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OSAC 2025-N-0002

Standard for Qualifications for Forensic Anthropology Practitioners

Forensic Anthropology Subcommittee
Medicine Scientific Area Committee (SAC)
Organization of Scientific Area Committees (OSAC) for Forensic Science



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OSAC Proposed Standard

OSAC 2025-N-0002 Standard for Qualifications for Forensic Anthropology Practitioners

Prepared by
Forensic Anthropology Subcommittee
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Disclaimer:

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58 **Foreword**

59 Anthropology is a broad discipline dedicated to the study of humanity in both the past and
60 present. Forensic anthropology is a specialized subdiscipline focused on the search, recovery, and
61 analysis of human remains within the context of the medicolegal death investigation system.

62

63 Currently, uniform qualifications do not exist for forensic anthropologists, leading to variability
64 in competency to practice. This standard was developed to provide minimum qualifications for
65 forensic anthropology education, training, certification, ethics, and professionalism in the United
66 States of America.

67 This document supplements ASTM 2917-24 Standard Practice for Forensic Science Practitioner
68 Training, Continuing Education, and Professional Development Programs. This standard is of
69 value to 1) forensic anthropology students and practitioners as they acquire and maintain their
70 knowledge, skills, and certification; 2) institutions and/or organizations (within and outside of
71 academia) in their development of student and professional educational, training, and
72 certification programs; and 3) forensic anthropology service providers and consumers in their
73 evaluation of forensic anthropology competency.

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90 **Keywords:** *forensic anthropology; education; training; qualifications*

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105 **Standard for Qualifications for Forensic Anthropology Practitioners**

106

107 **1 Scope**

108

109 This standard describes the minimum qualifications for forensic anthropologists in professional
110 practice, including education, training, experience, certification, ethics, and professionalism in
111 the United States of America.

112 This standard does not prescribe or endorse any specific educational curriculum or training
113 program, nor does it supersede any requirements from certification or licensing bodies.

114 **2 Normative References**

115 The following reference is indispensable for the application of the standard.

116 ASTM Standard E2917-24, *Standard Practice for Forensic Science Practitioner Training,*
117 *Continuing Education, and Professional Development Programs.*

118

119 **3 Terms and Definitions**

120

121 **3.1**

122 **The American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA)**

123 Certification body for practicing forensic anthropologists, accredited by the Forensic Specialties
124 Accreditation Board (FSAB).

125

126 **3.2**

127 **ABFA diplomate (D-ABFA)**

128 A forensic anthropologist certified through the American Board of Forensic Anthropology.

129

130 **3.3**

131 **chain of custody**

132 A chronological record of the handling and storage of an item from its point of collection to its
133 final return or disposal.

134

135 **3.4**

136 **competency**

137 A forensic science practitioner's acquisition and demonstration of necessary specialized
138 knowledge, technical skills, and abilities to successfully perform examinations and analyses prior
139 to independent practice.

140

141

142

143

144

145 **3.5**

146 **continuing education**

147 The formal mechanism through which a forensic science practitioner increases or updates
148 knowledge, skills, or abilities (KSAs), reinforces knowledge or learns of the latest research,
149 developments, or technology related to their profession.

150

151 **3.6**

152 **education**

153 Formal academic coursework from an accredited school, college, or university, that counts
154 towards an academic degree.

155

156 **3.7**

157 **ethical conduct**

158 Behavior that conforms to relevant published standards of professional conduct (e.g., follows
159 applicable Codes of Ethics for the discipline).

160

161 **3.8**

162 **experience**

163 Direct observation of and participation in the practice of a discipline.

164

165 **3.9**

166 **expertise**

167 Knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform tasks with minimum competency or greater.

168

169 **3.10**

170 **forensic science service provider (FSSP)**

171 An organization or individual that provides forensic science services.

172

173 **3.11**

174 **fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR)**

175 A technique used to obtain an infrared spectrum from a solid, liquid, or gas emission or
176 absorption.

177

178 **3.12**

179 **human remains**

180 Human soft, osseous and dental tissues, and/or samples thereof (e.g., hair, fingernails, cuttings
181 for DNA or isotopic testing, extracts derived from a primary source).

182

183

184

185

186 **3.13**

187 **internship**

188 An in-depth educational or training program that offers a period of supervised practical
189 experience in a forensic science setting.

190

191 **3.14**

192 **medicolegal authority**

193 A person or agency charged by law with conducting death investigations for the purpose of
194 certifying deaths (e.g., Coroners, Medical Examiners, Justices of the Peace).

195

196 **3.15**

197 **professional development**

198 The mechanism through which a forensic science practitioner improves personal skills,
199 successfully handles increasing responsibility, makes contributions to the profession, and
200 reinforces ethical behaviors.

