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Policing Advisory Agency



DOCUMENT SPECIALIST ADVISORY GROUP

Good Practice Guideline for the Forensic Examination of Handwriting and Signatures

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A document prepared by the Australia New Zealand Forensic Science Community

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ANZPAA acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders are Australia's first peoples and the traditional owners and custodians of the land on which we work. ANZPAA is committed to fulfilling the principles of New Zealand's founding document The Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi). Central to the principles is a common understanding that all parties will relate and participate with each other in good faith with mutual respect, co-operation and trust. This report is committed to fulfilling the intent of international treaties and human rights legislation applicable to the various jurisdictions in which we operate, our obligations to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, and the principles of the New Zealand (Aotearoa) Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti o Waitangi).

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Principle

The Good Practice Guideline for the Examination of Handwriting and Signatures ('the Guideline') has been developed to provide a standardised framework for the forensic examination of handwriting and signatures. It is designed as a bridging document to the Document Specialist Advisory Group (DocSAG) approved The Modular Forensic Handwriting Method – 2023 Version¹ ('Modular Method') which details a validated handwriting² examination method in the field of Forensic Document Examination³. The Modular Method can be used as a high-level procedure in the majority of handwriting comparison casework by the Forensic Handwriting Examiner (FHE), or as a reference for others, such as academics and researchers, who may be interested in certain aspects of forensic handwriting examination. The Modular Method has been formed as a modular framework, using an agreed general approach of the government forensic laboratories in Australia as represented by the DocSAG. It is currently adopted within these DocSAG laboratories. The modules within the Modular Method are routinely reviewed and updated with relevant advances in the field.

Scope

The Guideline covers relevant aspects of forensic handwriting examination, for example, risks, equipment, analysis/examination, recording, evaluation and interpretation of results, for a holistic best practice guide to the examination. It does not detail other types of examinations conducted by Forensic Document Examiners (FDEs), nor does it cover the unrelated field of 'graphology'⁴. The Guideline may help the practitioner or laboratory to have confidence in a validated field of forensic science but does not limit them to using this approach.

Background

The Good Practice Guideline for the Forensic Examination of Handwriting and Signatures is available on the ANZPAA NIFS website. Developed by the ANZPAA NIFS Document Specialist Advisory Group and approved by the Australia New Zealand Forensic Executive Committee (ANZFEC), the Guideline provides a broad overview of the handwriting examination method, including key considerations, risks, and limitations. In addition, the Guideline aligns with the Modular Method, supporting the harmonisation of practices across jurisdictions. The Guideline is not intended to replace individual ANZFEC-agency standard operating procedures (SOPs) or policies but may guide agencies when creating or updating procedures and policies.

Footnotes

¹ *The Modular Forensic Handwriting Method – 2023 Version*. Edited by Bird, C., Jones, K., and Ballantyne, K. Approved by DocSAG. As this is the primary reference document for the Guideline, it is referenced continuously throughout and will hereby be referred to as the 'Modular Method' without additional footnoting.

² For the purpose of this document, the term 'handwriting' should be understood to also include signatures.

³ The field of Forensic Document Examination comprises numerous examination types in addition to handwriting comparisons. This document will use the term Forensic Handwriting Examiner (FHE) to specifically refer to practitioners who conduct forensic examination and comparison of handwriting. It is recognised that some FHEs may not be trained in all aspects of Forensic Document Examination and not all Forensic Document Examiners (FDE) are trained in Forensic Handwriting Examination.

⁴ 'Graphology' refers to the study of handwriting to infer a person's characteristics such as gender, age or personality. No scientific evidence exists to support graphology.

The Modular Method was written by practising FHEs and academics in a systematic modular format as an attempt to standardise a human process, and was first published in the *Journal of Forensic Document Examination* in 1999. The Modular Method has been validated by FHEs through a series of blind trials for both handwriting and signature comparisons over a ten-year period. The validation program was aimed at characterising skill and expertise associated with human perceptual and cognitive processes and how these relate to forming opinions. This was to address the criticisms of forensic handwriting examination from published literature and court challenges, and to provide scientific validation of the modular approach. The original Modular Method was published with the modules presented in a flow diagram, with the current version containing significant updates, primarily providing further alignment with the evaluative, or logical, framework for evidence evaluation (refer to Modular Method **Module 9 – Evidence Evaluation** for further information on the evaluative approach to opinion evidence in forensic science).

