ASSESSMENT OF DANGEROUSNESS USING HANDWRITING CHARACTERISTICS

By Kimon Iannetta, DABFE, FACFE

A Brief Historical Synopsis

Since ancient times, writing has been used to provide information regarding the potential dangerousness of people. The Roman historian Suetonius declared that he could see the meanness in Augustus Caesar's script. The Chinese philosopher and painter, Jo-Hau, stated, "Handwriting infallibly shows whether it comes from a vulgar or noble minded person."
Beginning in 1609 with the work of the Frenchman Francois Demelle, character as revealed by writing became an established field of study. Early pioneers applied scientific principles beginning in 1878, with the work of Jules Crepieux-Jamie. The Germans in the 19th century, beginning with Wilhelm Preyer, originated the idea that handwriting is "brainwriting". Later, George Meyer related handwriting to emotions. Ludwig Klages applied Gestalt theory to handwriting. Later, Max Pulver studied the unconscious through writing, applying the principles of Sigmund Freud. Others reviewed physiological principles applied to handwriting, with Robert Saudek being one of the serious researchers and writers in this area. In the 1940s, Thea Stein Lewinson studied handwriting along with psychosomatic medicine. In his Diagrams of the Unconscious, Werner Wolff observed that man expresses his unconscious thought in his writing. The well-known psychologists Allport and Vernon further studied handwriting and declared its importance in the study of human behavior. Alfred Binet was interested in handwriting as a means of determining intellectual traits. Early research by Binet and Crepieux-Jamie indicated that handwriting could be used as a differential diagnostic tool in establishing intelligence.

In Europe, handwriting analysis was often taught within the confines of psychology. In the U.S., Milton Bunker, who pioneered the graphoanalysis movement, evaluated specific letter traits through longitudinal studies. In 1980, the U.S. Library of Congress reclassified handwriting analysis from its previous category - the occult - to the field of psychology.

Writing is an appropriate field for scientific study in that it has been found, like other behaviors, to be stable and consistent over time. In a research study conducted by Harvey in 1934, writings of 50 women were evaluated, with samples taken 2 months apart. Correlations between the writings were found to be significant.

In addition to utilizing handwriting as an evaluation tool in determining components of behavior, it has long been established as an instrument in rendering identification of suspected forgers, writers of anonymous notes, and perpetrators of violent crimes. This field of forensic writing or document examination includes evaluation of papers, inks, and other related characteristics. For the most part, the fields of handwriting analysis in behavioral evaluations and document examination have remained separate, although there has been some discussion regarding the overlapping techniques and characteristics of both. The skills of the document examiner and the behavioral profiler can assist in the identification of the writer and the establishment of the personality characteristics of dangerous people. It is useful to have at least a fundamental knowledge of both disciplines in order to appreciate how they can be helpful and reinforce the findings of each other. Both observe that no two persons write alike and that writing is an established behavior that can be used to identify an individual. They share some common history and principles, despite the modern divisions within the professional communities.

Review of the Literature on Psychopathology in Handwriting: Three Major Authorities

Background studies in handwriting analysis provide a foundation for our interest in the scientific study of handwriting and its use in determining dangerousness. We know that handwriting emanates from the brain. It responds and relates to physiological changes, to physical structures, and to emotional responses. Writing provides an avenue for the assessment of individual characteristics and behaviors. It is a way to describe these behaviors as they would predict violence against individuals and institutions. The need to classify and categorize these specific features as they relate to specific types of dangerous persons remains an ongoing challenge. We will briefly survey the work of three principal authors whom most professional handwriting analysts recognize as experts in the field.

Klara Roman (1952) declared that writing reflects one's inner states. Most of her research was done in the 1950s. She noted that one's script can indicate personality features and moods. Anger, depression, and anxiety can be observed by the changes in pressure, speed, and spacing. Illegible, heedless writing is indicative of depressed individuals or those for whom life has no meaning. Slow, constricted writing can depict inner sadness. Inadequate inner spaces may show a craving for contact. Every handwriting is unique and cannot be duplicated. It is always changing, yet consistently reflecting individual expression. One or two traits alone do not indicate dangerousness. The entirety, the combination of various traits and features, must be taken as a whole to be examined.

