

How Much Do People Write Alike?

A Study of Signatures

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(It is suggested that the reader first inspects the illustrations before reading this article.)

No two persons write exactly alike, but document examiners occasionally find persons who write with amazing similarity. From such incidents the experienced examiner develops a healthy respect for "handwriting doubles."

Nearly everyone can write and we are usually able to read what the other fellow puts down, meaning there must be a lot of handwriting similarities somewhere.

Would it not be interesting if every adult submitted a sample of handwriting using the same size paper, type of writing instrument, and text. We could count the Greek "e's," printed "S's," and other characteristics and come up with rough statistical data on *how much people write alike*. But no such records exist so it is necessary to rely on other sources and one's own experience to answer this question.

The five illustrations show that some people write quite a bit alike (although never exactly the same, given sufficient handwriting to compare). The illustrations also graphically point out why precautions are necessary in rendering opinions based on small amounts of writing.

The Smith Photograph

The question in the Smith photograph (Fig. 1): Is the "Smith" outlined in black written by any of the Smiths below? Or are they all written by the same person? Is the left column by one person and the right column by another? These signatures were signed over a period of approximately ten years and under varying conditions, sometimes standing and other times sitting.

Now that you have been completely misled, here are the facts. Each of the twenty-one Smiths is by a different writer. The signatures were photographed at the Los Angeles County Registrar of Voters. They represent samples from less than one-fifteenth of the Smiths on file. Most of these people are named "John Smith."

Each signature was individually photographed, holding the camera, and using available light, which will explain why a few of the specimens are fuzzy.

That "S" is not so identifying after all. Couldn't Mr. Smith, right column, third from top, forge the smith immediately below with a minimum of effort; in fact, the less he tried, the better. He would just be doing what comes naturally.

At the Voters Registration, an overwhelming number of "Smiths" sign their name using the conventional script "S." So many of these signatures lacked individuality and looked alike that they were not worth photographing.

Shaw Series, et al

The Shaw series (Fig. 2) is also from the Registrar of Voters. Each signature is by a different person.

Three types of Shaw signatures are shown. Systemic or conventional specimens are in the top column while the lower left column is made up of specimens each with a disconnected "S" and a high beginning on the "h." And the lower right column has the flying "w."

In Figure 3, the top "Harris" is a part of the writer's signature, and the others are fellow voters.

The "Dybdahl" series (Fig. 4) is unusually similar, considering there are only a few people with this name. Notice the capital "D," a short "d" and "l," and the slim "h" in most of the signatures.

This last series "Dye" (Fig. 5) was picked because of the Greek "e." It is an eye catcher and the differences between the rest of the signatures might go unnoticed.

There are over 2,300,000 signatures on file at the Los Angeles County Voters Registration. Because of the limited writing in each signature, it is only practical to compare handwriting of persons with the same name. Results might be even more enlightening if Smith's handwriting could be compared with Brown's and Jones'.

Conclusions

Since some people write quite a bit alike, the following suggestions might be kept in mind, in addition to the age-old rule of *always* obtaining plenty of specimen writing.

1. Certain "highly identifying" letter forms are not necessarily so identifying. Caution should be exercised placing too much emphasis on *one* particular feature in a writing.
2. When comparing these so-called "highly identifying" characters in two writings, they must correspond just as the other letters do. Greek "e's" can be made in a dozen different ways.
3. The importance of considering movement and manner (line quality) in a given handwriting identification problem is emphasized.
4. Slight but persistent differences in slant, size, shading, letter forms, and movement between two

specimens of handwriting is a strong indication that they are by different writers.

5. In examining a handwriting problem, can the number of suspects be limited or must it be determined that one suspect, and only one in all the nation, wrote the document?
6. People who write alike have a great natural potential in imitating one another's writing. And therefore, it is important to examine the handwriting of all parties involved.

