

Module 11

Reporting procedures

Overview

Having explored the qualitative nature of the examination we now must consider how best to express the results of our examinations. The interface between what we do and the perception of what we do and probative power of the FDEs' opinion is conveyed to the user group at this stage.

Discussion

Reporting procedures are diverse in the field. This is due to the large number of ways that an examiner's confidence in an opinion can be painted in terms of words. Some scales express opinion confidence in terms of verbal probability (McAlexander, 1991). The approach used here (Found & Rogers, 1995; Found, 1997; Found, Dick & Rogers, 1994; Found & Dick, 1992) is based on the Bayesian philosophy summarised in the work of Evett (1998), who states that 'the expert should consider the probability of the evidence given each of the two stated propositions' (the specimen writer (or comparison sample writer) wrote or did not write the questioned handwriting) 'and thus assess the extent to which one of them is supported by the evidence'. Relevant to this discussion also is a reported investigation into the variation in perceptions of what individuals and experts mean by their opinions (Sjerps, Massier & Wagenaar, 1996).

The terminology reported here is the first step in Australian and New Zealand reporting uniformity and there is significant common ground with the Evett (1998) model. As the methodology evolves there is room to modify the reporting approach depending on submissions made and evidence derived from validation and skill testing research.

Explanation of nature of examination

Written reports may contain a brief overview of the method that provides the reader with an understanding of the qualitative nature of the examination. The following statement is an example of an overview which should precede the conclusions of an examiner in a written report.

‘The purpose of conducting a forensic comparison of handwriting is to express an opinion, where the evidence is deemed to be sufficient, as to which of the following propositions the examiner believes the evidence supports

1. The writer of the sample material wrote the questioned material
2. The writer of the sample material did not write the questioned material.

In the initial stage of the process, the examiner makes a determination as to whether or not the questioned writing is similar or dissimilar to the comparison sample writing. Based on this determination all propositions are considered which could account for the observed similarities and/or dissimilarities. At the conclusion of the examination an opinion is expressed regarding the extent to which the evidence supports one of the two general propositions above.’

Levels of opinion

Since the observations made by the examiner are on the product of human behavior there are a large number of variables that could contribute to limiting the examiner's ability to express an opinion confidently. These factors, which have been considered in preceding modules, include the amount of writing being compared, the degree of variability in the writing, the complexity of the writing and the relative timing of the questioned and comparison material. To allow for these variables a scale is used which has two levels on either side of an inconclusive result. These levels are:

1. The questioned handwriting sample **was written by** the writer of the comparison handwriting sample.

This has been described as an opinion of ‘moral certainty’ on the part of the examiner.

For some examiners this opinion level translates into ‘*very strong support for the proposition that the questioned sample was written by the writer of the comparison handwriting sample.*’

2. There is moderate support for the proposition that the questioned handwriting sample **was written by** the writer of the comparison handwriting sample.

This opinion level is used when there is an identifiable limitation associated with the examination process.

3. **No opinion** can be expressed as to whether or not the questioned handwriting sample was written by the writer of the comparison handwriting sample. *This is an inconclusive opinion.*

4. There is moderate support for the proposition that the questioned handwriting sample **was not written by** the writer of the comparison handwriting sample.

This opinion level is used when there is an identifiable limitation associated with the examination process.

5. The questioned handwriting sample **was not written by** the writer of the comparison handwriting sample.

This has been described as an opinion of ‘moral certainty’ on the part of the examiner.

For some examiners this opinion level translates into ‘very strong support for the proposition that the questioned handwriting sample was not written by the writer of the comparison handwriting sample’.

Conclusion

Forensic handwriting examination is a qualitative process which involves FDEs perception and judgment. Both written and verbal reports are expected to reflect this reality. It is expected that there will be continual refinement of both the written method and the approach to reporting procedures in light of research and development within the field.