

Graphology with Sylvia Kessler

Ologies Podcast

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Oh hey it's your old PodDad Ward, just me, hangin' out in a breezy summer tunic and linen culottes, Alie Ward, back with another episode of *Ologies*.

Are you ready for a weird one? Kind of a random one? Kind of a dark one. If you're all about bank robberies and/or calligraphy and/or *Murder, She Wrote*, why, the writing's on the bathroom wall, you've landed on the correct episode my friends. But before we get deep into it, let's first thank some folks.

Thank you to the patrons at Patreon.com who make the show possible. Thank you to everyone buying merch at OlogiesMerch.com. Thank you to the folks who subscribe, and rate, and especially review, which I read gingerly. Each week I pluck a fresh one. But your reviews keep it up in the charts. So thank you to this week AnnaBanana, who says,

My first blood meal was acarology. But unlike ticks, I needed more. Lots and lots more. Never did I think I would stay sitting in my car for an extra 30 minutes to finish a podcast about hagfish, but here I am. Thank you DadWard VonPodcast.

The pleasure, AnnaBanana, it's all mine.

Okay, graphology. Let's just roll our sleeves up, let's sharpen our pencils, let's get into it. So in Greek, *graphos* means 'to write' so it's the study of writing. Should be simple, right? Nehhhhhh, don't know, eh, not so much. Okay so graphology is the study of personality through the analysis of handwriting traits.

So, can you tell if someone is organized, or anxious, or ambitious, or critical, through the way they write their Fs and Ts and Is and such? This was a field pioneered by a Frenchman Jean-Hippolyte Michon in the mid-1800s and before you say, "Wait a second, analyze a personality via handwriting? Isn't that flimflam?" It's been called pseudoscience, which is why this episode doesn't focus much on it. Instead, we're talking all about actual forensic handwriting analysis, and signature forgeries, and wills, and fraud, and court cases.

So that field is technically called graphanalysis, and this guest is an expert in that, as well as does graphology on the side. So yeah, this episode title is called Graphology and this expert does do graphology, but really there's not a lot of graphology in this episode. We stick to mostly the scientific penmanship analysis and expert witness stories.

So I was in Nebraska, I was on a tour through the Midwest talking to different ologists, and this was a stop in Lincoln, Nebraska. I think it was Lincoln, it was that or Omaha. Nebraska, I'm so sorry. I had looked on a site for expert legal witnesses in the area, and I'd come across her name as a graphologist before I really understood the distinction. Anyway, we met in a conference room in the back of a Kinko's, which I don't even think they call Kinko's anymore, but whatever. She came in, she was smartly dressed, with curled blonde hair carrying a folder of paperwork in case we needed visual references. She's kind of like the aunt that makes family barbecues a little more lively and gives you dating advice that you remember for years. A real hoot.

She completed a four-year comprehensive handwriting profiling and forgery detection training program. She developed and taught quote, "red flags of forgery" classes, and teaches handwriting analysis through the Metropolitan Community College in Nebraska. She's so passionate about

handwriting. So, if you like sitting around and gabbing about weird court cases and upstrokes and downstrokes, this is your lady.

So, cross your Is, dot your Ts, let's hear about why your handwriting is unique, how to protect your signature, which letters of note and ransom notes in history may have been fakes, and how you can chill out by writing stuff with graphanalyst, court witness, forensic handwriting expert, and also on the side graphologist but we don't talk about that much, Sylvia Kessler.

Sylvia Kessler: About right there?

Alie Ward: Yeah that's great.

Sylvia: Okay.

Alie: They're on, and they're ready to go. Now, Sylvia, you are a graphologist?

Sylvia: Yes.

Alie: Yes! How long have you been a handwriting expert?

Sylvia: Oh since 1980, that's when I opened my business.

Alie: Wow! How did you get into it?

Sylvia: I met a lady that was a retiring chiropractor, and she was my teacher, and I was just fascinated. I was just fascinated right from the very beginning with it and so she said, "Well if you're going to study this, you also need to study forensic document examination." And so I was with her for four years training. It's quite in-depth and I still absolutely love it today, that's how come I still haven't retired.

Alie: [*laughs*] You're like, "I don't want to give it up, I like it too much!"

Sylvia: Well, it's exciting. It's exciting, and it's different every day, even though we're still talking about handwriting, and documents, and now technology, and things like that. It's a very exciting business.

Alie: Did you have impeccable penmanship as a child?

Sylvia: Yes.

Alie: You did?

Sylvia: I did. [*both laugh*]

Alie: Do you remember when you'd have to do the cursives? Did you always like doing it?

Sylvia: I learned to write in a one-room schoolhouse in Pennsylvania; Taylortown, Pennsylvania. We had grades one through six and we had to use the quill pen with inkwells.

Aside: So quick aside, what is this Palmer Method? Well, news to me, different styles of penmanship over the eras have different names! This hasn't just evolved organically. Back in the 1700s, that gorgeous curly-cued script was called English Round and following that, was another beautifully ornate oval-based Spencerian-style script, designed by this Victorian pen master Spencer. But some folks thought it was too girly, so they created the Palmer Method, which was simpler and less beautiful, but it was faster.

Now, the Palmer Method reigned in schoolhouses from like the 1840s to the 1950s. So if you wonder why old letters from 50 years ago look like they're all written by the same great-aunt, well maybe because everyone was all Palmered up. But of course the only constant in

life is change. And wanting snacks. And since the Palmer method, a few different types of printing and cursive have been taught in schools. So you may have learned the Zaner-Bloser method of printing, or you may have learned nothing at all.

Alie: And now, was there something about writing with quill pens that was soothing to you?

Sylvia: Well no, that was just what we had. We had pencils and quill pens. Ballpoint pens were invented in 1940. And they were invented to go through carbon papers. It was wartime and they needed those to go through those duplication of papers, so those weren't available.

