

## Graphology: Write and Wrong

by John A. Thomas

Graphology is said by its practitioners to be the scientific study of handwriting to reveal personality traits and predict behavior. I became curious about these claims a few years ago after reading an article in a Dallas newspaper. The article claimed that some 2,000 American companies use graphological methods to evaluate prospective employees. My only acquaintance with handwriting analysis had been with the graphologists one finds at psychic fairs, who seem to be happily nestled between the astrologers and the tarot-card readers. Is graphology a science reliable enough to be used in personnel management, or is it only fortune telling? The idea that handwriting might reflect some personality traits is not entirely implausible, but the association of graphology with the demimonde of the psychic fair gave me pause. I decided to look into the scientific validity of the subject and its use, if any, by employers in the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

### Old Belief

\*The belief that handwriting is a sign of the inner personality is very old. The first serious attempt to analyze handwriting seems to have been that of Camillo Baldi, an Italian scholar, who published a book on the subject in 1622. As literacy spread, handwriting analysis became popular, being practiced as an art form by such literary figures as Goethe, Poe, the Brownings and Dickens. The term "graphology" was coined by Jean Hippolyte Michon in 1875. Michon systematized handwriting analysis by associating hundreds of graphic signs with specific personality traits.

Around the turn of the century, the French psychologist Alfred Binet performed several experiments with handwriting analysis as a device for testing personality. Binet claimed that handwriting experts could distinguish successful from unsuccessful persons with high accuracy. The German school of handwriting analysis, led by Ludwig Klages, developed a subjective and esoteric approach to graphology, and apparently never even attempted experimental verification of its claims.

### Graphoanalysis

There is today no single theory or method which dominates graphology. The French school concentrated on isolated signs as specific indicators of personality, and the Germans sought to make subjective interpretations based on a total impression of a person's handwriting. In 1929 M. N. Bunker founded "graphoanalysis" as a compromise between these two extreme positions, and the language and techniques of graphoanalysis seem to be more or less the common graphological practice in the United States today. Bunker founded the International Graphoanalysis Society, which now offers an 18-month correspondence course for analysts. The society is based in Chicago and claims 10,000 active members.

### Expression of the personality

Even though there is no canonical school of graphology, some discussion of the practice may be helpful. Remember that the basic assumption underlying graphology is that handwriting is an expression of the personality; hence, a systematic analysis of the way a person forms words and letters will reveal traits of personality. The graphologists are fond of repeating, "handwriting is brain writing."

Graphologists look for such features as the slant of characters, the size of individual letters, angularity and curvature, and such non-graphic features as the pressure of upward and downward strokes. In most systems, the slant of the letters is very important. A right slant is generally correlated with extroversion, and a left slant with introversion. The shape of the letter "t" seems important to all systems. Bunker's book contains a dictionary of specific signs and their correlates with personality, such as "pride: tall d-stems, t-stems not vertical."

Another system (Rosen) defines 16 factors, including graphic factors such as slant, spacing and letter size, as well as global features such as "rhythm" and "tempo." Sheila Kurtz uses handwriting features such as slant, pressure and t-formation to create a subject's "graphoprofile", which reveals, among other things, his thinking pattern, goal orientation,

fear traits, defenses, integrity traits and social traits. In general, graphologists prefer handwriting samples that are spontaneous and not given for the express purpose of being analyzed. They prefer a text of some length, written with a tool sensitive to pressure and speed. Graphologists want a text with biographical material if possible, and they want to know the age and sex of the writer. The output of the analysis is a free-form personality description, perhaps systematized in some way (Kurtz).

