

Forensic Case Study

Unidentifiable Handwriting: An Anonymous Note Case

From My Forensic Case File



Jacqueline A. Joseph, D-BFDE

Board Certified Handwriting & Document Forensics

921 SW Washington Street, Portland, OR 97205

503-227-3411 ■ 1-800-698-8954

info@jjhandwriting.com

www.jjhandwriting.com

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ABSTRACT:

In an anonymous note case, the first step in the investigation was an examination of the cash register receipt upon which the message was written. The fact that the note was written on paper not manufactured for writing created significant features which prevented identification. Because of these distortions and disturbances, a comparative examination of handwriting would have been futile. Further examination of the suspects' actual handwriting (exemplars) was curtailed, saving time and costs for the client.

KEY WORDS:

Anonymous notes, questioned documents, graphic traits, pen scope, handwriting identification.

To determine that the handwriting appearing on an anonymous note cannot be used to identify a writer is considered a hallmark of expertise. In the case described below, the commission sought identification of the writer of an anonymous note (see Figure I). An opinion of "inconclusive" was rendered. This opinion was based on the facts discussed in this article.

Distortions of the handwriting appearing on the note were attributed to the writer's use of a disguise. Other disturbances in the handwriting were attributed to someone writing upon cash register receipt paper. Conway¹ states that the examiner who presumes to definitely identify every handwriting with which she is confronted seeks to do that which cannot be done. Conway goes on to say that no handwriting is susceptible to identification if it is not truly representative of its source (the writer).² Observations, which will be discussed herein, became limitations indicating that the handwriting was not truly representative of its source and, therefore, was unidentifiable. To be identifiable, a questioned handwriting must bear significant, stable and unique characteristics upon which to base an opinion.

Because an orderly study of any questioned handwriting is a prerequisite to identifying its author³, the condition of the document should first be examined to determine if it is legible and suitable for

comparison.⁴ In this case, the anonymous note was legible and the condition of the original document was good.

Next, we ask the following three questions: 1) What dominant graphic trait is observed? **THE DOMINANT GRAPHIC TRAIT is defined as the graphic trait happening most often in the handwriting.⁵ 2) Can the dominant graphic trait be established as a significant, stable and unique characteristic which repeats in the exemplars? and, 3) Can the dominant graphic trait be explained as an element of disguised writing or not?

Regarding the first question, looking at the questioned writing on the anonymous note, we observe that the dominant graphic trait is letter impulse writing. Letter impulse writing results when a person writes each word one letter at a time, the hand moving to a new position to form each letter. This, then, created a baseline which was individual and unique for each letter.

Letter impulse writing is a very short pen scope.⁶ * Pen Scope is defined as the amount of writing done before the writer makes a notable readjustment in movement or in grip, or without a break in the progressive motor sequence. Letter impulse writing means that a notable readjustment is made, or a notable break in continuity occurs, between each letter. Sentence impulse writing means that entire sentences are written without such readjustment or break.⁷

Next, as to whether the dominant graphic trait (letter impulse writing) can be established as a significant, stable, and unique characteristic which repeats in the exemplars, we consider that pen scope is a uniquely identifying characteristic, but if and only if, it repeats in the exemplars. However, the pen scope observed in the exemplars of the suspects submitted for this examination showed sentence, not letter, impulse writing.

Further, if it is assumed that the exemplars submitted were representative of the entire population of suspects, the note's dominant graphic trait (letter impulse writing) would then be explained as an element of the disguise. This would limit the comparative examination of the handwriting submitted by the two prime suspects, because, as indicated their handwriting was written with sentence impulse exclusively which identified them as skilled, graphically mature writers.

In discussing the identification of handwriting involved in a disguise, one would consider the use of letter impulse writing by a skilled writer to be a distortion of his usual handwriting habits.⁸ When letter impulse handwriting is executed by graphically mature writers, it is defined as unnatural handwriting. The anonymous handwriting was then considered not truly representative of its source and therefore unidentifiable.

Every handwriting can be identified with its author, provided it contains the handwriting habits, individualities, and characteristics of its author in adequate kind and number.⁹ In the anonymous note another significant feature which prevented identification was the lack of any potentially identifying characteristics to use as a basis for opinion. This was due to the brevity of the message, and the fact that the only letters which did repeat in the anonymous handwriting "A," "E," "H," "I," "N," "O," "U," "W," "Y," were written differently each time. There was no distinct pattern of letter formation. Therefore this comprised a limitation. Even though variation in letter forms were observed, these

letter forms did not repeat often enough on the note to be considered a pattern.

Generally, letter forms in themselves are rarely identifying graphic traits, because they are most often class characteristics and the easiest graphic traits to alter. In general, however, the observation of a pattern of variation of letter form, or the peculiar use of a letter form in a particular situation, could be very uniquely identifying.¹⁰

Next, the disturbances of the anonymous handwriting were then considered. It is impossible to identify handwriting which is qualitatively inadequate.¹¹ Close scrutiny should be made of every feature of the handwriting to determine whether there are variations that would indicate unusual conditions.¹²

In the handwriting in question, the effects of an irregular writing surface were observed via regular patterns of interruptions in each stroke. The surface upon which the paper was laid while writing could be discerned. Because this disturbed line quality showed a uniform pattern of corrugation, it was distinguishable from true tremor. Irregular writing surfaces can interfere with smooth movement of the writing implement (in this case, a pencil), and can also affect the appearance of the handwriting as well.¹³ Writing done under unusual conditions may not be suitable for comparison purposes. This added to the basis of opinion in this case.

