J3   The Determination of Authorship From a Homogenous Group of Writers

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After attending this presentation, attendees will learn the history and development of the Palmer system of handwriting and learn to identify certain class characteristics associated with that system.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by teaching how handwriting systems provide a foundation upon which people learn to write the language of their culture.

This presentation is based on a research project where samples of writing were obtained from over 50 writers who grew up in the same neighborhood, were taught the same copybook style (the Palmer system of handwriting), at the same Catholic elementary school, by the same teachers, approximately four decades ago. Knowledge of class characteristics of a particular handwriting system is important because these characteristics have a significant influence upon how a person writes.

Handwriting systems provide a foundation upon which people learn to write the language of their culture. Each person's writing contains a combination of class and individual characteristics. The extent of these combinations depends upon the individual. This is one of the basic reasons why handwriting is identifiable. For the forensic document examiner, knowledge of forms dictated by a particular handwriting system provides a reference point from which writers may deviate, and it is these deviations that document examiners must discern when performing examinations to attempt to identify or exclude writers as authors of questioned documents. Understanding of the influence of a particular handwriting system on those providing writing samples can help forensic document examiners evaluate features that make handwriting identifiable, and can aid in the performance of handwriting examinations and comparisons.

The presentation will cover the challenges encountered by forensic document examiners when they were asked to render conclusions of authorship on handwriting obtained from an homogeneous writing population, and will discuss possible sources of errors during the examination of such writings. Potential pitfalls involved in examining large groups of writing that may appear to be similar due to common class characteristics will also be discussed.

In this research study, the submitted specimen writings obtained from former students and teachers from the same school were subsequently examined and compared by a group of 49 forensic document examiners throughout the world. The examiners rendered conclusions of authorship on the writings and submitted them for grading.

The study sought to find supporting evidence that:

1) There is a high degree of inter-writer variation among writers, even in populations where the driving forces for variation are low; and

2) Among these homogeneous writing populations, forensic document examiners would still be able to extract features from the   writing samples that would enable them to attribute authorship.

The research also hopes to answer criticisms that earlier studies on the individuality of handwriting did not include populations from "homogeneous writing communities," and relied on computer analysis of handwriting, rather than on human examiners.

Overall results of the study of handwriting from an homogeneous group of writers will be discussed, including how well human examiners performed as a group in making distinctions among the writing specimens. Effects on results that will be discussed include factors such as examiner experience level, peer review, geographic location of the participating examiners, and the length of the questioned documents submitted for examination. Potential sources for error in certain problematic samples will also be discussed.

Handwriting Systems, Homogenous, Palmer System