Aside: Side note: let's take a trip through time to just appreciate the pen in your purse, which you probably got for free from a car wash or something. So 4,000 years ago, Egyptians made pens out of hollow bamboo reeds, and then, about 1,500 years ago, folks were like, "I have a great idea, let's sneak up on an alive goose, or maybe a turkey, let's rip a feather out of its butt, and sharpen it with, yes, a penknife, and then use that as a writing instrument!" Everyone loved this idea... except alive birds.

And then in the early 1820s, steel nibs were the next great thing. Literacy rates improved because of this advancement, and then only five years later the fountain pen was patented. "Who cares?" you say. Well guess what, having a pen on your person as opposed to carrying around a jar of ink and a smeary goose feather was huge, alright? This was a big deal.

But fountain pens still smeared, which sucked, so ballpoint pens as we know them were inspired by quick-drying newspaper ink when this newspaper writer was damn sick and darn tired of spending time refilling his fountain pens and then smearing them all over the page. So he invented the ballpoint pen. Now, ballpoint pens involve pigment suspended in oil. Or, in some cases now, a smooth, silky gel in the kind of pens that you borrow from an officemate and then quietly refuse to give back.

Sylvia: And now it's so chemically manufactured but it's mostly alcohol or gel. And so that comes into play in forensics, to see what kind of ink was there. I'm not an expert in ink but I've studied about ink.

Alie: I bet.

Sylvia: All of the things that have to do with handwriting or documents I have studied over the course of the years.

Alie: What was it like when you were learning for four years? It seems almost like an apprenticeship with a master.

Sylvia: It was an apprenticeship! What was really funny about it is my teacher said, "I don't want to take you as a student." I had to beg her to take me as a student because she was just retiring. And I said, "I will do anything you want me to do, I will pay you whatever you want me to pay. I will not argue, I will be a good student." So she finally agreed, and I would go every other weekend to Kansas City, that's where she lived.

Aside: This, my friends... this is passion. So pour yourself a cup of tea, stare into the morning mist, and ask yourself, "What would I drive to Kansas City to learn?" And at the end of that question may hang the secret to a happier life. Anyway...

Alie: And what are some things that a handwriting expert learns? Do you learn about the idiosyncrasies of each person's handwriting?

Sylvia: Every person writes differently, and there's a Supreme Court ruling on this that goes back to the, I want to say, 1846 something like that? The Howland Will.

Aside: The wishes of the late Sylvia Ann Howland – whose fortune today, btw, would equivalent to \$32 million – she left half of that to charities, various entities, and the remaining half to her niece, a woman named Henrietta Howland Robinson.

So upon Sylvia's death, Henrietta produced an earlier will that said everything was to go to Henrietta with an attached note that said, "Nah, any future will should just be ignored." Which is a weird thing to have attached to your Will. But anyway, Henrietta produced it, saying, "Give me everything."

So, based on the number of overlapping downstrokes in the late Sylvia's signature, an expert handwriting witness concluded that it was statistically near impossible to do an identical signature, and so this must be a tracing, a forgery!

Sylvia: This was a fascinating story: A grandson took his grandfather's letters. Kept his grandfather's letters, maybe for sentimental reasons, I don't know about that, but in the long run he made out a will, cut and pasted a will – and that's called holographic will when it's handwritten – leaving everything to him and ruling out the rest of the family. And then he got an agreement with a printer that had some paper that was age appropriate. They printed up this will. And they actually... he actually got everything. However, the way the story goes is the printer got greedy and wanted more money and when the grandson wouldn't give it to him, then he ratted him out. So I think they both went to jail.

Alie: Oh my god!

Sylvia: But I don't know how it ended. That was the ruling that no two people can ever write the same, and mathematicians were brought in and somehow, they proved this. Families may have similar writing because sometimes the parents will be teaching the children. However, it's just 'no two people write alike'. If you have enough handwriting you will see the differences.

Alie: How has handwriting changed over the decades?

Sylvia: How has it changed in our society?

Alie: Yeah. Because if you look at a document from the 1800s, it's gorgeous! And if you look at a note that someone leaves, you know, for the mailman, it's garbage. So what happened to our beautiful handwriting?

Sylvia: Well, people quit practicing. They quit learning cursive writing, over the years. One of the things that was a big influence on why they quit teaching cursive writing was computers. [*robot voice: "I was invented to ruin your handwriting."*] Because everybody types now, and texts now, and people aren't writing as much as they used to. If you get a handwritten card in the mail you treasure it because you get to see it. I have collections of handwriting over all these years, and it's just fascinating. Sometimes I'll look at it and go, "Oh wow, I've got to keep this. This is really important."

Alie: Yeah. Is there someone in the world or in history whose handwriting you think is the most beautiful? Any documents you've seen that you're just like, "Wowzers."?

Sylvia: Well the Declaration of Independence, not only the content of it, but the beauty of it. And every now and then I will run into someone that still writes like that, with all the flourishes. They practice that for years.

Aside: So if you don't like practicing or mastering stuff because, you know, there are things on the internet to look at and naps to take, I get it. You can always use this Declaration of

Independence font! It's available via P22.com and it's called, what else, Declaration. And as long as you can print it on a thin sheet of aged cow tissue, no one will ever know it's fake!

Also, the original penman of that Declaration of Independence document was Timothy Matlack who was a Quaker and a professional engrosser who lived to the ripe old age of 99! So if you're scared of dying young, and are convinced that good handwriting will help, you could practice the artful penmanship of calligraphy, or you could start kiddos young and then have them compete for money.

There's one competition called the Zaner-Bloser National Handwriting Contest and it offers 500 bucks in prizes for the neatest penmanship. And this year, a ten-year-old Sara Hinesley earned the Nicholas Maxim award in the national handwriting contest. One detail: she was born without hands! She learned to hold a pencil and write impeccably anyway! And she told reporters, she's not sure what she's gonna do with the cash, but she said quote, "I felt proud and I hope others who have challenges learn from me that if you try your hardest, you can do it." So. That thing you wanna do, but you're afraid you can't do? Learn from Sara Hinesley and try hard and then just do the thing.

