

HISTORY

The American Board of Forensic Document Examiners (ABFDE) was established in 1977 with a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice to provide, in the interest of the public and the advancement of science, a program to recognize qualified forensic document examiners (FDEs) in government and private laboratories.

Initially the Board was sponsored by the American Academy of Forensic Sciences (AAFS) and the American Society of Questioned Document Examiners (ASQDE). Since its inception the sponsors of the Board have grown and now include the Canadian Society of Forensic Science (CSFS), the Southeastern Association of Forensic Document Examiners (SAFDE), and the Southwestern Association of Forensic Document Examiners (SWAFDE). The ABFDE is the only certifying body that can claim such sponsorship.

In *United States v. Buck*, 1987 WL 19300 (U.S. Dist. Ct. S.D.N.Y.) the court recognized the existence of the ABFDE as a certifying body for FDEs in denying a motion that claimed handwriting comparisons were unreliable. By referring to the ABFDE, the court was satisfied that professional scientific knowledge in the subject area exists and is sufficiently reliable to be of assistance to the jury.

Job announcements for FDE positions issued by federal and state laboratories consistently include ABFDE certification or eligibility to be certified by the ABFDE as a required or desired qualification.

SCOPE

The objectives of the Board are to establish, enhance, and maintain standards of qualification for those who practice forensic document examination¹ and to certify, as qualified specialists, those voluntary applicants who comply with the requirements of the Board. Through this mandate, the Board's mission is to make available to the judicial system, and to others in the public, a practical and equitable system for readily identifying those persons professing to be specialists in forensic document examination who possess the requisite qualifications and competence. In purpose, function, and organization, the ABFDE is thus analogous to certifying boards in many other scientific fields.

The primary purposes of the Board, in the public interest, are:

- To grant and issue Certificates of Qualification in forensic document examination to voluntary applicants who conform to the standards established by the Board and who have established their currency in the profession and their fitness and competence therefor.
- To encourage the study of forensic document examination.
- To improve the practice of forensic document examination.
- To establish and enhance standards for forensic document examination.
- To advance the science of forensic document examination.
- To encourage and promote adherence to high standards of ethics, conduct, and professional practice in forensic document examination.

Minimum qualifications for ABFDE certification are:

- Earned baccalaureate degree

There is no college degree or major in forensic document examination. The majority of FDEs have undergraduate or master's degrees, however most regional and national forensic science organizations (e.g. SWGDOCⁱⁱ, AAFS-Questioned Documents sectionⁱⁱⁱ, ASQDE^{iv}, and SAFDE^v) require a baccalaureate degree as a condition of membership.

- Full-time training program at a recognized document laboratory

Like most forensic disciplines, on-the-job specialized training from experienced examiners is the only way to acquire expertise. No substitute exists for a legitimate apprenticeship training program. Forensic document examination does not lend itself to either autodidactic learning or correspondence courses. The importance of a formal written training program supervised by an experienced, qualified FDE has been recognized by the Scientific Working Group for Documents^{vi} (SWGDOC) and the American Society for Testing and Materials^{vii} (ASTM).

Completion of a formalized training program, of at least two (2) years, is not only a basic requirement of the ABFDE, but is also a minimum requirement for membership in numerous professional organizations to include: the AAFS (QD Section)^{viii}, ASQDE^{ix}, SAFDE^x, and SWAFDE^{xi}.

- Actively engaged in the practice of forensic document examination

Forensic document examination is not synonymous with graphology. Graphology or graphoanalysis attempts to predict character traits from handwriting examination. Some graphologists call themselves handwriting analysts or document examiners and are therefore confused with FDEs. In *U.S. v. Bourgeois*, 950 F. 2d 980 (5th Cir. 1992), the court rejected the testimony of a proffered handwriting examiner, in part, because the individual's training was completed through a correspondence school and its strong emphasis on graphoanalysis. It also pointed out that the witness was not certified by the ABFDE.

ASTM also differentiates forensic document examination from graphology. Standard E444-98 states, "[f]orensic document examination does not involve the employment of calligraphic or engrossing skills, nor does it involve a study of handwriting in an attempt to create a personality profile or otherwise analyze or judge the writer's personality or character."

PROCESS

In order to achieve certification through ABFDE applicants must meet all of the qualifications and requirements as follows:

- 1) General Qualifications
- 2) Educational Requirements
- 3) Professional Experience Qualifications
- 4) Examinations

General Qualifications

- Applicants must be persons of good moral character, high integrity, and good repute, and must possess high ethical and professional standing.

Educational Qualifications

- Applicants must possess at least an earned baccalaureate degree from an institution acceptable to the Board. (Transcript required.)

Professional Experience Qualifications

- Applicants are required to document a full-time training period of at least two years in duration, or the equivalent, in a forensic laboratory recognized by the Board.
- Applicants should submit as references the names and addresses of three (3) forensic document examiners recognized by the Board attesting to his/her qualifications for certification and high ethical character.
- Applicants must be actively engaged in the practice of forensic document examination at the time they apply for certification.
- Each applicant will be required to demonstrate a record of appropriate professional activity in forensic document examination.

The Credentials Committee handles applications^{12xii} for certification between the time all information has been received from the applicant and the time the applicant is approved or disapproved for testing.

Once all of the applicant's materials have been received, the Credentials Committee chairperson will forward copies of the application packet to the other two committee members for review. Additional copies of the application packet are forwarded to the President and Vice-president.

After reviewing the application packet, each committee member forwards his/her recommendation to the chairperson. Based on the positive recommendations of the Credentials Committee, the chairperson notifies the applicant that they are now a test candidate and through coordination with the Testing Committee chairperson arrangements are made for the candidate to begin the three-part testing phase of the certification program.