Alfred Mendel (republished 1990) observed that the most important criterion for establishing mental disturbance comes from noting parts of letters that have been left out, one or several letters that are replaced by letters that don't belong, or one letter left out and a thread formation substituted. He differentiated among various personality types, noting that paranoids frequently have blurred spots in their writing. Schizophrenics, who have problems making lasting contacts, show their personality disorganization through the dissolution of their writing, with distorted and grotesque letters. A tendency for middle zone letters to abruptly move into the upper or lower case shows social-emotional disharmony.

Saudek noted ten graphic features to indicate psychopathological attributes. He included slow writing, unnatural pressure of the writing, general instability in the writing; touching up of letter formations, letters written as other letters, blobbed or punctuated handwriting, frequent pen lifts, important parts of letters that are omitted, marked initial emphases, and letters. "b",...
perfection, is a particular clue to the potentially deceptive and dangerous person.

**Danger Between the Lines: A Project Study**

Research at the Hawaii State Hospital, undertaken by this author, with James Craine, Ph.D., and Dennis G. McLaughlin, Ph.D., expanded our knowledge of the identifying traits of dangerousness in writing. Initially, the study was conducted to analyze the writings of potentially violent psychiatric patients as a diagnostic tool. The project was initiated in 1984; 24 subjects were studied. Two handwriting analysts, with no prior knowledge of the subjects or their histories, studied their writings. Their results in identifying potential danger were superior to the standard methods currently in use. Their evaluations were correct to a highly significant degree statistically, and the study outcome noted the predictive capability of handwriting as a diagnostic tool.

Handwriting characteristics were organized and categorized into three main classifications, including (1) a sign of dangerousness, (2) a facilitator of action, and (3) an inhibitor of violent action. The handwriting was further rated on a scale from 0 to 5, with 0 indicating no danger signs and 5 indicating extreme likelihood for exhibiting dangerous behavior. The study provided evidence that the technique of handwriting analysis has considerable validity in the prediction of violence. Therefore, dangerousness can be evaluated with a high degree of certainty using the classifications and identifying characteristics indicated in the study.

**Handwriting as a Visual Blueprint**

Handwriting can be defined as a visual blueprint in that it can efficiently register one's propensity toward violent behavior. It can provide a map to pertinent data about potentially dangerous persons. To an expert in the discipline of behavioral profiling, the study and analysis of written communication reveals a broad understanding of the inner workings of the writer's mind. Mind prints, expressed as handwriting, are used as a method of identification, just like fingerprints. No two writings are identical. The patterns of movement are established from one's specific physiological and psychological characteristics and behaviors. The patterns of writing movements are locked in time for scrutiny and observation. One is able to evaluate an individual's specific timing, cadence, rhythm, consistencies, and peculiar features.

An individual's patterns of energy are revealed through his or her symbolic movements. The individual's stream of consciousness can show subtle layers and dimensions of the person's multi-dimensional self. A person's energy patterns can be revealed through his or her writings. With this visual product, one can observe mental, emotional, physical, and biological changes. Writing is a register of an individual's state, traits, and conscious and unconscious impulse reactions. An individual's sudden or slow change in behavior can be monitored through evaluating the writing over a period of time. It can be used to predict violence in the workplace by comparing characteristics of writing done at various times. Writing, like fingerprints, leaves a written trail with patterns that expose the guilt, the anxiety, and the looming explosion or decompression of the would be threat.

Handwriting analysis is recommended as just one factor of the total process. Criminal records, personality tests, background data, environment factors, and medical information combine with handwriting characteristics to form the basis of the evaluation.

Interpreting handwriting requires a review of traits and their relationship as they combine to form an impression. Margins, word spacing, line slopes, rhythm, and the overall organization of the writing are reviewed. An evaluation is made of the overall appearance of the writing, whether it is refined or crude, rhythmic or lacking in rhythm and balance. Pressure characteristics, orientation to the page, and special letter traits, including size, shape, and zonal distributions, are examined. The strong traits that most clearly represent the individual will stand out. Very unusual structures or styles will indicate potential emotional or thought disturbances.

