

Standard for the Expression of Source Opinions in Forensic Document Examination



WHAT IS AN AAFS STANDARD FACTSHEET?

The AAFS produces clear, concise, and easy-to-understand factsheets to summarize the contents of technical and professional forensic science standards on the OSAC Registry. They are not intended to provide an interpretation for any portion of a proposed standard.

WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS PROPOSED STANDARD?

This standard provides a framework for the communication of opinions by a forensic document examiner as to the source of an item(s) when addressing a pair of competing, mutually exclusive propositions relevant to a case.

It applies only to subjective judgments based on the observed features when comparing submitted items. It prescribes the use of statements of relative support provided by the evidence for the propositions in question.

This standard is to be used with ANSI/ASB 035, 1st Ed., 2020; 070, 1st Ed., 2022; 117, 1st Ed., 2020; and 172, 1st Ed., 2024.

This OSAC Proposed Standard has been sent to AAFS Academy Standards Board (ASB) for further development and publication. Get involved as a member or by providing public comment.

This standard prohibits a categorical exclusionary opinion in a handwriting examination.

WHY IS THIS PROPOSED STANDARD IMPORTANT? WHAT ARE ITS BENEFITS?

There is ongoing debate on how forensic document examiners are to communicate an opinion of source. This standard promotes consistency in how those opinions are presented when giving a statement of the relative degree of support the evidence provides for a pair of competing propositions.

This standard restricts expressions of support provided by the evidence to statements of support for different sources, equal support, or support for same source; and requires the forensic science service provider (FSSP) to provide or make available the full opinion scale.

HOW IS THIS PROPOSED STANDARD USED, AND WHAT ARE THE KEY ELEMENTS?

This standard requires an FSSP to:

- define the necessary types, quality, and possibly approximate quantities of data required to form an opinion for each level used in the scale
- describe the accuracy and consistency of opinions using the scale
- express their assessments of the support provided by the evidence as a statement of support for different sources, equal support, or support for same source
- include a statement of factor(s) affecting the strength of opinion
- include or make available the full opinion scale

This standard recommends nine opinion categories: extremely strong, strong, moderate, and limited support for common source; equal support; and limited, moderate, strong, and extremely strong support for different sources. This standard addresses a categorical exclusionary opinion, stating that it may be justified in the comparison of physical items.

Recommended and example support statements are provided for common/different source and equal support.

