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Recognition and Identification of Multiple Authorship

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ABSTRACT: Multiple authorship of handwritten documents is not an unfamiliar problem encountered by questioned document examiners. A detailed examination should reveal factors that will enable an examiner to recognize indications of multiple authorship in a questioned writing. As in any other handwriting examination, if the proper criteria exists, the writers can be identified.

KEYWORDS: questioned documents, handwriting, multiple authorship, indicators, recognition, identification

Multiple authorship is not an unfamiliar task encountered by questioned document examiners. It is a task not unlike many other problems faced by examiners on a regular basis. In fact, one of the primary concerns of an examiner as he surveys the writings that are submitted as standards, in every case, is that all of the writings are specimens of one individual and not the product of multiple authors. This is a necessary precaution for ". . . no identification can be more accurate than the standards that support it" [1, p. 310]. However, this paper does not deal with the verification of standards. It will attempt to review factors that can assist examiners in recognizing and identifying multiple authorship.

When we deal with this task, we are faced with two problems. First, we must recognize significant differences that break the continuity of the writing and attempt to establish that more than one writer is involved. Secondly, we must attempt to find sufficient unique and individual characteristics by which we can identify the writer responsible for a specific portion of the writing in question.

Recognizing Indicators of Multiple Authorship

An examiner must be alert to detect indications of multiple authorship in questioned writings. The indicators may be conspicuous or subtle, and the examiner must be careful not to excuse them as ". . . normal variation, disguise, or accident" [2]. In general, any abrupt, unusual, or extreme deviation in the continuity of the writing or its component parts could be an indication of multiple authors.

The components that serve as indicators may be either class or individual characteristics.

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They may be as conspicuous as features, style, form, slant, or the overall quality of the writing (Fig. 1). They may be as subtle as movement, writing pressure, proportions, relative proportions, approach, ending, and connecting strokes, or line quality, which is indicative of simulation (Figs. 2 through 4). The areas in which a break in writing continuity might occur are numerous. The examiner must automatically consider all of the various component parts of a writing which could be an indicator during the examination and correlation of characteristics. Any of the components may reveal significant differences that could serve in separating different segments of a writing.

Consideration must be given to all aspects of the document. Hilton makes a relevant point when he deals with the arrangement of writing. He states,

The arrangement of the writing on the paper may be as individual as the writing itself. Margins, spacing, crowding, insertions, and alignments are personal habits. . . . Spelling, punctuation, phraseology, and grammar may further individualize the author [1, p. 158].

The examiner must consider all of these areas as he conducts his examination and correlation of characteristics, because they are components of the document where indicators may be found.

There is no way to describe exactly each and every personal or individual characteristic that an examiner may encounter [3]. Consequently, an examiner must be alert and recognize any significant differences that break the continuity of a multitude of factors and may indicate multiple authorship.

According to Hilton, “. . . if two specimens of writing were not prepared by the same writer, this can be established through significant differences in either individual or class characteristics” [1, p. 160]. This same philosophy can be applied in the detection of multiple authorship.

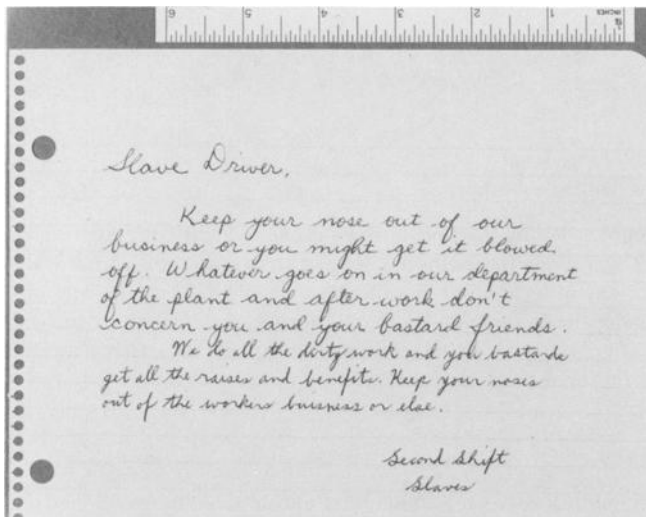


FIG. 1—An example of conspicuous indicators. Notice the abrupt change in writing styles at the beginning of the second paragraph. The writing is generally more cramped, with tighter connecting strokes. There are differences in form between the uppercase "S," "K," and "W." Also, there are many inconspicuous differences between the writing of the first and second paragraphs, indicating multiple authorship.

