

Obtaining Handwriting Specimens

Forensic handwriting and signature comparisons require access to a suitable and adequate quantity of specimen material. Some suspect writers will readily provide specimen handwriting on request. In other instances, documents which the suspect wrote during business or social circumstances may be the only materials available. The following guidelines should ensure the document examiner is provided with the standards needed to reach a meaningful conclusion.

Documents bearing specimen handwriting fall into one of two categories. In the first category are "requested" specimens that consist of handwriting, signatures or printing produced solely for the purpose of conducting a handwriting comparison. "Requested" specimens are often prepared at the request of the person seeking the services of a handwriting expert. The second category consists of "collected" specimens. These include documents which were written or signed by a person during his or her normal day-to-day activities.

Requested Specimens

As mentioned above, "requested" specimens are written by the victim or suspect at the request of and in the presence of a witness. These specimens have several advantages:

- If prepared properly, they will contain letters and letter combinations similar to those that appear in the questioned writing.
- They can contain repetitions of the questioned text and thus better represent a person's range of writing habits.
- They are easy to prove because they have been prepared before a witness.
- Writing materials (i.e. pen, pencil, paper, cardboard, etc.) similar to those used in the preparation of the questioned document can be utilized.
- The format or arrangement of the questioned writing can be duplicated.
- They can be prepared under similar writing conditions to those which prevailed when the questioned document was produced.

"Requested" specimens also have certain disadvantages. The writer is usually aware of their purpose and, rather than being naturally written, "requested" specimens may display features associated with nervousness. On occasion, the writer may attempt to alter or disguise his/her natural writing habits. The extent to which disguised writing influences the results of a handwriting comparison varies from case to case. In certain situations, "requested" exemplars can be so disguised they are of little use in a handwriting comparison.

Collected Specimens

"Collected" specimens have their own set of advantages and disadvantages. These specimens can be obtained by an investigator or they can be volunteered by people who have access to documents written by an individual. In other instances, the suspect or victim himself can provide handwriting that he/she prepared at an earlier time. These specimens have the following advantages:

- Since they are usually naturally written, influences attributed to disguise or nervousness are usually not a factor.
- They can be selected so as to be contemporaneous with the date of the questioned document.

"Collected" specimens also have a number of disadvantages:

- It can be difficult to prove who wrote them.
- The conditions that prevailed at the time of writing are often unknown.
- They may not have been produced by the same writing materials as those used to prepare the questioned document.

- It is difficult to locate samples which contain repetitions of the questioned text.

Sources of Collected Specimens

We write or sign an astounding number of documents during the course of our lifetime. The following is a list of documents where specimen handwriting or signatures can often be found.

Personal Library Books	Public Library Records	Drivers Licenses
Bible, marginal notes, etc.	Union Cards	Hunting & Fishing Licenses
Hotel Registration Cards	Credit Card Invoices	Receipts & Delivery Signatures
Greeting Card Notations	Marriage Certificate & License	Report Card Signatures
School Records	Inventories & Listings	Identification Cards
Membership Cards	Recipes	Photograph Notations
Personal Correspondence	Address & Phone Books	Diaries & Journals
Memoranda	Manuscripts	Registration Forms
Personal Attendance Records	Building Permits, Applications & Licenses	Passports
Domestic & Foreign Licenses	Sign-In Sheets	Return Addresses on Envelopes
Social Insurance Card	Hospital Records	Incorporation Documents
Mail Order Forms	Household & Personal Account Books	Cancelled Checks
Federal & Provincial Tax Returns	Business & Employment Records	Bookkeeping Records
Loan Application Forms	Credit Application Forms	Mortgage Applications/Guarantees
Deposit & Withdrawal Slips	Safety Deposit Access Records	Promissory Notes
Rental & Lease Forms	Automobile & Boat Registrations	Insurance Forms
Broker's Records	Deeds & Land Titles	Powers of Attorney
Bond/Surety Applications	Divorce Papers	Court Records

Submitting Exemplars

No two naturally written words or signatures produced by the same person are identical in every detail. This is due to the body's inability to carryout actions with machine-like precision. No act of writing, when executed in a free and natural manner, is void of that element of writing known as variation. Largely a reflexive action, a person's handwriting is subject to changes which depend upon his/her mood, physical condition, muscular co-ordination and external influences such as writing conditions, drugs, alcohol, nervousness or the nature of the document bearing the writing.

In spite of natural variation, the developed handwriting of every person contains habitual features that are as peculiar as any of his/her habits or mannerisms. The quantity of specimens needed to represent a person's writing or signature habits depends on both the extent of the contested writing and the degree to which the handwriting varies. If the questioned writing consists of a single signature, then perhaps 10-15 specimen signatures are all that is needed. However, if the questioned material consists of several pages of handwriting, printing and signatures significantly more samples will be required to establish a suspect's writing habits.

The handwriting and signatures of some writers can be remarkably consistent. Samples written on one occasion will appear similar to those produced weeks, months or even years later. In these cases, the writer's range of variation is described as *limited* and conclusive opinions can often be supported by only a few exemplars. In other cases, a person's writing will vary considerably. Often writing conditions, the writer's physical/mental condition and the nature of the document itself can all contribute to the varied appearance of his/her writing. In such cases, many more specimens are needed to isolate individual writing features and determine their significance.

It is useful to keep the following points in mind when collecting specimen handwriting or signatures for comparison purposes:

- Obtain both "collected" and "requested" writing samples whenever possible.
- Submit original documents for examination and not copies.
- Obtain "collected" writing samples written both before and after the period when the questioned document was allegedly signed or written.
- "Collected" writing samples should be similar in content to the questioned writing.
- "Requested" samples should contain repetitions of the same letters and letter combination appearing in the questioned text.
- Include 10-15 consecutively numbered personal checks that surround the date when the questioned document was written.
- The person should be asked to assume the same writing position (i.e. seated, standing, etc.) which was used when the questioned document was produced (if this is known).
- Extended handwriting samples should be dictated and the speed of dictation should be varied.
- Signatures should be written on separate pieces of paper that are similar in size and format to the questioned document.
- Each document should be removed from the victim's or suspect's sight after it is completed.

Each document bearing specimen writing should be labeled (e.g. K-1, K-2....etc.) in an inconspicuous area (preferably in the bottom margin) so as not to interfere with the writing. Specimens attributed to the same writer should be grouped together and placed in the same envelope.

The success of every handwriting comparison depends to a large extent on the quality and quantity of specimens submitted. Occasionally, it may not be possible to obtain "requested" samples. In those instances, efforts should be directed at locating as many "collected" samples as possible. Results of handwriting comparisons tend to be more conclusive and meaningful when both "requested" and "collected" exemplars are available.