

## ABFA Guidelines for Case File Submission

This document contains guidelines used by the ABFA when reviewing applicant case files. The ABFA requests you submit three (3) case files that contain enough information for a thorough review of your analyses and conclusions.

Submission requirements include the following:

1. The written case report as it was issued by you and your agency.
2. Cover letter for each case file. Briefly outline case details and also use this document to explain when the actual report varies from the ABFA guidelines. Explain circumstances such as co-signed reports or the absence of chain of custody information, scene & investigative information, and/or forensic analyses.
3. Bench notes for each case submitted.
4. Photographs for each case submitted.

### **OVERALL:**

- The three (3) submitted case files will serve to demonstrate the applicant's overall skill level and allow the ABFA to evaluate your abilities that covering the subspecialties within forensic anthropology as well as confirm your professional involvement in the discipline. Choose your cases carefully and take the time to prepare your submission.
  - Preferably submit cases that contain nearly complete or complete skeletal/fleshed remains.
  - As much as possible, submit three reports that contain the following analyses:
    - Age at death
    - Sex
    - Ancestry
    - Stature
    - Time since death
    - Perimortem trauma
    - Antemortem conditions
    - Postmortem modifications
- The written case report and supporting documentation is carefully scrutinized to ensure that you are able to clearly, concisely and accurately relay the above information. The ABFA is aware that case report formats differ according to jurisdictional requirements. The goal of the ABFA is

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to assess your abilities across the spectrum of analyses utilized in forensic anthropology. Please choose cases that include a full array of analysis. Only one case dealing solely with significant trauma analysis is acceptable. Based on evaluations of past files, the ABFA suggests particular attention to the following areas:

- Proper use of grammar and proofreading within the report. Choose past or present tense and be consistent. Long wordy descriptions should be edited for clarity. Keep all descriptions brief, direct and objective. Avoid non-specific language such as “tiny”, “large” etc. Avoid vernacular, jargon, slang, or colloquial terms.
- Professionalism in the language of the report. (i.e. the report should read like it was written by a Ph.D.) The overall quality of the report should be commensurate with the level of education and experience attained by the applicant.
- References cited should be current and appropriate. (Note: If your report format requirements preclude reference citations note in the cover letter and provide a supplementary document that lists the references utilized.)
- For all areas of analysis, the standards used should be listed and the specific criterion from that method (i.e. pubic symphysis Phase with reported mean or range) should be either in the report or accompanying bench notes. These standards must be correctly applied and must be the most appropriate standards for the case.
- A case report should be organized, concise, clear to the intended reader, and factual. Ensure that your report is helpful (in the sense of providing clear, accurate, objective information) to the agency requesting it. Does it contain enough information regarding the biological profile to assist with identification; is the trauma clearly interpreted and not overly interpreted; is the PMI supportable?
- Co-signed reports require explanation in the cover letter. If you work in a large agency the protocols for the agency must be addressed in your explanation (e.g., an internal peer-review process in which the reviewer co-signs the final document, or a signature from a supervisor signifying an administrative review). Remember submitted reports should reflect work done solely (or primarily) by the applicant.
- If not mentioned in your written report, include information regarding “chain of custody” and legal authority for your examination in the cover letter. Include the date and time of transfer, from whom you received the remains, in what condition, and specific information regarding the type of analysis you were asked to perform and by whom (i.e. medical examiner/coroner, law enforcement, family).
- If not mentioned in your written report, include information regarding the date of recovery of remains, and investigative circumstances of the case in the cover letter. The

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ABFA requires some contextual information to see that you have appropriately assessed PMI.

