Individual or Class Evidence
YOU MAKE THE CALL!!!
By Jill Gross & Michael Fauss

Directions: There are 12 different stations around the room. At each station you must decide and EXPLAIN if the evidence is individual or class evidence.

Class or Individual Characteristics

Class

Any characteristics that are common to a group are called class characteristics. Type of fiber is a class characteristic. Since there are many thousands of yards of polyester made, even in specific shapes and colors, this is a class characteristic—all polyester fiber has the same chemical characteristics. Hair is another class characteristic. All brown human hair has the same class characteristics, under a microscope. Their medullas are fragmented or absent and the color and scale pattern of the hair found on any individual varies over their entire scalp.

Individual

Individual characteristics are those that are unique to a single person or a specific item that only one person can possess. For instance, the brown human hair that was a class characteristic on it has a root on can give the DNA of a specific person. DNA is an individual characteristic. Fingerprints are an individual characteristic. Since fingerprints are a random growth pattern on an individual’s skin, and they do not change over time, no two people have identical fingerprints. Footwear that has been worn for a few days has individual characteristics.

How is it determined whether a characteristic is class or individual? The investigator must determine how much of that substance or object were produced and how much of it may be found still in existence. The probability of finding another sample exactly like the one in question can then be calculated. That probability is used to determine whether or not that questioned evidence has individual or class characteristics.

Station 1: A torn T-shirt was found in the back seat of a suspect’s car. Two pieces of torn cloth were found at the scene of the crime. Can the two pieces be individualized to the T-shirt? Explain.

At the station: I have an old white T-shirt in a large brown bag and 3 pieces torn from it in 3 small brown bags…all have evidence tags

The students can take out the pieces of T-shirt and match them to the torn shirt; this would make the evidence from the scene individual because they do match like a puzzle.
Station 2: A broken test tube was found at a crime scene at a lab. Would small glass fragments be considered class evidence or individual evidence that can be uniquely associated with that? Explain.

At the station: I have 2 Ziploc bags; 1 with a partially broken test tube and one with glass fragments…I DO NOT let me students take the glass out of the bag to see if it matches the broken tube.

Because the students can’t take the glass out of the bag to see if it fits I take either answer here as long as they support it. Individual evidence if the glass can match and class if it doesn’t.

Station 3: A note was found at a crime scene at a bank. A notepad with a similar type of paper was found in the desk of a suspect. Can the note be traced to the pad? Explain. Can the handwriting be associated to a person? Can fingerprints on the note be individualized to a person? Explain.

At the station: I have a large brown bag with a legal pad with a page that is not completely torn…there is a little corner left on the pad. In a Ziploc bag I have a folded note that says “Give me $5,000,000” the note was ripped from the pad.

This is individual evidence because the note can be matched to the paper missing from the legal pad. If you take handwriting samples from all suspects you can attempt to individualize the handwriting, but this would be circumstantial evidence. Fingerprints can be individualized to a person if they can be removed from the paper.

Station 4: A soda can was found at the scene of a crime. Investigators tried to determine whether any of several tabs found in a suspect’s garage could be uniquely associated (individualized) with the can. How would this be possible? Explain.

At the station: I have a Ziploc bag with a pop can and a bag with lots of pop tabs in it.

The pop tabs can be individualized by checking to see if any of the tabs found match the broken piece from the top of the can.

Station 5: A shoe print was found at the scene of a hit and run automobile accident. How can a suspect’s shoe be individualized to match a print? Explain.

At the station: I have a brown paper bag with one shoe and a Ziploc bag with a print from a different shoe.

Looking at a crime scene print and then the print off the suspect shoe individualizes the print. If they match the print is individualized to the shoe. As we wear shoes we put a specific wear pattern on the shoe so even though hundreds of shoes were made the wearer individuals the shoe.
Station 6: The Midlands Section of the Omaha World Herald was found at the scene of a crime. The Sports Section was found in the home of the suspect. Is the Sports Section individual or class evidence? Explain.

At the station: I have a brown paper bag with a Midlands Section and a brown paper bag with a Sports Section from the same paper.

The Sports Section is class evidence because there were many papers made that day and you cannot be sure that the Midlands section was from the same paper.

Station 7: Some powder was found in a plastic bag in a suspect’s pocket. Some similar powder was found on the victim. Can the first powder be individualized to the second powder? Explain. If the two powders were determined to be chemically identical, does that prove they came from the same source? Explain.

At the station: I have a Ziploc bag with white powder and a Ziploc bag with a druggist fold with white powder in it…I DO NOT let the students open the druggist fold.

With chemical tests the first powder can be individualized to the second. If they are found to be chemically identical it does not guarantee they come from the same source, they came from the same company, but not necessarily the same source after distribution.

Station 8. If a small piece of paper were cut into four pieces, would the pieces be class or individual evidence? Explain.

At the station: I have cut a piece of white computer paper into 4 even pieces and put each piece into a Ziploc bag.

The four pieces would be class evidence. Because they were cut equally it cannot be determined they came from the same piece of original paper.

Station 9: If the same small piece of paper were torn into four pieces, would the pieces be class or individual evidence? Explain.

At the station: I have ripped a piece of plain computer paper into 4 sections and put each into a Ziploc bag.

The four pieces would be individual evidence because the ripped sides can be matched to form a complete piece of paper.
Station 10: A match was found at a suspicious house fire. A suspect was found carrying a book of matches, several of which were missing. Is the single match class or individual evidence? Explain.

At the station: I have a matchbook in a Ziploc bag and several matches torn from that matchbook, lit and blown out in another Ziploc bag.

The matches would be individual evidence because the ripped bottoms can be matched to the matchbook.

Station 11: A piece of duct tape was taken from a victim of a B & E (breaking and entering). A roll of the same brand of duct tape was found at the suspect’s home. Would this be considered class or individual evidence? Explain.

At the station: I have a roll of duct tape in a Ziploc bag that has a piece torn from it. In another Ziploc bag I have a piece of duct tape ripped at a different time. I make sure the two ripped edges are very different.

This is class evidence because the ripped pieces cannot be matched to each other.

Station 12: A pair of latex gloves was found at the scene of a robbery. A box of the same brand of latex gloves was found at a suspect’s home. Can the gloves be individualized to the box? Explain.

At the station: I have a box of latex gloves in a brown paper bag…the box was opened, but taped shut with clear packing tape so I still have gloves in it when I need some. In a Ziploc bag I have pair of gloves from the box. I do let the students remove the gloves from the bag, but caution them that they are latex gloves and if they have a latex allergy they need to not open the bag.

The gloves cannot be individualized to the box because gloves have no individual markings, every glove from this company looks the same.
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