

Type and Typography

Type is a catchall term used to refer to a collection of letterforms. Type operates on two levels: first, the words carry the written meaning; second, the type selection, or font, contributes to the feeling or aesthetic tone of the work. Typography is the arrangement of letterforms on a surface, such as a page or a screen. It aids understanding by imparting difference in undifferentiated text. Breaks such as paragraphs and headlines in running text are typography, as are size, treatment, and spacing of text.

Selecting Type

Choose a typeface for its **functionality** and **readability** first, its aesthetic second. Criteria for functionality include **medium-specificity**, **scale**, and **the nature of the text** itself. Will this text be seen on screen, in print, or both? Each medium has its type conventions. For example, high-contrast modern typefaces that look great in printed fashion magazines may look jarring on screen. Is the text itself big or small, the copy long or short? Longer book or web body text should be smaller and consistent to sustain focused concentration. Short advertising copy, by contrast, might be large, and would strive to keep the reader's attention by disrupting each previous line with a new type treatment. As with all your design decisions, the typefaces you pick should also serve your intended audience and purpose. Instructions on playing a game will require type that is clear, direct, and undistracting; a poster for a circus would warrant big, bold, even fanciful text.

Among the many ways to classify typefaces, the most important distinctions are between **serif**, **sans-serif**, and **illustrative**. A serif on a typeface is the extra stroke (line) added to the end of the main lines of a character — for instance, the “feet” at the bottom of a lowercase serif-type “n.” A sans-serif typeface has no extra strokes. Some argue that serif and sans-serif typefaces have distinct functions, used correctly, however, both can work in a variety of contexts. The third category, illustrative or decorative type, covers a wide range of typefaces that are used to express a strong connotation, for example a pirate typeface on a kid's treasure hunt map. While there are no bad typeface choices, only more or less appropriate ones to the task at hand, we recommend using decorative typefaces sparingly and only when it fully supports the purpose of your communication.

Serif example: Times

Sans example: Helvetica

Illustrative example: *Tratatello*

The aesthetics of fonts are infinite and subjective, but generally speaking, serif typefaces are associated with a traditional feeling and sans-serif typefaces with a modern feeling. Your type choice can go with this expectation, playing to a reader's expectations, or it can work against it. Design is flexible enough to accommodate contradictions. Designers for fashion companies, for example, often use serif type in ways that feel completely contemporary. With thousands of typefaces to choose from, developing a type sensibility takes time. The best way to acclimate yourself is to review visual precedents for your own task and take note of how type affects your reading and visual experience.

Here are a few other characteristics to consider in type selection:

1. Does the typeface have enough weights and other variations (**bold**, *italic*, etc.) in the “font family” in the type menu bar for you to express your content? It’s always best practice to use these font variations rather than the generic style buttons, which simply distort the original typeface.

Here are the standard variations and their uses:

roman, text, **medium**, and regular are used for body copy (usually at 9–13 pts)

italic and *oblique* are used for emphasis

bold and **demi** are used for emphasis greater than italic (be careful with **bold**; too much results in typographic noise, not emphasis)

display type is used for large type sizes

condensed type permits more characters on a line at a larger point size

2. Does the typeface have all of the characters you will need? Some typefaces do not include a complete set of numbers, fractions, or diacritics and accent marks. These would not do for a text heavy in data or foreign-language words.
3. In some cases, you might want to honor the time period of your subject matter, for example, setting the biography of Benjamin Franklin in Caslon or Baskerville. He introduced Caslon to the colonies, after all, and used Baskerville as well.
4. Learn to love the default fonts Times New Roman and Helvetica and use them well when you want type to be unobtrusive. Mixing a different face with one of these default faces often adds just enough accent.

Finally, when choosing more than one typeface for a text comprising mixed uses, such as a long body text with short image captions, select a typeface first for your dominant textual element, then choose an alternate type that contrasts significantly enough to make the distinction clear. You may only need this one typeface, shifting size and weight for various functions. Occasions for more than two typefaces in any design are rare.

Typography

Typography applies to the arrangement of all text in a document — from body text to captions to headlines. Three typographic elements, and the relationship among them, contribute to the reading experience of the body text: horizontal line length (referred to as **measure**), vertical distance between lines (referred to in print as **leading** and on screen as line-height), and **type size**.

The arrangement of these elements in space is determined in part by the dimensions of the page or screen, but their relationship is also highly variable and critical — well worth exploring beyond default settings. Here’s a general rule of thumb: the larger the type the fewer the words on a horizontal line and the smaller the vertical distance between each line itself; the smaller the type the more words on a line and the greater the vertical distance between each line. When measure, leading, and type size are in a harmonious relationship with each other, the type area will have a pleasing “gray color” due to the massing of dark (type) and light (leading and the negative space of the type).

Measure should keep the reader’s interest in mind. An overly long line tires the reader’s eye. A line that is too short will interrupt the rhythm of all but the shortest of texts. Fortunately, optimal line length is easy to establish (some say it’s simply sixty-six characters). Forty to seventy-two characters (roughly seven to twelve words) per line of any given text is a good range. With left-aligned, ragged right text, your measure will contain lines that are as long as your measure as well as shorter. Ideally your ragged text will have a long-short-long-short-long rhythm to it in the line breaks. Try to avoid “orphans” (single last words in a line or single last lines at the bottom of a column) and “widows” (single last lines at the top of a column).

