

Continuous Professional Development

According to Koppenhaver (2002), it is imperative that the forensic handwriting examiner continues to study throughout the course of his or her career. One of the ways to do so, is to have membership of associations where learning opportunities and knowledge sharing is a major activity of the association. A number of forensic document examination associations worldwide expect members to submit to proficiency tests. Others offer online conferences and continuing education classes, such as the Scientific Association of Forensic Examiners (SAFE) and the International Association of Document Examiners (IADE) as well as others such as NADE, ASQDE and ABDFE and others.

There is a dearth of such associations in South Africa. Serious forensic handwriting examiners in South Africa therefore seek out international associations to maintain the relevance of their skills in the global context.

A group of private document examiners are in the process of establishing such an association (Association of Professional Handwriting Examiners of South Africa), for the South African document examination community. Visit <http://www.APHESA.org.za>.

So then how do you know whether the FHE's knowledge is up to date? It is important to ask whether the document examiner is a member of associations in the field of forensic handwriting examination as these associations share knowledge and expertise through conferences, seminars, online debates and proficiency testing.

Since 1910, when Osborne was instrumental in having FDE recognised as a field of science, a great deal of developments have taken place. Obtaining a 'qualification' at a certain point in time, does not make one an expert. Expertise is obtained through study on the one hand, and continuous professional development and practice, i.e. experience, on the other hand.

Ultimately, the FHE needs to justify any claim made in the course of an investigation. Thus, apart from being open to the latest developments in the field through attendance at conferences, etc and reading of peer reviewed research and writing, the FHE has the responsibility of thorough research for each case being investigated. All claims in the investigation, should be underpinned by solid research into the aspect being assessed.

Ultimately, it is up to the court to decide whether the expert witness possesses the necessary skills to provide the technical knowledge, which the court does not have.