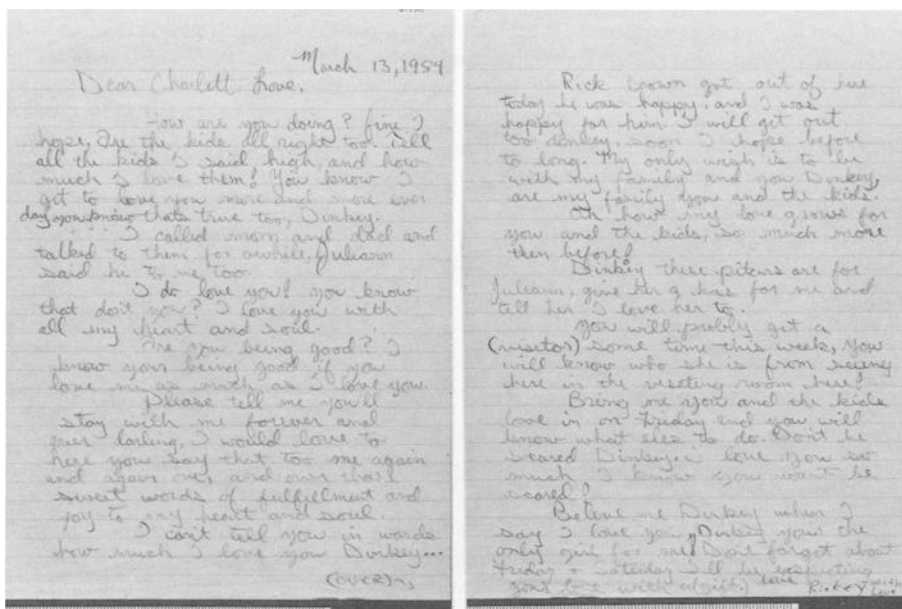


FIG. 2—Letter involved in prison drug smuggling case. Note! The letters displayed in Figs. 2 through 4 were submitted for examination in conjunction with an investigation of drug smuggling in a prison. The letters were alleged to have been written by a cellmate of Ronald Barnes. Barnes—nickname "Rinky"—denied writing any part of the letters. The investigators obtained court-ordered specimens from the cellmate covering only incriminating portions of the text in each letter. They did not obtain specimens from Barnes, since he was a "cooperative witness" for the prosecution. A survey examination of the exhibits available revealed factors that indicated the possibility of multiple authorship. The investigators were instructed to obtain proper, request, and nonrequest specimens of both individuals and they complied. A detailed examination revealed that a cellmate wrote the main body of the letters; however, Barnes did write his signature and various handprinting appearing on the questioned documents.

Identification of Multiple Authors

The problem presented by multiple authors is one of identifying each writer with the segment of the writing he/she has authored. The criteria for identification is the same as that which applies to any other writing identification problem. If the writing in question compares favorably with the specimens of a specific author, and if there are sufficient unique and individual characteristics with no unexplainable variations, the writer may be identified with the segment he authored (Figs. 5 and 6).

Conclusion

Multiple authorship is not an unfamiliar task encountered by questioned document examiners, but it can be a very difficult task. However, a detailed examination should reveal factors that will enable an alert examiner to recognize indications of multiple authors in a questioned writing. The examiner may be able to separate the writings into segments, and, if the proper criteria exists, the writers can be identified.

