

Did Pete Cheat? Lab



At crime scenes, investigators often find unknown materials that need to be identified. If an unknown material is a mixture, an investigator may want to know one of two things about it: the ingredients of the mixture and/or whether it is the same as a known mixture sample.

A mixture is a collection of two or more pure substances that are physically close together. You are familiar with a variety of mixtures. For example, a soft drink is a mixture of water, sugar, artificial colors, caffeine, and flavors. Other mixtures include foods, drugs, cosmetics, fuels, lubricants, and dyes.

You may not realize it, but black ink is a mixture of several different colors. If you doubt this, write your name on a paper napkin with a black felt-tip pen. Dip the end of the napkin in water and watch the black ink separate into colors when the water reaches it. This is a simple example of ink chromatography. The colored pattern that forms on the napkin is called a chromatograph.

Chromatography is an ancient method of separating parts of a mixture. The word chromatography really means "color writing". The inks in modern pens are made of a mixture of dyes. These inks show a variety of colors when a solvent, such as water, passes through them.

Different types of water-soluble ink pens vary in their composition. Two different brands of pens will give two dissimilar chromatograms. Therefore, if ink samples are taken from separate locations on a document that was written with one pen, all samples should produce the same chromatogram. By using chromatography, forensic scientists can determine whether a document contains two or more different inks. One drawback of using ink chromatography in forensic science is that it destroys the evidence. The document under suspicion must have areas cut from it so the ink can be analyzed.

In summary, if an entire document has been written with the same ink pen, tests applied to different portions of the document should produce the same results. If the chromatograms are the same, the forensic scientist can assume the inks are the same.

Divers solvents can be used in ink chromatography. For inks that are water soluble, water is the solvent of choice. For inks that are not water soluble, methanol, ammonium hydroxide, ethanol, acetone, or hydrochloric acid can be used as solvents.

Pre-Lab Questions:

1. What is a mixture?
2. What is a chromatograph?
3. What does "chromatography" actually mean?
4. How can chromatography be used to determine that 2 different pens were used to write the same paper?
5. What solvent is used on water-soluble inks?

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