The claims of graphology are bold: "The analyst can, with surprising accuracy, predict what the writer will do and how he will react under certain conditions" (Bunker). "Analysis of a handwriting specimen becomes a behavioral indicator and a remarkably accurate gauge of the writer's character. Graphology can even foretell a person's future actions and future intellectual performance" (Rosen). "By focusing attention on [a child's] drawings, you will discover the attitudes and reactions responsible for shaping his personality" (Solomon). Some even claim that changing one's handwriting can change one's personality (Kurtz). Is graphology really a valid method of assessing personality? Psychological tests which attempt to judge personality, as opposed to ability, are notoriously difficult to validate. The difficulty would seem even greater when we are talking about such complex traits as honesty or integrity. Psychologists freely admit that they do not have any paper-and-pencil tests that give even remotely reliable information about these traits. It seems only fair to ask the graphologists to come up with some evidence to support their claims.

#### No Clear Correlation

Unfortunately for the graphologists, scientific research has found no clear correlation between handwriting behavior and basic personality patterns. Although some psychologists believe that the subject is worth further study, the existing research is almost uniformly inconclusive or negative. For example, one recent study examined the ability of graphologists to predict sales success, in the sense that graphologists' evaluations would concur with supervisor's ratings. No evidence of validity was found (Rafaeli and Klimoski).

A study for the Netherlands Society of Industrial Psychology considered 2,250 judgments by graphologists and 6,000 by a control group. The Dutch researchers found that graphological judgments, for large numbers, were slightly more often correct than incorrect, but they concluded that for judging the individual, "...graphology is a diagnostic method of highly questionable and in all probability minimal, practical value." (Jansen).

A 1989 analysis of 17 earlier studies of the validity of graphology as a personnel selection device found that even the minimal correlations sometimes obtained by graphologists could be accounted for by content-laden scripts. (Neter and Ben-Shakhar). Summaries of the research literature can be found in Beyerstein, et al. and Nevo. The Beyerstein book presents the best collection of writings on the current state of graphological research and validation.

None of the many graphology books I examined cited any validating research. The attitude of the practicing graphologists seems to be represented by this quote: "Moreover, graphology is a self-validating science. This means that the credibility of the method can be proven immediately by the feedback you get from the graphologist." (Kurtz). This comment gives us a hint why graphology seems work for its practitioners and their clients.

Persons who have some experience with graphological analysis are usually positively impressed. That is, they personally validate what the graphologist is telling them about themselves. Personal validation gives a powerful subjective impression of truth, but unfortunately, the impression can be created by methods that have nothing to do with objective validity. A character reading containing statements are vague or general enough to be true about almost anyone tends to be accepted as unique by the client. If the reader has real information about the client from other sources, as graphologists usually do, he can tailor his stock reading to more closely fit the client's case, thus increasing the subjective feeling of validity. A handwriting sample with autobiographical material is obviously helpful to the analyst, as is the age and sex of the subject, or the job he is applying for. The article by Hyman describes the process of character reading in more detail. A corporate user of graphological judgments may be in no better position to evaluate their reliability. How does the employer really know that the persons rejected on graphological advice were likely to be incompetent or dishonest? The personnel officer may get a sense of personal validation simply because the graphologist can prepare a character sketch that sounds detailed and credible.

#### A Typical Pseudoscience

In summary, then, it seems that graphology as currently practiced is a typical pseudoscience and has no place in

character assessment or employment practice. There is no good scientific evidence to justify its use, and the graphologists do not seem about to come up with any.

In late 1988 I undertook to estimate the extent to which graphology is used in personnel practice in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. I contacted local graphologists, employment agencies and personnel consultants, a firm of industrial psychologists, and a selection of large corporate employers. The latter included the airlines, real estate, electronics, security services, and stock brokerage. I also called the personnel offices of the cities of Dallas and Fort Worth and the counseling and testing office at the University of Texas at Arlington. The uniform response was "we don't use it and we don't know anyone who does." Apparently the claims in the press about the wide use of graphology in business are exaggerated, at least in the north Texas area. From my conversations with the head of the Institute for Graphological Science in Dallas and a local graphoanalytic practitioner, I gathered the impression that most users of graphological services are individuals or small businesses. Obviously, someone is using it, or the several local graphologists would not be in business.