Sylvia: Nowadays it's a simplified writing that we do. But computers were the biggest influence for the printed word. And printing is just fine, except I can't evaluate... there's very few extensions, but not in all printing. If it's block printing, those people are usually very constructive and you get that with engineers, architects. They will naturally write that way. Because it feels best to them.

So, handwriting is a kinesthetic activity, so when you're learning these exercises, they were taught with number 2 lead pencils, and you feel that motion. And I've actually gone to a hospital before where someone had had a head trauma, and their motor skills were involved, and I've done the circular motions to help build back coordination.

Alie: Has anyone ever come to you, just... maybe not trauma related, but just said, "Listen, Sylvia, my handwriting sucks, what can you do to help me? I'm an adult, can you help me with my handwriting? It's not good."

Sylvia: Well what's interesting is, most people will tell me, "My handwriting is terrible," or "I have two different kinds of handwriting," and it's not. It's seldom. I've only seen one or two people in my whole career who had two separate, different handwritings.

Aside: So let's address the elegant elephant in the room, graphology proper. Mmmm, okay, this again, not considered hard science. So graphology hangs out kind of in the same lunch table as astrology, or numerology, or chiology, which is the technical term for palm-reading, no joke. Should I do an episode on that? Maybe I will. Anyway. This show is *Ologies*, and Sylvia is a legit forensic handwriting witness by day and a graphologist on the side. So let's just ask her opinion on that ology.

Alie: What do you think handwriting says about a person's personality?

Sylvia: A lot.

Alie: Yeah? How so?

Sylvia: Now, let me qualify this; not everybody that says they're a handwriting expert is a handwriting expert. They'll read a book and say, "Oh I can go make 20 bucks on this or something at the mall, or at the carnival, or whatever." In fact, when I've been on... I'm an expert witness about documents and signatures on documents, and I have to prove that to the benefit of the judge or jury. I've been asked when I was getting qualified in the

beginning, "Well is this like what they do over at the state fair?" Well no, it isn't. It isn't. I said, "I don't know what they do at the state fair because I've never been hired to go over there." [laughs]

Anyway, to get back to your question, cursive writing and penmanship is now coming back into the school systems in some states. The last I heard there were like 12 or 13 states that have put that back into their educational system because it does build discipline. It builds self-determination, it builds all the characters that you can find. Now, when I get a court case, my reputation in that area, that field, that arena, that is really heavy duty.

Alie: And now, tell me a little bit about the forensic side of it. What kind of cases do you get called in for?

Sylvia: Oh you, you know what, I get unfortunate... There's a lot of probate cases, which means when somebody dies. There's wills that are questioned, there's wills that show up that counter other wills, there's forged deeds of trust. There's a lot, and it splits families.

Alie: I bet.

Sylvia: I will say to them, "Let's sit down at the table and discuss this." I'll tell the attorney, "Get the other attorney, because this is going to cause a divide in this family that will never be healed unless we do it now." Some attorneys will look at me like I'm a bleeding heart, others will say, "You know, that's a good idea. Maybe we can get it settled." So when I come back with the true answers, they will usually come to some kind of agreement, and they don't always forgive one another unfortunately. [*"Sorry, I didn't mean to do it!"*]

Alie: Does one person say, "Well, I have a will and it's the latest will," and someone else says, "Well, I have a will from 1975 but he was in a better state of mind here."?

Sylvia: Yeah, if you have medical records to back that up. It's called capacity; if the person had capacity at the time they were signing it. And if they do not have capacity, whoever's there with them at the moment can influence them quite easily.

Aside: So what else does Sylvia's job entail?

Sylvia: That's just one part of it. I work with stock certificates. Right now I have six cases. One's with a Fortune 500 company on fraudulent invoices, one of them is with an artist where agreements were broken and he thinks that they've forged his name on something. It's just really interesting the different cases; wills, contracts. I've done athletic contracts that were forged.

Alie: Really?

Sylvia: Yes.

Alie: And how do you see when something is forged? Where do you even start?

Sylvia: Well, you start by getting known signatures of the person whose signature it's supposed to be. And then you do the habitual patterns. People cannot help it, they have patterns. You write your name more than anything else in your whole life.

Alie: That's true.

Sylvia: And so, there'll be patterns, habitual characteristics in your signature that you don't even see. You don't see it, because it's unconscious. That's the first thing.

Aside: She recalled another case that went down in Carlsbad, New Mexico.

Sylvia: I had the man's writing from over 60 years. He was in his 80s. Even though the writing changed as he got older, you could see how it came out of being a young man, and got more serious and more efficient in what he was doing, and came into his own. And then you could see where his health started to decline over those 60 years but the same habitual patterns were there.

Alie: And so was it a forgery?

Sylvia: And so in that case it was a forgery, yes.

Alie: What's it like when the verdict comes?

Sylvia: Well, they settled! I'm there in the courtroom after this long journey and they settled!

Alie: [*scandalized gasp*] Oooh!

Sylvia: When the opposing attorney looked at the report and looked at my illustrations, the next thing you know, they're back talking to the judge and it was all settled. [*gavel pounding*]

Alie: Oh my gosh. And now, what other kinds of things come up when you're doing forensic handwriting analysis? Is there the type of papers or the type of ink? Or is it the hardness?

Sylvia: Sure, those are all things, but now our technology is about electronically lifted signatures, that have been manufactured from other documents. It's amazing how much of our signatures are out there.

Alie: I bet. And now, when it comes to electronic documents, how do you feel about things like DocuSign where it's just essentially you sign a PDF?

Sylvia: [*a can of worms is opening*] Ohhhhhh!

Alie: I know! I'm worried about that!

Sylvia: We just bought a house, and we got some final paperwork in the mail, but it doesn't have any of our original signatures on it.

Alie: Yeah, it's all electronic. I just had to do a bunch of DocuSign things too, and I'm like, "This isn't even my handwriting, and all I'm doing is clicking a button!" How is that legit?

