

Book Review

Forensic Handwriting Identification: Fundamental Concepts and Principles (2nd Edition)

by Ron Morris

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Slightly more than 20 years since the 1st edition, the 2nd edition by Ron Morris has provided an update on his approach in explaining the field of forensic handwriting comparison. In the acknowledgements he gives credit to one of his trainers Bill Schulenberg (US Treasury Department), for instilling the importance of learning about the writing process and the changes that take place over the course of time for a writer. As part of this approach in this book he "... consolidates basic concepts of the act of writing and how some factors can affect it." One theme that he repeats throughout the book is that handwriting is receiving limited, if any, instruction in many schools.

In the writings on certain chapters, he has taken a very practical approach to describing certain concepts. In doing so he has made references to many classic sources as well as modern ones. Certain references include writers such as Robert Saudek who have become synonymous with graphology as many of their published works included topics associated with graphology. Mr Morris alleviates any potential controversy surrounding this early in the Introduction:

"Several of those writers have been named graphologists because they include some of that topic in their works. The author wishes to clarify here that

references referred to in this book deal primarily with the actual mechanics of the writing act. No graphological significance is attached to any referenced material or principles in this work..."

In Chapter 1, *The physiology of writing*, a fundamental discussion of handwriting development is given. Within this the concept of a writers "graphic maturity" is introduced from the manner in which a writer learns to write by what Saudek described as the "impulse method". The "impulse method" is really an increasing complexity of a writer's graphic capability: stroke impulse, letter impulse, word or name impulse and finally sentence/phrase impulse. This chapter also covers several aspects of pen grip with different grips illustrated and photographed to assist in the description of muscle relaxation and contraction and its role in observed pen pressure of the written trace. Included in this are references to Rosemary Sassoon, a UK researcher and author on handwriting instruction and typography. The chapter closes with a discussion of other factors that may have an influence on the physiological aspects of writing including but not limited to professional environment, writing instruments and materials, with a final description of what constitutes graphic maturity.

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Chapter 2, *Handwriting systems*, provides a historic and modern viewpoint on the systems of handwriting instruction including the reality that there is far less emphasis on handwriting instruction at least within the context of the USA. In keeping with less emphasis and rigour in following one particular system of writing this is a short chapter, but it does include some illustrations of a modern system by Zaner-Bloser along with some summary charts of other handwriting systems some may still be in use while others are historical.

In Chapter 3, *Class characteristics*, is the topic with a very good summary of the thoughts of some classic writers. The question is raised about whether a new definition of class characteristics is needed as there is not the same adherence to writing systems in modern times. In this there is some thought about whether features such as those indicative of left-handed writing, inverted hand position, letter construction, system influence and others can be considered as class characteristics.

Chapters 4-8 provide good illustrations and images of topics such as letter construction, line connecting strokes, relative writing speed, line quality, slope, ratios and their relativity and the appearance of beginning, connecting and ending strokes. All these features are coupled with detailed descriptions of a particular concept or principle. These are very relevant later at Chapter 11, *The process of comparison*, where a thorough discussion of the comparison process from macroscopic features to subtle ones are brought together with several examples.

The issues around abnormal/disguised writing appear in Chapter 13 with a review of what disguised writing is and the features that are suggestive of it. As for other chapters, images of such features are provided to reinforce the discussion. At the close of the chapter the passage:

"In criminal cases, known writings are requested writings, and their preparation is witnessed while the investigator is observing the suspect write."

if read out of context could be misunderstood to mean that only requested writings are available in criminal cases.

As a practical matter, the issue of specimen writing and obtaining request specimen writing has its own section, chapter 14. Interestingly,

as for the 1st edition a portion covers the use of handwriting specimen forms. While such forms can be used, there is limited discussion on the use of dictation to obtain specimen writings. This is in marked contrast to most of the texts in the field where much more emphasis has been placed on the use of dictation to obtain requested specimen handwriting. Nonetheless, Mr Morris provides a very easy to follow step-by-step guide with important reminders of what should be done and what should not be done during this process.

A chapter entitled, *Writing instruments and their influence*, at Chapter 9, is a rather timely addition to the recent books on document examination. Younger trainees entering the profession may not have experience with a variety of writing instruments and will benefit from this section. As stressed in other sections of the book, readers are encouraged to conduct their own tests and experiments to see first-hand the points of discussion.

Chapter 12, *Is it fabricated?*, a section devoted to the limitations that are present when working with copies. Two case studies and three examples are provided to demonstrate how documents may be altered or fabricated leaving few, if any, traces on the resulting copy. The point of this was to make the reader aware:

"The examined copy may not be an accurate recording of all the evidence on the original document it purports to represent. In fact the copy may actually be a fabricated document made by using a photocopier, computer, software, and scanner."

The last two chapters, *Submitting a questioned document case to the laboratory* and *What does the examiner's report say?* provide practical advice on steps to take in submitting cases and interpretations of report conclusions among other related topics.

Overall, the book provides a bridge between many of the classic textbooks to modern times. Along with summaries of what several of the luminaries in the field thought about certain topics, Mr Morris has emphasised the need for the reader to conduct their own tests and experiments. The book will be a welcome addition to the bookshelf of trainees, practising document examiners, and others who interact with document examiners.