Typo-graphy

A brief guide

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What is meant by typography?

Simply put, typography is the craft of arranging type in a way that makes copy appealing, readable and legible to the reader. Designers and typographers use a range of styles, spacing and formatting to achieve this.

A brief history

Traditionally, typography has been defined in terms of printing and printed material. Although a form of moveable type was first used in China in the 11th century, it was Johannes Gutenberg's invention of the printing press in 1439 that revolutionised the mass production of literature.

This initiated the creation of cast metal alloy letters and full ranges of alphabets manufactured by foundries. We still refer to type 'foundries' today, even though no physical type is cast.

The late 19th century saw the rapid advancement of printing. Better casting methods of metal type ensured uniformity and longevity of letterforms. This became known as hot-metal letterpress typesetting, a method used by newspapers until the 1970s and 80s.

From the 1970s, printing moved away from using physically-created blocks of type to photographic methods (phototypesetting) and eventually to computer-generated type.

Today, a vast range of typefaces exist. Digital methods ensure consistent and legible reproduction, and production now takes a fraction of the time.

With such a choice, where do you start? In this mini-guide, we examine the different styles (pages 4-6), show examples on how to pair typefaces (pages 8-10), and how to define a type hierarchy (page 11).

Typography is an art form and there are several artists and typographers that use type in creative ways, often pushing the boundaries (see pages 13-14).

Did you know, the terms 'upper case' and 'lower case' are derived from how typesetters stored their sets of type? These were kept in drawers or cases, with capital letters together in an upper drawer and non-capitals in a lower one.

Typeface styles

Typefaces and fonts

Often people refer to typefaces as 'fonts' and it's become a term that's used interchangeably. A typeface is a family of 'fonts'. Fonts are the different weights or styles within the family – for example, light, medium, bold and black. A typeface can also include italic, condensed or expanded versions.

Typefaces can be divided into four main categories, with several sub-categories. These are Serif, Sans-serif, Script and Decorative.

1. Serif

There are roughly 5 sub-categories of serif, from the early Old style serifs, to Transitional (e.g., Times New Roman), Modern, Slab and Glyphic. Serifs are distinguished by the 'feet' at the end of the stroke. They are an earlier style and are perceived as being more classical and traditional.

Typography
Goudy Old Style

Typography
Didot

Typography
Roboto Slab

Typography
Albertus

Old style: minimal difference between thick and thin strokes, bracketed serifs (curve between stem and serif), diagonal axis. *Examples: Garamond, Goudy*

Modern: greater contrast between thick and thin strokes, thin serifs, more geometric, vertical axis. *Examples: Didot, Bodoni*

Slab: very little stroke contrast, block serifs or 'slabs' that are either square or slightly rounded at the junction, vertical axis. *Examples: Rockwell, Courier*

Glyphic: low stroke contrast, typically with triangular serifs or tapered stroke ends, vertical axis. Often only available in capitals. *Examples: Albertus, Trajan*

2. Sans-serif

Translating as 'without serifs', the first sans serif appeared in 1816 by William Caslon IV.

Sans-serifs can be categorised in roughly four groups: **Grotesque**, **Neo-grotesque**, **Geometric** and **Humanist**. Early sans-serifs were seen as 'grotesque' (Italian: *belonging to the cave*) because of their brutal lack of flourishes. They are more geometric in appearance with less stroke variation. Sans-serifs are typically regarded as more modern, with better readability because of their clean lines.

Typography

News Gothic

Typography

Helvetica Neue

Typography

Futura

Typography

Gill Sans

Grotesque: irregular stroke width, narrow width letters with oval-shaped curves, curved strokes often have diagonal finishes, occasional spurs to letters, vertical axis. *Examples: Akzidenz Grotesk, News Gothic*

Neo-Grotesque: greater stroke consistency, uniform width letters, curved letters have vertical or horizontal ends, vertical axis. Available in several weights. *Examples: Helvetica, Univers*

Geometric: regular stroke contrast and regular width letters, based on geometric shapes of circles, squares and triangles. The 'O' is almost circular. Single story letters ('a' and 'g'), vertical axis. *Examples: Futura, Bank Gothic*

Humanist: these take the traditions of type into a modern equivalent. Low to medium stroke contrast, based on classical proportions, double story letters for 'a' and 'g', vertical axis. *Examples: Gill Sans, Frutiger*

3. Script

All script typefaces are based on handwriting – whether they're inspired by early Blackletter calligraphy, cursive brush scripts or more free-flowing contemporary handwriting. Script typefaces can be divided into two main categories of **formal** or **casual**.

4. Decorative

With the advent of digital type, this group is highly varied and vast. This can include retro, vintage, novelty, artistic or futuristic styles.

