

The difference between the study of handwriting for personality assessment and forensic handwriting examination

Although these two fields of the study of handwriting dynamics, both have as their points of departure, knowledge of handwriting features, and the dynamics of handwriting, the theoretical frameworks for each of these disciplines is vastly different. Since this article is focused on forensic handwriting examination, the explanation of this element will have a greater focus in discussing the above question.

Forensic Document Examination is referred to by a number of terms. As listed by Koppenhaver (2002) and Ellen (2003), forensic document examiners, are also referred to as forensic handwriting experts, forensic handwriting examiners, etc. Forensic handwriting examination is a subsection of the umbrella term Forensic Document Examination which is all inclusive of the skills required in the examination of the many aspects of document generation. Document Examination has been around in one form or another since Roman times. However, Osborn was instrumental in having document examination recognised in the early 20th century. During the course of the next number of decades, the status of forensic document examination as been tested in courts of law. In the present day, although viewed with some scepticism, it is recognised as a technical skill and those practicing the skill are regarded as skilled craftsmen in the study of documents. These are skills which courts generally do not have, and the forensic handwriting examiner is able to shed light on questioned documents which would otherwise go amiss in the courts.

Handwriting Analysis, on the other hand, has been researched and studied as far back as the middle ages where French monks observed that variations in handwriting corresponded to personality. Thus the theory of handwriting analysis, sometimes referred to as graphology, started to evolve. The debate regarding the reliability of this aspect of the study of handwriting, rages on and thus, it is not recognised in courts of law.

The methods used in handwriting analysis for personality profiling is different from forensic handwriting examination, although there are overlapping areas, such as a knowledge of handwriting features and the impact of physical and mental influences on handwriting.

Those forensic handwriting examiners who have had a handwriting analysis background, have a more solid foundation regarding the dynamics surrounding handwriting behaviour as the training requires a more detailed understanding of handwriting features and external and internal factors which may affect handwriting. An example of internal aspects which may affect handwriting, would be the signature and or handwriting of an elderly person, perhaps suffering from Parkinsons Disease. Research at the University of Haifa has shown a link between handwriting

and Parkinsons Disease. The forensic handwriting examiner needs to know the effect of the disease on handwriting.

Because handwriting behaviour is extremely complex, being inextricably linked to the central and peripheral nervous systems, an understanding of how neuropathy and the mental state will affect handwriting, is a crucial element in the examination of handwriting especially when faced with questioned documents. The handwriting analyst (graphologist) has this as part of their training.