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A History Of Handwriting Analysis

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If we have to sign our name to a document, it is recognised as a representation of ourselves in law. The fact that it is a serious criminal offence to forge the signature of another person indicates the gravitas of this unique marker. If we have a strong visual memory, we can often identify the handwriting of a relative or close friend and this is seen as part of who they are. The key question is to what extent, if any, do these unique markers reveal to others more than just the meaning of the words on the page?

The Birth of Handwriting

When the first writing systems were developed more than five thousand years ago, they relied upon pictorial representations to communicate a message. These early writing systems include cuneiform which developed in Sumer (now in modern day Iraq) and hieroglyphics from Egypt. The development of the first pure alphabets that use a single symbol to represent a single phoneme (letter sound) began in Egypt in 1800 BC and in time the Phoenician alphabet emerged in approximately 1200 BC. This alphabet, developed along the coastline of modern Lebanon, consisted of 22 consonant letters and did not record vowel sounds. This practice is still seen in the Arabic and Hebrew written languages today.

Image of the Phoenician alphabet



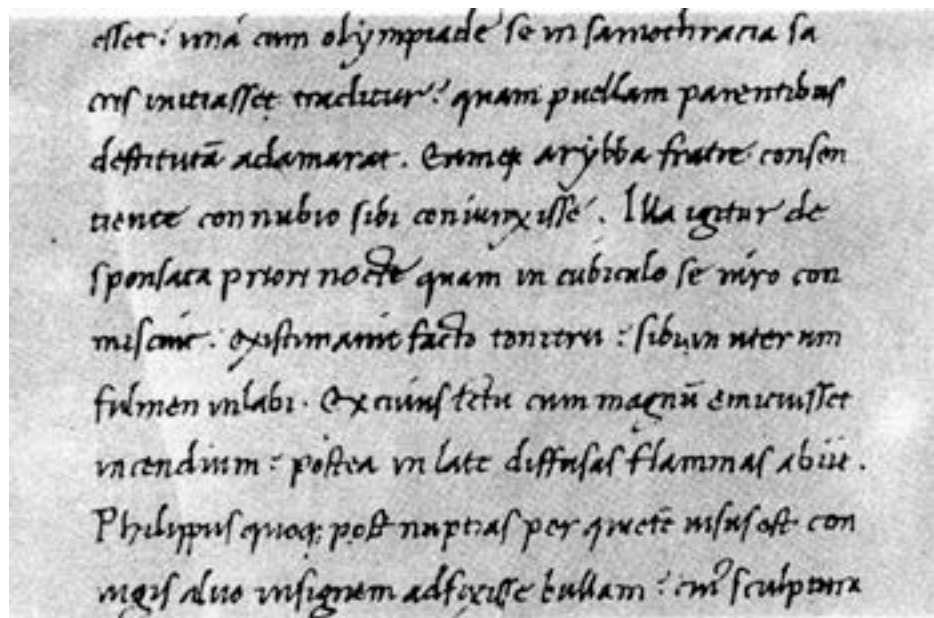
The significance of the Phoenician alphabet cannot be underestimated. Writing systems that subsequently developed in Europe, Western Asia and Africa have their roots in the Phoenician alphabet as do many of the modern scripts used in Europe. The Greek alphabet was developed in 900 BC and was one of the first to be written from left to right. The most famous descendent of the Greek alphabet, namely Latin (700 BC) spread quickly throughout Europe with the expansion of the Roman Empire.

The appearance of the Latin alphabet has also experienced many transformations since its inception. Most of these changes have been dictated by the writing im-

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plements and surfaces available at the time. To begin with, only upper case letters were formed and these made use of straight lines only. As writing implements evolved and improved, so too did the Latin alphabet and its appearance. By 600 AD, lower case letters began to be used. At this time however, letters were still printed in a singular form and it was only with the widespread use of both paper and quill pen together that cursive script or italic style fonts became popular.

Sample of early italic handwriting



Pupils at ancient Roman schools learned the value and importance of neat handwriting as they repeated their lessons over and over on a clay tablet, unlikely to be allowed to waste a sheet of papyrus until they had learned to write neatly. The teaching of handwriting has been an important feature in the curriculum in both England and the United States since the inception of schooling. Children are usually taught first to form letters in a printed fashion before progressing to cursive or 'joined-up' writing at about the age of eight. There is an expectation that by the start of secondary schooling, children will have adopted a fluid joined-up writing script which often already shows some markers of individuality.

