

**QD SOP-7 Terminology for Expressing Conclusions of  
Forensic Document Examiners**

*Approved by Director: Dr. Guy Vallaro*

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**Purpose:** Terminology for Expressing Conclusions of Forensic Document Examiners

This SOP provides the terminology intended to assist forensic document examiners in expressing conclusions or opinions based on their examinations.

The following terms are based on the report of a committee of the Questioned Document Section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences that was adopted as the recommended guidelines in reports and testimony by the Questioned Document Section of the American Academy of Forensic Sciences and the American Board of Forensic Document Examiners.

**Responsibility:** Forensic Science Examiners assigned to the Questioned Document Unit or conducting casework in the Unit.

**Overview of Reporting of Conclusions and Opinions:**

Document examiners begin examinations from a point of neutrality. There are an infinite number of gradations of opinion toward identification or toward elimination. It is in those cases wherein the opinion is less than definite that careful attention is especially needed in the choice of language used to convey the weight of the evidence.

When the opinion is less than definite, there is usually a necessity for additional comments, consisting of such things as reasons for qualification (if the available evidence allows that determination), suggestions for remedies (if any are Known), and any other comments that will shed more light on the report. The report should stand alone with no extra explanations necessary.

The expressions used to differentiate the gradations of opinions should not be considered as strongly defined "categories". These expressions should be guidelines without sharply defined boundaries. To avoid the possibility of misinterpretation of a term where the expert is not present to explain the guidelines in this standard, the appropriate definition(s) could be quoted in or appended to reports.

The material that follows deals with handwriting but forensic document examiners may apply this terminology to other examinations within the scope of their work.

**Reporting Terminology:**

**Identification/Common Authorship** (definite conclusion of identity)—This is the highest degree of confidence expressed by document examiners in handwriting comparisons. The examiner has no reservations whatever, and although prohibited from using the word "fact," the examiner is certain, based on evidence contained in the handwriting, that the writer of the Known material actually wrote the

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writing in question. The term “identification” is used when the lead examiner has physically observed the subject authoring the handwriting exemplar. The term “common authorship” is used when the examiner relies on the agency surety of the exemplars author.

*Example* — It is the opinion of the undersigned examiners that the Questioned handwritten entries appearing in Submission 001 and the Known handwritten entries [reportedly] authored by John Doe appearing in Submission 002 share common authorship.

**Strong probability** (highly probable, very probable)—the evidence is very persuasive, yet some critical feature or quality is missing so that an *identification* is not in order; however, the examiner is virtually certain that the Questioned and Known writings were written by the same individual.

*Example* — It is the opinion of the undersigned examiners that it is highly probable that the Questioned handwritten entries appearing in Submission 001 and the Known handwritten entries [reportedly] authored by John Doe appearing in Submission 002 share common authorship.

**Probable**—the evidence contained in the handwriting points rather strongly toward the Questioned and Known writings having been written by the same individual; however, it falls short of the “virtually certain” degree of confidence.

*Example* — It is the opinion of the undersigned examiners that it is probable that the Questioned handwritten entries appearing in Submission 001 and the Known handwritten entries [reportedly] authored by John Doe appearing in Submission 002 share common authorship.

**Indications** (evidence to suggest)—a body of writing has few features which are of significance for handwriting comparison purposes, but those features are in agreement with another body of writing.

*Example* — It is the opinion of the undersigned examiners that there are indications that the Questioned handwritten entries appearing in Submission 001 and the Known handwritten entries [reportedly] authored by John Doe appearing in Submission 002 share common authorship, but the evidence falls far short of that necessary to support a definite conclusion.

**No conclusion** (totally inconclusive, indeterminable)—This is the zero point of the confidence scale. It is used when there are significantly limiting factors, such as disguise in the Questioned and/or Known writing or a lack of comparable writing, and the examiner does not have even a leaning one way or another.

*Example* — It is the opinion of the undersigned examiners that no conclusion could be reached as to whether the Questioned handwritten entries appearing in Submission 001 and the Known handwritten entries [reportedly] authored by John Doe appearing in Submission 002 share common authorship.

**Indications did not**—this carries the same weight as the indications term that is, it is a very weak opinion.

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*Example* — It is the opinion of the undersigned examiners that there are indications that the Questioned handwritten entries appearing in Submission 001 and the Known handwritten entries [reportedly] authored by John Doe appearing in Submission 002 do not share common authorship, but the evidence falls far short of that necessary to support a definite conclusion.

**probably did not**—the evidence points rather strongly against the Questioned and Known writings having been written by the same individual, but, as in the probable range above, the evidence is not quite up to the “virtually certain” range.

*Example* — It is the opinion of the undersigned examiners that it is probable that the Questioned handwritten entries appearing in Submission 001 and the Known handwritten entries [reportedly] authored by John Doe appearing in Submission 002 do not share common authorship.

**strong probability did not**—this carries the same weight as strong probability on the identification side of the scale; that is, the examiner is virtually certain that the Questioned and Known writings were not written by the same individual.

*Example* — It is the opinion of the undersigned examiners that it is highly probable that the Questioned handwritten entries appearing in Submission 001 and the Known handwritten entries [reportedly] authored by John Doe appearing in Submission 002 do not share common authorship.

**elimination**—this, like the *definite conclusion of identity*, is the highest degree of confidence expressed by the document examiner in handwriting comparisons. By using this expression the examiner denotes no doubt in his opinion that the Questioned and Known writings were not written by the same individual. Eliminations are often difficult determinations to make in handwriting examinations, especially when only requested exemplars are available, and extreme care should be used in arriving at this conclusion.

*Example* — It is the opinion of the undersigned examiners that the Questioned handwritten entries appearing in Submission 001 and the Known handwritten entries [reportedly] authored by John Doe appearing in Submission 002 do not share common authorship.

**Sources of Error:** Not applicable

**References:**

SWGDOC Standard Terminology for Expressing Conclusions of Forensic Document Examiners ver. 2013-1