Sylvia: They can check your, where it's coming from.

Alie: Your IP.

Sylvia: Your computer, and stuff like that, your IP address.

Alie: Okay, alright. And now what about signing the back of your credit card? Should you do that or should you not?

Sylvia: Well, if you don't it's not going to be accepted. But what I do is, I say, "Ask for ID."

Alie: Okay. See, that's a good tip from someone who is a professional forensic graphologist.

Sylvia: If we're in a restaurant and waiter or waitress, whoever, takes our credit card and comes back and they don't ask for it, I say, "Turn over that card and look at it" [*"I need to see some ID."*]

Alie: And have there been any huge forgery cases in history that have really captured your attention?

Sylvia: Uh, no.

Alie: No?

Sylvia: I'll tell you why. I've studied some of those and I can't even remember their names. I think probably one of the most famous ones is the Howard Hughes diaries. They were all forged.

Alie: [*gasps*] Ooohh!

Aside: Side note, if you're like "Whaaaaat?" Howard Hughes, business magnate, film director, pilot, wealthy person, became a recluse. And in the 1970s a few scoundrels devised a scheme to have artists mimic his handwriting. And they got this lucrative book deal, so many dollars, based on this autobiography which was totally fake. And they were found out, and the main perp, a guy called Clifford Irving, went to prison for like a year and a half. But during that time, he gave up smoking and he took up weightlifting, so maybe it was like a bit of a glow up for him.

Then he wrote a book about it and he made gobs of money. He was married six times. They made a movie called *The Hoax* starring Richard Gere! So yay! [*sarcastic*] Crime *does* pay! And after this whole scandal in the 1970s, Hughes died just a few years later, likely still very annoyed.

Now, any other cases that Sylvia's been really taken by?

Sylvia: I'll tell you something though, that fascinated me. I saw some of Marilyn Monroe's handwriting in one of Oprah's magazines years ago. And then I saw a letter that was sold at Sotheby's for some big amount that was not the same handwriting.

Alie: Wow.

Sylvia: And I go "Whoa, I should really take the time to look into that." But nobody's asked me about that. But I noticed it when I saw it.

Aside: So a little googling turned up two different sad letters supposedly in Marylin's handwriting. One to her acting teacher Lee Strasberg on Hotel Bel-Air stationary, which was written in loopy cursive, kind of slanted forward as if leaning into a wind. It read:

My will is weak, but I can't stand anything. I sound crazy but I think I am going crazy. It's just that I get before a camera and my concentration and everything I'm trying to learn leaves me, and I feel like I'm not existing in the human race at all.

So this cursive note looks nothing like another one written to her psychiatrist, which was in print, saying:

I guess I've always been deeply terrified to really be someone's wife. Since I know from life that one cannot love another, really.

Sylvia says she'd love to sit down and compare them. Now, she didn't leave a note before her overdose of barbiturates at the age of 36, and it was ruled a probable suicide by coroners. Sylvia notes that a slim percentage, less than 30% by my research, do leave notes in such a tragic occurrence.

And as your pod Dad, just a reminder that folks are here to listen and the National Suicide Prevention Hotline is there 24 hours a day. 1-800-273-8255, I'll add it in the show notes.

Now another famed note left by Nirvana singer Kurt Cobain has been the subject of widespread conspiracy theories. The last few lines raised a bunch of eyebrows for decades. But *Dateline* at one point passed it off to four handwriting experts who concluded that it was either in Kurt's own penmanship or it was inconclusive.

Sylvia: I've had several cases that I knew were murder, we just couldn't get the attorneys to move forward with that, or we couldn't get it investigated properly.

Alie: Oh my gosh.

Sylvia: And it's heartbreaking. It really is heartbreaking.

Alie: And it's interesting that something like handwriting can come in to speak for the person who's gone, you know?

Sylvia: Oh absolutely. Absolutely. I consider that part of what I do. I have to take a stand for the handwriting. The truth is always in the handwriting, in the papers. So you get enough of those papers, and enough of the handwriting, and you can figure it out; anonymous writing, hate mail.

Alie: If we're texting and typing more than were writing, are we leaving behind...

Sylvia: Evidence of your language patterns, yes you are.

Alie: Oh really? So our language patterns are something that maybe could be looked at?

Sylvia: Language patterns are something that I have looked at before. Another case I had was about... the known handwriting had never been more than maybe six or seven lines of a paragraph on a page. And then here's this big long letter, it's indented... it's typed, but it's indented and the language patterns are completely different than what the person used. That was on a harassment suit that got solved real quickly.

Aside: Well, here's a fun little confidence booster to remind you about intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation:

Sylvia: You get your image out of work. You get your image out of production. Whether it's work in school, or work for, it's not about the pay, it's about the accomplishment. That's where people get their confidence. It's not something that just comes out of the sky and blesses you. You get it from becoming competent by doing things and that builds the confidence.

So sometimes people will say to me, "I want to have more confidence." And I said, "So what kind of person would it make you if you had a lot of confidence and you didn't listen to feedback?" Which, we have a lot of those today, don't we?

Alie: Yes, we do. *[laughs]* And now what do you think about the daily habit of journaling or doing morning pages of just connecting pen or pencil to paper? What do you think that does?

Sylvia: I think it's wonderful. It's wonderful not only as therapy, it's wonderful to focus. It's wonderful to have that time for yourself to really get your thoughts down on paper. And when you go back and read that years later you go, "Oh my goodness, that is so interesting." Because you can see it... I can see it in my handwriting over the years how it's changed.

Alie: Yeah. Any movies about forgeries or handwriting that you like?