**Assassins and Bombers**

In Chapter 1 of this book, Harold Hall discusses assassins. Iannetta (1993, 'pp. 221) cited Clarke (1988), who listed characteristics common to assassins, which he placed into the following four categories:

1. **Type I assassins** view their acts as probable sacrifices of self for political ideals. These assassins are fully aware of the meaning and consequences of their acts, and emotional distortion is present only to the extent that political ideals supersede survival instincts. This group includes John Wilkes Booth, who assassinated Lincoln, and Leon Czolgosz, McKinley's assassin.
cognizant of the personal consequences of their acts. They are characterized by moderately high levels of reality based anxiety that has a strong influence on their behavior. These assassins seek power in order to compensate for low self-worth that is frequently the result of a deprivation of love and affection is their personal lives. The exercise of power in a public manner generates attention that has been denied in the past. The Type II assassin is anxious, emotional, and depressed and is primarily concerned with personal problems and only secondarily concerned with causes or ideals. Lee Harvey Oswald, assassin of John F. Kennedy; John Hinckley, attempted assassin of Ronald Reagan; and Lynette "Squeaky" Fromme, attempted assassin of Gerald Ford, all fall into this category.

3 Type III assassins are psychopaths who feel that their lives are intolerably meaningless. These assassins have no positive political values and are highly contemptuous of morality and social convention. The rage and perversity of these people may tend toward suicide, mass murder, or assassinations, but in the case of assassination there is no political motive. Except for their intense anger, they are emotionally flat; they feel neither joy nor sadness, they are indifferent to death, and they are unable to relate to others. Type III assassins include Arthur Brewer, who shot George Wallace.

4 Type IV assassins are characterized by severe emotional and cognitive distortion that is expressed in delusions of persecution and/or grandeur and in hallucinations. Contact with reality is tenuous and they are therefore unable to grasp the significance of their actions. Their acts are typically "divinely inspired." Charles Guiteau, who assassinated President James Garfield, was a Type IV assassin.

Killers such as the Unabomber, who used explosive devices are discussed in Chapter 1, and trait descriptions such as repressed rage and dysfunctional social relationships are provided.

The following analysis of Timothy McVeigh's handwriting shows how his development and adult history, including the masterminding of the bombing of the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, are translated into a distinct writing style (see Figure D1).

Timothy McVeigh:
A Case Study in Terrorism by Bombing

Background. On April 19, 1995, 168 people, 19 of them children, were killed in a bombing that destroyed the Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City. What kind of person would commit such an unbelievably horrendous crime? We will investigate briefly the background of Timothy McVeigh, who was convicted of perpetrating this tragedy and then review those personality aspects in his writing that provide a glimpse of the motivating factors.
McVeigh came from a small town in upstate New York. His father was a blue collar worker who was employed making radiators. His mother worked as a travel agent. His parents were reportedly often absent during his growing up years. His father worked nights, and his mother was very active socially in addition to maintaining a regular work schedule. In school, he was considered outgoing, bright, and talkative. According to biographical accounts, his friends say that McVeigh loved guns at an early age and took them to school. He spent hours by himself shooting at targets.

Following high school, McVeigh joined the Army, serving as an artilleryman. He was a loner but made a few mends, such as Terry Nichols and Michael Fortier. Those who recall McVeigh's time in the military remember that he talked incessantly. He had paranoid descriptions about the threat of the federal government, especially with regard to individuals losing their right to have guns. During the Gulf War, he killed two enemy soldiers and bragged about it. Frustrated over his failure to complete the Green Berets training, McVeigh eventually left the Army.

He became a drifter, living in motels, frequenting gun shows, and becoming increasingly bitter about the federal government. He became outraged when the Federal Bureau of investigation (FBI) raided the Branch Davidian compound on April 19, 1993, which happened exactly 2 years before the bombing in Oklahoma City. He visited the site to demonstrate his anger over the FBI raid. This background laid the framework for the violence in McVeigh's life. He had been described by those who knew him as someone who loved guns, had a deep philosophical hatred of government control over guns, and was a loner. He learned to kill in the military. He used the raid on the Branch Davidians as a precipitating issue of his rage. His handwriting
indicated aspects of this potential for violence.