With all script and decorative typefaces, it's important to consider how legible and readable they are. Often it's better to keep these to display headlines or short lines of copy. See page 8 for tips on best practice

Type terminology

cap height

x-height
height of the lower case letters

Simple Type

descender

serif

ascender

Baseline

Terminology

kerning
the space between letters

leading
the space between one baseline and the next

Choosing typefaces and font pairing

Stuck for inspiration? Here are some quick things to consider and a few ideas to get started

Tips for best practice

Consider the type of communications you're creating for, the audience and the overall mood – a poster for a fashion event will have a different feel to a social media post for a fast-food chain, or a company pitch deck. Think about the application – some typefaces work better online than they do in print.

Don't choose typefaces that are too similar as it can look like a mistake. Pairing opposites such as a serif and a sans-serif is a common and successful approach. However, they should share some common characteristics – such as similar letter shape or x-height (see)

Keep choices to 2-3 styles maximum. Many typefaces come in different weights so you could keep to one typeface but use light, medium and black weights.

Keep display or decorative type for larger headlines. Limit the use of italic or script fonts for shorter extracts of copy.

Make sure copy is legible at smaller sizes. It's better to keep paragraph copy to simple, standard typefaces that are known for their readability.

Be aware that free fonts may not include all characters in other languages or a full range of glyphs such as ligatures*

* These are when two letters are combined as a single character – for example fi becomes fi

Frederik Danko
https://unsplash.com/@frederikdanko

Different weights   **Different widths**   **Different styles**

Publico

Bold | **Medium** | Light

Archivo

Expanded | Standard | Condensed

Roboto

Slab | Sans-serif

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Why this works:
Families of typefaces will always work together. Even though this is quite simple, it's very effective. Choose typefaces with a different range of weights such as black, extra-bold, medium, regular and light. To create a clear hierarchy, use heavier weights against lighter weights.

Examples: used everywhere

Why this works:
As a style, mixed variable width type is very much on trend at the moment, particularly for headings/digital animation. However, this needs to be done with care, especially as standard and expanded widths are easier to read than condensed. It's best to use condensed for title headings or short quotes.

Examples: automotive, sport, food

Why this works:
Another option is to still use the same type family but mixing serif with sans-serif, or slab-serif with sans-serif.

Examples: automotive, technology

Contrasting typefaces

Serif and sans-serif

Arima
Lato

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Why this works:

Arima is a calligraphic serif and Lato is a humanist sans-serif. They work as they have a similar character width and x-height. There are also similarities with the a, q, f, i, t and j. The calligraphic flicks to the ends (or terminals) of the letters adds difference. Also displayed here in mixed weights.

Examples: food, lifestyle, well-being

Sans-serif and serif

Montserrat
Chaparral

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Why this works:

This switches the other way around with a sans-serif for the heading. When using this hierarchy, choose a simple serif that's easy to read (like Chapparal shown here). Otherwise, keep the serif for pull-quotes or short passages of copy. Shown in mixed weights.

Examples: fashion, sport, publishing

Display and sans-serif

LIBRARY
Noto

THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPS OVER THE LAZY DOG

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Why this works:

Use display typefaces sparingly as they limit readability – for example, use for logos or short headlines. To retain readability, combine with a sans-serif for all other copy. This example uses a capital display typeface paired with a simple sans-serif, as they share a similar character width.

Examples: technology, entertainment, sports

Establishing a type hierarchy

Having a type hierarchy identifies to the reader the order in which to read the information. We are drawn to larger and bolder type first. The most established methods are ordering the headings by descending size, weight and/or style.

There are various ways to choose a scale of type sizes. Typographers and print designers still use the points (*pt*) system (1 point = 1/72 of an inch). Web type can be defined by an absolute unit such as pixels (*px*) or by a ratio (*em*) that scales relative to the display device.

It's good practice to make the leading (line spacing) 120-145% (1.2-1.45) of the type size. E.g. 10pt type on 12pt leading. This type is set at 130%.

Heading 1
Heading 2

Heading 3
Heading 4
Heading 5

Body copy

· Bullet
· Bullet

Pull-quote

Heading 1: Usually the largest size. Distinguished by a heavier weight or caps.

Heading 2: A step down from heading 1 in terms of size and/or weight.

Headings 3-5: A cascading set of styles – usually in descending size and/or weight.

Paragraph/body copy: ensure good leading (min 120%) and use spacing between paragraphs.

Pull-quote: this can be styled differently to body text – e.g., a different typeface, colour or even size. This works best if separated from the main body copy by using spacing, lines or indents.

a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a a

6 7 8 9 10 11 12 14 16 18 24 30 36 48 60 72

Print type sizes (pts)

a a a a a a a a

0.8em 1em 1.2em 1.4em 1.7em 2em 2.5em

Web type sizes (em)

Font licences

In order to install or use typefaces, you must have a licence. Using a typeface without a licence, or not adhering to the terms, is a legal infringement and potentially a costly one.

