

Signature event

Handwriting analysis provides glimpse into the person behind the pen

By Justin Skinner

As it turns out, I'm not in touch with the yin - or feminine - side of my personality, preferring to keep an emotional distance from others while protecting my own self-imposed boundaries.

While I already knew this was an issue, the point was driven home when I was told as much by clinician Annette Poizner. While her conclusion seemed accurate, I was largely taken aback by Poizner's means of determining in-depth personality traits. Far from a typical therapist, she's a graphologist, or handwriting analyst.

Though graphology is taken seriously in many cultures and countries, it still has an air of mysticism in our culture and is often dismissed as mere hocus-pocus. Admittedly, when I submitted my handwriting samples to Poizner, I did so with some skepticism. After all, how much can one learn from a few paragraphs and a couple of signatures?

As it turns out, one can learn a lot. Graphology relies on projective assessment, which takes in a number of elements, including not only handwriting style, but the content of what you write - in my case a description of one full day in detail, three signatures, two drawings of trees and 10 brief synopses of early memories.

"The premise is that people fundamentally express themselves through patterns and rhythms, which comes out in handwriting," Poizner said. "Every behavior betrays something expressive about a person."

The science is precise, with every little element of one's handwriting revealing a facet of one's personality. For instance, a person who retraces the vertical line in lowercase letter t's and d's (as I do) is intent on covering their tracks precisely. Someone with an illegible signature (as mine is) is equally keen on keeping a wall up, deciding whom he or she will and will not allow to know their personality.

"There's a certain private discretion there, determining who gets to know your first name," Poizner said, referring to my chicken-scratch scribble of a signature.

The analysis even includes the parts of the page where a subject does not write - blank space can be as telling as the writing itself.

"The left side of the page is me, the 'self' part, which implies being connected to yourself emotionally and comfortable with yourself," Poizner said. "The right side represents the future, ambition, where you want to go."

Poizner related a story of a client she had who had been in a serious car accident and had become afraid to venture out in public due to the trauma she had endured. That personality trait was evident in the woman's writing, as her words clung tightly to the left side of the page and never ventured too far toward the right margin.

"It showed an avoidance of forward movement," Poizner said. "You can tell a lot about a person just from the way they place words on a page."

And how they space them out, for that matter. By leaving larger-than-usual spaces between words, for instance, a writer demonstrates a desire to be insulated and keep an ordered space between themselves and others.

While graphology is only recently becoming accepted in the Western world, and is still met with resistance by some, there is little doubt that there's a science to it. Graphologists don't look for individual symbols and signifiers as much as trends that help triangulate a person's personality.

"In order to get a good reading on a person, you want to see the same things show up in the memory exercises, the handwriting, the tree drawing and a content analysis of the person's day in detail," Poizner said. "You want to see a oneness everywhere. If one thing doesn't agree with another, you're missing the point. In psychological testing, you always want to look at different tests and see the same themes coming out in several places."

While most people's distinct handwriting reveals nuances about their personality, graphology can also detect severe mental problems.

"The distortion (in the writing) can get pretty loud," Poizner said. "Of course, there are some serious cases where anyone could look at the handwriting and say 'There's something wrong there', but this can really help find a number of problems. Sometimes, it's like being a mechanic. I open the hood, look around and say 'Here you go.'"

Once she has an accurate understanding of the client, she said, work on the healing process can begin.

"It's useful because when you see someone regularly, you can get a good grip on what's bothering them and they're not just wandering in the desert looking for solutions," she said. "Every session, you get them to reveal more memories and you can monitor how the rewiring is taking."

Poizner, who has a master's degree in social work from Columbia University and recently completed a doctorate in education in counseling psychology from the University of Toronto, not only works as a clinician in private practice, but often gives presentations advocating the use of graphology as a reliable personality assessment tool.

"There are still people out there who think it's not real, or that you can't get a good read on people through it," she said. "But once you master it, you start to see issues that are almost archetypal. We all have certain attributes and gifts and we all have weaknesses, which are always the underside of our strengths."

Poizner will be offering a presentation about the psychology of handwriting on Thursday, October 14 at Israel's Judaica Centre at 878 Eglinton Avenue West. The seminar begins at 8 P.M. and costs \$10. For details, call 416-280-6442.