A Behavioral Profile Through Written Communication

When the author (Iannetta, 1993) first began to examine McVeigh's writing, dated 1992, she was struck by the apparent discrepancies between the signature and the body of the text. This revealed immediately an individual in great conflict with himself. Later, similarities between the two writings were found which were not so obvious at first glance, but nevertheless showed the consistent pattern of thought and behavior.

Taken alone, his signature fairly screams for attention, while hiding the writer's identity. It reveals the major precipitating factors that resulted in the destruction McVeigh later perpetrated. He has an organized design in his signature, beginning with the first stroke, the "T" for Tim, which symbolically curls into a fetal position, indicating his looking to the past and reaching for it hungrily. The central stroke of the signature divides the past from the future. The final and third stroke, which is made with powerful and forceful energy, indicates a dominant and tremendous power which culminates in an explosion of superfluous dots that grind in his unconscious. This represents the explosion that occurred 5 years later.

McVeigh's entire signature is symbolic of his inner need, his drama and myth, which are acted out in total in the body of his writing where his text portrays how he proceeds in his daily activities and habits. Overall, McVeigh's writing depicts his intelligence, his consistent patterns, his ability to be shrewdly manipulative and controlled, and his ability to control his behavior and carry out his missions within his own defined parameters. He sees himself as sane and behaves and talks normally. His inner conflict is hidden from others as he goes about his everyday life, but in fact that turmoil is reflected in his handwriting.

McVeigh further shows arrogance, a need for recognition and status. This attitude, coupled with feelings of omnipotence, could catapult him to the point where he could be convinced that he could kill and escape detection by being more clever than government officials or law enforcement personnel.

The writing also shows that this is a man who feels deprived of intimacy. Of course, there are reports that McVeigh may have experienced psychological damage from environmental deprivation caused by parental absences. In his writing, as the authors observed in the specific characteristics, he has not developed the ability to establish and maintain deep and significant interpersonal relations, proper bonding, and attachment. He may not have developed bonding at an early age, as he certainly has not learned the elements of trust. In fact, he expects and anticipates the worst and guards against the perceived threats by authority/parental/governmental figures. He therefore becomes suspicious and doubting of the motives of others, another characteristic exhibited in the writing. Other feelings of withdrawal, fears, and loneliness are exhibited.

Certain patterns predominate and repeat in the body of the writing. For example, certain structures reveal McVeigh's obsessions with his dependent needs for a nurturing figure. The authors note the particular strokes in the "g"s that curl into a fetal position, as the capital "T" does in the signature, which represent this need. The "g"s reflect the emotions, the feelings of sexual intimacy, and, again, that fetal position bending into the past, indicating that McVeigh is looking for the mother figure that was missing. Specifically, the circular part of these "g"s reside in the lower zone, representing the unconscious need for that nurturance and the significant void that is felt at that level.

McVeigh has experienced deprivation of sensory imagery which is shown clearly in his "y" Structures that also represent his tangible and physical acting out of his concerns, his memory, and his actions. The "y"s are retraced and angled, formed in such a way as to reveal his violent and aggressive mood as well as his hidden agenda. Again, like the "g", this unusual letter structure stands out in the body of the writing. Both the "y" and "g" structures, in their unusual formations, reveal McVeigh's improper bonding and his overwhelming need for intimacy and his inability to create it.

Much of the body of the writing visually appears to slant to the left, but certain letter Structures do so in an unusual and dramatic pattern. Patterns of writing that slant unnaturally to the left further reveal the writer's emotional withdrawal, a feeling which is compounded by his need for space and his feelings of alienation and desire for distance from others. While his unconscious concerns are for intimacy, at the same time, he needs to separate himself from others. There is therefore a conflict between the conscious and unconscious drives.

McVeigh chooses to print. This reflects his desire to communicate clearly without revealing his emotional content.

There is a tension exhibited in the writing indicating a writer who has difficulty releasing feelings appropriately. The pressure of the writing shows greater intensity than the average writer would demonstrate. It shows McVeigh's energy and lasting feelings. The energy is propelled by his will power (demonstrated by the firmness and strengths of his "t" bars) which pushes and drives forward, and yet control is revealed by the downward directional focus of the crossbars.
The authors observed the grinding dots that accompany McVeigh's signature. That similar pattern is interspersed throughout his writing.

