



COURSE LESSON PLAN

Valid Comparisons

Advanced Courtroom Testimony Principles and Techniques for Forensic Pattern Experts

FORMAT Self-paced online course	INSTRUCTION TIME 7 hours
INSTRUCTOR John M. Collins MA, SHRM-SCP	AUDIENCE Forensic pattern examiners
COMPANION TEXT Valid Comparisons by John M. Collins	COMPLETION Certificate of completion

COURSE OVERVIEW

The courtroom environment for forensic pattern examiners is not what it used to be. Attorneys are better prepared to challenge pattern comparison testimony, and criticism of these disciplines has become more organized and persistent. Many capable examiners enter the courtroom uncertain how to anticipate and answer the questions that matter most: whether their work is truly scientific, what can be said about the possibility of error, and how much trust our courts should place their conclusions.

Valid Comparisons was created to address this important challenge. Based on the book of the same name, the course prepares examiners to speak with authority about the scientific foundations of their disciplines, to respond to difficult questions with honesty and composure, and to present their findings in a way that earns the confidence of judges and juries. It concentrates on preparation and execution: explaining conclusions in plain, defensible language, stating the limits of a finding without diminishing its value, and recognizing the lines of challenge that recur in cases involving forensic patterns.

INTENDED AUDIENCE

The course is designed for forensic laboratory scientists who compare and report on pattern evidence, including firearms and toolmarks, latent prints, footwear and tire impressions, and handwriting. It serves examiners preparing for their first testimony as well as experienced witnesses seeking to stay current with the challenges they now face. Laboratory administrators, trainers, and attorneys who work with pattern evidence will also find the material useful.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Upon completing this course, participants will be able to:

- Define science and explain what makes a scientific method valid.
- Articulate why the forensic pattern disciplines are worthy of the court's trust.
- Explain the purpose of the Daubert ruling and how it has shaped challenges to the pattern disciplines.
- Respond to criticism that draws on past failures in other areas of forensic practice.
- Explain the random, or stochastic, nature of forensic patterns and its significance to identification.
- Address the possibility of error with confidence and transparency.
- Respond effectively and credibly to requests for error rates or statistical measures of accuracy.
- Answer questions about certainty in a way that is both honest and scientifically sound.
- Address questions about past errors, whether confirmed or hypothetical, with candor and composure.
- Respond credibly to questions about identification thresholds.
- Explain the meaning and purpose of an identification to the court.
- Understand how expert testimony should be evaluated, and why it matters to every expert who testifies.
- Recognize an often-overlooked factor that can strengthen or weaken an expert's credibility.
- Recognize behaviors that undermine credibility and maintain a composed, professional temperament under cross-examination.
- Describe how the role of the forensic expert has evolved and what today's justice system expects of it.
- Recognize how social causes can influence experts and their critics alike.
- Evaluate claims of invalidity with a critical, scientific eye.
- Respond with composure when the words and phrases used in testimony are challenged or taken out of context.
- Practice responses to demanding cross-examination questions and identify areas for continued preparation.
- Take ownership of their professional development and pursue lasting competence as consummate expert witnesses.

COURSE OUTLINE

The course is organized into five modules totaling 7 hours of instruction, including a brief orientation to the course platform (approximately 7 minutes). Lessons are designed to be completed in order, since each builds on the ideas that come before it. Times include the introductory reading that precedes each module and lesson.

MODULE 1 • APPROX. 24 MINUTES

Welcome to Valid Comparisons

An introduction to the course, its purpose, and its materials. This module is open to the public.

Official Welcome from the Author	The purpose of the course, the audience it serves, and the standard of testimony it promotes.
Are You Courtroom Ready?	A series of challenging questions and criticisms of the kind forensic pattern examiners increasingly face in court.
Course Information and Downloads	Review of the course brochure and this lesson plan.
Order Your Book (optional)	Information about <i>Valid Comparisons</i> , the book on which the course is based.

MODULE 2 • APPROX. 52 MINUTES

Challenges and Doubts

The historical, cultural, and scientific forces that shape the scrutiny facing forensic pattern experts today.