Definitions

For Definitions of terms relevant to the examination of handwriting refer to the Modular Method **Glossary**.

Reference Document

The Guideline has been written as a bridging document to the Modular Method to provide a framework for the forensic examination of handwriting. The Guideline is designed to be read in conjunction with the 2023 Version of the Modular Method.

The Modular Forensic Handwriting Method – 2023 Version. Edited by Bird, C., Jones, K., and Ballantyne, K.
Approved by DocSAG December 2022.

Work Health and Safety (WHS)

All examinations present potential risks to health and safety. WHS considerations when conducting handwriting examinations include, but are not limited to, ergonomics, biological hazards, chemical hazards, and psychological risks. Organisational WHS policies and procedures must be followed when conducting handwriting examinations.

Risks

In the realm of forensic science, the concept of risk is primarily focussed on the risk of error, ultimately due to uncertainties in the process. In *The Sydney Declaration*⁵, Roux et. al. describe a “continuum of uncertainties” in the practice of forensic science, with a view that these uncertainties should be identified and managed, however uncertainty cannot be entirely eliminated. Risks are present in all stages of the process, from evidence collection, continuity and identification to examination and evaluation of the evidence, and ultimately understanding of the evidence by the trier of fact. Although risks exist, they can be managed to ensure confidence in the value of the

Footnotes

⁵ Roux, C., Bucht, R., Crispino, F., De Forest, P., Lennard, C., Margot, P., Miranda, M. D., NicDaeid, N., Ribaux, O., Ross, A., Willis, S. (2022). *The Sydney declaration – Revisiting the essence of forensic science through its fundamental principles*. *Forensic Science International*, Volume 332. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.forsciint.2022.111182>.

scientific findings. It is important that the examiner has an appreciation of the inherent risks in handwriting examinations.

Validity and Reliability

The field of forensic handwriting examination in Australia and New Zealand has been subject to thorough skill testing through validation studies. Refer to the Modular Method **Annexure 1 – Validation of Handwriting and Signature Modular Method** and The Modular Forensic Handwriting Method – 2016 Version⁶ (Annexure – Validation of method and blind testing) for more information on the validity and reliability of handwriting examinations using the Modular Method. In addition, empirical support for the validity and reliability of various aspects of forensic handwriting examination was investigated and presented by the Document Examination working group in the ANZPAA NIFS Forensic Fundamentals Gap Analysis⁷ and accompanying Forensic Fundamentals Document Examination Literature Assessment Summary⁸. The Gap Analysis reported that there is strong empirical support that an expert can provide an accurate and reliable opinion on the writer of a signature or body of handwriting. However, examinations involving numerals only and handwriting in languages other than English or explicitly by individuals who learned to write in languages other than English have not been empirically tested.

Bias

While the Modular Method, to which the Guideline is aligned, is a validated procedure for the examination of handwriting, the examination and decision-making processes remain centred in human behaviour and cognition and, as such, there are associated risks that must be acknowledged by the examiner. Cognitive bias, more specifically contextual bias, is discussed in detail by the Expert Working Group for Human Factors in Handwriting Examination their 2021 report⁹. The report contains definitions and examples of contextual bias in handwriting examinations, and outlines and recommends the use of contextual information management protocols as a risk mitigation approach. Refer to the Modular Method **Appendix 1 – Cognitive Bias and Contextual Information Management** for more information on bias and contextual information management for handwriting examinations.

Quality Management

Relevant organisational quality management systems should be followed at all times. Australian¹⁰ and International¹¹ Standards outline minimum requirements for a quality management system. Quality management systems should address risk mitigation and issues including, but not limited to, training, proficiency testing, exhibit handling, procedures, case reviews, and record control.