Lack of trust, resistance, and suspicion are reflected in the very unusual angles of letter strokes that dramatically turn left. Note for example, the "y" strokes that represent his personal standard, which is that lack of trust. McVeigh projects blame onto others; therefore, he has a need for self-defense. This paramount need is demonstrated in the fact that certain structures, as his "y" formations, are aggressive and weapon like. They thrust right, revealing his hidden aggression.

The location of certain letters, or portions of letters, as well as the formation of letters reflect the personality characteristics of the writer. In McVeigh's case, his "d"s are separated by an unusually large space from the rest of the letters in his words and sometimes hide behind the baseline. This characterizes his distancing of his personal ideas and behaviors, the fact that he was able to keep these hidden from others. He has a need to hide, protect, and go about his plans in a covert and oppositional manner.

We must look closely to see certain subtle characteristics that reflect the special concerns and behaviors of this writer. He reverses the direction of his writing at certain critical junctures in a habitual manner. These occur with unique endings such as the "ht" at the end of words. Rather than end at the usual juncture, as we are taught to form the letter "h" prior to the "t" formation, McVeigh performs an upward stroke to make the "t," which has no terminal structure. (McVeigh can therefore carry out his activities in a creative, albeit bizarre, manner.)

As noted previously, McVeigh has aggressive impulses. Where is this seen in his writing? There are certain club strokes at the beginning of down structures, as well as angular strokes where they should not be in the writing. These strokes, as they often bend left, recognize the writer's clinging to his past and the pressure that it brings to his present thoughts and behavior. His "i"s and "t"s are made in a backward formation and show his need for a protective shield against the world. He is ready for battle. Capital letters, that are out of place at certain sections of the writing, again show where his feelings are particularly defiant.

The author (Iannetta, 1993) observed that McVeigh has great self-involvement and arrogance. The tallness of certain letters, such as the stems of the "d"s and "I"s and similar letters, is a symbol of that particular obsession with his own belief system.

McVeigh connects certain words in a manner that is consistent and subconsciously demonstrates how he thinks and what ideas are linked in his thought patterns. For example, the words "murder" and "law abiding" are attached. The vertical slash that occurs between the words "rapist" and "murderer" connect below with the word "law-abiding". "Die" and "live" are also connected as are "life" and "law which are both underlined. It appears that McVeigh connects the words that have symbolic meaning for him.

The writer is attentive to detail. Almost every "i" is dotted and "t" crossed. These consistent patterns provide us with important information about this man in that he will organize carefully and ensure that every detail is considered. At the same time, the exceptions present another message. The "i" dot on the word "police" is missing, an ominous sign. The dot on the "i" in the word "jail" has a sharp, left slant, a sign of meticulous detail found on a word of some significance to McVeigh.

From McVeigh's writing, the author (Iannetta, 1993) would recognize in advance, without knowing him or his violent crime, that he is an introverted person and an organized planner. He conceives ideas based on his personal belief system. He carefully and accurately puts things together with precision and perfection. His thinking style is obsessive and driven by strong, powerful feelings and a desire to act on them. He needs to communicate and do so clearly. McVeigh wants to be important, yet feels rejected, and his final rejection brings the retaliation. His writing shows a type of superficial thinking that may not have really considered the women and children prior to the bombing as he focused on his own personal and safety concerns.

The readers are invited to explore the three tables adapted from the author's material (Iannetta, 1993) as follows: Primary indicators of dangerousness are listed in Table D1, facilitators of dangerousness are found in Table D2, and inhibitions to dangerousness are provided in Table D3. Factors on each table are numbered, labeled, given a condensed description, and interpreted psychologically. Presented for research purposes only and not for direct clinical application in predicting dangerousness in specific cases, the tables may be used to better understand written communications involving possible dangerousness.

References


Iannetta, K., with Craine, J.F. and McLaughlin, D.G. (1993), Danger Between the Lines: Facilitating Assessment of
