

ANALYZE THIS

By Reed Hayes



Is That Signature a Forgery?

As an individualized symbol or personal trademark, your signature is recognized as yours alone, whether affixed to a check, driver's license, credit card or legal document. Signatures have long been accepted as personally identifying and are often the target of forgery.

Due to the complexity of the writing process and the fact that your writing originates from your brain and your personality, the unique features of your signature are difficult, if not impossible, for anyone else to duplicate. This forms the basis for handwriting identification which has been accepted as long as 15 centuries ago when the Romans allowed testimony about handwriting in court.

The person who forges another's signature does so with intent to defraud, generally for monetary or personal gain. There is no limit to the type of documents that are presented as genuine but which may bear inauthentic signatures. Wills, checks, contracts, financial agreements and inventory records are but a few.

Sometimes, with sufficient practice, the forger gets away with his dastardly deed. After all, if a signature is to pass as genuine, it must look like the victim's real signature. Unfortunately, it may not be recognized as inauthentic until after the fact, if at all.

Typically, the forger concentrates not on what is being written, but how. He or she is faced with the difficult task of recreating the same movement pattern as the genuine signature, along with the proper spacing, size, proportions, individual letter formations and pressure patterns. At the same time, the natural speed and rhythm of the authentic script must be reproduced so that a natural, free-flowing signature results.

Even with extensive practice, it remains a daunting task for the forger to get into the head of the person whose writing he is attempting to simulate. Consequently, there are usually telltale signs that give the forger away.

At the top of the list is a "drawn" or labored quality that often belies the forgery. This comes from the forger's inability to maintain the proper rhythm as he proceeds cautiously and has to continually think of which form or movement comes next. An awkward look results and loops and connections are often poorly formed. (See examples.)

Tremor is also frequently seen in forged signatures. The outside of the writing line may take on a shaky, uncer-

tain look or will appear jagged. And when tremor is supposed to be a part of the writing (as in the signatures of the ill or elderly) the forger often makes the mistake of using too much tremor or inserting it into the wrong places (on upstrokes instead of downstrokes, for example).

The forger frequently hesitates at the very beginning of the signature and/or at the start of each portion of the name. This gives him a split second to plan his movement, but also results in resting points not natural to the genuine signature, usually a dead giveaway.

Also, under magnification a nongenuine signature will usually show evidence of pen lifts where they should not be. Again, the forger is unfamiliar with the proper stroke sequence or formation and must lift the pen momentarily to re-think his approach.

The signature on the left is genuine, while that on the right is a forged endorsement on a check. Note the smooth, fluid lines of the authentic signature compared to the awkwardness of the simulation. The letters are firm, clear and distinct, with no shakiness. The forgery appears drawn and clumsy. Individual letters are poorly formed and there are angles where strokes should be rounded. The letter m has two pen lifts where there should be none.

Genuine Signature

Forged Signature

A word of warning: If you purposefully sign your name illegibly to avoid forgery you may be leaving yourself open to fraud. The most difficult signature to copy is the one in which every letter is well formed and readable. On the other hand, faking a convoluted signature may even fool the experts.

Reed is a certified handwriting and document examiner and author of "Between the Lines: Understanding Yourself and Others Through Handwriting" (Destiny Books, 1993). Your questions and comments are welcome. Write or call Reed for information on private consultations:

P.O. Box 235213, Honolulu, HI 96823 Phone/Fax: 528-1112

E-mail: reed@reedwrite.com Web site: www.reedwrite.com.