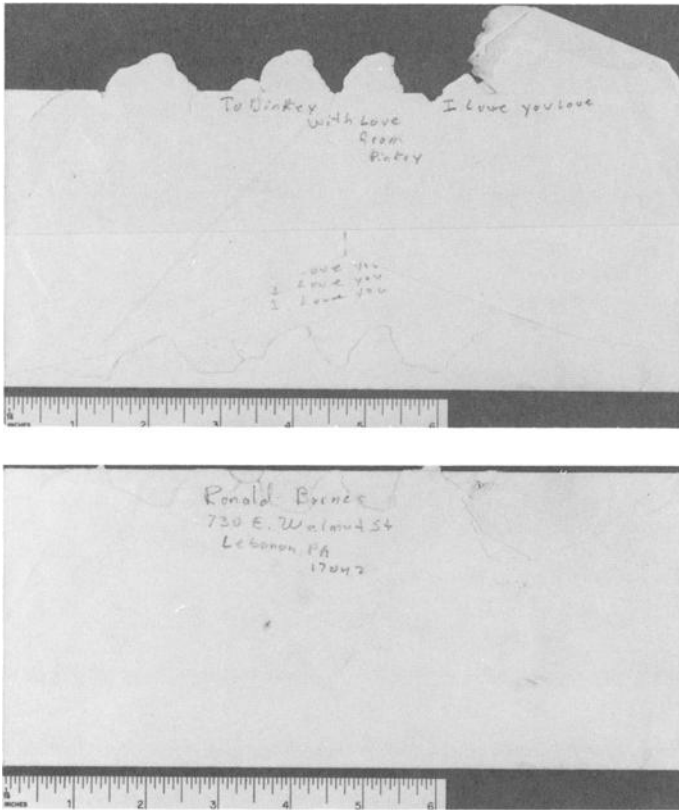


FIG. 3—The rear and inside of the envelope which was used to mail the letter in Fig. 2. The letter is generally composed of cursive handwriting. Notice the handprinted closing "Rinkey with Love," and the handprinted notations on the inside and rear of the envelope.

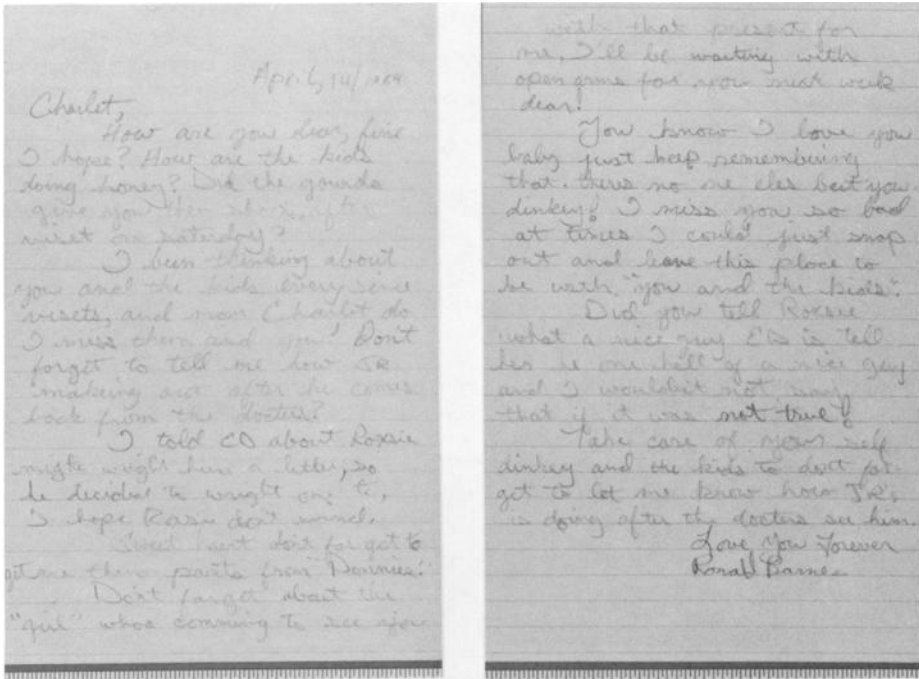


FIG. 4—Second letter involved in prison drug smuggling case. Notice the slight difference in the density of the pencil line of the signature with the remaining writing in Fig. 4. Examination also revealed further indications of heavier writing pressure in the signature. Compare the uppercase "R" and "B," the lowercase "S," and the "ld" combination (including the proportions and connecting strokes) in the signature with the same characteristics in the remaining writing of both letters. Compare the spacing between words in the body of the letters with the spacing between the given and surname of the signature. All of the aforementioned factors are subtle indicators.