Sylvia: Movies, I don't know. There's been a lot of movies... and *CSI*. You know, the thing about going to trial now is that the jury expects all of it to be like *CSI*. *[clip from National Treasure: "I'm gonna steal the Declaration of Independence.]"* And it's not always like *CSI*. Sometimes they'll say things and I'll go, "That is not true! How can you say that?? Who wrote this script??" *[Alie laughs]*

I've had several people that are writing books that've contacted me with different handwriting questions. I've given them information about what they could do, or where they should look, or that sort of thing. One time I had a case and the attorney told me he

couldn't get any handwriting. I said, "Well, then you're going to lose this case." And I said, "I can tell you from what I have, this man has been a real scrapper. This is a small town, go down to the police station and ask them if he's ever been arrested, that's public information, you're an attorney, get out of your office, and go down there, and get me some handwriting!" [Alie: "Go on, git!"] Well, sure enough, he had been arrested three times for assault in bars. And here it is, just exactly what I needed to prove that that was his signature. It was really an interesting case.

Alie: What was he guilty of?

Sylvia: Conspiracy to defraud a bank.

Alie: Wow. Oh my gosh. [*female voice: "Is he single?"*] And now, I have questions from listeners, can I ask them?

Sylvia: Oh sure! Sure oh!

Alie: Yeah!

Aside: Okay patrons, before we get to your numerous, excellent questions, a few words from sponsors that I like. These sponsors make it possible to donate to a related charity, and this week it goes to CARE.org's Letters of Hope Initiative, which encourages folks to send letters of support to refugees who have fled unimaginable violence and persecution in search of safety and a more promising future for their children.

So, Letters of Hope started in 2016, when Care Package recipients in the United States, who were themselves refugees following World War II, wrote letters of support to Syrian children. And that outreach has inspired thousands of people around the world to send their own heartfelt messages. CARE.org says, "Share your own letter of hope today and join in the movement to stand in solidarity with refugees everywhere." So a donation was made to them. These sponsors made that donation possible.

[*Ad Break*]

Okay, your questions.

Alie: There were 193 questions, so I'm not gonna ask you all of them.

Sylvia: No.

Alie: We'll run through, just rapid fire. We'll get as many lightning round as we can.

Sylvia: Okay sure.

Aside: This next question was also asked by Ariel [phonetic], Emma B. [ph.], and Ira Gray.

Alie: Lisa Elizabeth wants to know: How accurate is forensic handwriting analysis and is it a reliable source of evidence?

Sylvia: It is, if you have someone that's well trained and well qualified. You have to prove your case. You can't just write a report, you know... that happens a lot, where they write a report, "It's my opinion." Well, that and two bucks, we can go get a cup of coffee.

Alie: [*laughs*] Jessica Nidositko wants to know: Is it true that people with sloppier handwriting tend to have a higher IQ?

Sylvia: Not necessarily.

Alie: Okay!

Aside: So there you have it. This has been a known fact for decades. In one 1984 study published in *Human Learning: Journal of Practical Research and Applications* states:

[*Alie voice distorted to robotic*]

It is concluded that the lack of a significant correlation between handwriting legibility and IQ scores clearly disconfirms the popular stereotype of illegible writers as unintelligent.

Boom. So, Lacy Gilbert, Lisa Burbidge, Kadie Spino, Danielle Rivera, and Deli Dames, who also asked about that and maybe have terrible penmanship but smart minds, breathe easy letter slobs. You're all good.

Now the following folks all had a similar question to Jenne Bergstrom's: Caitlyn Carter, Jessica Beard, Rachel Casha, Madalyn Rogers, AYYY_Rene, and Rosario Neyra.

Alie: Jenne Bergstrom asks: Does handwriting change over time because your personality or interest or maturity changes?

Sylvia: All of it changes. Physical, emotional, spiritual, all of it changes.

Alie: Oh! What about when people dot their Is with hearts? What do you think about that?

Sylvia: There's something about them... That's called an idiosyncrasy. And that means there's something about them that's really different and they're kind of into the love... you know, sweetness and love and all of that. [*"I'm a romantic like that."*]

Alie: Michelle Grondine wants to know: What's the most commonly forged piece of writing?

Sylvia: Ohhh, I would have to say... Let's see, most commonly forged piece of writing. That's a very good question. I would say probably wills; checks would probably be the one.

Alie: Is it better to write a check in Sharpie so that no one can...?

Sylvia: You can actually buy pens now that they cannot bleach out the writing. I want to encourage everybody to get a locked mailbox or make sure that their mail is secure, because one of the common easy accesses, is to go along a line of mailboxes that are just regular mailboxes, pull them down, go through the mail. If there's a check going out, they take those. If there's birthday cards, or cards that look like they might have money in them, they take those, open them up, take the checks, bleach them, and honestly they will still pass those checks.

Alie: Ooooh!

Aside: For more on how bleach does that, just hit that old Disinfectiology episode from a few weeks ago! [*facetiously*] Bleach: not just for toilets and pools, it's also great for mail fraud! Just kidding don't do that.

Alie: So get a locked mailbox.

Sylvia: Get a locked mailbox, and you can get the pens at any of the stationary stores that's for forgery. I've actually had people call me up and ask me if I could come and forge a document that they needed somebody's name on a document and could I come right away?

Alie: [*gasps*] What'd you say?

Sylvia: I said sure, "Where do you want me to come?" I got the address and then I called the police and I told them that they were expecting me! [*laughs*]

Alie: [*laughs*] Nice! You're like, "Wrong person to ask!"

Sylvia: Wrong! Well I just went along with it. I said, “Oh wow, this is interesting. What kind of document is it?” And I told them, you know... Scam, scam, scam.

Alie: Busting crimes!

Aside: Speaking of crimes, Stephanie Broertjes and Derrick Allen also had a similar question to Sophie’s coming up.

Alie: Sophie Blackhall wants to know: What’s your favorite crime that was solved with the help of handwriting experts? Anything historical?

Sylvia: Historically, I think probably the Hughes diaries is one.

Alie: Sonya Karp had a cool question: Is handwriting gender-related at all, even though gender is fluid and gender-schmender, but why do boys typically tend to have less neat handwriting than girls?

Sylvia: That is a broad generalization, because I have in my files handwriting of men that has all the flourishes, even more flourishes and flair than you have in your writing.

Alie: Wow!

