

THE DATING OF DOCUMENTS

The dating of documents is one of the most difficult, although most frequently requested, Forensic Document examinations. Other than actually witnessing the creation of a document, it is almost impossible to determine precisely when a document was created. For example no satisfactory techniques have been developed for dating inks on paper, and many commonly used papers are unidentifiable.

To overcome this the Forensic Document Examiner relies principally on studying the association between a questioned document and documents of which the age and history have already been established. These notes describe some of the features of documents which can be exploited to reveal associations between documents.

Impressions

Examination of the questioned and associated document using the sensitive method of Electrostatic Detection (ESDA) can reveal impressions of writing from other documents demonstrating if, how and when they have been in contact. This laboratory has also pioneered an extension of the technique such that it is also possible in some cases to establish the order in which documents were written.

Examination of inks

Non-destructive techniques can be used to demonstrate differences in inks which are apparently similar to the unaided eye. Testing of inks by destructive, chromatographic techniques can be used to reveal further differences (though before using this technique, this Laboratory obtains the permission of the client to carry the examinations out).

Pen line striations

Ballpoint pens often produce microscopic striations in the pen line which in certain circumstances can be matched to allow identification of a particular pen. They can show that a pen was used continuously throughout a number of writings or documents without changing its relative position to the page.



Watermarks and other features of papers

There are a number of quality paper manufacturers who have introduced changes into watermarks over the years. Other features of paper include marks from the production process and the inclusion of ultraviolet brighteners.

Typewritings and printings

The introduction of new office technologies allows certain printed documents to be dated. Changes in technologies, typestyles and microscopic differences in typefaces can be used to establish the chronology of documents.

Photocopies

Although it is not possible to date a photocopy precisely, the study of ephemeral trash marks and other marks produced by the photocopier mechanism may allow documents to be linked.

Other features

Staple holes, punch holes, tears and carbon papers can all be scrutinised to deduce a document's history and its relationship with other documents.

Appropriate comparison material to aid in the dating of documents

The best chance of success is found in cases where there are comparable documents. For example, if the questioned document is a letter, then other correspondence from the relevant period will allow direct comparison of papers, typewritings and printing. Where the questioned document comes from a file of papers, the entire file should be submitted for examination.

Because every dating case is different we offer a pre-examination review of the documents in order to identify possible avenues of investigation and to assess the likelihood of success. We usually make no charge for this pre-examination.

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