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## Touch-ups in authentic writing

**Abstract:** Recognized texts in the field of document examination suggest that inconspicuous touch-ups (patching) in handwriting are a common defect in forgeries. This study explores the reasons behind patching, as well as some of the specific situations in which writers patch genuine writing. In addition, the location, causes, frequency of occurrences and types of patching will be explored. This study is based on a selfreporting survey to better understand this behavior in genuine writing.

### Introduction

A survey of the classic literature in the field of document examination revealed that touch-up strokes and patching are believed to be common in simulated signature forgeries. Conway (1959 p. 23) for example, states that the forger is "his own severest critic" and that he is "rarely content" with his work "without adding a few 'improving' and 'correcting' touches." Hilton (1982, p. 20) wrote that "careful patching is a common defect in forgeries," and went on to say (p. 169) that in addition to other features, patched portions of writing are typical of disguised writing. This matter was also addressed by Albert Osborne (1946 p. 129) when he refers to careful retouching as "often very convincing evidence of fraud." Osborne also addresses' problems of weakness due to disease or age in which a genuine signature is overwritten carelessly in obvious retouching that "often indicates genuineness" (p. 365). He describes the retouching by a forger as "painstaking and delicate." Harrison, (1959, p. 404) acknowledge that careless writers do retouch their signatures but states that this retouching has "but one object ..... to improve legibility."

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He goes on further to describe genuine retouching as "bold sweeping strokes" and states that it is "easily apparent to the naked eye," while "the retouching present in a forgery is unobtrusive." Harrison summarizes his views in his statement, "As there is no reason for anyone writing a genuine signature to indulge in this careful and painstaking retouching, no matter how carelessly it has been written, the discovery of fine retouching is perhaps the most convincing proof that a suspect signature is a forgery. "

The present study was undertaken after I personally observed people make not only conspicuous, but also careful inconspicuous touch-ups of their own handwriting. Since these observations apparently conflict with the views expressed above; namely, that touch-ups and patching necessarily imply the presence of a forgery, I decided to obtain further information to determine whether touch-ups in genuine writing are more common than the classic literature suggests.

In addition to touch-up strokes and patching, I also observed that individual letters were sometimes inserted (both carefully and carelessly) into authentic writing. Only one reference was found which referred to the insertion of individual letters (Hilton, 1982, p.120). In the absence of any known research, and because of the close association between insertions and patching, insertions of individual letters were included in the study as a form of touch-up.

## Methodology

### Subjects

The subjects for this study were obtained by contacting members of organizations comprised of small business entrepreneurs, professionals, and office personnel. A few personal acquaintances were also invited to participate. To increase the size of the sample, all participants were invited to involve family and friends.

The 73 respondents (males = 35, females = 34, gender not disclosed = 4) ranged in age from 20 to 70 years. In terms of education, eight were high school graduates, 11 had some college training, 36 were college graduates and 18 had post graduate degrees which included eight doctorates.

## Procedures

Each participant was informed that the purpose of this research was to study the use of touch-up strokes and patching in handwritten material. While no specific definition was given for the terms "conspicuous" and "inconspicuous," the phrases "carelessly written" and "careful touch-ups" were used in the instructions. The participants were asked to indicate the type of documents they write (notes, lists, letters, formal writing, etc.), the frequency with which they write these documents, the location where patching would be most likely to occur (body of a letter, salutation, signature, etc.) and the perceived need to retouch the writing (to correct a spelling error or an error caused by speed or a lapse in concentration, etc.) Finally, the participants were asked to rate themselves on a 10-point scale, indicating the degree to which they considered themselves perfectionists.

## Results

In the area of self-reported perfectionism, nearly 81 % of the subjects ranked themselves between 6 and 9 on a scale of 10.

Seven subjects expressed concern about self-revelation through their writing, with five of the seven stating that this caused them to touch-up their signatures.

While 39 subjects reported making both conspicuous and inconspicuous touch-ups, 16 stated they only do inconspicuous patching, and 8 reported only conspicuous patching. Two of the 65 subjects who reported patching did not respond to this question.

From multiple responses, the reasons reported for the need to touch-up were: speed (46), spelling (29), pen or surface problems (29), carelessness (26), lapse of concentration (15), and external distractions (15).

In response to questions about their use of handwriting and the type and frequency of handwritten documents, the most reported uses were correspondence and notes or lists, followed by formal writing or contracts.

Of the sixty-five subjects who reported patching, only 59 reported the types of patching they use. Multiple responses were permitted (Table 1).

Types of Patching

Subjects	Retraced Strokes	Insertions*	Added Strokes	Total # of Corrections
Females (29)	13	25	17	55
Males (27)	10	20	12	42
Gender not reported (3)	2	3-	0	5
No information (6)	0	0	0	0
Totals (65)	25	48	29	102

\* Insertion of Letters

Table 1

## Discussion

Eighty-nine percent of the respondents reported making use of conspicuous and/or inconspicuous touch-ups in their normal course-of-business writing, with 75% reporting only inconspicuous patching. In view of these findings, it would seem that a larger proportion of the population than was previously thought may indeed engage in the touching up of authentic handwriting.

It is important to recognize the limitations of the application of these results, as the subjects were not randomly selected, the research involved self-reported behavior and the lack of sufficient pre-survey writing of the subjects made it impossible to verify the accuracy of their reports. The subjects were mostly well-educated and almost 81 % rated themselves above-average in the trait of perfectionism. Because of these considerations, it must be noted that these findings may not be applicable to other populations.

## Conclusion

This research suggests that a larger proportion of the population than was previously thought may touch up authentic writing. The percentage of respondents (89%) reporting both conspicuous and inconspicuous touch-ups in authentic writing demonstrates that this behavior may be more widespread than the literature would indicate.

In view of these findings, it would seem unwise for document examiners to place too much emphasis on the presence of touch-ups in handwriting, in particular inconspicuous patching, when assessing the authenticity of a document.

**References**

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