What is meant by Graphology?

The British Academy of Graphology defines graphology as;

"...the analysis of the psychological structure of the human subject through his or her handwriting. The central nervous system provides a direct and undistorted link to the deeper self. Every human mind comprises a unique and immensely complex blend of character and accumulated experiences of life. Handwriting reflects this by constantly evolving."¹

The etymology of the term 'graphology' indicates that it is the theory or study of writing and whilst the first books on the subject were not published until the middle of the 17th century, it seems that a person's handwriting has intrigued observers from as early as the 2nd century AD.



The Beginnings of Graphology

The first book that dealt with the subject of handwriting analysis was written by Camillo Baldi, an Italian doctor of medicine and philosophy at Bologna University. Baldi's book was entitled *Treating or How from a Missive Letter, One May Know the Nature and Qualities of its Writer*. Colloquially, it was known as the *Trattato*, written in 1621 and published in 1625. In it, Baldi describes the study of handwriting as;

“Manifestation reflecting something of its writer's inner makeup”²

It was this search for the 'inner makeup' that perhaps inspired the second century Roman historian and biographer, Suetonius who noted the handwriting characteristics of each of the twelve emperors who were the subjects of his most famous work. He is best known for his book *De Vita Caesarum* or *The Twelve Caesars*, written in 119 AD.



The term graphology was first used by a French abbot and writer, Jean Hippolyte Michon (1806-1861) who described graphology as an art which he had learned through experience, studying the handwriting of thousands of people whose character he was familiar with³. This led to the perhaps simplistic observation that people, who shared similar handwriting characteristics, also shared similar personality traits. He created a vast record of the handwriting qualities that he associated with certain attributes. His records also contained a dictionary of graphological signs and rules as he had observed them, whilst not trying to attempt to explain the connection between a person's writing preferences and their character.

By 1895, a number of doctors and university professors from France, Germany and Austria had made contributions to the growth of graphology as more than just an 'art' as Michon had described it; it was now being referred to as a 'science'.

“ [Dr William Preyer] ... became the founder of a new theory which took into account the physiology, psychology and pathology of handwriting and so connected graphology with the other achievements of modern science.”⁴

Whilst the origins of graphology lie in mainland Europe, the works of Swiss physiognomist, Kasper Lavater were available in England. His book *Physiognomy* was first published in German in 1775 but underwent more than 50 editions until 1810 with nearly half of these available in England. Lavater's work is known to have inspired the text written by the first Englishman on the subject, Thomas Byerley in 1823. In his essay, *On Characteristic Signatures* Byerley wrote that;

“In using his pen, a man acts unconsciously, as the current of his blood impels him; and there, at all times, nature flows unrestricted and free.”⁵

Two other key figures in the history of graphology are Dr Georg Meyer and Dr Ludwig Klages. Klages (1872-1956) was the first to identify that handwriting could be a reflection of the human personality and established a systematic approach. He believed that handwriting was a constant struggle between a person's 'natural impulses and rhythms' and 'mental discipline' on the other.⁶ When the two are in har-



mony with one another the quality of a person's handwriting is of a higher standard than when they are in conflict. Klages did not state that a particular handwriting trait revealed a specific personality attribute. For each handwriting trait Klages believed that there could be a favourable and an unfavourable personal characteristic, depending on the general standard of the writing. For example, large writing could be an indication of greatness in a person, but conversely, it could suggest a boastful or inconsiderate person. One of the criticisms of Klages' approach was his

disregard for the role that national identities and characteristics may play in handwriting. In some countries, the speed at which children are taught to write and the style of writing are more closely dictated than others.

Another contemporary of Klages was Max Pulver (1889-1956) who was a graphologist from Switzerland. Pulver described the empty page like a canvas and the writer like an artist seeking to fill the space. He believed that the writing that fills that space is a reflection of the writer as a person. The word that is currently being written represents the present moment, the writing that precedes (to the left) represents the writer's past, roots and origins and what has already been. The words that are still to be written are a representation of the future and the rest of the world. Pulver also extended this poetic interpretation to the individual letters within each word. He identifies letters such as m, v and a as short letters as they do not extend above or below the level of the written text. Those letters that extend above the short letters (such as h, l and d) symbolise a move towards the spiritual world and those that extend below (such as p, j and y) represent the more material and subconscious world. According to Pulver, therefore, the appearance of all words written on the page are a representation of a more holistic picture of the writer, regardless of the subject content or meaning of the text.