201

202 **3.16**

203 **proficiency testing**

204 Evaluation of participant performance against pre-established criteria using inter-laboratory
205 comparisons.

206

207 **3.17**

208 **qualifications**

209 The combined education, training, and experience of an individual.

210

211 **3.18**

212 **quality management**

213 The coordinated activities to direct and control an organization concerning quality. Direction and
214 control with regard to quality generally include the establishment of a quality policy and quality
215 objectives, quality planning, quality control, quality assurance, and quality improvement.

216

217 **3.19**

218 **Stable isotope analysis**

219 Identification and measurement of stable isotopes (alternative stable forms of organic and
220 inorganic elements with different molecular weights) used to reconstruct dietary and migration
221 patterning.

222

223

224

225

226

227 **3.20**

228 **training**

229 Formal, structured process of teaching and assessment outside of academic coursework, often
230 at a laboratory or other non-educational institution, but also includes continuing education
231 opportunities. Often results in a certificate or formal documentation of completion.

232

233 **3.21**

234 **technical record**

235 All pertinent items created or used to support findings of a forensic anthropological examination.
236 Technical records may be field and/or laboratory notes documenting tests undertaken,
237 photographs and medical imaging forming the basis for analysis or technical conclusions, test
238 records, antemortem medical and dental records, and other documentation (e.g., bench notes,
239 inventories, observations, diagrams, sketches, charts).

240

241 **3.22**

242 **X-ray diffraction (XRD)**

243 A technique using X-rays to determine elemental composition and phases of a material.

244

245 **3.23**

246 **X-ray fluorescence (XRF)**

247 A technique using X-rays to determine elemental composition of a material.

248

249 **4 Qualifications**

250

251 Forensic anthropologists shall have discipline-specific expertise to conduct forensic
252 anthropological examinations. The following represent minimum qualifications for forensic
253 anthropology education, training and experience, certification, continuing education and
254 professional development, and adherence to ethical and other professional standards.

255

256 **4.1.1 Education**

257 Forensic anthropologists shall have a graduate degree in anthropology from an accredited
258 university. This degree should be a Ph.D. with an educational curriculum that includes a broad
259 foundation in anthropology and a focus in forensic anthropology. The discipline of forensic
260 anthropology does not currently have a standardized curriculum comparable to other forensic
261 specialties such as medicine, dentistry, genetics, or toxicology. Therefore, the academic
262 transcripts of forensic anthropologists are variable. To ensure educational programs are meeting
263 the needs of future forensic anthropology practitioners, the competency areas outlined in
264 Appendix A shall be addressed in formal coursework, regardless of course title. If competencies
265 are not acquired through formal coursework, see Section 4.1.2.

266

267

268

269 **4.1.2** Training and Experience

270 Forensic anthropologists shall supplement their education with discipline-specific training and
271 experience, as outlined in ASTM Standard E2917 (“Standard Practice for Forensic Science
272 Practitioner Training, Continuing Education, and Professional Development Programs”).

273 Forensic training may be obtained through internships, postgraduate fellowships, continuing
274 education coursework, and other types of professional mentoring.

275 Experience is an important component of building and maintaining competency as a forensic
276 anthropology practitioner. Experience shall include both practical and theoretical aspects of the
277 discipline. For example, it is recommended that forensic anthropologists have experience
278 working with medicolegal authorities, including observation of casework in a medicolegal setting
279 (e.g., medical examiner/coroner facility) and observation of courtroom testimony when possible
280 and appropriate.

281 Although the length and depth of training and experience are dependent on the scope and setting
282 of work to be performed, they shall focus on addressing the competency areas listed in Appendix
283 A.

284 All training and experience should be from accredited educational and training programs and
285 supervised by a certified forensic anthropologist, when possible. Forensic anthropology
286 practitioners shall demonstrate and document training and related experiences. Training and
287 experiences should be documented in a training log verified by a subject matter expert.

288 **4.1.3** Certification

289 Forensic anthropology practitioners shall obtain certification from an accredited body that
290 assesses expertise and competence in forensic anthropology. Certification is a necessary
291 component of professional development, in part, because it provides an objective means of
292 demonstrating competence to practice. It is a key indicator to stakeholders (e.g., employers,
293 medicolegal community, legal practitioners, families of decedents, and the public) that an
294 individual is a competent practitioner in the area(s) in which they practice. It also mandates
295 adherence to a code of ethics and a recertification program.

296
297 Certification assesses competency to practice. Competency in a discipline is assessed through the
298 demonstration of the requisite knowledge, skills, and abilities in areas specific to that discipline.
299 It is typically established by passing certification and/or competency exams.

300 Accredited certification to become an ABFA Diplomate (D-ABFA) is currently available for forensic
301 anthropologists through the American Board of Forensic Anthropology (ABFA)
302 (www.theabfa.org) and involves a formal review of application materials and successful passing
303 of examinations designed to test core forensic anthropology competencies similar to those in
304 Appendix A.

