CHAPTER 8

Standards for Forensic Document Examiners

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Excellence costs a great deal.
(May Sarton, The Small Room, 1961)

Introduction

Forensic document examiners (FDEs) follow standards for methodology and competence. An array of 21 standards developed by the Scientific Working Group for Forensic Document Examination (SWGDOC) was published by ASTM International covering the Scope of Work of Forensic Document Examiners to a Standard for Altered Documents and many more specific examinations. Beginning in 2012, the ASTM standards pertaining to FDE began to be replaced as they expire by standards generated by SWGDOC. The American Board of Forensic Document Examiners (ABFDE) continues to certify the competence of FDEs through their testing and certification program.

Standardization in Questioned Document Literature

Before ASTM and SWGDOC standards became ubiquitous and vital to FDEs, several questioned document authors discussed standards in a more general way in their books.

Roy Huber offered standards for FDEs for the examination of handwriting. His suggested standards included sections with the following titles: “The Protection of Material,” “The Approach to Examination
and Study,” “The Basis of Reporting Results,” “The Certainty of Conclusions,” and “The Assertion of Qualifications” (Huber and Headrick, 1999).

David Ellen discussed quality assurance in his book (Ellen, 2006). He mentioned the importance of reliable methods and the importance of competence of FDEs (ibid). Outside testing of the competence of FDEs by researchers like Dr. Kam (Kam et al., 1994) was cited as an example of quality assurance in the profession (Ellen, 2006).

Kirsten Jackson and Jan Seaman Kelly wrote directly about ASTM standards related to FDE in a chapter titled “Preparation for a Daubert Hearing” in the fine book Scientific Examination of Questioned Documents, Second Edition, edited by Jan Seaman Kelly and Brian Lindblom (Kelly and Lindblom, 2006). Since the Daubert v. Merrill Dow Pharmaceuticals, Inc., U.S. Supreme Court 509 U.S. 579, (Daubert, 1993) decision the reliability of a scientific discipline must satisfy five criteria. These criteria, known as the Daubert factors, include:

1. General acceptance.

2. Whether the theory or technique has been tested.

3. Whether the technique has been subject to peer review and publication.
4. The existence and maintenance of standards controlling the technique’s operation.

5. The known or potential error rate.

The Daubert decision intended to ease the admission of new scientific evidence in court, but the five Daubert factors were actually used to attack and disqualify established forensic experts. These factors were meant to serve as guides for judges to assess scientific methods, and each factor did not have to be met. The approach of FDEs has been to address how our discipline meets each factor.

Kelly and Jackson (2006) listed ASTM published standards related to FDE as guidelines that fulfilled the fourth Daubert factor, which calls for proving the existence and maintenance of standards controlling the technique’s operation. This chapter lists the ASTM standards pertaining to FDE at the time of publication.

**ASTM International Standards**

ASTM International, previously called the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM), is an international developer of voluntary consensus standards for industry and forensic sciences. ASTM originated in 1898 (ASTM, 2013). The founders were engineers and chemists at the Pennsylvania Railroad. ASTM International serves a wide group of industries.
through 144 standard-writing committees (ibid). ASTM International’s headquarters is in West Conshohocken, Pennsylvania (ibid).


**SWGDOC**

The Scientific Working Group for Questioned Documents (SWGDOC) evolved from the Technical Working Group for Questioned Documents which began in 1997 (Riordan et al., 2013). The group includes FDEs from federal, state, and county laboratories and private practitioners. They meet at the FBI Academy in Quantico, Virginia (ibid).

SWGDOC developed drafts and updates of standards for FDEs and originally published them through ASTM International. Since 2012, SWGDOC has published standards that they developed on their website rather than through ASTM International. The standards are readily available and free to all on the SWGDOC website (SWGDOC, 2013). The mission of SWGDOC is to gather together FDEs in order to:
• Define the scope and practice areas of the profession.

• Standardize operating procedures, protocols, and terminology.

• Consolidate and enhance the profession of forensic document examination.

• Promote self-regulation, documentation, training, continuing education, and research (ibid).

The goals of SWGDOC published on their website include:

• Strengthen the content and the enforcement of published performance standards.

