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**Case Report: The Individuality of Handwriting  
Demonstrated Through the Field Screening of 1000 Writers**

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## INTRODUCTION

That no two people write exactly alike is axiomatic to questioned document examination. Document examiners know that individualities in handwriting distinguish the writing of one person from another and allow for the identification of handwriting.

While document examiners accept the individuality of handwriting as fact, a few vocal opponents of handwriting comparison have recently criticized the field for failing to sufficiently document through independent research what examiners have all known through years of experience and experimentation. Most document examiners have seen no need in wasting valuable research time documenting what has been known and accepted for many years, both by document examiners and the courts. Now the critics have gained some headway in the court system. It has become incumbent upon document examiners to conduct meaningful research on the individuality of handwriting and some examiners have made progress toward that goal.

This paper does not purport to be such a research project. It is not even a study. It is more along the line of a case report. It may be criticized as anecdotal, as the critics of handwriting comparison have criticized many other works arising from experience as opposed to research. The author, however, believes this case to be an excellent example of the individuality of handwriting and the value of handwriting comparison. It may even be viewed as a test. The critics have suggested that document examiners be tested in each case by placing several unrelated writer's exemplars along with any suspect writings. This case should exceed even that requirement.

## CASE REPORT

In January 1996, thirteen checks, totaling several thousand dollars, were passed on two military bases in the western United States. The imprinted account holders and banks were fictitious. Investigators believed the checks to be computer scanned, altered and printed. They also believed,

based on some of the information placed on the checks, that the perpetrator was assigned to, or associated with, a particular military unit of nearly 1000 individuals. No legitimate suspects had been identified. The investigating office requested the assistance of a questioned document examiner to come on site and review personnel records in an attempt to identify a suspect or suspects.

I traveled to the investigating office and examined the evidence. The checks bore both handwritten and handprinted entries. Although the case investigator had requested an examination of unit personnel records, the author chose to review postal locator cards for the unit. These cards are normally prepared by the individual service member, contain mostly handprinting and are retained for departing unit members for a one-year period. Personnel records often contain only signature samples. A total of 981 of these postal locator cards were available for review.

Several handprinted and numerical features were chosen for purposes of screening the records. I would not term any of the features used in the screening process as being highly individualistic. The screening features were chosen for ease and accuracy of the screening process. During the screening process, those cards with handwriting features that appeared to significantly disagree with the questioned writing were rejected. Those that were found to have some substantial agreement were examined beyond the screening features. Those cards that were found to have some substantial agreement were placed to the side for later examination. In addition to the 981 cards, nineteen other postal documents were reviewed, making the total number of documents reviewed an even 1000. Approximately twelve hours were expended in the review of the cards. An average of less than one minute was spent reviewing each card.

At the conclusion of the review, the author had selected three cards with handprinting that had some agreement with the questioned checks. Only one of the cards had very significant agreement. Put another way, only this card contained a significant combination of the screening features, without

disagreement among other features. Unfortunately, there was not enough writing on the postal locator card to identify the writer at this point. The other two cards had some agreeing features, but also had some areas of disagreement. I wanted to see additional known writing from these individuals before I eliminated them.

I examined the personnel records of the person whose card had significant agreement and found other areas of handwriting agreement. The suspect was brought to the investigating office, where the investigator obtained exemplars from the suspect. I examined the writing in another room. The suspect appeared to be attempting to disguise his handwriting. This made it necessary for the investigator to return several times to the suspect to get additional writing.

At the conclusion of the examination, the suspect was fully identified as the writer of the handprinted entries. Only a qualified conclusion could be rendered on the handwritten entries. It appeared that the suspect was not going to provide a sufficiently natural sample of his handwriting to effect a full identification.

When confronted with the identification the suspect immediately confessed. He stated that he had prepared the checks using a word processor on blank sheets of paper. The portions of the checks that could not be prepared with a word processor (account numbers, bank logos, etc.) were cut and pasted. He photocopied this sheet until all shadow lines were removed. He then photocopied the checks on to commercially produced stationery having a background similar to bank checks and cut the bogus checks off the stationery page. The word processor, a Smith-Corona printwheel model, was located. A later laboratory examination of the ribbon disclosed text consistent with the typed portions of the checks. The two fonts used on the checks were consistent with printwheels located with the word processor.

Additionally, a later laboratory examination of the checks disclosed that several of them bore latent fingerprints identified as those of the suspect.

## CONCLUSION

I believe this case to be a demonstration of the individuality of handwriting and validity of handwriting comparison. Using only a few handprinted and numerical features, 1000 documents were reviewed, ultimately resulting in the identification of the writer of the questioned checks. Those that doubt the validity of handwriting comparison should have difficulty in explaining why this was possible.