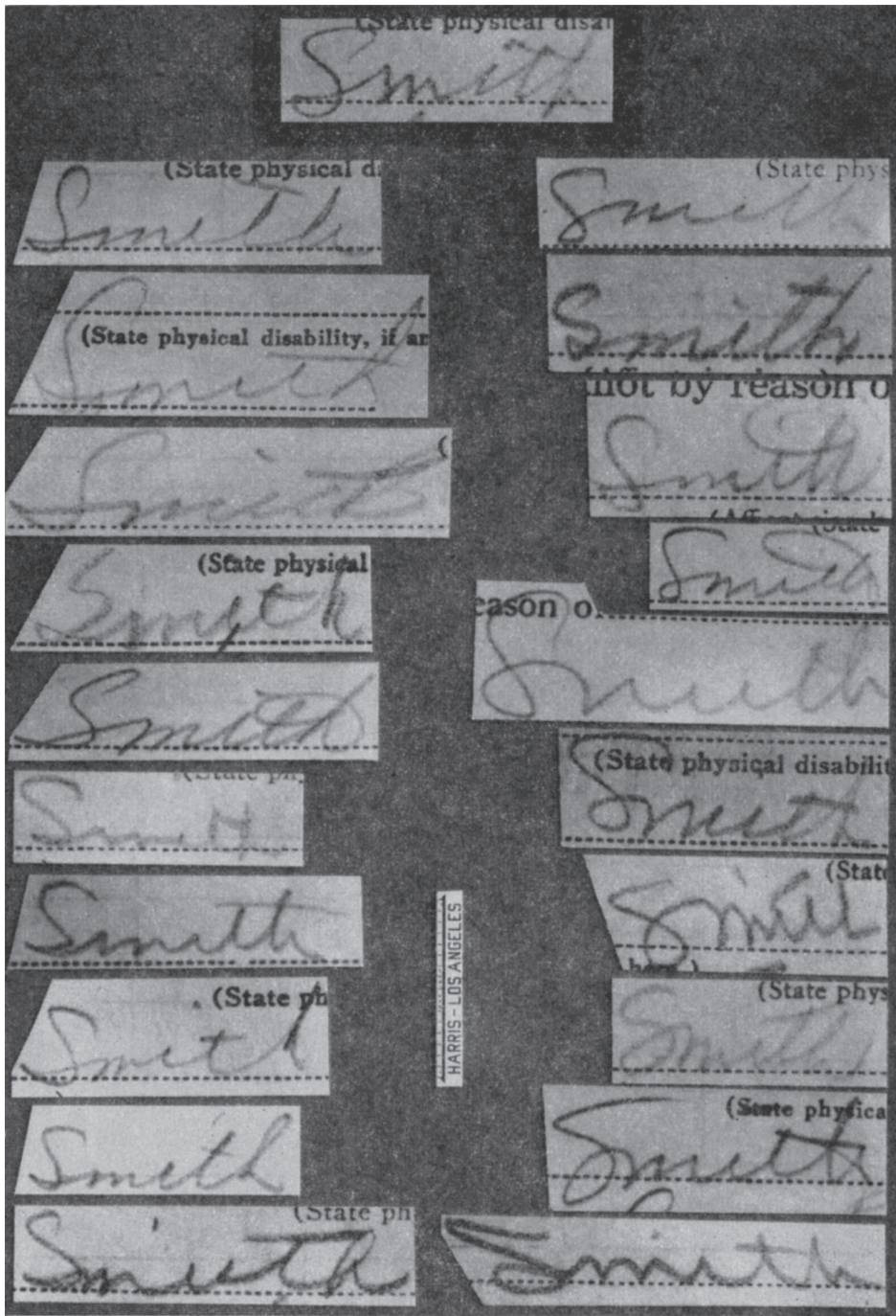


Figure 1

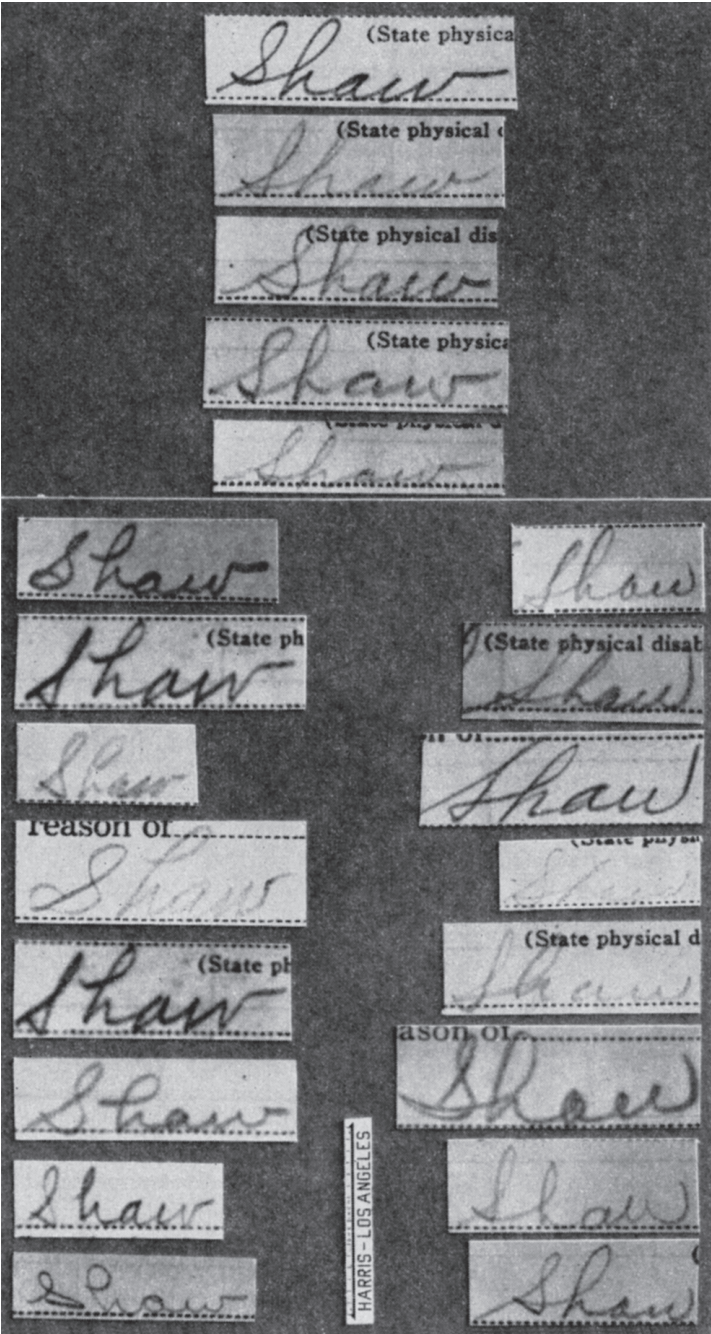


Figure 2

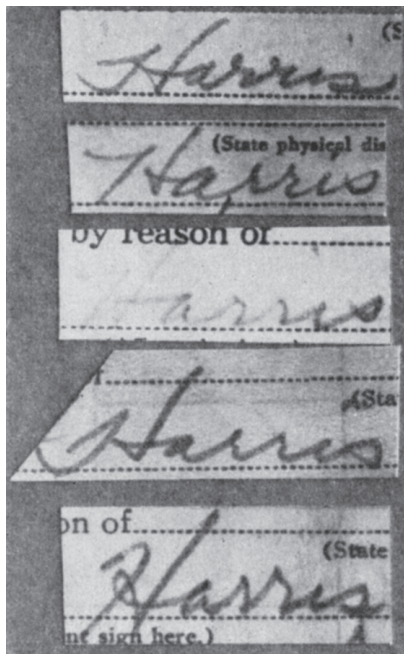


