



J13 Initials: Value for Identification

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After attending this presentation, attendees can expect to better understand the identification value of initials in 21st-century handwriting.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by increasing appreciation for the individuality and limitations of the examination of initials representing abbreviated signatures that forensic document can expect to encounter in their casework today.

A paucity of research on 21st-century initials along with a case involving disputed initials on a loan application motivated this study. Computer keyboarding, diminished teaching of cursive writing to school children, and more use of hand printing in modern writing may have an impact of the use of initials in everyday business documents. This study was conducted to determine the individuality of handwritten initials and their similarities or differences when compared to the capital letters representing the first letter of each name in a signature. Initials are condensed signatures. Forensic document examiners use the same methodology in examining initials as they do for signatures and extended hand printing or cursive writing. Appreciation for the individuality of initials and their consistency or departure from the first letter of each name in a signature will help forensic document examiners correctly identify or eliminate writers of initials in disputed documents.

Forms using letter-sized paper were created to collect four initial samples and two signature samples from each writer in 2017. Sections requesting age, gender, and country of origin of the writer were also included. The goal was to collect samples from at least 200 writers. Evaluation of the collected forms revealed the individuality of many of the basic letter forms of initials in cursive and hand-printed styles. Individuality was also revealed in the punctuation, connectedness, spacing, and size of initials that forensic document examiners can expect to see in cases. Sets of initials composed of two to three letters were compared to the signatures by the same person to discover instances of consistency and differences between the two in basic letter construction, spacing, size, slant, and punctuation.

This study sought to provide an evaluation of modern initials, their general format, and individuality. It also sought to illustrate that initials can conform closely to the capital letters of a signature, but also may be constructed quite differently. This study revealed that the number of letters in a group of initials and their complexity will determine their value for identification. Forensic document examiners must also consider that since letters used to write initials do not always conform to the capital letters of each initial of a signature, known initials must be collected for comparison purposes in casework involving questioned initials.

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