- Bench notes and photographs must be included in your submissions. Consider the following when reviewing your bench notes and photographs for cases you plan to submit:
  - Contradictory statements (i.e. saying that a bone was missing or fragmentary and then later indicating the use of said bone to determine age, etc.) All statements in the report must be supported by the bench notes and photographs.
  - Bench notes must be the work of the analyst under evaluation (i.e. do not submit bench notes from a student or other assistant-they are not under review). Examiner's initials and date are recommended for each individual bench note sheet. Bench notes must reflect the reported results. Explain any deletions, additions or discrepancies between your bench notes and the final report.
  - Conditions mentioned in the bench notes, that are not noted in the report require explanation. Use the cover letter.
  - Diagrams should be clear and readable and contain the case number, date, and the initials of the person completing them. A legend clearly outlining the symbols used must accompany all diagrams, if applicable.
  - Each case should be accompanied by photographs including at least one view of the complete set of remains submitted for evaluation taken from a superior view.
  - Photographs must be in focus and include a clearly visible scale and case number. If your jurisdiction requires anonymity in case submissions to the ABFA, the case number may be blacked out. An L-shaped ruler with ovals at the corners developed for the ABFO demonstrates any distortion within the photograph. As laboratories move toward accreditation, NIST-traceable rulers will be required in all photographs.
  - Photographs of the features used to assess the biological profile, PMI, postmortem modification, and trauma (i.e. close-up photo of pubic symphysis face, sternal rib end, and auricular surface) must be included. Photographs should clearly match the written descriptions.
  - Six views of the cranium or skull in Frankfort plane should accompany every submission (that includes these elements) to cover all morphological features of the cranium used for ancestry and sex estimation.
  - Close-up photography of all defects, including the inner table, should be included with proper scale.

- All photographs must be labeled with descriptors.

The ABFA recommends that each document or photograph be labeled to stand on its own if separated from the bulk of the report or if removed from the context of another larger report.

**SKELETAL INVENTORY:**

- Complete a skeletal inventory to include all remains listed by element when possible (i.e. each rib is a separate element and should be sided and seriated when possible). Inventory can be listed as all that is present OR all that is absent, depending on the case and individual style. Reference to a diagram is not an acceptable replacement.

**POSTMORTEM INTERVAL:**

- Contextual data and/or bone preservation data should be listed and the PMI, if estimated, must be supported by evidence and appropriate reference citation. The environment from which the remains were recovered should be clearly described. (Note: If the case was analyzed in the blind, then this should be noted in the report or in the cover letter.)

**SEX:**

- When listing morphological traits, list their presentation (i.e., non-projecting mastoid processes). Submit supporting photographic evidence of each trait used in the analysis.

**ANCESTRY:**

- Appropriate use and proper interpretation of FORDISC. Posterior probabilities and typicality statistics should be interpreted rather than a blanket statement such as “Fordisc 3.0 indicates this is a white individual.”
- Fordisc printouts must be submitted.
- Morphologic traits listed as supporting a particular ancestry should be established through appropriate reference citations.
- Six views of the cranium or skull in Frankfort plane will provide supporting photographic evidence of each trait used in the analysis when cranial analysis is performed. (Note: It is recognized that the photographs will not necessarily be part of the original report.)

**AGE:**

- Criteria and skeletal element used must be stated (i.e. right 4<sup>th</sup> rib sternal end) and appropriate references cited. Submit supporting photographic evidence of each trait used in the analysis.
- Tooth wear/condition is generally not an appropriate aging standard in a forensic case.
- Tests performed for age estimation should be the most probative available given the condition and completeness of remains.
- Synthesis of the results from multiple tests should be clear and rational to the reader of the report.

**STATURE:**

- Conclusions are solidly based on appropriate interpretation of standards and references.
- Ensure that the most appropriate stature model is utilized for the remains in question. This would require that you have first determined the sex and ancestry for the remains in question. In the absence of information regarding sex and ancestry, a justification for the model(s) selected should be provided.

**TRAUMA:**

- Trauma documentation must include measurements, appropriate interpretation, and photographic documentation. All defects should have location within the skeleton clearly described, such as using measurements from at least two anatomical landmarks (modeled after the pathology standard).
- The type of trauma should be stated, if appropriate, (i.e. consistent with blunt force, sharp force, or projectile/GSW).
- Trauma description should be succinct.
- The method(s) of evaluation should be stated (i.e. radiographic, gross, microscopic).
- Do not make statements regarding cause and manner of death.

**POSTMORTEM MODIFICATIONS:**

- Do not over-interpret results. If you state that postmortem modification is caused by carnivores or rodents, that statement must be supported. For example, if you specifically describe damage as canid damage, you must show supporting evidence.

**CONCLUSIONS:**

- Conclusions should summarize the overall findings in the report, be appropriate to the evidence presented, and be supported through careful documentation.
- Refrain from drawing behavioral conclusions from the evidence (i.e. activity patterns). Avoid overstating facts from anecdotal evidence.
- No conclusions should be drawn or analysis performed outside of the expertise of the analyst or the field of forensic anthropology (i.e. discussion of the cause and manner of death should be left to the pathologist).