The Theory and Principles of Handwriting Analysis

Those who believe that the study of handwriting can be useful, range in their views from those who believe that samples of handwriting can be compared to ascertain whether a forgery has taken place to those who believe that the manner in which a writer crosses his or her 't' or dots their 'i' reveals deeply personal clues as to their true desires and drives.

When children are taught how to write, they are instructed in a standard format and appearance for each letter. It is only as pupils progress into the teenage years



and young adulthood that deviations from this 'copy-book' form of writing begin to appear. It is in this deviation that graphology seeks out clues as to a person's character as the suggestion is that these inadvertent choices in our handwriting reveals the true self. If writing is more elaborate and ornamental than copy-book writing, then it suggests an interest in creativity and aesthetics whereas a simplification of copy-book would suggest a tendency for sobriety and a desire to stick to the essential rather than fuss about presentation.

Image of copy book cursive handwriting



The words chosen by an individual are interesting as they can indicate the education level of the author. They are also useful as a trained eye can seek out particular words or phrases that indicate a change in the 'normal' handwriting patterns of the writer which could also indicate the person's preference or opinion about those issues. It is also possible to identify common themes and patterns in terms of the choice of certain words or phrases or the omissions of others. This process is obviously made easier when there are multiple samples of the same subject's handwriting available.

Much emphasis is placed on the holistic approach to handwriting observation. That one person demonstrates one characteristic because of letter size and position does not indicate that they have a particular personality trait. Graphology may suggest this handwriting feature as a signal or marker in one direction that, if combined with several other markers pointing towards the same trait, could be evidence of its existence.

Handwriting analysts also suggest that handwriting that changes during the course of a text can reveal a person's desire to mask their true self which is often revealed in the latter parts of such a text. Likewise, close analysis of the last letter in any given word can also be revealing. Graphologists suggest that forgers can often be detected by the careful study of the ends of words where a forger has not necessarily invested the same amount of consideration as the first more nervous letters of a word.

It is unusual today for a formal situation to exist where it is necessary to hand write a page of text for others to read. In most cases, it is considered more socially acceptable to type a letter, if it is even required in the place of an email. The layout of handwritten text on a blank page is however, meant to be telling as to the ability of the writer to plan and think ahead. The use of a margin, the placement of words at the end of a line and the conclusion of text before turning over the page, according to graphology, reveal the extent to which a person is able to think ahead and plan as well as their degree of spatial awareness.

Other Key Indicators

Handwriting Feature	What it is meant to reveal about the author
Size of Handwriting	<p><i>Handwriting size relates to a person's confidence –</i></p> <p>A person with large writing needs to have space for themselves</p> <p>A person with small writing is more content with less space</p>
Emphasis of Particular Parts of Letters	<p>The upper length of letters (think of the top of a 't') represents the intellectual and spiritual spheres.</p> <p>The middle length of letters represents the rational and conscious part of the self.</p> <p>The lower length of letters (think of the bottom of an 'f') represents the unconscious, sexual or material aspect of life.</p> <p><i>A writer who emphasises any one of these over the others could have a focus in that aspect of their life.</i></p>
Degree of Pressure	<p>Application of significant pressure whilst writing suggests strength, vitality and conviction or that the writer believed that the words required force to labour the point of their meaning.</p> <p>Application of light pressure whilst writing suggests a finely skilled writer who does not need to apply great pressure to write or one who is gentle or soft hearted.</p>



Angles of writing	<p>Upright writing suggests independence</p> <p>Writing that has a slant to the right suggests an extraverted personality</p> <p>Writing that has a slant to the left suggests an introverted personality.</p>
Mounting and Descending Text	<p>Writing that mounts or moves upwards on the page indicates a largely optimistic or positive person.</p> <p>Writing that descends or moves downwards on the page indicates a tendency for pessimism or negativity.</p>

It is interesting to note that whilst there seem to be very strict 'rules' about what might constitute typical or usual copy-book handwriting, as well as an indication of what character traits are revealed through straying from these rules; there also seems to be an exception for those individuals who are so creatively gifted that the written recording of their genius is tiresome.

Robert Saudek, a Czechoslovakian graphologist suggested that highly individualised writing as seen in individuals such as Immanuel Kant and Beethoven do not suggest a fractured mind, but one far too important to concern himself with the rules of penmanship.