Federal Law

\*There is a good reason why large corporate employers and local governments do not use graphology: the use of unvalidated pre-employment tests is unlawful if the tests have any discriminatory impact. Although a full review of employment discrimination law is beyond the scope of this fact sheet, we should look at Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the primary federal law relating to employment discrimination. Title VII does not apply to all employers, but it has a pervasive influence on American employment policies.

Title VII applies to employers, employment agencies and unions. It prohibits discrimination on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, national origin, or reprisal. The Act allows the use of employment tests if they are "professionally developed" and not used to discriminate. The Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) has interpreted the Act to permit only the use of job-related tests. The EEOC guidelines are based on the standards of the American Psychological Association (APA) and require "criteria-related validity." That is, validity must be demonstrated by comparing test scores with some external variable that provides a direct measure of the characteristic in question. Put another way, test scores must correlate with performance on the job, and this must be established in a statistically proper way. This interpretation of the Act was upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Griggs v. Duke Power Co.*, 401 U.S. 424 (1971).

Graphological assessments are usually free-form personality descriptions rather than scored tests, but this does not exempt them from Title VII's coverage. The APA standards require that when any kind of test is used to aid an interviewer's assessment, the resulting assessment should be validated like other psychometric measures. The standards state: "...when on the basis of projective test data, biographical information, or various behavioral cues elicited during an interview, the interviewer makes a statement such as 'this man will fail...' he is making a prediction based on his assessment and should be held to the standards for demonstrating the validity of his prediction."

If graphology is a pseudoscience, as seems highly probable, then graphological evaluations are nothing more than character readings combined with a large chance element. The biases of the graphologist will consciously or unconsciously skew the results. If the result is an assessment which results in discrimination on one of the grounds recognized by Title VII, then users of graphological tests bear a heavy burden of showing job-related validity for them. Since the current state of scientific knowledge does not support the validity of graphological judgments, employers using such assessments are in a very risky legal position. If you are asked to submit a handwriting sample for your next job interview, call your lawyer!

"Objectives"

Some other legal aspects of graphology are worth mentioning. The Institute for Graphological Science the only graphology school licensed under the Texas Proprietary School Act. The Act requires applicants for a proprietary school certificate to show that the courses, curriculum and instruction are of such a quality, content and length as to reasonably achieve the stated objectives for which they are offered. Apparently the Act's administrator is not required to go behind the course outline and judge the validity of what is being taught. He is only required to find that the school will adequately meet its teaching objectives. Officials in Austin confirmed this interpretation with me in a telephone conversation. I posed the question of how an application for a course in astrology would be handled. I was told (after

some hesitation) that the statute would probably not prevent the approval of such an application. It seems to me that a proper interpretation of the statute would hold "objectives" to mean the objectives of assessing personality and predicting behavior, not merely the objectives of teaching graphological techniques. Anyway, the use of state licensing laws by pseudoscience practitioners to achieve credibility and legal protection is a potentially serious problem. Consider the success of the chiropractors, who years ago embraced medical licensing laws instead of fighting them.

Expert Witnesses

Most graphologists boast of providing evidence as expert witnesses in court. I was unable to locate a single case in which graphological testimony for the purpose of personality assessment has been admitted in evidence. A few courts have considered whether or not a handwriting analyst can give testimony as to a person's physical or mental condition, and all of them have held such testimony inadmissible. See, for example, *Warren v. Hartnett*, 561 S.W.2d 860 (Tex. Civ. App. 1977); and *Cameron v. Knapp*, 520 N.Y.S. 2d 917 (N.Y. Sup. 1987). If graphological evidence is offered, it must meet the test for scientific evidence required in most jurisdictions. That is, there must be a general consensus in the appropriate scientific field that the theory behind the technique is sound, and that it has been reliably reduced to practice. Neither is the case with graphology. Where do the graphologists' claims of courtroom expertise come from? Many graphologists today attempt to qualify themselves as questioned-document examiners. Forensic handwriting examination for the purpose of detecting altered or forged writings has long been recognized by the courts as admissible. It appears that graphologists are attempting to bootstrap themselves into respectability by combining forensic handwriting analysis with their questionable personality-assessment techniques.