Licence terms
Each licence agreement varies, so it's important to read it carefully. Terms may include:

• the number of users who can install and use the font
• whether the font can be shared, distributed or modified
• if it's for personal or commercial use
• the duration of the licence.

Foundries may charge a one-off cost or a recurring fee.

Licence types
Different uses require specific licence types. The most common are:

Desktop – this is installed on your computer and can be used for multiple purposes. You may need to upgrade to a commercial licence for anything that is published or commercially produced.

Web – to use a font on a website, developers use embedded code to display the font when viewed by the end user. Licences can be dependent on number of page views or have time or domain limits.

App and ePub – you will need a separate licence for apps. They're not covered by a web licence. These are often based on the number of app users. The same is true for ePub formats such as digital books and magazines. Again, the licence terms may cover readership numbers or have a limited time frame.

Free fonts
There are many free font libraries available such as Google Fonts, Dafont and Font Squirrel. Google Fonts alone has 1,800 options, with all licence types available under its free Apache Licence. However, even with free font libraries, there may be restrictions on usage for commercial work, redistribution or modification. It's always best to check the terms of each individual licence carefully.

Using type creatively

Breaking convention

Many artists and designers have pushed the norms of typography and extended its use into art. All of them understand traditional typographic principles but defy aspects of them for reasons of creativity, impact or subversion.

Filippo Tommaso Marinetti
1876–1944

A controversial figure, Marinetti was an Italian poet, art theorist and founder of the Futurist art movement and Fascist Manifesto.

Herb Lubalin
1918–1981

Herb Lubalin was a graphic designer, best known for his magazine work and creation of the Avant Garde typeface in 1970.

David Carson
1955–

David Carson is an American designer and surfer, who became known in the 1980s for his style of experimental and often illegible type.

Neville Brody
1957–

Neville Brody is a British graphic designer, typographer and art director who started his extensive career working on *The Face* and *Arena* magazines.

Joost Schmidt
1893–1948

Joost Schmidt was a German typographer and Bauhaus teacher, renowned for his poster of the first Bauhaus exhibition in 1923.

David Hollier
1971–

David Hollier is a British artist who paints portraits using words, a technique known as Imago Verbosa. His works are often large-scale public artworks.

Paula Scher
1948–

Paula Scher is a graphic designer, painter and the first female Principal at Pentagram. In the 1990s, she started painting large-scale maps comprised of text.


Stefan Sagmeister
1962–

Stefan Sagmeister is an Austrian graphic designer and typographer. This piece, featured on the streets of Amsterdam in 2008, was comprised of 250,000 euro cents.

Nicola Yeoman

Nicola Yeoman is an artist predominantly working in installation art. Many of her artworks have featured letters, such as this piece commissioned for the New York Times.
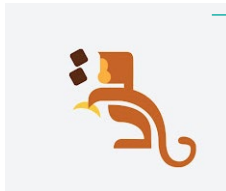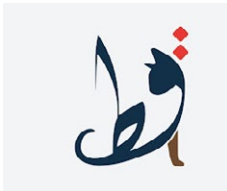
Manmoud Tamman

Egypt-based illustrator, Manmoud Tamman, creates simple and playful visual depictions of Arabic words.

Resources

Type foundries
Free
Search and download over 1,800 type families from Google and over 40,000 fonts from DaFont. All are free for personal use and most are free for commercial use – but check the licence first.

Google Fonts
fonts.google.com

Font Squirrel
www.fontsquirrel.com

DaFont
www.dafont.com

Free to subscribers
Adobe Fonts
fonts.adobe.com

Typeface identifiers
Seen a typeface in use and not sure what it is? Upload an image to these websites to identify it. However, the results may vary depending on the quality of the image.

What the Font
www.myfonts.com/pages/whatthefont

Font Spring Matcherator
www.fontspring.com/matcherator

Alternative font finder
If you've found a perfect typeface but need to find a cost-effective alternative, this site has indexed over 990,000 free and commercial typefaces to compare.

What the Font Is
www.whatfontis.com/similar-alternative-fonts.html

Font pairing
Need some inspiration to pairing typefaces? These websites will generate matches. Monotype compares commercial typefaces, Font Joy compares Google Fonts.

Monotype
www.monotype.com/font-pairing

Font Joy
fontjoy.com

Website type scale generator
A quick way to generate and view examples of heading sizes for websites. The free version only allows for one typeface and weight but it's a good starting point.

Typescale
typescale.com

A brief guide

Other titles in the series:

Colour
Images
Design
Accessibility

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