Footnotes

⁶ Found, B. J., & Bird, C. (2016). The Modular Forensic Handwriting Method – 2016 Version. *Journal of Forensic Document Examination*, 26, 7–83. <https://doi.org/10.31974/jfde26-7-83>.

⁷ ANZPAA NIFS, Forensic Fundamentals Gap Analysis, 2022, www.anzpa.org.au/nifs

⁸ ANZPAA NIFS, Forensic Fundamentals Document Examination Literature Assessment Summary, 2022, www.anzpa.org.au/nifs

⁹ Expert Working Group for Human Factors in Handwriting Examination. (2021) *Forensic Handwriting Examination and Human Factors: Improving the Practice Through a Systems Approach*. U.S. Department of Commerce, National Institute of Standards and Technology. <https://doi.org/10.6028/NIST.IR.8282r1> . ('Human Factors Report').

¹⁰ AS 5388 (2012) Forensic Analysis

¹¹ ISO/IEC 17025:2018 General requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories. ('ISO/IEC 17025')

Personnel

Initial Training

Each Document Examination laboratory should have a documented training program. This program should be competency-based and contain a combination of theoretical and practical components. External agencies such as tertiary institutions or other laboratories may be utilised where required.

While theoretical training is important to provide education on underlying principles of handwriting examination, trainees should also undertake hands-on training, conducting a range of real or simulated casework under the supervision of experts. For this reason, it is essential that trainees are working in an established Document Examination laboratory during their training.

Handwriting and signature examination is one of the eight practice domains listed in the ANZPAA Education and Training Guidelines for Document Examination¹². The practice domain lists theory components and practical components that may be used to inform training programmes. The training of FHEs should enable them to perform the functions as outlined in the *Application of Theory and Practice* component of the practice domain.

Incorporated in the training program should be study of the Modular Method which outlines in detail each of the steps involved in conducting handwriting examinations. Those steps are:

- Pre-analysis of the handwriting material available
- Analysis of questioned material
- Analysis of known material
- Comparing the questioned and known material
- Evaluation, and
- Reporting.

The theoretical and practical components of the training program should be applied, with the trainee undertaking handwriting examinations in accordance with the Modular Method. These examinations should involve mock cases where the ground truth is known, as well as assisting an expert with actual casework.

Ongoing Demonstration of Competency

It is important that a FHE's competency be demonstrated on an ongoing basis. This will generally take place via proficiency testing but also takes place via ongoing technical reviews, reviews of court testimony and any other reviews as outlined in organisational policies.

Proficiency testing should be carried out at a frequency in accordance with organisational policy. In the case of NATA accredited laboratories, such proficiency testing will meet standards in accordance with ISO/IEC 17025¹³ accreditation guidelines.

It is good practice for FHEs to maintain their professional development through such means as reading texts and periodicals, liaising with examiners from other document examination laboratories, networking via membership of societies and attending professional meetings and symposia.

Footnotes

¹² ANZPAA NIFS, Education and Training Guidelines for Document Examination, 2015, www.anzpaa.org.au/nifs.

¹³ ISO/IEC 17025 (n 11).

Equipment

As outlined in the Modular Method, the FHE conducts examination of both macroscopic features such as size, slope and spatial characteristics, as well as microscopic features such as line quality, pen direction and order of strokes. For this reason, adequate lighting is essential, as are appropriate visual aids such as hand-held magnifiers and microscopes.

Other equipment that may assist in the visualisation of handwriting include:

- Electrostatic detection devices such as the ESDA® (Electrostatic Detection Apparatus)
- Spectral imaging devices such as the VSC® (Video Spectral Comparator)
- Imaging equipment such as cameras and scanners
- Digital imaging software such as Adobe Photoshop™

All equipment should be maintained, and quality tested regularly, including calibration where appropriate, to ensure optimal working function. Frequency and type of calibration/maintenance can be informed by manufacturer's instructions, practical considerations such as frequency of usage, and accreditation requirements. The calibration and maintenance schedule should be documented as part of the laboratory's quality system.

