

**UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE
UNIFORM LANGUAGE FOR TESTIMONY AND REPORTS
FOR THE FORENSIC GEOLOGY DISCIPLINE**

I. Application

This document applies to Department of Justice examiners who are authorized to prepare reports and provide expert witness testimony regarding the forensic examination of geologically-derived materials. This document applies to reports and to testimony based on reports that are finalized after its effective date. Section III is limited to conclusions that result from the comparison of two or more geologically-derived materials. Section IV is applicable to all forensic geology examinations unless otherwise limited by the express terms of an individual qualification or limitation.

II. Purpose and Scope¹

The Uniform Language for Testimony and Reports is a quality assurance measure designed to standardize the expression of appropriate consensus language for use by Department examiners in their reports and testimony. This document is intended to describe and explain terminology that may be provided by Department examiners. It shall be attached to, or incorporated by reference in, laboratory reports or included in the case file.

Department examiners are expected to prepare reports and provide testimony consistent with the directives of this document. However, examiners are not required to provide a complete or verbatim recitation of the definitions or bases set forth in this document. This is supplemental information that is intended to clarify the meaning of, and foundation for, the approved conclusions.

This document should not be construed to imply that terminology, definitions, or testimony provided by Department examiners prior to its effective date that may differ from that set forth below was erroneous, incorrect, or indefensible. It should also not be construed to imply that the use of different terminology or definitions by non-Departmental forensic laboratories or individuals is erroneous, incorrect, or indefensible.

This document does not, and cannot, address every contingency that may occur. For example, an examiner may not have an opportunity to fully comply with this document's directives during a testimonial presentation due to circumstances beyond the examiner's control. In addition, this document does not prohibit the provision of conclusions in reports and testimony that fall outside of its stated scope. Finally, the substantive content of expert testimony may be subject to legal rules imposed by the court or jurisdiction in which it is provided.

¹ This document is not intended to, does not, and may not be relied upon to create any rights, substantive or procedural, enforceable by law by any party in any matter, civil or criminal; nor does it place any limitation on otherwise lawful investigative or legal prerogatives of the Department of Justice.

III. Conclusions Regarding Forensic Comparison of Geologically-Derived Materials

An examiner may provide any of the following conclusions:

1. Physical fit
2. Inclusion (i.e., included)
3. Exclusion (i.e., excluded)
4. Inconclusive

Physical fit

‘Physical fit’ is an examiner’s conclusion that two or more geologically-derived materials were once part of the same object. This conclusion is an examiner’s opinion that two or more broken geologically-derived materials show sufficient correspondence between their macro- and microscopic characteristics to indicate that they once comprised a single object and insufficient disagreement between their macro- and microscopic characteristics to conclude that they originated from different objects. This conclusion can only be reached when two or more geologically-derived materials physically fit together.

The basis for a ‘physical fit’ conclusion is an examiner’s opinion that the macro- and microscopic characteristics of the broken geologically-derived materials provide extremely strong support for the proposition that they were once part of the same object and extremely weak support for the proposition that the materials originated from different objects.

A ‘physical fit’ conclusion is the statement of an examiner’s opinion (an inductive inference²) that the probability that the broken geologically-derived materials were not part of the same object is so small that it is negligible.

Inclusion

‘Inclusion’ is an examiner’s conclusion that two or more geologically-derived materials could have originated from the same source with indistinguishable characteristics. Additional geologically-derived material(s) that are indistinguishable in all assessed characteristics could also be potential sources.

² Inductive reasoning (inferential reasoning):

A mode or process of thinking that is part of the scientific method and complements deductive reasoning and logic. Inductive reasoning starts with a large body of evidence or data obtained by experiment or observation and extrapolates it to new situations. By the process of induction or inference, predictions about new situations are inferred or induced from the existing body of knowledge. In other words, an inference is a generalization, but one that is made in a logical and scientifically defensible manner.

The basis for an ‘inclusion’ conclusion is an examiner’s opinion that two or more geologically-derived materials do not exhibit any exclusionary differences³ in the assessed characteristics.

Exclusion

‘Exclusion’ is an examiner’s conclusion that two or more geologically-derived materials are excluded as having originated from the same source.

The basis for an ‘exclusion’ conclusion is an examiner’s opinion that two or more geologically-derived materials show exclusionary difference in their assessed characteristics and no inseparable mixing or deleterious change is indicated.

Inconclusive

‘Inconclusive’ is an examiner’s conclusion that no determination can be reached as to whether two or more geologically-derived materials could have originated from the same source.

The basis for an ‘inconclusive’ conclusion is an examiner’s opinion that there are insufficient assessable characteristics to determine whether two or more geologically-derived materials could have originated from the same source. The reasons for this determination include insufficient quantity of geologically-derived materials, inseparable mixing with other sources of material, and deleterious change.

IV. Qualifications and Limitations of Forensic Geology Examinations

- A conclusion provided during testimony or in a report is ultimately an examiner’s decision and is not based on a statistically-derived or verified measurement and comparison to all other geologically-derived materials. Therefore, an examiner shall not:
 - assert that a ‘physical fit’ conclusion is based is based on the ‘uniqueness’⁴ of an item of evidence.
 - use the terms ‘individualize’ or ‘individualization’ when describing a ‘physical fit’ conclusion.’
 - assert that two or more geologically-derived materials originated from the same object to the exclusion of all other objects.

³ Exclusionary difference:

A difference in one or more characteristics between compared items that is sufficient to determine that the compared items did not originate from the same source, are not the same substance, or do not share the same composition or classification.

Organization of Scientific Area Committees for Forensic Science Lexicon (Oct. 16, 2023).

⁴ As used in this document, the term ‘uniqueness’ means having the quality of being the only one of its kind.

- An examiner shall not assert that two or more geologically-derived materials were once part of the same object unless the materials physically fit together.
- An examiner shall not provide an ‘inclusion’ conclusion unless the examiner explain that the geologically-derived materials could also have originated from additional geologically- derived sources that are indistinguishable in all assessed characteristics.
- An examiner shall not assert that the total number of objects within a group of similar geologically-derived materials can be predicted with absolute certainty.
- An examiner shall not assert that forensic geology examinations are infallible or have a zero error rate.
- An examiner shall not provide a conclusion that includes a statistic or numerical degree of probability except when based on relevant and appropriate data.
- An examiner shall not cite the number of forensic geology examinations performed in the examiner’s career as a direct measure for the accuracy of a conclusion provided. An examiner may cite the number of forensic geology examinations performed in the examiner’s career for the purpose of establishing, defending, or describing the examiner’s qualifications or experience.
- An examiner shall not use the expressions ‘absolute certainty,’ ‘100% certainty,’ ‘reasonable degree of scientific certainty,’ ‘reasonable scientific certainty,’ or similar assertions of reasonable certainty in either reports or testimony unless required to do so by a judge or applicable law.⁵

⁵ See Memorandum from the Attorney General to Heads of Department Components (Sept. 9. 2016), <https://www.justice.gov/opa/file/891366/download>.