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Scientific Association of Forensic Examiners Standards

**Guide for Expressing and Reporting Opinions for Handwriting Examination**

**1. Scope**

1.1. This guide addresses terminology for document examiners in expressing opinions based on their examination of case materials.

**2. Significance and Use**

2.1. It may not always be possible for the document examiner to give an unqualified opinion as to authenticity of a document or handwriting. Therefore, a qualitative scale is needed that includes various gradations that will provide consistency among document examiners. This scale should not, however, contain so many shades of meaning that the opinion rendered becomes moot.

2.2. A clear explanation of the term(s) used in the document examiner's report will avoid any misinterpretation of the opinion expressed. This may be done within the report itself or attached as an addendum to the report.

2.3. The terminology in the scale should be easy to understand and convey what the expert intended.

2.4. This guide recognizes that no scale can cover all possible gradations of an expert opinion. It is intended to provide clear distinctions between levels of opinion.

2.5. Any significant differences between disputed and known writing must be explainable. For example, the effects of age, writing surface, writing instrument, medications or recreational substance, etc.

**3. Non-original documents**

3.1. When working from non-original documents, it may be possible to reach an opinion of "Identification," with respect to the handwriting or signature. However, because of the possibility of digital or other manipulation, it is improper to state that the document itself is authentic without examining the original.

## 4. Terminology

### 4.1. Recommended Terms:

**Identification (the strongest opinion of identity)** –in this case, based on the evidence at hand, identification is made within a reasonable degree of scientific certainty. Other than natural variation, which is expected, no unexplainable differences are observed. The known writing compares favorably to the questioned writing. The writing contains substantial similarities, no significant dissimilarities, and there are no limitations associated with quantity or quality of writing or documentation.

**Strong probability did write**—there are substantial significant similarities in the range of writing and no significant dissimilarities. However, there may be limitations imposed, such as insufficient comparison characters and/or insufficient quantity of exemplars.

**Probably did write**—there are few significant similarities in the range of writing and no significant dissimilarities. There are limitations associated with the examination that preclude a stronger opinion. These limitations may include a lack of appropriate comparison materials.

**Inconclusive**—the range of writing may contain similarities and/or dissimilarities, but they are insufficient to make a determination of authenticity. Additionally, limitations may be placed on the examination due to quality and/or quantity of comparison materials, or other constraints.

**Probably did not write**—there are significant dissimilarities in the range of writing and no significant similarities. However, there may be limitations imposed, such as insufficient comparison characters and/or insufficient quantity of writing exemplars.

**Strong probability did not write**—there are substantial significant dissimilarities in the range of writing and no significant similarities. However, there may be limitations imposed, such as insufficient comparison characters and/or insufficient quantity of writing exemplars.

**Elimination—(the strongest opinion of rejection)** based on the evidence at hand, the examiner is absolutely certain that the writer of the known writing is not the writer of the questioned writing. The writing contains substantial dissimilarities, no significant similarities, and there are no limitations associated with quantity or quality of writing.

4.2. When a qualified opinion is offered, it is important to comment on what would make it possible to provide a stronger opinion. For example, the report might request additional or better quality exemplars in order to provide the expert with a better basis for his or her opinion.

## 5. **Undesirable terminology**

4.1 Document examiners are discouraged from using terms that could be misconstrued or are ambiguous. These include (but are not limited to):

**Possible**—‘Possible’ is a term that can leave the document examiner vulnerable to attack.

Anything is ‘possible.’ Therefore, the term is useless.

**Reason to believe**—as document examiners’ opinions are based on verifiable fact, not beliefs, and they testify to evidence-based opinions.