

Know your Expert

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Considerable confusion exists between graphology and forensic handwriting examination. To compound the confusion, a number of graphologists profess to practise forensic handwriting examination. The purpose of this article is to clarify and reinforce the distinction between the two disciplines. It also urges against the instruction of graphologists as expert witnesses in matters involving questioned documents.

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According to the British Institute of Graphologists, graphology may be defined as 'the analysis and interpretation of handwriting as a means of in-depth psychological and personality investigation'. By contrast, forensic handwriting examination is the application of scientific method and techniques to the comparison of handwriting and signatures in order to determine who wrote them.

The services offered by graphologists include assessment of integrity for security, criminal profiling, personnel selection, compatibility assessment, corporate appraisal and career guidance. Some graphologists also provide 'on the spot' character analysis for exhibitions, promotions and parties.

Forensic handwriting experts are concerned solely with determining the authorship of handwritten and/or signed documents. As forensic document examiners they will also possess expertise in other areas, such as the detection and interpretation of erasures, alterations and indented impressions, and the examination of printed, typewritten and photocopied documents.

Whether graphology should be considered as a science is open to debate. Scientific studies have found no clear correlation between handwriting and basic personality patterns. To my mind, such shortage of empirical evidence places graphology firmly in the category of pseudoscience.

Forensic handwriting examination involves putting forward a hypothesis, then testing it using a number of parameters and with reference to background knowledge, in order to reach a conclusion. The use of scientific method in all forensic sciences is established as the correct way of evaluating evidence. This is not to say that forensic handwriting examination is an exact science, it is not. The comparison of handwriting does not allow for the calculation of precise probabilities; an element of subjectivity exists. However, this would be true of any scientific technique that is not automated; the background knowledge of the scientist and an appreciation of the limitations of the method will ensure that conclusions can be properly drawn.

The difference between the two disciplines is clear. Indeed, the British Institute of Graphologists issues a disclaimer on the homepage of its website stating that 'it does

not concern itself, either directly or indirectly, with (questioned document or forensic) analysis of writing', although it acknowledges that 'some members of the British Institute of Graphologists have undertaken further studies that qualify them to deal with questioned documents'.

The majority of graphologists listing 'document examination' or 'forensic' handwriting examination as an area of their expertise are somewhat vague about detailing the nature of their 'further studies'. Many appear to lack even basic scientific training. The question that needs to be asked, therefore, is what would pass muster as suitable 'further studies' to allow a graphologist to practise as a forensic handwriting expert with any sort of credibility?.

The University of Central Lancashire (UCLan) offers a Master of Science degree in Document Analysis. The purpose of the course is to allow the student to 'understand and develop the theoretical knowledge underpinning all aspects of forensic document examination'. The operative word here is 'theoretical'. Possession of this degree, in itself, would be insufficient to qualify its holder as a practising forensic document examiner. Indeed, the course synopsis suggests that the next stage would be for the student to become a trainee document examiner.

The Forensic Science Society offers a Diploma in Document Examination that is accredited by Strathclyde University. The Diploma is awarded to members of the Forensic Science Society who pass the written and practical examinations based on a syllabus drawn up by the Society. One of the criteria of eligibility of entry to the examinations is that the candidate must have 'an appropriate level of professional training and experience deemed by (the) Council (of the Forensic Science Society) to be acceptable'. I consider that training in graphology does not fulfil this criterion. Whilst one of the questions on the application form to sit the Diploma examinations invites the candidate to 'List any other disciplines involving handwriting in which you have practical experience' and lists graphology (and calligraphy) as one such discipline, other questions require the applicant to give precise details of his/her training and expertise in Questioned Document Examination. The implication is clear; graphology is not a forensic science.

The majority of forensic document examiners practising in the United Kingdom have been trained 'on the job' by the two largest providers of forensic scientists, namely the Forensic Science Service or LGC Forensics (formerly the Laboratory of the Government Chemist). In Scotland, forensic document examiners are trained within the four police maintained laboratories. Whilst some forensic document examiners have moved on to practise independently, they do so having been trained to a high level of competence within an established laboratory.

The American Board of Forensic Document Examiners firmly believes that 'on-the-job specialized training from experienced examiners is the only way to acquire expertise. No substitute exists for a legitimate structured training program'. The Board makes the further point that 'Forensic Document Examination does not lend itself to autodidactic learning or to correspondence courses'. This is not to say that correspondence courses in forensic document examination do not exist – they most certainly do - but those that I found after searching the internet did not profess to turn their students into practising

forensic examiners; rather their aim is to provide an introduction to the subject, upon which the student may build.

Studying graphology by correspondence course appears to be commonplace. A number of practising graphologists offer courses to prepare their students for the examinations of the British Institute of Graphologists or the British Academy of Graphologists. Having obtained the Diplomas of these organisations, no further experience appears to be necessary to be considered a trained graphologist.

In my opinion, an individual cannot consider themselves to be qualified to practise as a forensic document examiner without undertaking a professional 'apprenticeship'. This effectively precludes graphologists from working in the field of forensic handwriting.

Graphologists and forensic handwriting experts are, clearly, different beings, but technically, graphologists are 'handwriting experts'. The term in its legal sense is a definition of those who give expert evidence in court. The purpose of expert evidence is to provide the court with information on scientific procedures or results that are outside the experience of judge and jury. I would suggest that the court requires the expertise of the individual with the forensic science training.

Not all graphologists offering 'document examination' are prepared to attend court (although some do), instead preferring to offer a 'Signed Declaration'. What does this say about the quality of their forensic expertise if they are not prepared to be cross-examined?

Public service trained forensic handwriting experts accept that attending court is part of their duties. They will have received expert witness training during their probationary period. They should be able to present their oral evidence clearly, outlining the principles of the method employed, followed by a demonstration of the application of those principles to the handwriting under consideration. It will be obvious to the court that the forensic handwriting expert has the requisite scientific background and training to be called a 'handwriting expert' in the legal sense.

Ultimately, it is the Court's responsibility to establish competency. However, in my opinion, the possession of a qualification in graphology on its own does not render the holders suitable to accept instructions for the forensic examination of handwriting. The dangers of instructing a graphologist may not be manifest until the case is in progress; by then it is too late.

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