



Questioned Documents Section - 2014

J15 All Copies Are Problematic

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The goal of this presentation is to review the problems associated with the examination of photocopies.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by providing information to attendees so that they will become familiar with the problems associated with the examination of photocopies.

Frequently, recipients of reports from a Forensic Document Examiner (FDE) expect the FDE to be able to determine with absolute certainty the authorship of handwriting and hand printing material or the presence of alterations or interlineations on the documents submitted for examination. Under no circumstances is this always possible. The evidence present on the document being examined limits the conclusion reached by the FDE because the conclusion must be based on the totality of the evidence present on the documents being examined.

When the document is a copy, the evidence in the writings or other features of the copied material is always a limiting factor and the conclusion reached by the FDE is generally less than conclusive. In every case where the submitted document is a copy, the real question is whether the examined material on the copy is actually on the original the copy purports to represent. Examples of answering the real question are presented.

A number of factors determine the value of the observable evidence on copies: some are the color of the ink used to write the original material, whether a portion of the writings on the original is overwritten, or partially covered by a stamp impression, or partially obliterated by other written material, etc. These characteristics are limiting factors when examining a copy of an original on which they appear.

Trying to determine the significance of features of writing can be difficult when examining original writing. When examining the original, virtually every characteristic, quality, and feature of the writing is visible and can be examined with the aid of magnification, different wavelengths of light, changes in the angle of illumination, etc. If a copy of the original document is examined, that examination is limited to the visible elements of toner, ink jet printing, etc., on the copy that may or may not correspond to a counterpart characteristic, quality, or feature on the original.

If the examined document is a copy of a copy, or is a multiple-generation copy of the original, the accuracy of the recorded material on the copy becomes increasingly less. The new copy is the result of the copier scanning, toner, or ink jet ink applied to the document being scanned. What the scanner sees, and the accidental application of toner or ink applied to the first-generation copy or multiple-generation copy, are usually deposited on a copy and must be considered during the examination process. One example of this is random toner that may be in a location that could be misinterpreted as a critical feature on the original. For example, a dot over a staff that is supposed to be the letter "i" but the writer of the letter on the original did not place a dot over the eye staff.

A feature, such as a pencil outline or indentation of writing, is lightly impressed in the original document and may be hard to see when examining the original; these particular features, when copied, may be non-existent on the copy. Such features can be extremely significant when present in the original document. Not having these recorded characteristics on the copy being examined, the FDE may misinterpret the evidence on the copy and reach the wrong conclusion. Indented outlines on original documents are virtually never seen on the photocopy of a document.

In summary, it is not possible to reach an unqualified conclusion in every case the FDE examines. Various factors in the writings combine to limit the significance that can be attached to the characteristics, qualities, and features of the examined writing to support a conclusion that it is or is not written by the same writer. This is especially true when the examined writings are copies. The reason is that not all of the characteristics, qualities, and features of the writing on an original are present on the copy. Additionally, it can never be assumed that the writing on a copy is actually present on the original the copy purports to represent.

Copy, Interlineations, Evidence