Aside: Sylvia had taken a peek at my little binder earlier and decided, based on my flair, that I am inquisitive with perfectionist tendencies, but that I am not moody. And I did not have the heart, or the balls, to tell her that I am moody as hell and I can get bummed out for hours just after seeing a dead bee.

Sylvia: There’s three things that you cannot tell from handwriting. Everything else is open. So the three things are: whether it’s a male or female, whether it’s right or left-handed, or how old they are. You cannot tell exact age. Those three things. Everything else, if you have enough handwriting and you’re trained well enough, you can figure out a complete profile on the person.

Alie: Even though lefties do a little smearing?

Sylvia: They... No. That is a misconception that’s across the board. Another misconception is, like, if you’re going to forge something you better make it different because you cannot write your name the same way twice in your entire lifetime.

Alie: Oh, so you can have similar patterns but not --

Sylvia: There’s habitual patterns and variation and so... This is why it takes so long to study this. This is not just something that you pick up a book and read it. You can get gather a lot of information that way.

Alie: Tyler Q wants to know: When was the first case of a ransom letter being written with newspaper clippings, and is that to fool people so that they can’t be traced?

Sylvia: I don’t know, he’d have to google that. That’s why we have google is because we don't know. I don’t know about the ransom notes.

Alie: Okay, I’ll look that up.

Aside: This, as it turns out, is an excellent question because it pulled back the curtain to a reveal, a big flashing neon sign, that read in curly script: *Flim Flam*. So apparently, people don’t even ransom note like that. According to design historian Dr. Arden Stern in her thesis “The Ransom Note Effect: Cut-and-Paste Typography in American Visual Culture,” the

imagery of a note penned by a criminal with cut-and-paste letters originated from the Sherlock Holmes crime novel *The Hound of The Baskervilles* from the early 1900s.

But before you go doing evil with the written word, be warned that your printer might be secretly encoding its own signature via tiny yellow microdots that show up under blue light. And it's on *everything* you print! Oops! So don't go crimin'.

Also, y'all know I'm not a big true crime lover, please see: "gets sad about a dead bee," but many of you brought up a certain famous handwritten ransom note involved in the 1996 death of a small child. And there's plenty of media spotlight on this case already, so I'm sure I don't have to name it, but before today, I didn't even know that there was a ransom note involved. But an overwhelming percentage of forensic handwriting analysts agree that the ransom note is in the mom's handwriting. And either way, that life was still lost.

Now what about lifesavers out there? This next question was also asked by Nicki D., Abigail Mannelin, Kate Chapman, and Michael Satumbaga.

Alie: Sarah Terry and a lot of other people asked: Is the old stereotype true that all doctors have sloppy handwriting? Where did that even come from in the first place?

Sylvia: Oh my goodness. Every doctor that I've ever seen has it. I can't say that they *all* have it. I think where it comes from though is speed and acceleration. When a doctor goes through their residency, it's completely insane what they put doctors through. I have several friends that have told me horror stories about working, you know, all those long hours, and doing double shifts, and they're grinding all the time. It's very stressful, and when you get stressed you tend to make more of the mountain peaks. You imagine that?

Alie: Yes!

Sylvia: And Donald Trump's handwriting is a really good example of that. He shows his signature all the time and it's just pure mountain peaks. Donald's, his stubbornness shows up because they're like teepees.

Aside: Okay so side note, I google image searched the president's signature and it did not... it didn't remind me of anything related to Indigenous people's culture. It's more like a few people standing at the forefront of a big crowd... but they're all wearing hats... but like pointy ones.

Anyhoozle. A bunch of people had this next question including: Laura Schulte, Laurence, Ashra Kolhatkar, Robin Kuehn, and Sharla Rodrigue.

Alie: Taaren Haak asks: There's such a rise in mobile devices that they seem to sign their name more with their finger than an actual pen these days, and they don't think it looks anything like the real signature. So does the method of finger-signing capture really hold up? Like what do you think?

Sylvia: I've done a couple drug cases where... They were serious drug cases on narcotics where people were selling prescriptions and the signatures that they gave me, it was amazing that you could see the patterns in there. It wasn't perfect.

Alie: Wow!

Sylvia: But you could see the handwriting. The habitual patterns that I mentioned, you could see those on the ones that this one person had.

Alie: Really?

Sylvia: Yes.

Alie: So even on a finger-swipey.

Sylvia: And it was on where you just write out your name with your finger.

Alie: Timothy Dykes asks: What is the best way to train your handwriting both in print and in cursive?

Sylvia: Go online and get a penmanship printout, and on the cursive writing, make sure that you have your upper loops, your lower loops, and your middle zone loops.

Aside: Ooh, how many other people asked about different handwritings? So many of you! Including Jenne Bergstrom, Caitlyn Carter, Jessica Beard, Rachel Casha, Madalyn Rogers, AYYY_Rene, Rosario Neyra, Sonya Karp, Graham Tattersall, Rachel Walwood, Troy Clarkson, Caleb Patton, Dawn Ewald, Emily Hoban, Kelly Breidenthal, Cody Albert, Wayne Brantley, Emma Fiori, Jen Athanas and...

Alie: Casey Arden had a great question: Why the heck do I have 87 different handwritings? Sometimes it's so neat it looks like a typeface, sometimes it's illegible, sometimes I have curly letters, sometimes not, what is up with this? Jen Athanas says: Yes, what she said.

Sylvia: Well that depends. You know, that's something I would have to look at. But generally speaking, people will tell me they have different handwritings and all it means is sometimes it's sloppy and sometimes it's neater; sometimes it's bigger. If we are real scattered, if our energy's real scattered and we have too many balls in the air, so to speak, then our handwriting will be large and sloppy, generally speaking.

Now, one way that you can calm yourself is to write a sentence and then just keep making it smaller and smaller and smaller and you will actually feel... internally you will feel a sense of focus. It's like meditation. It will bring you into focus very quickly, just as long as it takes you, you know, like a few minutes just to write three or four sentences and making it smaller. Your mind knows what to do with these things. It's really cool.