Image of Beethoven's handwriting



The Accuracy of Graphology

Graphology is often referred to as a pseudoscience with many written studies citing a lack of empirical evidence to support its validity. In 1992, Geoffrey A. Dean conducted a meta-analysis of 200 scientific studies of graphology which revealed that there is insufficient data to support the suggestion that graphology can be considered a science.⁷

"The respectability of graphology within the scientific community has now been all but wiped out."⁸

Despite the evidence to the contrary however, graphology remains a popular tool within the recruitment industry particularly in France where between 38% and 93% of companies make use of graphologists when seeking suitable employees.⁹ Some of the most common arguments against the validity of graphology include:

- If we are taught handwriting in schools how can there be any real difference between handwriting?
- We change our handwriting daily depending on our mood – how can we deduce a person's character from it?
- Handwriting involves only the hand, so any analysis can only relate to the person's ability to use their hand. In cases where a person's hand is injured their handwriting may change but not their personality. Likewise a person who undergoes a personality change as a result of brain injury will not necessarily adopt a different style of handwriting.

Forensic or Questioned Document Examination

Those who work in the area of forensics that specialise in the examination of documents would not consider their work as related to graphology, although this might be an area of confusion for fans of crime and police television dramas. Questioned Document Examination is the forensic science branch of document analysis which is used whenever documents play a role in a legal case. This could range from simple forgery or white collar crime to murder cases where a suicide note is believed to have been forged. The forensic analysis of handwriting could ascertain the likelihood of an individual being the author of the text by comparing the language used as well as the appearance of the text itself in comparison with other authenticated samples.

Questioned Document Examination will also consider other factors in addition to the handwriting including the ink and writing surface used as well as impressions that might have already existed on the paper prior to writing. The use of graphology as a tool for character profiling is not accepted as a science or even a valid psychological test with many scientists suggesting that it is on a par with palmistry or astrology for predicting personality.

Handwriting analysis has been used to confirm that one sample of handwriting matches the authorship of another, as in the case of the Washington Sniper in 2002¹⁰, but it is unlikely to be used by police as a tool to help reveal the identity of a criminal. What can be revealed from the text, rather than the personality of the author, may be their state of mind at the time of writing, or their level of education or clues to their nationality. This was the case with the Mad Bomber in New York in the 1940s and 1950s where analysts corrected identified that the author of the notes was of Slavic descent.





Image of newspaper article about capture of Mad Bomber

The notion of being able to learn about ourselves or others from handwriting is understandably appealing as interest in discovering the secrets of human behaviour have intrigued humans for millennia. It can be argued that seeing graphology as a scientific tool with which one can judge or discriminate against others is at best misleading and at worst potentially dangerous. It cannot be denied however, that the appearance of one's written words are important to others for if their appearance was insignificant why would individuals spend considerable time and money selecting the perfect writing instrument?

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- 1 Quotation taken from the British Academy of Graphology website located at : <http://www.graphology.co.uk/what-is-graphology.html>
 - 2 Quotation taken from a review of Camillo Baldi, His Life and Works, written by Bob Backman. The review is located at <http://www.handwriting.org/camillo-baldi.html>
 - 3 E Singer, 1986, A Manual of Graphology, Treasure Press, p33.
 - 4 E Singer, 1986, A Manual of Graphology, Treasure Press, p34
 - 5 Quotation taken from G Brophy's blog Character- Building: Disraeli and the "Physiognomy of Writing" located at <http://floatingacademy.wordpress.com/2009/06/18/character-building-disraeli-and-the-physiognomy-of-writing/>
 - 6 E Singer, 1986, A Manual of Graphology, Treasure Press, P 35.
 - 7 G A Dean, 1992, The Bottom Line: Effect Size printed in B. L. Beyerstein, D. F. Beyerstein (Eds.). The write stuff: evaluations of graphology – the study of handwriting analysis. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books. More information can be found at <http://psycnet.apa.org/psycinfo/1998-07238-011>
 - 8 Quotation taken from Graphology: Connections Between Handwriting and Personality are Illusory located at: <http://www.spring.org.uk/2008/03/graphology-connections-between.php>
 - 9 Statistic taken from article referred to in endnote viii
 - 10 <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/11/02/us/sniper-suspects-linked-to-yet-another-shooting.html>

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