

Contrast: An Investigator's Basic Reference Guide to Fingerprint Identification Concepts

by Craig A. Coppock

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Reviewed by Sabrina Henze

Contrast was compiled by the author while teaching fingerprint science to experienced police officers, new crime-scene investigators and criminal justice students. The book covers several major topics, including friction skin characteristics, exemplar and latent prints, identification errors, photography and computerised databases.

This is a valuable basic reference or introductory text. Unfortunately, it is very poorly edited and suffers from numerous distracting typographical, punctuation and printing errors (averaging at least one per page). The section on fingerprint identification concepts in Chapter 8 would be more logically placed near the beginning of the book. Better cross-referencing might have eliminated the need for some repetition: for example, the illustrations of common friction skin characteristics in Chapter 2 appear again in Chapter 8.

The author digresses at a few points, and some portions of the text do not belong in an introductory guide—eg 'Friction skin has even been found on the gripping side of the tail of a red howler monkey' and 'In Heisenberg's indefinable quantum world, our classical laws and logic do not apply. Of course, fingerprint identification need not go this far'.

Most illustrations are clear, especially the reproductions of ten-print cards, the FBI diagram of friction skin structure, and the ninhydrin and cyanoacrylate flowcharts. Others are less so, like the illustration of a fingerprint impression made through a thin latex glove to adhesive tape. Colour photos would have enriched the chapter on photography, image enhancement and colour. The useful description of the National Crime Information Center fingerprint classification system and its drawbacks would perhaps be easier to assimilate in tabular form.

As *Contrast* is also designed as a reference guidebook, a few additional tools would make it more user-friendly. A glossary, including terms like 'dactylography'/'dactyloscopy', 'dysplasia', 'exemplar' versus 'latent' prints, 'incipient ridges', 'reversals', 'tension' and 'flexion' creases, and 'edgeology' and 'poroscopy' would be helpful, along with an expanded index.

The most interesting passages are the comparison of inked and computerised prints, the discussion of reversals and why they are problematic, and the side note about footprint identification (plantar surfaces are often better protected in fires and aeroplane or car accidents, though this technique has largely been replaced by DNA identification). A discussion of automated fingerprint identification systems (AFIS) worldwide and of foreign networking and cooperation would have added an interesting international perspective.

While those working regularly with fingerprint evidence would probably wish to consult more in-depth and up-to-date sources on AFIS, digital photography and live-scan technology (though ideas can be found in the solid bibliography), the book gives a clear outline of the possibilities and limitations of fingerprint collection, development and classification techniques.

Sabrina Henze
Security Without Borders
Paris, France