



Experts in determining writing authorship

by Melissa Hickey, Senior Document Examiner, Document Examination Unit

Queensland Police Service document examiners can become the vital link in any criminal investigation.

The Document Examination Unit is a specialist area within the Service's Forensic Services Branch and performs a variety of tasks.

A large percentage of the work undertaken involves examining handwriting and signatures to determine whether or not a particular person wrote a specific piece of writing.

Examining a variety of evidence

There are countless examples of when document examiners are requested to determine authorship of writing and signatures.

For example, police investigators may request a drug recipe, seized from a suspect's home, be compared to known diary entries of the suspect.

Similarly, bank cheques are often examined to determine authorship after the account holder denies writing or signing the cheque.

It is also common place for the Document Examination Unit to examine suicide notes for the Coroner's Court to conclusively determine that the note was in fact written by the deceased.

A major ingredient in successfully determining if a person wrote the questioned writing is the availability of suitable specimen material. It is only when a good amount of comparable writing is made available that a comprehensive examination can be conducted.

Deciphering latent impressions

Apart from handwriting examinations, the Document Examination Unit has the capability to examine documents for latent impressions – impressions of handwriting that are not visible to the naked eye – by using a Electro-Static Detection Apparatus (ESDA).

The relevance of the ESDA was brought to the fore during an investigation into large amounts of child pornography being sent to many well-known female newsreaders.

When all other areas of investigation had failed to establish any leads, seized material was bought in for ESDA examination.

After examining the majority of the exhibits, no impressions were recovered and it was clear that the offender was very cautious. However, on one piece of paper, faint impressions were observed predominantly in the top right hand corner.

Deciphering latent impressions... Document examiners are required to examine documents for latent handwriting impressions that are not visible to the naked eye.

Through further enhancement of the impressions it was determined that part of an address had been discovered. It was obvious that the offender had hand written a letter on another piece of paper, which at the time had been placed on top of the exhibit, therefore allowing handwriting impressions to be recovered.

Only part of the street name could be deciphered, although the postcode was quite clear and after looking through the refidex, a possible street was pinpointed. The investigating officers went to the house and found the offender with masses of child pornography.

Variety of work

Other examinations conducted by the unit include: recovering original entries that have been altered or obliterated; examining inks to determine whether or not a different pen has been used; typewriter and typewritten document examinations; physical and fibre matches of paper; and the determination of methods of printing.

Like all other areas of the Forensic Services Branch, document examiners must present their findings in the courts as expert witnesses.