

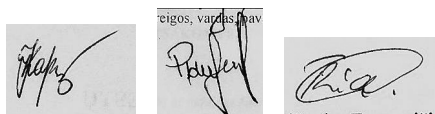
## Short signatures — our headache

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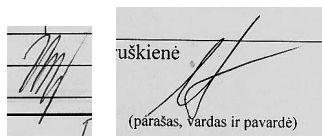
Forensic Science Center of Lithuania  
Vilnius, Lithuania

The main problem for handwriting experts in our Centre today is short and too simple signatures. Only a small part of our citizens sign by writing their full name. The modern-day Lithuanian signature consists of one or two letters and illegible elements, or even entirely illegible elements.

The most common examples of signatures in Lithuania



Usually Lithuanian surnames are long. It is easier to use short sign instead of full name signature. So in our hurried age signatures become shorter and simpler.

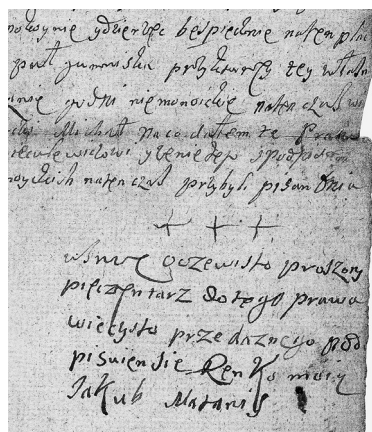


Such graphic abbreviation of signatures complicates the examination. In the majority of cases it is impossible to identify signing person.

In 2015 out of all unsolved cases 93% was due to short and too simple signatures. For comparison in 2014 out of all unsolved cases 61% was due to short and too simple signatures<sup>1</sup>. This situation displeases our customers, particularly in those cases where the only evidence is signature. But modern handwriting examinations are powerless to solve this problem. This is beyond limits of experts possibilities.

There are countries where due to traditions long signatures, consisting of name and surname, remain most common signature type. Most Nordic countries are still using long signatures. But that's not the case in Lithuania. Even though Lithuanian surnames are long and there are letters with diacritics, but in our opinion this is not main reason why we mostly use short signatures. The two main reasons that drove the change of signing habits were recent *historical circumstances* and *irresponsible approach to falsification protection*.

Up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century there were citizens (especially in the villages) who were illiterate and therefore they used a simple way of signing – to write one, two or three crosses (see picture below)<sup>2</sup>.

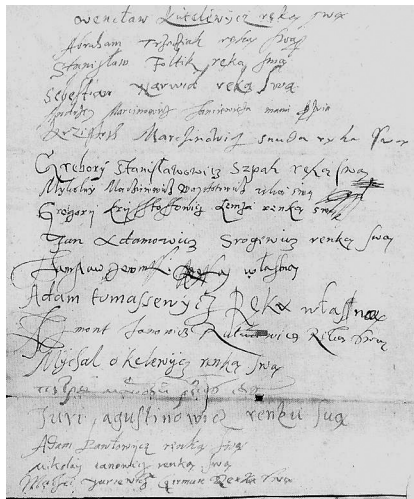


The illiterate nobleman signature — three crosses and the literate nobleman signature — full name in 1749 document (Lithuanian State Historical Archives)

<sup>1</sup> Forensic Science Centre of Lithuania Expert work reports.

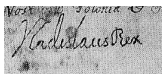
<sup>2</sup> J. Karpavičienė *Lietuvos notariato istorija*, Vilnius 2012, p. 94.

But even in the 16<sup>th</sup> century there were citizens that could write and sign<sup>3</sup> (see examples in picture below).

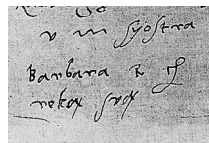


The signatures of 27 Kedainiai citizens in the 13<sup>th</sup> of June 1596 script of the complain about the yeoman Vaitiekus Tumaševskis rude behavior (Lithuanian State Historical Archives)

The signatures of the noble persons were clearly written. In addition they were likely to include their positions in the state and other words, for eg. “rekoy swoy” which translates as “by my hand”<sup>4</sup>.