Handling Items

In order to maintain the integrity of the evidence, appropriate exhibit handling procedures should be documented and adhered to at all times (see ISO/IEC 17025¹⁴). Handling considerations are further outlined in Australian Standard for Forensic Analysis *Part 1: Recognition, recording, recovery, transport and storage of material*¹⁵. For items requiring handwriting examination, considerations include, but are not limited to, the following:

- Items should be stored securely at all stages to prevent unauthorised access, contamination and/or loss. The continuity of items must be maintained. Where items are received in the form of electronic documents, the security of the electronic file/s should also be maintained.
- Questioned and known samples must be identifiable, with unambiguous identification.
- In general, items received for handwriting examination are in the form of paper documents. These documents are susceptible to damage from tearing, moisture, and heat and/or sun exposure, and as such, items should be stored and handled appropriately to prevent damage.

Items may require examination for additional evidence, such as fingerprints and DNA, and consideration must be given to how these examinations may affect, or be affected by, the handwriting examination. Contamination issues must be considered and addressed, and where possible, non-destructive techniques should be performed prior to destructive techniques.

Footnotes

¹⁴ ISO/IEC 17025 (n 11).

¹⁵ AS 5388.1 (2012) Forensic analysis – Recognition, recording, recovery, transport and storage of material.

Analysis/Examination

The examination of handwriting is outlined in detail in the Modular Method. The various steps in the process are explained, including the following:

Hypothesis Testing

There must be two competing and mutually exclusive propositions, set at the commencement of the examination and considered when evaluating findings. Refer to **Module 3 – Formulation of Propositions** of the Modular Method for information about the process and requirements for setting propositions.

Methods or Analysis Protocols

Handwriting examinations progress through several stages, including Pre-Analysis, Analysis of Questioned Material, Analysis of Known Material, Comparison, Evaluation and Reporting. Refer to **Module 1 – The Modular Method Examination Process** of the Modular Method for information about these stages.

Various issues to consider at different stages of the examination are detailed further, including:

Suitability of Materials

In order for a handwriting examination to take place, the material must be comparable and with any contamination removed. Refer to **Module 2 – Determination of the Suitability of Questioned and Known Samples: Issues of Comparability and Contamination** of the Modular Method for information regarding determination of the suitability of questioned and known samples.

Non-Original and Digitally Captured Handwriting

This includes handwriting appearing on a document which has not been produced directly by the interaction between the writing implement and writing surface, as well as handwriting appearing on a document that has been produced using a digital capture mechanism or device. Refer to **Module 4 – Non-Original and Digitally Captured Handwriting** of the Modular Method for information regarding the examination of non-original and digitally captured handwriting.

Complexity of Handwriting

An assessment of the complexity of handwriting is routinely done by a FHE as part of the examination process. Refer to **Module 5 – The Assessment of Handwriting Complexity** of the Modular Method for information regarding complexity assessments.

Features

In order to examine handwriting, an examiner will identify a set of features of the questioned writing sample that can be compared to a set of features of the known writing sample. Refer to **Module 6 – Features of Handwriting** of the Modular Method for information regarding feature examination.

Unnatural Writing Behaviours

Unnatural writing behaviours encompass those writings that are disguised, simulated or modified by internal or external factors. Refer to **Module 7 – Unnatural Handwriting Behaviours** of the Modular Method for information regarding the examination of handwriting for unnatural writing behaviours.

Comparison of Questioned to Known Material

The aim of the comparison is to determine whether the questioned material is similar or dissimilar to the known material through comparison of the features of the writing. Refer to **Module 8 – Comparison of Handwriting Samples** of the Modular Method for information regarding the comparison process.

Recording of Results and Observations

Notes should be taken throughout the examination process, detailing the features observed and any other observations about the questioned and known handwriting samples. The notes should also include information about the comparison of the features, any limitations in the examination and the reasoning behind any decisions made. Sufficient notes should be taken for another FHE to be able to fully comprehend the findings.

Evaluation and Interpretation

The evaluation and interpretation phase of the method involves the decision making. Based on the observations made, any limitations in the examination, and any relevant case information, along with professional judgement of the FHE, a probability of the evidence given each proposition is assessed. From here an opinion is reached regarding the strength that the evidence provides for one proposition over the alternate. FHEs following the Modular Method use a verbal scale which includes the findings of approximately equal, moderate support, strong support and very strong support for one proposition over the alternate.