In English-language typography, your text should be left-aligned and ragged right — not justified — unless there is a very good reason to reject this principle. Justification, even with keen word space settings, is prone to creating wide gaps and uneven space between words, as well as “rivers” of negative space running vertically through the text. This distracting effect overrides the smooth right edge that justification creates.

Leading also diminishes readability when it is too little or too great. Within an acceptable range, a generous leading will feel more open, whereas tightly set leading feels dense and transforms the type column into a visual element unto itself. 120–130% of the type size is a good rule of thumb for acceptable leading range. The larger the type, the less the leading you need (very large type might even require negative leading). The longer the horizontal line length, the greater the leading. If you use linespaces rather than indents to mark paragraph breaks, make sure the leading there is wide enough to register for the reader.

Type size depends on context and kind of text (body, heading, etc.). For printed matter, body text should generally be set between 9 and 13 points. Do not be afraid to use decimal values. Sometimes 9.75 pt is a much better setting than 10 pt. The point size should be determined in part by how many characters fit on the horizontal line for your particular type choice. For a web page, type size should be targeted between 12 and 21 pixels (abbreviated as px), but the actual units should be relative, or set proportionally (percentage based or em based) to accommodate various screens.

A quick calculation for translating type size from the printed page to web page to presentation is: 1 = print, 1.5 = web screen, 3 = presentation screen. So, for example, a 10 pt book text would be scaled to 15 px for a web page and 30 pt for a presentation. (Always use your eyes and best judgement about the viewing context to fine tune.)

Example of adjusting type size to a long measure:

This measure is 34 picas wide, but the text has not been adjusted in size or leading from the settings for a much smaller measure. The longest line is 103 characters. Explab iliciat uritatia diciatem fuga. Nam naturei undignisi odia non porerat. Ficia consequodic tet vid qui ut ut volore am restiis alisqui aut dolore que nonsequi conet, ex endemporem ratquaecae as eum volutate vendunt velendae aut qui duciis nos quas eum voluptam re es est ut et eatusa non cus ullendunt quatia de voloreictur simaios debis aut res imin nost ommo to min cum exceperum ra eaturis renissimus adit moles max.

Example of adjusting type size to a long measure:

This measure is 34 picas wide, the text is 16 points, and the leading is 18 points. The longest line is 53 characters. Explab iliciat uritatia diciatem fuga. Nam naturei undignisi odia non porerat. Ficia consequodic tet vid qui ut ut volore am restiis alisqui aut dolore que nonsequi conet, ex endemporem ratquaecae as eum volutate vendunt velendae aut qui duciis.

Once you've set your body or main text you'll want to set the other typographic elements, such as headings and captions. These elements must be made distinct through contrast. In *Design with Type* Carl Dair outlines seven types of typographic contrast:

1. Size: a fundamental contrast. Simply setting your body and your headlines in different sizes creates contrast.
2. Weight: thickness of line can add emphasis. Too much reliance on weight for contrast can make the whole composition overly heavy.
3. Structure: using two different typefaces together, for example.
4. Form: the difference between the capital letter and lowercase letter or the roman versus the italic in the same typeface, for example.
5. Color: the use of a second color. Color is a powerful tool for contrast as well as continuity—we actually tend to group color before shape.
6. Direction: changes in directions and angles can be quite compelling, but should be used judiciously in visual communications.
7. Texture: type repetition generates texture. Changing texture creates contrast.

These types of contrast can operate alone or in combination, work relatively across all elements, and always operate in concert with uniformity.

10 Do's and Don'ts

There is a great tradition of distilling type rules into short lists of do's and don'ts. These rules are broken, bent, and discarded frequently, but they make for a handy reminder when you're in a hurry.

- Don't use too many typefaces in one project. Do choose one.
- Don't use too many colors in one project. Do use at least two.
- Don't distort type. Do let the work of the type designer sing.
- Don't letterspace lowercase text. Do letterspace all capitals.
- Don't mix regular capitals and small caps. Do break this rule when necessary.
- Don't set type smaller than 8 points in a printed document. Do keep your type readable.
- Don't right align or justify your text. Do set text as flush left, ragged right when setting English and other left-to-right reading languages.
- Don't set headlines smaller than the body copy. Do make the hierarchy clear.
- Don't set big text with big leading. Do reduce the leading when setting large text.
- Don't choose the typeface because it's cool. Do choose the typeface because it's functional, serves your aesthetic purposes, and you own the rights to use it.

Resources

Robert Bringhurst, *Elements of Typographic Style: Version 4.0* (Vancouver: Hartley & Marks Publishers, 2013).

Matthew Butterick, *Practical Typography* (<http://practicaltypography.com>, 2010).

Charles Dair, *Design with Type* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1967).

James Felici, *The Complete Manual of Typography: A Guide to Setting Perfect Type* (San Francisco: Adobe Press, 2003).

Nigel French, *InDesign Type: Professional Typography with Adobe InDesign* (2nd edition; San Francisco: Adobe Press, 2010).

Cyrus Highsmith, *Inside Paragraphs* (Boston, MA: Font Bureau, Inc., 2012).

John Kane, *A Type Primer* (2nd edition; Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2011; <http://www.atypeprimer.com>).

Ellen Lupton, *Thinking with Type* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2010; www.thinkingwith-type.com).