The signature of King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania Vladislovas Vaza in the 28<sup>th</sup> of April 1648 Privilege to Kėdainiai

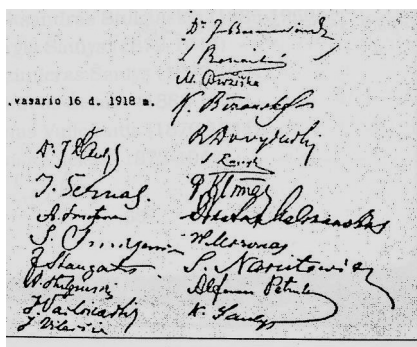


The signature of the second wife of Grand Duke of Lithuania Zigmantas Augustas and queen of Poland Barbora Radvilaitė (~ 1550) in letter to her brother

<sup>3</sup> A. Tyla, *Lietuvos Magdeburginių miestų privilegijos ir aktai*, t. 3, Kėdainiai, Vilnius 2002, pp. 6–31.

<sup>4</sup> R. Ragauskienė, A. Ragauskas, *Barboros Radvilaitės laišakai Žygimantui Augustui ir kitiems*, Vilnius 2001, p. 181.

By the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century even in the villages cross-type signatures were almost extinct. By that time less educated people signed by writing only some letters of their surnames. For example, a person Plaušys signed as „Plau“, person Repšas as „Rep“ or „Reps“. Sometimes they added illegible elements to the end, while educated people signed by writing their full names (see picture below).



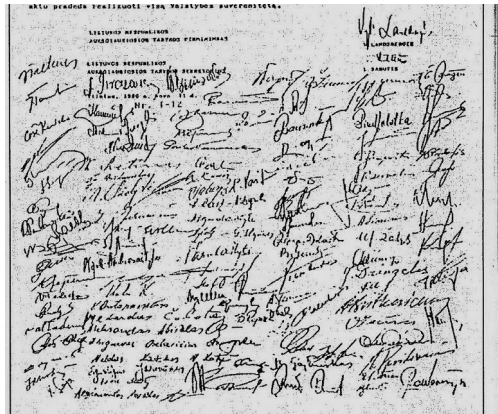
The signatures of the signatories of the 16<sup>th</sup> of February 1918 Act of Lithuania State

In manual “*Suspect Documents their Scientific Examination*” by Wilson R. Harrison published in 1958 in London signature is defined as a **word**: “The signature is the **word** with which a person identifies himself, and as such will have a greater personal significance than any other word he may write”<sup>5</sup>

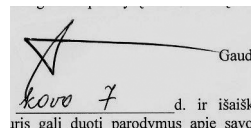
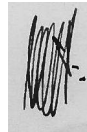
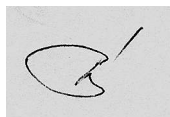
Similarly the signature as a *monogram* (graphical abbreviation) of the first letters of a persons name, surname and patronymic was used in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century Russia. So signatures were long enough and informative. But over the time signatures composed only of illegible elements started to appear. Therefore literal signatures and illegible signatures existed. In manual „Судебно-почерковедческая экспертиза“ част II published in 1971 in Moscow signature is defined as a **graphical**

<sup>5</sup> W.R. Harrison, *Suspect Documents Their Scientific Examination*, London 1958, p. 374.

*picture*<sup>6</sup>. Whereas in 1940 Lithuania was occupied by Russia and for 50 years was incorporated into Soviet Union, the Russian conception of the signature influenced Lithuanian signatures. However, until 1990 in Lithuania almost all documents were filled in by hand. Possibly due to this reason many people still preferred longer literal signatures. This is shown in the signatures of the signatories of the 11<sup>th</sup> of March 1990 Act of Restoration of Independence of Lithuania.



But during that time people lost emotional connection to their signature. Nowadays credit card pin numbers are more valued than a signature. People stopped using long signatures and replaced them with short and simple signatures. Many of the signatures of the high officials, who usually sign very important documents, are also very simple and sometimes seem more like graphical pictures than signatures.



<sup>6</sup> В.Ф. Орлова, Судебно-почерковедческая экспертиза, Часть II, Москва 1971, p. 269.