Refer to **Module 9 – Evidence Evaluation** of the Modular Method for information regarding the evaluation and interpretation process and the formation of opinions.

Reporting

There are several elements that are required to be included a report on a handwriting examination. These include identifying:

- The propositions used to evaluate the evidence
- All background information provided to the examiner
- All assumptions made by the examiner
- Any limitations affecting the assessment or evaluation of the evidence
- The reporting scale used
- A caveat stating that should there be any changes to the case information, exhibit material or propositions, then the examiner's opinion may also change.

Refer to **Module 10 – Reporting Procedures** of the Modular Method for further information regarding the reporting of handwriting examinations, and the Australian Standard for Forensic analysis *Part 4: Reporting*¹⁶ for information regarding general elements required in a forensic report.

Footnotes

¹⁶ AS 5388.4 (2012) Forensic analysis – Reporting.

Case Review

Clear expectations, requirements and/or recommendations with regards to case reviews in Forensic Science are outlined and discussed in Australian¹⁷ and International Standards¹⁸. More specifically, recommendations relating to handwriting examination are also discussed in the 2021 Report of the Expert Working Group for Human Factors in Handwriting Examination¹⁹.

As identified in these documents, an important part of a robust quality management system is the requirement for case reviews. While not infallible, this provides an extra level of protection against error in the examination process and/or results. The review process covers the content of the entire case file, as well as that of the report prior to release. A documented procedure outlining requirements for case review should be maintained by the laboratory. This procedure should cover the criteria for each type of review, the percentage and/or type of cases requiring each type of review, who can conduct the review and the recording requirements, as well as procedures for situations where disagreements arise.

A brief description of each review type is provided below, however, specific requirements should be sought from relevant jurisdictional quality management systems and/or Australian and International Standards.

Technical Review

A qualified FHE reviews all aspects of the case file for the purpose of ensuring the following:

- The examiner has used the correct procedure/s for the examination and has applied the procedure correctly
- The examiner has recorded sufficient information to allow for the examination to be repeated under conditions as close as possible to the original²⁰
- The conclusion/s of the examiner are supported by the evidence available.

Administrative Review

The contents of the case file are checked to ensure all required documentation as per quality management system is present and accurate.

It is not a requirement for the administrative review to be conducted by a qualified FHE, however the reviewer should be familiar with the relevant quality management system.

Report Review

A review is conducted to ensure the report:

- Contains all relevant information as per quality management system requirements
- Accurately reflects the examinations conducted and conclusions formed
- Is coherent and free from spelling and/or grammatical errors²¹.

Footnotes

¹⁷ AS 5388.4 (n 16).

¹⁸ ISO/IEC 17025 (n 11).

¹⁹ Human Factors Report (n 9).

²⁰ ISO/IEC 17025 (n 11).

²¹ Human Factors Report (n 9).

References

AS 5388.1 (2012) Forensic analysis – Recognition, recording, recovery, transport and storage of material.

AS 5388.2 (2012) Forensic analysis – Analysis of material.

AS 5388.3 (2012) Forensic analysis – Interpretation.

AS 5388.4 (2012) Forensic analysis – Reporting.

ANZPAA NIFS, Education and Training Guidelines for Document Examination, 2015, www.anzpaa.org.au/nifs

ISO/IEC 17025:2018 General requirements for the competence of testing and calibration laboratories.

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The Specialist Advisory Group members involved in the preparation of this report were:

Linda Jones (Victoria Police, Australia)

Liz Ockleshaw (Forensic Science South Australia, Australia)

Denise Pickering (Queensland Police Service, Australia)

Katrina Stokes (Australian Federal Police, Australia)

Dean Swift (New South Wales Police Force, Australia)

ANZPAA
Australia New Zealand
Policing Advisory Agency



Victoria Police Centre
Level 24, 311 Spencer Street
DOCKLANDS VIC 3008

T +61 3 9606 4515
E secretariat.nifs@anzpaa.org.au
Web: www.anzpaa.org.au/nifs