Who Forensic Experts Once Thought They Were	How earlier generations of forensic experts understood their role, and why that history still matters today.
An Introduction to Good Science	What science is, what it owes to society, and a specific influence that can affect experts and critics alike.
Understanding the Objections	What critics of pattern comparison testimony are really objecting to, and a key, foundational principle that weaves itself through the course.
Death By a Thousand Bites	The history of bite mark evidence and what it means for examiners in other pattern disciplines.

MODULE 3 • APPROX. 1 HOUR, 29 MINUTES

Scientific Foundations

The scientific and legal principles on which credible testimony depends, including how to address questions of error and certainty.

The Science of Randomness	A scientific field rarely discussed in forensic training, and why it matters to every pattern examiner.
The Daubert Contagion	A landmark Supreme Court ruling, what the Court intended, and the mischaracterizations that followed.
The Limited Utility of Established Rates of Error	A courtroom example that puts a fictional error rate to the test.
What Makes Science Valid? (Part 1 of 2)	What validity really means, and why a discipline's history matters.
Questions About Error and Certainty	The questions on which many capable experts falter, and how to meet them.
Questions About Past Error	How to approach one of the most personal lines of questioning an expert can face.
What Makes Science Valid? (Part 2 of 2)	How experts can undermine their own credibility, and what validity ultimately rests upon.

MODULE 4 • APPROX. 1 HOUR, 33 MINUTES

Strategies and Opportunities

The conduct, judgment, and professional disposition that distinguish a credible expert witness.

The Identification Threshold	Why questions about identification thresholds are so difficult to answer, and how to respond with confidence.
Avoidance of Specific Words and Phrases	The debate over testimony language, and a perspective that is often overlooked.
The Dual Role of Forensic Experts	A distinction rarely discussed in forensic training that can change how an identification is understood.
Degrees of Difficulty: An Issue of Credibility	Why the effort behind an identification deserves more attention than it usually receives.
The Significance of Temperament	Temperament as a professional competency, and its influence on how testimony is received.
Global Competence: A Worthy Goal	The professional development of forensic examiners, and a goal worth pursuing over a career.

Closing Lessons and Assignments

Applying the principles of the course through practice, reflection, and assessment.

Ten Critical Inquiries: Part 1	An introduction to ten demanding questions examiners should prepare to face under cross-examination.
Ten Critical Inquiries: Partnered Exercise	A practice exercise in which participants respond to each inquiry with the help of a partner or volunteer.
Ten Critical Inquiries: Part 2	Guidance on answering each inquiry with honesty, composure, and scientific accuracy.
A Conversation with the Author	A wide-ranging discussion with John M. Collins about the book, the course, and the future of the pattern disciplines.
Test Your Knowledge	A fifty-question assessment of the key concepts presented in the course, followed by review of the answer key.
Participant Feedback	An opportunity to share feedback on the course and, if desired, a testimonial.

COURSE RESOURCES

- Course brochure and lesson plan, available for download
- Practice worksheet for the partnered exercise
- Fifty-question knowledge test
- *Valid Comparisons*, the companion book, recommended for reading before or after the course

ABOUT THE INSTRUCTOR

John Morrey Collins, MA, SHRM-SCP, is a professional coach and author who works with leaders and professionals in authoritative, high-responsibility occupations, with particular emphasis on policing, forensic science, criminal law, and civil law. He established his private practice in 2013 after retiring from a twenty-year career in forensic science, during which he served as director of forensic science for the State of Michigan.

Over the course of his career, he has spent hundreds of hours on the witness stand in criminal trials, death penalty cases, and Daubert hearings. He is a Gallup-Certified Strengths Coach and the author of five books: *Valid Comparisons*, *The New Superior*, *50 Situations Awaiting Every Forensic Scientist*, *Crime Lab Report*, and *HR Management in the Forensic Science Laboratory*.

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validcomparisons.com

TUITION
\$249

QUESTIONS
office@criticalvictories.com
(517) 803-4063