

The 7 things Legal Professionals should know about Document Examination

#1 What is Document Examination?

Document Examination or Forensic Document Examination is the science involved in the analysis and evaluation of various types of documentation for the purpose of helping to detect possible forgery, identifying writers and proving or disproving document authenticity.

Questioned document cases usually revolve around the handwriting and/or signatures surrounding the document. Others involve documents that have been physically manipulated or altered. In many cases the sequence of entries, paper type, folds, watermarks, individual writing instrument or printer used may play a significant role.

#2 Why do I need a Document Examiner?

A Document Examiner can potentially help with any investigation into possible forgery, anonymous letters, altered documents or identification of printing method. They have the experience, know-how and equipment to provide an independent assessment of the situation on behalf of a client.

A good forged signature will always look like a genuine signature – that is the point! A document examiner will focus on the structure of the signature rather than the appearance to determine if it is genuine or not. Similarly, one or two unusual letters forms in a signature does not necessarily mean a signature is not genuine. How many times have you heard a client say something like “My father never wrote his S like that”. A document examiner is trained to put any pre-conceptions to one side and provide a non-biased, objective opinion on the matter.

#3 How do I find a Document Examiner?

There is no formal training path to a career as a Document Examiner. Many Document Examiners may have trained as Scientists and have a post-graduate qualification in Forensic Science. Some may be involved in other areas of Forensic Science such as Fingerprint Analysis or IT Forensics. Other Document Examiners can have a qualification in Graphology and have subsequently been trained as Document Examiners. The following points should be assessed when choosing a Document Examiner

- Some formal qualification in Document Examination
- A demonstration of commitment to ongoing education in the field
- Membership of relevant professional bodies and adherence to ethics and a code of conduct
- A track record. How many years in operation, number of cases handled, how many Expert Witness reports submitted to court, number and type of court appearances
- Testimonials from former clients and case examples/case studies

#4 What is the Process for verifying a signature?

The Document Examiner follows a repeatable process that minimises the chances of any bias creeping in. The steps are

- 1) The questioned signature is examined in isolation to see if it shows any obvious signs of simulation.
- 2) The known, genuine comparison signatures are examined.
- 3) The questioned signature is compared to the known comparison signatures. Any similarities and differences are noted.
- 4) The relevant importance of any similarities and differences are evaluated and an opinion reached.

#5 How many comparison signatures does my client need to provide?

Every case is different. Generally 10 known comparison signatures is a good starting point. Often a writer can be safely identified with less comparison

signatures but to eliminate a writer more ground may have to be covered. If the writer has a wide natural variation in their signature habits, or has more than one style of signature then a large number of comparison signatures may be required to safely eliminate them as the author of the signature in question.

#6 Do I need to have the original document examined?

If the original document exists it represents best evidence and should be examined if at all possible. An initial investigation can be conducted using photocopies but the opinions given by document examiners will always be limited by the fact that they have not examined the originals. Without looking at the original document it is not possible to check for certain signs of simulation such as guidelines that are indicative of tracing or to check if the signature is actually a “wet ink” signature and not a computer generated one.

#7 What types of opinions do Document Examiners provide?

Document Examiners provide opinions based on the results of examinations and the weight of any evidence found as part of these examinations. Document Examination, like most branches of science, is not an exact science and opinions reflect the degree of certainty or uncertainty in any particular case. Document Examiners usually use a scale which ranges from inconclusive to conclusive with several levels in between to reflect any level of uncertainty. One commonly used framework for expressing opinions is the ASTM model, more details can be found on the ASTM website. It is important that the reasons for any qualified opinion are explained by the Document Examiner in their report.