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Scientific Association of Forensic Examiners Standards

**Guide for Writing a Forensic Handwriting Examination Report**

**1. Scope**

1.1 This guide provides procedures for writing a questioned document report involving handwritten items.

1.1. The guide covers the scope of information to include in a report, as well as language for inclusion in the report.

1.2. These procedures assume sufficient quality and quantity of exemplars and questioned material in order to form an opinion and prepare a report.

**2. Referenced Documents**

2.1. ASTM E2710-11 Standard Practice for Reporting Opinions of Scientific or Technical Experts

2.2. SAFE Standard on Reporting Opinions

**3. Significance and Use**

3.1. Employing the scientific method, questioned document examiners gather, evaluate, and analyze data in order to reach an opinion as to authorship. The examiner's conclusions are reported in a manner that is clear and understandable to the layman (attorney, client, investigator, finder of fact, etc.).

3.2. No single Guide can cover all possible scenarios. Therefore, this document is a general guideline for use once the data have been evaluated.

## **4. Procedure**

- 4.1. The procedures outlined herein are based on a generally accepted body of knowledge in the field of forensic document examination. By following them the examiner can produce a template for a report that includes the essential areas and provides consistency across cases.
- 4.2. Language included in the report must be objective and free from confusing jargon.
- 4.3. The format and content of the report may depend upon specific court rules.

## **5. Headings**

- 5.1. The report may be broken into several subheadings as follows:

- 5.1.1. *Overview*
- 5.1.2. *Questioned Writing*
- 5.1.3. *Known Writing (or Exemplars)*
- 5.1.4. *Examination Question to be Addressed*
- 5.1.5. *Methodology*
- 5.1.6. *Range of Variation*
- 5.1.7. *Evaluation*
- 5.1.8. *Conclusions and Opinion*
- 5.1.9. *Basis for Opinion*
- 5.1.10. *Declaration*

## **6. Report Content**

- 6.1.1. *Overview*

- 6.1.2. *Case Name* – Following the recipient’s address, include a subject line containing the attorney/court’s case name or one you designate and your case file name or number.
- 6.1.3. *Introductory paragraph* or describing the assignment. For example: “*On or about February 10, 2016 you submitted to me certain handwriting and requested me to perform a comparison and examination, and provide an opinion as to authenticity.*”
- 6.1.4. *Definition*. A boilerplate paragraph might be included to explain what constitutes a forgery.
- 6.1.5. *Examination Question*. In one or two sentences describe the assignment.
- 6.1.6. *Questioned Writing*. A description of the questioned handwriting that includes, if available, the date it was signed and any other pertinent information such as the title of the document on which the handwriting appears and the type of document examined (e.g., original, photocopy, NCR, PDF, etc.).
- 6.1.7. *Known Writing*. A description of each exemplar following the same format as the description of the questioned writing.
- 6.1.8. *Methodology*. Describe the tools and procedures used in the examination.
- 6.1.8.1. *Limitations*. Describe any factors that limit your ability to perform an examination that leads to an unqualified opinion. Examples of limitations include examination of photocopies, electronic scans at low resolution, and insufficient number of exemplars.
- 6.1.8.2. *Assumptions*. State all assumptions made by the examiner. An example of an assumption is the known writing was executed by the person who the examiner was told wrote the writing.

- 6.1.9. *Range of Variation.* Describe how the range of variation was determined.
- 6.1.10. *Evaluation.* This section describes the examiner's procedure. Include observations made of the questioned and the known writing.
- 6.1.11. *Results.* Describe similarities and differences observed between the known writings and the questioned writings. State significant variations and disparities or significant similarities between the known and questioned writings. Any facts or data relied upon in rendering an opinion should be mentioned.
- 6.1.12. *Opinions.* In this section the expert describes any information s/he has obtained about the writer (age, medical conditions or writing conditions that might affect the outcome of the examination) and renders an opinion regarding authenticity of the document. The examiner may quote from the SAFE Standard on Reporting Opinions.
- 6.1.13. *Basis for Opinion.* State the reason why similarities or significant differences provide the weight for the opinion. Cite any applicable authorities.
- 6.1.13.1. When a "not genuine," opinion is rendered, the expert may wish to elaborate on whether the questioned writing was a traced or digital simulation, freehand simulation, or other type of non-genuine writing.
- 6.1.14. *Declaration.* Declares under penalty of perjury that the opinions given in the report are true and correct. It is also prudent to include the following disclaimer: *I reserve the right to re-evaluate my opinion if presented with new or previously unavailable evidence.*
- 6.1.15. *Signature.* At the conclusion, the report should be signed by the expert.

6.1.16. *Curriculum Vitae*. The expert's current professional resume should be added to the report.

6.1.17. *Demonstrative Exhibits*. If exhibits were created as part of the examination process and with a view to future testimony, they should be included.

6.1.18. *Documents Examined*. Attach copies of all documents reviewed, both questioned and known.

6.1.19. *Peer Review*. If the examination was peer reviewed by another expert, this person's name and contact information should be included.

## **7. Inappropriate Material for inclusion**

7.1. Include only information directly relevant to the scope of the information in the report.

7.2. Do not include information pertaining to conversations with the attorney or client.

7.3. "Folksy" or informal language is inappropriate in a forensic report.

7.4. Omit words such as "draft," "work product," or "confidential" in the final report.

7.5. Do not use hedge words, such as "I believe," "could," or "it seems." Opinions expressed should be firm and confident. See SAFE Standard on reporting Opinions.

## **8. Keywords**

8.1. Report, Opinion, Range of Variation, Questioned, Known, Exemplar