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## DISGUISED HANDWRITING

John J. Harris

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Disguised handwriting is the willful modification of a person's natural writing for the purpose of concealing identity. As a subject it is growing in importance. Nowadays persons can be convicted of forgery on handwriting testimony alone, and this fact motivates many criminals to disguise their handwriting in an attempt to evade justice.

Most laymen have the classic impression that disguise means grotesque writing as found in blackmail and kidnap notes and in some anonymous letters. Actually, grotesque disguise is the exception. Disguised writing is used more frequently for passing fictitious checks and writing comparison specimens. Therefore, the most common and practical disguise is one which attempts not only to keep the writer anonymous but that also appears to be natural handwriting, thus arousing no suspicion.

Disguised handwriting is most commonly used in the following situations:

1. Writing fictitious checks.
2. Endorsing stolen checks.
3. Writing anonymous letters, extortion notes, etc.
4. Submitting handwriting standards.
5. Signing name with the purpose of denying signature later on.

Methods of disguise vary with the ability and imagination of the writer. An extreme change of slant is the most popular means and the least effective method of disguise. Other writers concentrate more on letter formation and ignore slant changes. In a recent Los Angeles case an anonymous letter writer, posing as an 18 year old girl, attempted to design his disguise to fit the personality of the imaginary girl. He wrote daintily, used circular eye dots, etc. and was effective enough that early in the case one officer described the writer as an immature girl. The writer turned out to be a 47 year old man who drew on his drama teaching experience to create an affected girl's handwriting.

A few persons are ambidextrous and, therefore, have quite a talent

for disguising handwriting. Occasionally, check passers are arrested who have written checks with one hand and then submit disguised specimens using the other hand.

Pen lettering or printing is a commonly attempted method, because of the general impression that printing cannot be identified. Obtaining proper standards is usually the most difficult problem to solve in these cases.

An unusual disguise is writing upside down and backwards, and another is by copying someone else's handwriting, or by combining both of these methods.

Disguised handwriting fails to accomplish its objective in the same way that a forged signature fails to imitate genuine writing. There are characteristics of disguise which label such writing as artificial just as hesitation, pen lifts, and careful retouching can point to forgery.

Inconsistency is the most important characteristic indicating disguise. Frequent changes in slant, letter formation, spacing, pen pressure, size, and legibility are indicative of the writer's effort to create new handwriting characteristics in place of his own natural writing habits. The dual process of eliminating the old and creating the new is not unlike a driver reaching for the gear shift in his first hydromatic car.

Usually, only the most obvious features are disguised. For example, capital letters are disguised more often than small letters. Grotesqueness is another characteristic, and it is often very difficult to identify writing consisting of weird and fantastic patterns.

Slowness and hesitation can also be found in disguised writing caused by the writer deliberating in order to avoid his natural writing habits. Backhand slant is another characteristic since many people just assume they are disguising by changing slant. A careful disguiser may check his work and go back and touch up letters attempting to make the writing consistent. The over-writing and correcting of naturally written letters is strong evidence of the writer's attempt to deceive.

Our greatest aid in solving these problems is the perpetrator's lack of knowledge of how to disguise his handwriting. Few persons can describe their own writing, which weigh the odds heavily against them ever being successful in disguising it.

#### DISGUISED HANDWRITING TEST

For the past 17 years John L. Harris, Examiner of Questioned Documents, Los Angeles, has tested each student in his university

classes<sup>1</sup> on ability to disguise handwriting. Students are given a 5 x 7 inch ruled card and told to copy the following letter:

Los Angeles California  
(The Date)

Dear Mrs. McBride:

I hope you will look upon this note as the truth even if it is not signed. You will do well to heed the advice in my last letter. It is for your own best interest. Every time John goes to the Club it makes matters worse. Why do you let him go?