As a result current Forensic Science Centre of Lithuania STPA (Description Standard Procedure of Examination) signature definition certified in the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2014, par. 5.27.: “Signature is the *composition of letters* of the persons surname, sometimes of full name or of illegible elements. Signatures may be *literal* (consist of letters), *illegible* (consist of illegible elements) and *mixed*<sup>7</sup>.”

Unfortunately, short, illegible signatures spread like wildfire, especially among today’s youth. It is high time to inform people to pay more attention to their signatures; to remind that signature is not a simple tick or drawing, but it is legal binding written word which should consists of the letters’s in accordance with a person’s name and surname; to point out the significance of the signing and the necessity to protect the signature from the forgery.

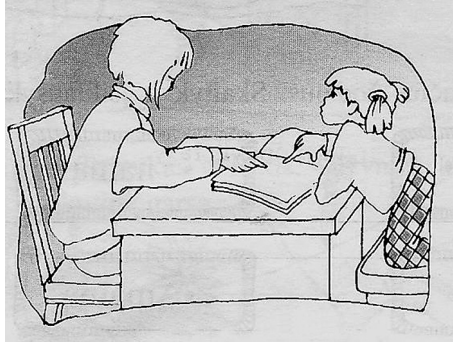
We are working on a few ways to improve current situation:

1) We educate people about the importance of a person’s signature and ways how to improve personal signature by press, TV and lectures.



<sup>7</sup> Description Standard Procedure of Examination certified in the 29<sup>th</sup> of December 2014, par. 5.27.

2) We advise Board of Education to include some lectures about person's signature structure and protection in secondary and/or higher school programme.



Usually person's signature starts to develop when he is about 14–16 years old. 80% of people who are 18–20 years old already have a matured individual signature. When they were asked what made the biggest influence in creating a signatures structure many young people answer that it occurred somehow unconsciously. Some of them claim that the influence was made by the signatures of their parents or relatives. Still others say they noticed a “nice” signature and tried to compose something alike<sup>8</sup>. Signatures of people from certain occupations (e.g. doctors) are a bad example.



Some of the doctors' signatures which were investigated by our experts

<sup>8</sup> Ирина Крылова. О некоторых проблемах, связанных с современной подписью. Эксперт криминалист № 1/2015.

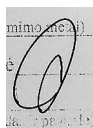
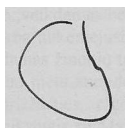
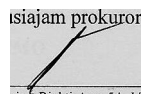
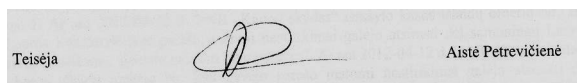


3) We recommend banks, financial workers and their clients, directors of the companies, insurance companies, notaries to pay more attention to their signatures and to legible writing. In the case when there is no written letter included in the signature the person's name and surname should be written beside it.



Two signatures in the same document —  
the general manager and senior accountant

4) We give lectures for justice and police employees that they should use literal signatures (which means their signatures should match their surname and be legible).



Some signatures of justice and police employees. They are our main  
customers

## Conclusions

Short and non-informative signatures are easy to use, but complicated for handwriting experts to work with.

Short signature poses problems for lawyers, financial companies and other institutions.

It is our duty to inform people about the dangers of short signatures and to educate people to sign accordance with a person's surname.

This would contribute to the signing culture growth, and as a result would let us answer and help in more cases.



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## Summary

It is difficult to imitate another persons signature. Handwritten signature is unique. There are no special rules for person's signature. The signature can be any. It only should meet the requiments: consist of letters not only loop, line, curve and etc. elements. Unfortunately, in our hurried age signatures become shorter and simpler. During that time people lost emotional connection to their signature. Many of the signatures of the high officials, who usually sign very important documents, are also very simple and sometimes seem more like graphical pictures than signatures. We receive many short and too simple signatures recently. It is a real headache for Lithuanian handwriting experts. Modern handwriting examinations are powerless to solve this problem. It is our duty to inform people about the dangers of short signatures and to educate people to sign accordance with a person's surname. This would contribute to the signing culture growth, and as a result would let us answer and help in more cases.

**Keywords:** too simple signature, literal signature, illegible elements, mixed signature, monogram, graphical picture, historical circumstances, irresponsible approach to falsification protection.