



Designation: E 1658 – 96^{ε1}

Standard Terminology for Expressing Conclusions of Forensic Document Examiners¹

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1. Scope

1.1 This terminology is intended to assist forensic document examiners in expressing conclusions based on their examination.

1.2 This terminology is based on the report of a committee of the Questioned Document Section of the American Academy of Forensic Science which was adopted as the recommended guidelines in reports and testimony by the Questioned Document Section of the American Academy of Forensic Science and the American Board of Forensic Document Examiners^{2,3}.

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 ASTM Standards:

E 444 Guide for Description of Work of Forensic Document Examiners²

3. Significance and Use

3.1 Document examiners should always begin their handwriting examinations from a point of complete neutrality. There are an infinite number of gradations of opinion toward an identification or toward an elimination. It is in those cases wherein the opinion is less than definite that careful attention is especially needed in the choice of language used to convey the weight of the evidence.

3.2 Common sense dictates that we must limit the terminology we use in expressing our degrees of confidence in the evidence to terms that are readily understandable to those who use our services (including investigators, attorneys, judges, and jury members), as well as to other document examiners. We must be careful that the expressions we use in separating the gradations of opinions do not become strongly defined “categories” that will always be used as a matter of convenience; instead, these expressions should be guidelines without sharply defined boundaries.

3.3 When a forensic document examiner chooses to use one of the terms defined below, the listener or reader can assume that this is what the examiner intended the term to mean. To avoid the possibility of misinterpretation of a term where the expert is not present to explain the guidelines in this standard, the appropriate definition(s) could be quoted in or appended to reports.

3.4 The examples are given both in the first person and in third person since both methods of reporting are used by document examiners and since both forms meet the main purpose of the standard, *i. e.*, to suggest terminology that is readily understandable. These examples should not be regarded as the only ways to utilize probability statements in reports and testimony. In following any guidelines, the examiner should always bear in mind that sometimes the examination will lead into paths that cannot be anticipated and that no guidelines can cover exactly.

3.5 Although the material that follows deals with handwriting, forensic document examiners may apply this terminology to other examinations within the scope of their work, as described in Guide E 444, and it may be used by forensic examiners in other areas, as appropriate.

3.6 *This standard does not purport to address all of the safety concerns, if any, associated with its use. It is the responsibility of the user of this standard to establish appropriate safety and health practices and determine the applicability of regulatory limitations prior to use.*

4. Terminology

4.1 Recommended Terms:

identification (definite conclusion of identity)—this is the highest degree of confidence expressed by document examiners in handwriting comparisons. The examiner has no reservations whatever, and although prohibited from using the word “fact,” the examiner is certain, based on evidence contained in the handwriting, that the writer of the known material actually wrote the writing in question.

Examples—It has been concluded that John Doe wrote the questioned material, or it is my opinion [or conclusion] that John Doe of the known material wrote the questioned material.

strong probability (highly probable, very probable)—the evidence is very persuasive, yet some critical feature or

¹ This terminology is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee E-30 on Forensic Sciences and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee E30.02 on Questioned Documents.

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² McAlexander, T. V., Beck, J., and Dick, R., “The Standardization of Handwriting Opinion Terminology,” *Journal of Forensic Science*, Vol. 36, No. 2, March 1991, pp. 311–319.

³ *Annual Book of ASTM Standards*, Vol 14.02.