And if you have a child that's having a fit or tantrum, you could have them draw a line, and then draw another line a little shorter, another line a little shorter, and even if you're directing their hand, they will still calm down.

Alie: Ooh that's a great tip! I love this question from Jenn Athanas, she says: Why does it seem some kinds of pens make my handwriting nicer and some are not as good for my handwriting, and is there an ultimate pen? Like, what is the most expensive pen, what's the nicest... Do you have a preferred pen?

Sylvia: I have a preferred pen.

Alie: What is it?

Sylvia: I use a Uni-ball. And I only sign documents, important documents, with blue ink.

Alie: Okay. Ooh.

Sylvia: And I use a Uni-ball rolling writer and I never use ballpoint pens. Ballpoint pens will seep into the fibers of a paper in a few years. I discovered that when I was going through some original checks that had been written in ballpoint pen.

Aside: Are ballpoint pens bad for writing checks? What the fuck? So, I looked into this and apparently most ballpoint pens are dye-based and they're easy to wash using a solvent of matching polarity, like nail polish remover. But Uni-ball and other gel pens are pigment

based, and you can't remove pigments without destroying the paper also! So, text you crush, cut bangs, get yourself a nice gel pen, live for today!

Alie: What about point size? Are you a .5? Are you a fine?

Sylvia: I like five to seven.

Alie: Now, what do you think, I hold my pencil on my third finger. I think we're supposed to hold it like this. Is there a best way to hold your pens?

Sylvia: It's however is most comfortable for you.

Alie: Yeah, I think I, yeah... I do it on the third.

Sylvia: And to answer her question, each person will have a preference for what kind of pen and paper. I love papers. I have more paper at my house than you can imagine. And I love pens and pencils. And I don't like those erasers on there that blur. I like the white gummy erasers that get it cleanly swept off.

Aside: So many maybe lefties had the same question, including: Jack Kelleher, Kitti Halverson, Xuan Wei, Arielle Brousse, Katie Chavez, Wayne Brantley, Dawn Ewald, Michelle Grondine, Sophie Cousineau, Nathan Ahlgrim, Jessica Shunk, and AYYY_Rene.

Alie: A lot of people had this question. Hannah Raddatz asks: Why is the right hand considered to be the proper hand for writing? Does it have a practical or religious background? I know my sister went to Catholic school and the nuns wouldn't let her use her left hand.

Sylvia: You know, we program our children by where we put their silverware.

Alie: Oh really?

Sylvia: Think about that for a moment We were always taught that 'this is how you set the table'.

Aside: Sylvia paused here to get a cough drop.

Alie: In Catholic school they would come and smack you cause *sinistra*, left, you know, the hand of the devil.

Sylvia: I know, it's just superstitious stuff. Most things have been developed for right-handed people because of that very fact, that we were forced to write with our right hand or programmed, based on where our silverware was. So, I recommend if you're with your children, you just put the silverware in the middle of the plate and let them decide which hand they want to use.

Alie: Ooooh! Nice!

Sylvia: Isn't that a good idea?

Alie: Yeah! Do you know what a hagfish is? A hagfish is a kind of a slimy eel-like fish, that doesn't have a backbone and it exudes just gallons of mucous, but they coil into a little coil, and some of them coil one way and some of them coil the other way! They have right-handed and left-handed preferences! Isn't that cute?

Sylvia: [laughs]

Alie: These little hagfish at the bottom of the ocean? I think that's wonderful.

Sylvia: So if you look in nature that's the same truth. Even back in Caesar's time he would select his people by their handwriting.

Alie: He would?

Sylvia: Yeah. That's what he told me anyway.

Alie: Yeah? [*laughs*]

Sylvia: [*laughs*] No.

Alie: Back in the day.

Sylvia: No, that's something that I read in one of my historical books about handwriting.

Alie: Oh wow! That surprises me.

Aside: So back then, there were people who acted as assistants and then they'd just take notes as orators orated. They were called 'amanuensis', which sounds a lot like a medical condition that I don't want.

Alie: What do you think of celebrities who are asked to give autographs? Are they giving away their signature to everyone who asks for it? Is there any security issues in that?

Sylvia: Well, it probably gets pretty sloppy as it goes along. I've watched them sign these autographs and they do it just, you know, they're standing, they're in a hurry. Some of them will actually have different pens for them to use and then they take the pen back. So I think that's fine, I don't think that there's a problem. That is where the most fraud is committed though, is in memorabilia. So be very cautious about that.

Alie: [*gasps*] Ooooh! Yeah because if you have some scribbled-on poster of Halle Berry, how do you know she actually signed it?

Sylvia: You don't. Unless you have some of her known signatures. And there can be natural variation. It could be that she had a signature for public and a signature for her own personal account.

Alie: Do you have any autographs from famous people that you treasure?

Sylvia: James Taylor. I actually... James Taylor signed a guitar for me.

Alie: Wow!

Sylvia: One of my good friends took me to see James Taylor and got a picture of me with James Taylor. He's always been one of my favorites and he signed a guitar for me.

Alie: What'd you think of his signature?

Sylvia: Didn't pay much attention to it, truthfully.

Alie: What?!

Sylvia: No! People think I look at everything, no I don't! I have had people's personal diaries that had all kinds of stuff in it, and I'm just looking at the characteristics. And then when I took it back the guy said, "Well, what did you think about all of that?" And I said, "All of what?" And he said, "You didn't read it?" And I said, "No I don't read the content usually!" Now, in forensics I have to read the content, but... It's just funny.

Alie: When it comes to leaving behind a will or something, I talked to a thanatologist who's a grief counsellor and she said that written wills in an envelope just saying, "Yo, this is my will," those are legit. Do you think people should write those in their own handwriting instead of typing them?

Sylvia: Absolutely. Anything that's typed has doubt on it. And if you write it out it's called a holographic will and each state has different rules on it.

Alie: Jot it down on a piece of paper put it in an envelope!

