J13 The Document Examiner's Role in Deciphering Handwriting of a Severely Impaired Writer

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The goals of this presentation are to illustrate the use of Write-On Software to aid in the decipherment of a university student's master exam. The student has a severe form of writing impairment.

Sometimes in a professional capacity experts are presented with a case that, on first inspection, does not immediately appear to fall within the scope of one's expertise. This paper describes one such example.

The author was asked to analyze an illegible handwritten university exam produced by a post-graduate student with dysgraphia. The disability is defined as an impairment of the ability to write generally caused by a brain dysfunction or disease. It manifests itself as a difficulty in automatically remembering and mastering the sequence of muscle motor movements needed in writing letters or numbers. The handwriting is distorted or incorrect – letterforms are inappropriately sized and spaced, as well as being poorly organized on the line and on the page. In addition, words are misspelled or used improperly, despite thorough instruction. This disorder is a processing problem that causes writing fatigue and interferes with the communication of ideas in writing. It is out of harmony with the writer's intelligence.

As a consequence, faculty members could not read this version of the exam and requested that it be typed for grading. Ultimately the professor came to question the integrity of the transcript. The task was to determine if the written text was accurately represented in the tran- script. To aid in this assignment, Write-On© Handwriting Comparison Software was utilized.

Write-On© is a computer program that provides an efficient method to assess natural variation by allowing the user to search for all instances of a given letter or word within a document. A typewritten transcript must be linked to scanned copies of the handwritten pages. Searches can then be conducted for specific letter strings and the results illustrated in an occurrence chart.

Also submitted was a second exam that had originally been handwritten by the student and then transcribed by a university staff member. This sample exam was used to learn the student's handwriting style and to assess how consistent the writing of repeated words was.

No evidence was found amongst the pages examined to indicate that the answers as seen in the transcript were not representative of the handwritten version. It warrants mentioning that without the aid of the specimen exam it would have been much more difficult, perhaps not even possible, to learn the student's handwriting.

The approach taken in this case has many similarities with a standard handwriting comparison. However, the objective was to decipher not to authenticate. As with any handwriting comparison, assessment of the natural variation, in this instance from one repeated word to the next, was critical to interpreting content. This methodology could also be applied in other files where legibility is an obstacle. Three such examples include interpreting a doctor's progress notes, resolving the content of a holographic will, and deciphering the interview notes of a journalist.

Dysgraphia, Document Examination, Impaired Writer

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