J13   Decipherment of Latent Handwriting Impressions: Point/Counterpoint

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Learning Overview: After attending this presentation, attendees will understand what should be expected of a forensic document examiner concerning the decipherment of images raised through an Electrostatic Detection Device (EDD) or special lighting, what they should be able to do, and what limits they should impose, if any.

Impact on the Forensic Science Community: This presentation will impact the forensic science community by establishing a consensus methodology for use in everyday casework involving the decipherment of latent handwritten images so that the resulting conclusions will be more reliable and more uniform. In addition, accuracy will be increased by a consensus understanding of the limitations imposed on such procedures.

Forensic document examiners commonly, but not exclusively, conduct examinations of latent handwriting impressions utilizing an EDD. This device is the best practice for examinations in which use of the device is possible. Lighting from various angles are also used as an enhancement to the use of EDD and sometimes, by various necessities, as a substitute. Either method is applicable to the theme of this presentation.

The Scientific Working Group for Forensic Document Examination (SWGDOC) is an organization dedicated to developing and publishing discipline-wide standards in forensic document examination. One such standard is titled *SWGDOC Standard for Indentation Examinations.* In this standard are statements as to decipherment of indentations of latent handwriting impressions in Section 8.3 as follows: 8.3.—once examinations and evaluations have been completed, reports may include the following types of conclusion(s), opinion(s), or finding(s): 8.3.3.—the text of deciphered indentations.

A question arises as to: (1) whether a forensic document examiner is trained to decipher handwriting; (2) whether the experience of a forensic document examiner qualifies one to decipher writing; (3) whether there are any proficiency studies to establish that a forensic document examiner has a superior ability through either training or experience to decipher handwriting; and (4) whether there are limitations that should be placed on this process. It is the purpose of this presentation to address these specific four issues and initiate a debate concerning any needed modifications to the published standards if it is deemed necessary.

Attendees will be exposed to various opinions and ideas as to decipherment. It is the purpose of this presentation to present both sides objectively and moderate a discussion with attendees. As a result, attendees should come away from this presentation with a better understanding of the foundational bases for stating conclusions or limiting conclusion statements in regard to decipherment of latent handwriting impressions.

One position is that forensic document examiners are trained in the decipherment of latent handwriting impressions. In the standard titled *SWGDOC Standard for Scope of Work of Forensic Document Examiners,* Paragraph 4.2.2 (concerning forms of examinations) states: Other problems are the decipherment and sometimes the restoration, alteration or additions to document and relationships of documents. Some of the considerations as to a separate expertise in decipherment involve: (1) the specific training in decipherment; (2) the impact of the examination of large quantities of writing as a foundational basis for decipherment; (3) study of indentation obstructions and their impact in impressions; and (4) study of various forms of writing to include date formats, time formats, diacritics, etc.

Since this research is unaware of any proficiency studies as to decipherment capabilities of professional forensic document examiners versus a control group, a discussion of the design of research and a search for willing researchers will be a part of the general discussion. Next, there will be a short review of various form variations, such as date entries, phone numbers, time, etc. The purpose of this section is as a refresher to understanding that alternative forms must be considered in any decipherment process. Finally, this discussion will seek to reach a consensus as to report terminology that accurately reflects both the findings and the limitations to the noted examination data.

Handwriting, Indentations, Decipherment