Finally, there is no state certification or licensing of graphologists in Texas. Statements to that effect in graphologists' promotional literature can only refer to certification" by a graphological school or association.

[This fact sheet was written by John A. Thomas. Portions previously appeared in *The Skeptic*. Copyright 1988 by the North Texas Skeptics.]

Suggested Reading:

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Editor's Note: This article is one in a continuing series of articles on single-topic issues that should arm our readers with concise information for use in discussing with others, writing letters to the editor, etc. If you have any suggestions for other single-topic issues, please contact me at one of the addresses in the masthead.

From the Chairman

Lots of news, some good & some bad. On the bad side, the Illinois State Board of Education did, indeed, pass the new science standards without even a single mention of the word "evolution." They apparently left their spines behind in an effort to pass the standards without controversy. But I guarantee that next time these things come up for review (allegedly in about three years), I'll put this issue at the forefront of discussions and generate the controversy myself if I have to!

On the good news front, my short article on Therapeutic Touch ended up on the desk of the State Journal-Register's medical writer, Tony Cappasso. He has been doing some investigating and interviewing, and I expect to see an article in this weekend's paper addressing this unscientific practice being promoted by St. John's Hospital.

In other news, we'll be having elections at September's meeting (the day after Labor Day). I know I promised they'd be at the previous meeting, and I hated to disappoint everybody who came to that meeting just for that reason, but Rich Walker just had too much stuff to tell us! So if you want to help us out with things like you've read about here, please come and volunteer!

Speaking of Rich Walker, he gave another great presentation! I was hoping he'd tell us which Lotto numbers to play, but I guess he just ran out of time (hmmm, maybe I should have said that he did tell us which ones to play, and use that as encouragement for people to attend more meetings).

The next meeting will actually be headlined not by the elections, but by our own Wally Hartshorn, talking about "High Weirdness By Web." Wally is one of the founding members of REALL and is the webmaster at our unofficial site ([www.reall.org](http://www.reall.org)). If you want to know what's really out on the Web, as it pertains to REALL, don't miss this meeting!

And speaking of weirdness, the following meeting, Tuesday, October 7, will feature our own Professor Steve Egger talking about serial killers and related topics. Professor Egger is a nationally known expert on the subject and just had another book published (coincidentally around the same time as the Andrew Cunanan killings, though he claims he had nothing to do with any of that). One topic we can expect him to address is the use of "psychics" on serial murder cases (notice how none of the great "psychics" pinpointed that houseboat?), and the whole presentation should be extremely interesting. Another REALL meeting you won't want to miss!

From the Editor

In many issues, we feature original articles by REALL members and others. Other times, we reprint for you some of the best ones we find that have been published elsewhere, such as in other skeptic group newsletters.

This month's newsletter features one from the North Texas Skeptics on graphology. It is an article that also can be used by you as a single-topic source of information that can be passed on to others who may hold an unquestioned belief in graphology. We expect to print other such single-topic "fact sheets" in future issues -- as we have done in the past.

I have heard from Chairman David that Prof. Alex Casella's class on science and pseudoscience at the University of Illinois at Springfield this fall has filled up. We at REALL are pleased to hear that a class on critical thinking is so popular. We'll plan to provide you with an update on that class, and perhaps others, in a future issue.

As always, we welcome any comments, suggestions, or letters to the editor. Hope you enjoy this issue.

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REALL shall conduct research, convene meetings, publish a newsletter, and disseminate information to its members and the general public. Its primary geographic region of coverage is central Illinois.

REALL subscribes to the premise that the scientific method is the most reliable and self-correcting system for obtaining knowledge about the world and universe. REALL not not reject paranormal claims on a priori grounds, but rather is committed to objective, though critical, inquiry.

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