A Friend<sup>2</sup>

After copying the above letter, cards are collected, and the students are given a new 5 x 7 card and told to copy the same text, only this time disguise their handwriting as if they were really writing an anonymous note to Mrs. McBride. The cards are identified by the student signing his name on the back of both the natural and disguised specimens. The two sets are then shuffled, and as homework, the stack is studied and sorted by a different student each week. In a few classes students had an opportunity to disguise their writing at both the beginning and end of the semester. However, most students were tested during the first or second class meeting only.

100 sets of cards were picked out at random, dating from 1935 to 1951, for the purpose of ascertaining how these students attempted to disguise their writing and whether or not they succeeded. After studying and sorting the cards the following observations were made:

1. By far, the majority of students failed to effectively disguise their handwriting even though they were handwriting minded and members of a class on questioned documents.
2. Most of the students who succeeded in effectively disguising their handwriting accomplished it by reverting to pen lettering knowing that no comparable specimens were available, or they adopted grotesque letter forms making their disguise attempt very apparent and the cards difficult to read.
3. In only one case did a writer succeed in completely changing from one natural handwriting to another. He could write both a modern commercial system and an individualized form of Spencerian. This illustrates the great capabilities of a few writers.
4. Over half of the students wrote backhand attempting to disguise their handwriting.
5. Seven out of the 100 failed completely to even partially disguise their writing. It takes an expert to detect their slight attempts, thus illustrating that some persons know nothing about the physical characteristics of their own handwriting.

1. Class on Questioned Documents, School of Public Administration, University of Southern California.

2. Composed by the late Albert S. Osborn, D. Sc.

6. Although students were limited to the classroom, nearly 50% were resourceful enough to use a different ink or writing instrument on the disguised cards.
7. Less than ten percent disguised the arrangement of their writing. (Margins, etc.)
8. Unusual characteristics such as the "Mc" and a "?" were less frequently disguised than the regular letters.

The cards were segregated into five general classifications according to the most obvious method of disguise.

#### OUT OF 100 WRITERS

- 52% changed the slant of their writing.
- 8% changed the slant of their writing and wrote in a grotesque manner.
- 18% attempted to change the pictorial features and skill of their writing without appreciable change in slant.
- 15% used pen lettering, a third of which were written in the best grotesque blackmail form.
- 7% failed to appreciably disguise their handwriting.

Assuming that good pen lettering standards could be obtained it can be concluded that not more than 10% of the writers were successful in disguising their handwriting. The majority of those who were successful resorted to grotesque writing.

#### SOLUTION OF A DISGUISED WRITING PROBLEM

The solution of disguised handwriting problems are often very difficult especially when there is a limited amount of writing such as an endorsement on a check, or if only meager standards are available. An incorrect opinion is often based upon the assumption that differences between the questioned and standard handwriting are due to disguise. Recognizing identifying characteristics in natural writing is one thing and picking out the significant characteristics in carefully disguised writing is something else.

When confronted with a disguised writing problem the following steps are in order:

1. Collection and study of adequate standards which contain the fixed, occasional, rare, and accidental characteristics of the writer. Frequently the most difficult part of a case is locating good specimens.<sup>3</sup>
2. Study of questioned writing to determine if it is normal handwriting containing natural variations or if it is disguised.<sup>4</sup>

3. Refer to Ordway Hilton, "Collection of Writing Standards in Criminal Investigation" *Journal of Crim. Law and Criminol.*, 32 (2) : 241-256 (July-August 1941).

4. Refer to Albert S. Osborn, *Questioned Documents* (second edition), chapter on Anonymous Letters.

3. Comparison of questioned with standard writing methodically listing identifying (or non-identifying) characteristics of the handwriting, composition, arrangement, ink, writing instrument, paper, etc.<sup>4</sup>

Physical proof of disguise has a great deal of weight since it infers intent, deceit, and lack of authority. Convincing judges and juries of the facts require a complete photographic preparation, good testimony, and cooperation with the trial lawyer.