



Standard Terminology for Expressing Conclusions of Forensic Document Examiners¹

This standard is issued under the fixed designation E1658; the number immediately following the designation indicates the year of original adoption or, in the case of revision, the year of last revision. A number in parentheses indicates the year of last reappraisal. A superscript epsilon (ϵ) indicates an editorial change since the last revision or reappraisal.

1. Scope

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

1.2 The terms in this terminology are based on the report of a committee of the Questioned Document Section of the American Academy of Forensic Science that 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

2. Referenced Documents

2.1 *ASTM Standards*:³

E444 Guide for Scope of Work of Forensic Document Examiners

3. Significance and Use

3.1 Document examiners begin examinations from a point of 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. The expressions used to differentiate the gradations of opinions

should not be considered as strongly defined “categories”. 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, that is, 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 E444, 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.

¹ This terminology is under the jurisdiction of ASTM Committee E30 on Forensic Sciences and is the direct responsibility of Subcommittee E30.90 on Executive.

Current edition approved Aug. 15, 2008. Published October 2008. Originally approved in 1995. Last previous edition approved in 2004 as E1658 – 04. DOI: 10.1520/E1658-08.

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 For referenced ASTM standards, visit the ASTM website, www.astm.org, or contact ASTM Customer Service at service@astm.org. For *Annual Book of ASTM Standards* volume information, refer to the standard’s Document Summary page on the ASTM website.