305

306 **4.1.4** Continuing Education and Professional Development

307 All forensic anthropology practitioners shall remain current in their discipline through continuing
308 education and professional developmental activities, with the goals of maintaining competency
309 and broadening their knowledge, skills, and abilities. These activities are available in multiple
310 forms and should include professional involvement in formal and/or informal programs and
311 activities, such as:

- 312 • Research, including publication in peer-reviewed volumes and/or presentation at
313 professional meetings
- 314 • Teaching of forensic anthropology, forensic science, and associated topics (e.g.,
315 archaeology, anatomy, osteology, introduction to the forensic sciences)
- 316 • Attendance and active participation at professional meetings, seminars, and workshops
- 317 • Professional service, including participation in professional forensic committees in the
318 discipline, including the OSAC, ASB, ABFA, AAFS
- 319 • International initiatives in forensic anthropology
- 320 • Short courses or other continuing education opportunities at an advanced
321 educational/training level
- 322 • Presentation of invited lectures
- 323 • Visiting scientist or scholar positions
- 324 • Internships/fellowships/postdocs
- 325 • Mentoring and peer-review
- 326 • Reading peer-reviewed journals containing forensic anthropology research
- 327 • Participation in communities of practice in forensic anthropology.

328 All continuing education and professional development shall be documented.

329 **4.1.5** Ethics and Professionalism

330 Forensic anthropologists, as forensic science service providers (FSSPs), shall conform to a code of
331 professional responsibility. This includes strict adherence to a code of ethical conduct. As forensic
332 scientists, forensic anthropologists shall adhere to the National Code of Professional
333 Responsibility for Forensic Science and Forensic Medicine Practitioners (see Appendix B for
334 website address). Forensic anthropologists who are members of professional forensic science
335 organizations (e.g., AAFS, ABFA) shall also conform to their codes of ethics.
336

337 **5** Documentation of Qualifications

338 Forensic anthropology practitioners shall maintain documentation of all qualifications, including
339 education, training, certification, and continuing education and professional development.

340 Forensic anthropology qualifications shall also be documented within Quality Management
341 programs governing forensic anthropologists' work, including proficiency testing, competency
342 testing, and memoranda indicating training completion and/or ability to perform
343 supervised/independent casework. Developing and maintaining SOPs discussing training and
344 proficiency will assist with this process.

345 **6 Unacceptable Practices**

346

347 Forensic anthropology practitioners shall not:

- 348 • misrepresent education, training, qualifications, or experience
- 349 • fail to maintain certification in the discipline
- 350 • fail to seek/maintain current and accurate records of education, training, or certification
- 351 in the discipline
- 352 • violate codes of ethical conduct and professional responsibility for the practice of forensic
- 353 science.
- 354

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Annex A

Competency Areas for Forensic Anthropology Practice

Forensic anthropologists, at a minimum, shall be competent in the following areas:

- Human osteology, musculoskeletal anatomy, comparative osteology
- Bone biology, human variation, skeletal growth and development
- Laboratory methods for processing human remains (e.g., maceration)
- Determining medicolegal significance of remains
- Evaluation of commingled assemblages
- Estimation of the biological profile
- Personal identification comparative methodology (e.g., evaluating medical and/or dental imaging)
- Skeletal trauma and the role of bone biomechanics in trauma interpretation
- Evaluation of microscopic, histological representations of bone
- Evaluation of pathological conditions and anomalies of the skeleton
- Taphonomic modifications and estimating the postmortem interval/time since death
- Field search, recovery, and scene and evidence documentation and handling
- Evidence handling (e.g., chain of custody) and documentation (e.g., creation and management of technical records)
- Professional standards and ethical conduct in forensic anthropology
- Medicolegal system, including legal terminology, expert witness testimony, relevant court rulings, and familiarity with medicolegal authorities and jurisdictions
- Statistics (univariate and multivariate)

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Annex B

Recommended Areas of Education, Training, and Experience

Forensic anthropologists are encouraged to have education, training, and/or experience in the following areas:

- General knowledge of forensic science disciplines and their relevance to and impact on case analysis
- Bone histology (e.g., sampling and preparation) and light microscopy
- Biomolecular and chemical methods of skeletal analysis (e.g., XRF, XRD, FTIR, stable isotope, DNA)
- Bone and cartilage tool mark characteristics for classification
- Photography (e.g., effective lighting/exposure, orientation/distance, and scale/case number placement)
- Laboratory management
- Quality management including quality assurance
- Laboratory accreditation
- Geographic Information System (GIS)
- Unidentified decedent databases (e.g., NamUs, NCIC, NCMEC)
- Human Factors (e.g., cognitive bias and its effect on forensic anthropology).

Annex C

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