Figure 3

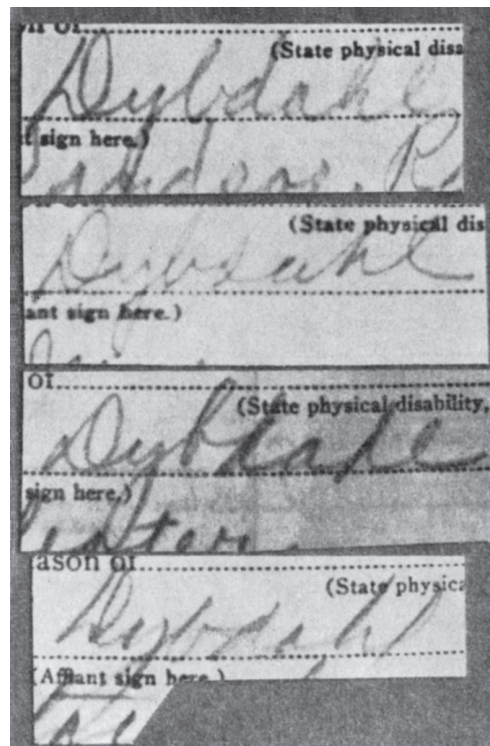


Figure 4

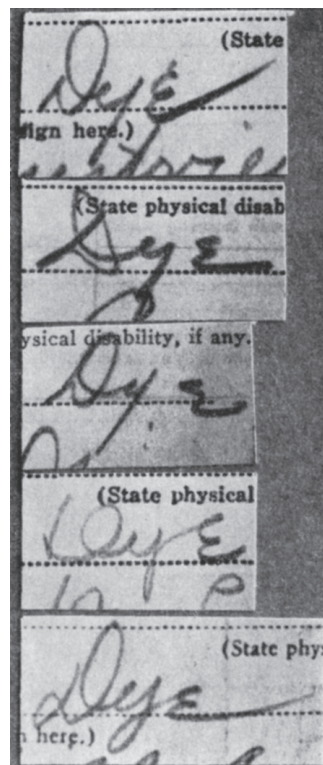


Figure 5