



Questioned Documents Section - 2014

J9 Report Writing and Opinion Terminology

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The goal of this presentation is to assist in the ongoing discussion about how forensic document examiners should write their report, the format they should use, the language for the “examination methodology and aids” portion of the report, and the language used to report their findings.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by helping in the ongoing discussion regarding terminology used in report writing and conclusions.

Report writing is probably one of the more difficult parts of a Forensic Document Examiner’s (FDE) work. Each FDE usually develops his own report format and wording he uses in virtually every case involving handwriting and hand printing. The wording of that report and the information conveyed to the reader must be precise in every case.

The reader of the report must have a report that stands alone. The wording of the report must be sufficiently easy to understand because the FDE uses language and technical terms, and wording in the report that could otherwise be misunderstood. These technical terms must be defined in the report, and if necessary, explained by examples from the submitted writings. Any illustrations prepared to accompany the report must also be able to stand alone as illustrations in court, when and if the case goes to trial.

The purpose of the report is to explain to the recipient that the FDE received and examined certain documents (both questioned and known). When writing the report, all the submitted documents must be clearly identified and described as to whether they are questioned or known, and placed in the proper category. Each document must be described in such a way that at time of trial the FDE is able to easily locate each one and present his conclusion concerning that document.

The FDE must clearly define and describe the purpose of the requested examination(s) and what examinations are to be performed. This is accomplished by explaining the examination methodology used to examine each aspect of the writing as well as describing any technical aids used in the course of the examination.

The conclusion(s) reached by the examination(s) must be clearly reported, as well as what factors were found and considered to be of importance in arriving at a conclusion. This is accomplished by presenting, in a logical way, the conclusion(s) and the basis for that conclusion(s). Several examples of the process can be used by inserting a segment of the examined writing in his report at this place, or make reference to it as it appears in the accompanying illustration. In either case, the significance of the characteristics, quality, features of the writing, and the weight attached to it or them must be described.

Finally, the disposition of the documents after the examination is completed must be clearly described. What should be done with the exhibits? Are they being retained in the FDE file of his office or returned to the submitter? Do they need to be kept together by the submitter for possible use in making a court illustration later, or for further examination purposes?

The wording used in each section of the reports, particularly section three where it describes the “Examination Methodology and Aids,” explains to the report reader how writing habits are developed and what is considered during the course of the examination and comparison to reach a conclusion based only on the evidence within the examined writing. When the examination involves alterations and interlineations, or other document issues, this portion of the report would employ different wording that describes the procedure used in each particular case.

In summary, because report writing is unique to each FDE, the format of the report he issues in most handwriting cases and the language he typically uses is described. An example of the text concerning the examination methodology provides background information for the reader so the conclusion reached and the basis for that conclusion is better understood.

This presentation also discusses some of the elements in report writing. In any report written by a FDE, a unique report format and language has to be developed. The purpose is to present one such format and the elements of the written report.

Report Writing, Examinations, Conclusions