• Continue to write and foster the publication of performance standards for sub-discipline examinations.

• Publish and maintain the Daubert Factors for Attorneys and Daubert Factors for Forensic Document Examiners presentations (as they relate to forensic document examination).

• Participate in and support a Human Factors Working Group for Forensic Document Examination.

• Expand the participant pool to include academicians, statisticians, legal professionals, and practitioners from other forensic disciplines (ibid).
SWGDOC has available 21 peer-reviewed published standards. They are the product of public and private FDEs along with academic researchers (ibid). The 21 SWGDOC Standards published to date are the following:

SWGDOC Standard for Scope of Work of Forensic Document Examiners

SWGDOC Standard for Test Methods for Forensic Writing Ink Comparison

SWGDOC Terminology for Expressing Conclusions of Forensic Document Examiners

SWGDOC Standard for Writing Ink Identification

SWGDOC Terminology Relating to the Examination of Questioned Documents

SWGDOC Standard for Examination of Mechanical Checkwriter Impressions

SWGDOC Standard for Examination of Dry Seal Impressions

SWGDOC Standard for Examination of Fracture Patterns and Paper Fiber Impressions on Single-Strike Film Ribbons and Typed Text

SWGDOC Standard for Physical Match of Paper Cuts, Tears, and Perforations in Forensic Document Examinations
SWGDOC Standard for Examination of Rubber Stamp Impressions

SWGDOC Standard for Examination of Handwritten Items

SWGDOC Standard for Indentation Examinations

SWGDOC Standard for Non-destructive Examination of Paper

SWGDOC Standard for Examination of Altered Documents

SWGDOC Standard for Minimum Training Requirements for Forensic Document Examiners

SWGDOC Standard for Examination of Documents Produced with Liquid Ink Jet Technology

SWGDOC Standard for Examination of Documents Produced with Toner Technology

SWGDOC Standard for Examination of Typewritten Items

SWGDOC Standard for Preservation of Charred Documents

SWGDOC Standard for Preservation of Liquid Soaked Documents
American Board of Forensic Document Examiners (ABFDE) Certification

The American Board of Forensic Document Examiners (ABFDE) was formed in Washington, D.C. in 1977. An LEAA grant from the Forensic Science Foundation helped found the ABFDE (Riordan et al., 2013). In 2013, 111 FDEs hold certification from ABFDE (ABFDE, 2013). The Board describes its purpose and sponsorship this way:

The Board’s objectives are two-fold: to establish, maintain and enhance standards of qualification for those who practice forensic document examination, and to certify applicants who comply with ABFDE requirements for this expertise. In doing so, the Board aims to safeguard the public interest by ensuring that anyone who claims to be a specialist in forensic document examination does, in fact, possess the necessary skills and qualifications. The ABFDE is sponsored by the Canadian Society of Forensic Science, the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners, the Southwestern Association of Forensic Document Examiners, and the Southeastern Association of Forensic Document Examiners, and also is recognized by the American Academy of Forensic Sciences, the International...
Association for Identification, the Midwestern Association of Forensic Scientists, and the Mid-Atlantic Association of Forensic Scientists. The ABFDE is the only certifying body that can claim such sponsorship and recognition.

A candidate for certification must be a resident of the United States of America, Canada, Australia, or New Zealand. At minimum, a baccalaureate degree from an accredited college is required. Professional experience must include a fulltime, two-year training program in a laboratory recognized by the Board. The training program must meet basic requirements of the SWG-DOC Standard for Minimum Training Requirements for Forensic Document Examiners. A testing program including written and practical problems and an oral board examination must be successfully completed. Recertification is required every five years (ibid).

ABFDE-certified examiners work at all of the major federal laboratories, including: the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), the U.S. Secret Service, the Internal Revenue Service, U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the U.S. Postal Inspection Service, the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms (ATF), the U.S. Army Criminal Investigation Crime Laboratory, and the Department of Veterans Affairs. ABFDE-certified examiners also work at state and county laboratories and in private practice.

In federal and state job announcements, qualification requirements often list certification by ABFDE as a required or desired accomplishment for applicants.
References


