



Questioned Documents Section – 2005

J5 A Study of Business Letter Features

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The goal of this presentation is to assist the Forensic Document Examiner community with identifying features in word processed letters that are common and sometimes rare.

A literature review found no research that dealt with specific features in word processed letters that were considered common (class characteristics) or uncommon (individual characteristics) by the forensic document examiners. This presentation will impact the forensic community by providing a basis for making such determinations.

As part of their work, forensic document examiners examine word processed letters. The purpose of this study, the first of its kind, was to determine how common or rare certain features are in word processed business letters and if any of these features could determine the author or source. Initially 114 original business letters were obtained that were dated from 1999 through 2003. The letters originated from 22 different states and the District of Columbia. Specific features of the letters were selected for examination. These features were letter format, type style, the point size of the font, margin spacing to ascertain the use or nonuse of the default margins for Word (1.25 inches non-justified) and the default margins for WordPerfect (1 inch non-justified). In addition, the research involved the examination of the right margins to determine if they were justified or not and the use of the comma or colon in the salutation of the letter. No two letters were from the same source or entity.

The features of each letter were independently examined by the authors and the findings documented. Any differences in findings were discussed and a consensus reached. As expected, several features were found to be very common. For example, full block format was used on 48 percent of the letters followed by the semi-block with 39 percent. The Times Family of Fonts was used on 67 percent of the letters. Font point size 12 was the most popular with 70 percent. The non-justified default margins were widespread with 67 percent and the colon was the overwhelming favorite in the salutation with 79 percent. There were some unexpected findings. The default margins for Microsoft® Word and Novell WordPerfect are 1.25 inches and 1 inch respectively. However, neither was used on 33 percent of the letters and in this 33 percent, the margin spacing varied dramatically. Other examples of unexpected findings include the use of the space bar 4 times after each period in a sentence on one letter and the use of 16 spaces for indenting paragraphs on another. Indentations on some of the letters did not follow generally accepted format practices or defaults and could be considered unusual. Only one letter contained a semi-colon in the salutation, while two letters were typed using a 13 point font. Some of the unexpected findings could possibly lead to the identification of a source or typist.

Future studies in this area may involve the common or uncommon use of paper and watermarks found in business letters.

Questioned Documents, Business Letter Format, Word Processing