wall may have something to do with the case. The message, thought at first to be a rude joke, had been scrubbed off the metal stall wall. He recalled the message said something about murdering women.

The crime scene analysts respond to the scene. The analysts at the crime scene telephone the questioned document unit to determine what, if anything, can be done to visualize the message that has been removed. The crime scene analysts dismantle the metal dividing wall and take the evidence to the forensic laboratory.

Experience enables the forensic document examiner to determine that the two methods most likely to produce results will be infrared luminescence or luminescence using the alternate light source (ALS) (laser). Using the ALS and filtration, the writing that has been washed from the wall “magically” appears, allowing the examiners to photograph the writing, preserving the handwritten message as evidence (1).

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Evidence that may be of interest to a document examiner is not only found on paper; writing left on walls, mirrors, windows, plumbing pipes, the side of automobiles, or even on the bodies of victims are submitted to the Questioned Document Section for examination. Plain paper or tablets that do not appear to have any writing on them are also examined for indentations of writing. Though the majority of work performed by the forensic document examiner is the examination and comparison of handwriting and hand printing, other examinations include the deciphering of obliterations and erasures, typewriting, printing processes, computer printing, machine printing, machine impressions, office machine copies, fraudulent credit card manufacture/alteration, identification cards, ink, paper, and, in some agencies, footwear impressions. This chapter will discuss, without going into specific detail, the examinations performed by forensic document examiners. Examinations within the field of questioned documents cover a wide range and specialization within the field is becoming necessary. An entire book could be written regarding handwriting comparison alone. The purpose of this chapter is to explain what evidence can reveal and, perhaps, what evidence cannot inform the analyst, the investigator, and the litigators.

2. **Handwriting**

Most people learn handwriting from a system, such as Palmer, Zaner-Bloser, or the newer D’Nealian style. We usually learn to hand print and eventually graduate to a cursive handwriting style. This is referred to as “Copybook Style” because, in the past, the handwriting system was copied from a book of instruction and then repeatedly practiced. The copybook is a thing of the past, but many of us can recall the strip at the top of the chalkboard and the mimeographed sheets containing the alphabet that were the model of handwriting taught in the schoolroom. It now may be rare to find the same emphasis in practicing penmanship in the schoolroom as in the past. In recent years, wide assortments of handwriting systems are taught in schools (2).

As we learn to write and practice this writing, we develop our own individual handwriting habits and characteristics. Some people may stay mainly with a hand printed style, whereas others write completely in a cursive style. However, some others may combine a hand printed style with a cursive style sometimes referred to as script. Of course, some writers are more skilled than other writers based on their motor coordination and the amount of practice in penmanship they endure. This repeated exercise of handwriting formulates a person’s handwriting habit usually by the completion of adolescence. Some writers are capable of improving their writing through practice after this time, but usually a person is unable to write above their skill level. The writing habit becomes