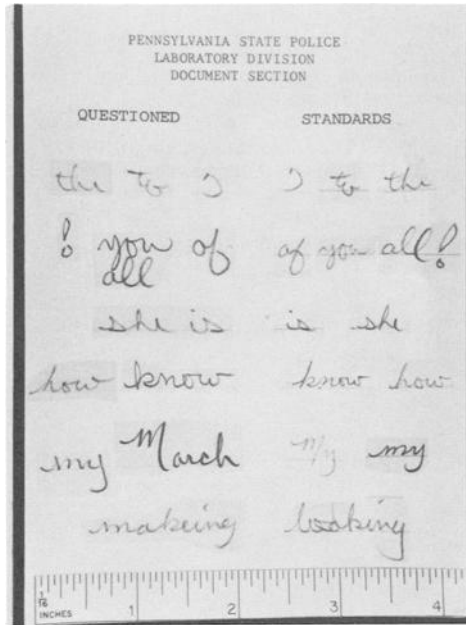


FIG. 5—Photographic exhibit prepared for court presentation demonstrating that the cellmate, Edward M. Ill, did write the cursive handwriting appearing in the body of the letters (refer to Figs. 2 and 4).

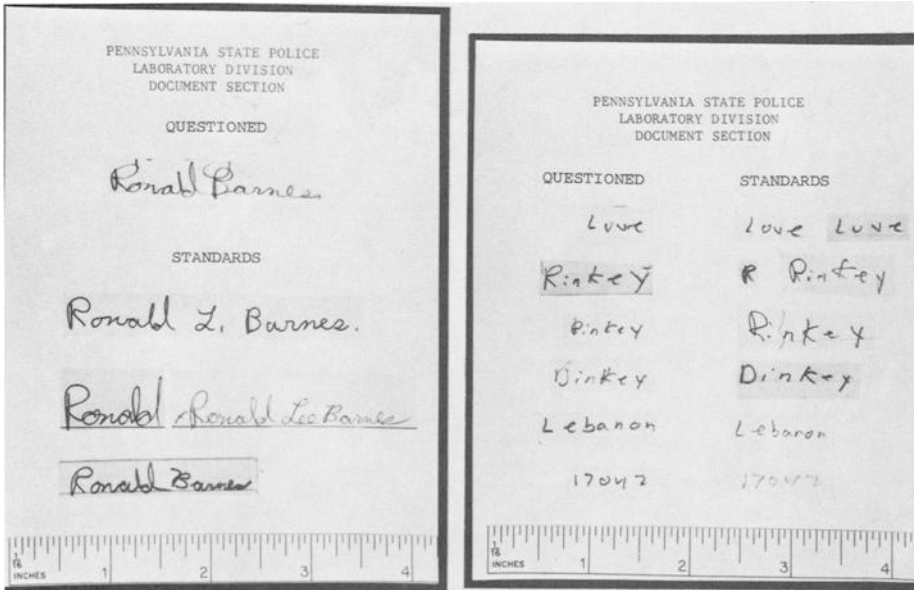


FIG. 6 (left and right)—Photographic exhibits prepared for court presentation demonstrating that Ronald L. Barnes did write the questioned signature appearing on the letter (Fig. 4) and the questioned handprinting (refer to Figs. 2 and 3).

References

- [1] Hilton, O., *Scientific Examination of Questioned Documents*, revised edition, Elsevier North Holland, Inc., New York, 1982, pp. 310, 158, 160.
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