Also of importance in this case was the fact that the anonymous note was written with a pencil on a cash register receipt, further limiting the identification of the writer. Paper type plays an important role in the formation of the different characteristics of the pencil strokes.¹⁴ The surface texture of paper manufactured for writing is finished so writing instruments may move freely on the surface.¹⁵ The cash register receipt was not paper manufactured for writing.

Additionally observed was the light pressure used by the writer of the anonymous note. The pressure patterns observed in the anonymous note was reasonably explained by the writer's attempt to prevent erosion of the cash register receipt paper.

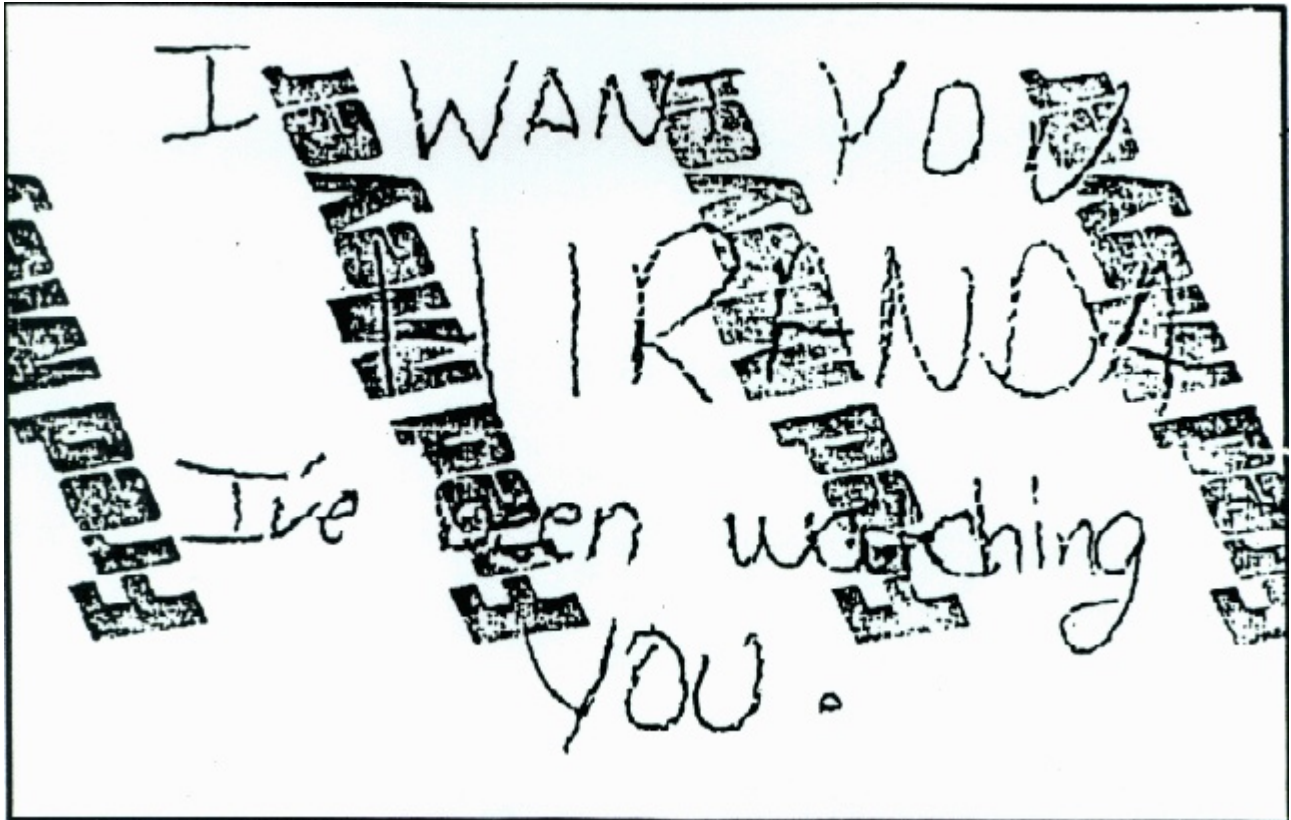


Figure 1

In summary, the combination of limitations discussed herein with their accumulative significance formed the basis of the opinion of "inconclusive" as to the identity of the writer. However, as to the opinion that the writer could not be identified, that conclusion was definite. Identification was prevented by the combination of observations that (a) the significant, stable and unique characteristics did not repeat in the exemplars (b) particular disguise (c) the note's limited amount of words (d) the corrugated line pattern (e) and the artificially light pressure. In general, what was lacking in this document were the elements which a competent document examiner would require to make a scientific identification of a writer.

¹ Conway, James V.P. "Evidential Documents," Page 53.

² Ibid. Page 31.

³ Ibid. Page 51

⁴ Robertson, Edna R. "Fundamentals of Document Examination." Page 86

⁵ Private discussions with Marcel B. Matley.

⁶ Saudek, Robert. "Experiments With Handwriting."

⁷ Matley, Marcel B. "The Physiology and Forensic Identification of Handwriting."

⁸ Private Discussions with Marcel Matley.

⁹ Conway. Page 67.

¹⁰ Saudek. Page 381.

¹¹ Conway. Page 31

¹² Matley, Marcel, B. "The Physiology and Forensic Identification of Handwriting."

¹³ Robertson. Page 180-182.

¹⁴ Mathyer, Jacques. "Influence of Writing Instruments on Handwriting and Signatures." Page 102-12.

¹⁵ Robertson. Page 182.

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