Sylvia: Well, I think it's terrific to have one typed by an attorney or a law firm, and signed, and witnesses. And then I also think that on your personal stuff that you want to give away, if you have that in your handwriting, and include your handwriting with it!

Alie: Oooh good idea.

Sylvia: You know letters and... Put the evidence there.

Alie: Yeah! Makes *your* job easier.

Sylvia: Well, it makes the job for the heirs easier too, because I have seen families just say, "I can't find anything."

Alie: Yeah, I know. So, just leave it behind. That's a great idea. You know, I think we always think, "Oh with a will you've gotta type it up and have it notarized." But it's better to have something than nothing.

Sylvia: Well, the notaries are always suspect too these days because not everybody keeps a notary log. I had one case where the man... Let's see, his first wife died, he got married the second time, she had three children, he had two. They were married for like 30 years. The man dies and he leaves everything to his wife, if she's deceased then it's to go to the children.

So here's what happens. He dies, she gets everything, and then she lives quite a long time, maybe ten years longer, and then she leaves everything to her kids and pulls out his. And each one of those girls lost a million dollars.

Alie: Oooohhh boy.

Sylvia: And it came primarily from his retirement, but because of the way it was written, it wasn't spelled out.

Alie: You'd think the step kids would be like, "We know this is rightfully yours."

Sylvia: You would think, with that much money.

Alie: Yeah evil stepsisters indeed.

Sylvia: I saw the will of the mother and someone had written over it. It was a fraudulent will, the signatures on it, and yet they couldn't do anything about it because so much time had passed.

Alie: I mean, they should just do a *CSI: Handwriting*. And you should be the producer of it!

Sylvia: Well sure! Absolutely! Just show me the money! *[laughs]*

Alie: Okay! And then I'll show you the signature on the check first. *[both laugh]* What do you dislike about your job? What sucks about your job?

Sylvia: Sometimes it's stressful, because everything seems to come at one time. Like, I had these five cases that all came last week, and that doesn't count what I've got on the backburner waiting. And so sometimes it'll come all at one time and it's with heavy deadlines and stuff like that. But I wouldn't even say I hate it, it's just stressful. And I love my job. I love the fact that I can do it, and I feel very competent in doing it, and it's just a lot of fun.

Alie: Yeah. What's your favorite thing about what you do or about handwriting?

Sylvia: Helping an attorney solve a case. Whether it's in probate or helping a family that's got a problem child and they don't know what to do. And I can't tell you how many gifted

children... I can think of three right off the top of my head, where they were in trouble at school but it's because they were bored out of their head. They weren't turning in their homework; they were quite gifted. One little boy, he was 11 years old. I insisted that the parents take him and get his IQ tested, and he was off the charts in math. And here he is just suffering. I mean, school was like prison to him.

Alie: Yeah. And he was just bored.

Sylvia: Yeah, he was just bored.

Alie: So, helping people helping families making a measurable difference.

Sylvia: Yeah, yeah. Things that I can see results.

Alie: Yeah. Do people write you handwritten thank you notes? Because they should!

Sylvia: Not very often.

Alie: They should!

Sylvia: But they will usually send me emails. [*both laugh*]

Alie: Close enough.

Sylvia: They'll send me emails and they'll express their gratitude.

Alie: That's sweet.

Sylvia: It is sweet.

Alie: Yeah. And do *you* handwrite thank you notes?

Sylvia: Absolutely.

Alie: Of course you do!

Sylvia: Of course I do!

Alie: And if nothing else, all of us listening should just remember how important thank you notes are.

Sylvia: Yeah. Go buy some nice note paper, and think of somebody that's been important to you, and just write them a nice little, sweet little note that says "You're so important in my life, thank you for all the things."

I have a friend. I was struggling with my oven racks. Scrubbing them meticulously, and I could not get them clean. There's an upper oven and a lower oven. There's six racks altogether and I'm going, "I'll never get through with these! I'm not a domestic goddess anymore. I just can't do this."

And so I was complaining to my friend and she said, "Put them in your dishwasher on the highest temperature, and put two pods in there, and it'll be just fine" [*DJ airhorn*] And they were! [*both laugh*] So young people have a lot to contribute to us!

Alie: Did you write her a thank you note?

Sylvia: Oh yeah I did! I wrote her a thank you note from Brian Andreas's collection. He's an artist that does these quirky things and I love his work.

Aside: PS: I looked up this stationary and I expected to find like an ornate, cream-colored paper, maybe with gold foiled venetian floral motifs but no. His work, very bold colors, with sketchy modern drawings, very cute!

Also I ate granola for dinner while writing this but I had like three bowls, I feel so sick now. But it was so good.

Okay, Berbye!

Transcribed by Bergen Adair

Final touches by Kaydee Coast who is ambivalent about her own handwriting, but is very aware of speech patterns.

Some links which may be of use:

A donation went to: Care.org

[A quick history on penmanship](#)

[High school students conducted a handwriting stress test](#)

[Le father du graphology: some French guy](#)

[CSI: QDE \(Questioned Document Examination\)](#)

[The Handwriting Olympiad](#)

[Buy a State Fair handwriting analysis business from Jack Libby!](#)

[Zaner-Bosler handwriting contest](#)

[Ballpoint pens: a history](#)

[What's the future of handwriting?](#)

[Hetty Green: the Greediest Person in America?](#)

[Hetty Green really liked money](#)

[Hetty Green Motel: in disrepair and abandoned](#)

[Hetty Green Motel is the town eyesore](#)

[Declaration of Independence scribe: Timothy Matlak](#)

[10 year-old-girl wins handwriting competition](#)

[How to help someone with suicidal ideation](#)

National Suicide Hotline: 1-800-273-8255

[Marilyn Monroe letters auctioned off](#)

[Declaration font](#)

[Arden Stern thinks ransom notes are garbage](#)

[Secret printer dots!](#)

[Messy handwriting and IQ scores](#)

[There is no correlation between IQ and Penmanship](#)

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