In those situations where the Credentials Committee does not recommend that an applicant be passed on to the Testing Committee, the chairperson contacts the President to determine the appropriate course of action. The decision of the Credentials Committee may be appealed to the

entire Board by the Candidate. An appeal override vote must be by a 2/3 majority of the Board of Directors.

Examinations

In addition to meeting the requirements as previously described, applicants are required to successfully complete comprehensive written, practical, and oral examinations based upon the broad range of problems frequently encountered in document examination.

An applicant must complete all testing phases within two (2) years after his/her application is approved.

Written test

- The written examination will be administered by a member of the Testing Committee or other member of the Board of Directors.
- The examination will be conducted at a meeting or event of a recognized organization.
- The Testing Committee Chairperson will grade the test and inform the candidate of the results no later than ten (10) days after receipt.
- For those candidates who are unsuccessful, the Testing Committee's recommendation may be appealed to the entire Board of Directors.
- Successful candidates will be sent a set of five (5) practical problems.

Practical test

These problems may include questions concerning the authorship of handwriting; the authenticity or spuriousness of a signature; the source of typewritten material; the presence or absence of alterations, additions, or deletions on documents; the comparison of inks, papers, and writing instruments; or similar questions as promulgated by the Board.

Prior to being utilized by the Testing Committee, each practical problem is submitted to three Directors for review/validation by the Test Preparation Committee chairperson. These problems are also sent to three ABFDE Diplomates (non-Directors) for review/validation. Each of the reviewers must insure that the question(s) test for knowledge, skills and abilities at the minimum competency level. Accepted problems are then forwarded to the Testing Committee.

- The candidate has forty-five (45) days upon receipt to complete all of the problems and to return the original practical examinations, reports, and notes to the Testing Committee chairperson. (For each problem, the candidate is required to submit a signed report stating the exhibits examined and findings, and all supporting notes. Three un-signed reports, notes, etc. are also required.
- Upon receipt of all practical problems, notes, and results, the Testing Comm. Chairperson forwards the anonymous reports and notes to three (3) committee members for independent review.

- The Testing Committee members' evaluations will include a review of the results and the methodology to determine whether they are logical and in accordance with accepted forensic document examination practices.
- Recommendations of pass or fail are made for each of the five (5) problems by each evaluator.
 - If a candidate doesn't satisfactorily complete a test, the Testing Committee member may recommend that the candidate rework the problem (or a similar one).
- A 2/3-majority vote by the Testing Committee is required to proceed to the oral examinations.
- For those candidates who are unsuccessful, the Testing Committee's recommendation can be appealed to the entire Board of Directors.

Oral examination

- The candidate will be informed by the Testing Committee chairperson of the three (3) practical problems (out of the original five) that the candidate will be required to present before a three (3) person Oral Board. (The Oral Board consists of three evaluators (Directors), to include if possible, the Testing Committee Chairperson and committee members.)
- The evaluators will assess the candidate in various areas to include: understanding of scientific methodology, speech and self-expression, responsiveness to questions, use of visual aids, etc.
- At the conclusion of the Oral Board Review, the Testing Committee provides its recommendation (pass/fail) to the Board of Directors.
- The Board of Directors must have a 2/3 vote in order to pass/fail the candidate.
- Once a candidate has successfully completed the testing process, they may use the designation of Diplomate and are issued a Certificate of Qualification in Forensic Document Examination.

The ABFDE does not offer different levels of certification or certificates in other areas. Certification is valid for a period of five (5) years, at which time the Diplomate must meet the requirements for recertification.

Recertification requirements

- Applicants for recertification must be actively engaged in forensic document examination, be in direct supervision of other FDEs or the training of FDEs.
- Applicants must be able to demonstrate that they have maintained currency in the profession. This is done by a system of accumulating and documenting credits in a manner described by the Board.
- A total of 50 credits during a five (5) year recertification period is required for renewal of the Certificate.
- Credits towards recertification are earned through various activities such as attendance at forensic meetings and/or workshops, paper presentations, conducting workshops or training, etc.

- In the event that a candidate has not accrued enough credits during the 5-year period, a written and practical examination is offered (40 credits).

ⁱ Forensic science is the application of various sciences to the law. The application of allied sciences and analytical techniques to questions concerning documents is termed forensic document examination. The American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) defines a forensic document examiner in E444-98 as one who “makes scientific examinations, comparisons, and analyses of documents in order to: (1) establish genuineness or nongenuineness, or to expose forgery, or to reveal alterations, additions, or deletions, (2) identify or eliminate persons as the source of handwriting, (3) identify or eliminate the source of typewriting or other impression, marks, or relative evidence, and (4) write reports or give testimony, when needed, to aid the users of the examiner’s services in understanding the examiner’s findings.”

ⁱⁱ SWGDOC-Guide for the Training of Forensic Document Examiners (Section 5.2.1)

ⁱⁱⁱ American Academy of Forensic Sciences - Membership Requirements (Questioned Documents)

^{iv} American Society of Questioned Document Examiners - By-Laws (Article II, Section II3.1a)

^v Southeastern Association of Forensic Document Examiners - By-Laws (Article V, Section V)

^{vi} SWGDOC-Guide for the Training of Forensic Document Examiners (Section 6.1)

^{vii} ASTM E444-98 -Standard Descriptions of Scope of Work Relating to Forensic Document Examiners (Section 3.4)

^{viii} American Academy of Forensic Sciences - Membership Requirements (Questioned Documents)

^{ix} American Society of Questioned Document Examiners - By-Laws (Article 11, Section 11.3.1b)

^x Southeastern Association of Forensic Document Examiners - By-Laws (Article V, Section 2)

^{xi} Southwestern Association of Forensic Document Examiners - Directives (Article II,II-Section 2)

^{xii} ABFDE - Application for Certification in Document Examination