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Which Typeface to Use... A Guide For Desktop Publishers

With literally thousands of typefaces available for use in desktop publishing, it is no small matter to determine which ones to use for a specific document. In this issue of *Printips*, we'll present some guidelines to assist you in narrowing the choices, as well as information on how to increase the effectiveness of the type you select.

Defining the task

Regardless of the document you are preparing – brochure, newsletter, flyer, training manual, direct mail marketing piece – your first task is to be sure the typeface you select promotes readability and comprehension for the your audience. In turn, this requires careful attention to a typeface's legibility.

Legibility refers to the clarity of the type – how easily one letter can be distinguished from another. *Readability* refers to how the letters interact when combined into words, sentences, and paragraphs.

Next, think about what you must accomplish with the document. The goal of a brochure is much different than the goal of an annual report or newsletter. For instance, a brochure must engage the reader's interest quickly and tell a convincing story, while an annual report consisting of large blocks of text with charts and financial tables must explain without fatiguing the reader. For a newsletter, eye-catching headlines and an informal look may be the goal.

Then consider the demographics of the intended audience. What is the age range, educational level, attention span, and vocabulary of those you are addressing? Different typefaces appeal to



different audiences: seniors look for clarity and legibility; teens are drawn to edgy, unusual type even at the expense of readability; children and beginning readers prefer larger, easy-to-read type.

Finally, think about how much reading you are requiring of your audience and what message you want them to take away. The more text your document contains, the more readable the typeface must be.

Visual characteristics of type

Because a typeface is both a symbol of the letters of the alphabet and a picture representation of those letters, type has more visual characteristics than legibility and readability. We consciously and unconsciously associate meanings to type based on our previous experience and exposure to the type. These *associative meanings* can be illustrated by setting a word in more than one typeface.

Consider, for example, the associations of a typeface like *Old English* versus the associations of *Courier*. These are extreme examples as it is unlikely that either typeface would be used for an entire document. But notice the different associations evoked when the same word is set in each font:

Which Typeface to Use (continued)

United States of America

United States of America

The uses of type in a document

Generally speaking, there are two uses of type in a document: *text* or *body* type that comprises the majority of the document; and *display* type used for headlines. Since body copy usually consists of sentences, paragraphs and perhaps long lines of type, the primary consideration for body type is legibility and readability. So a first test of how suitable a typeface is for body copy is whether it can be easily read in long passages set in body copy sizes (generally, 9-12 points).

Display type, by contrast, helps organize the document with headlines, subheads, and other effects like pull quotes. Accordingly, the characteristic of display type is how well it catches the eye and how it coordinates with the type used for body copy. Display type is also larger than body copy type (typically 16-24 points).

Serif versus sans serif type

Development of typefaces was initially limited by the ability of printing presses to reproduce fine lines. For 200 years after Gutenberg invented movable type, Black Letter and Roman type were used exclusively, even though readability was hampered. When William Caslon developed the ability to print fine lines, serif typefaces became the choice for body copy because of greatly enhanced readability when compared to Black Letter.

It wasn't until the early 1800s that sans serif typefaces were designed – and they were considered so much less readable than serif type that as a group they became known as *grotesque*. To this day, the general recommendation is to use a serif typeface for body copy because of readability; and to reserve sans serif faces for display type.

A generally accepted practice is to limit the number of different typefaces in a document to no more than three or four – and for a short document, one serif and one sans serif is enough. Within each family, you may use Roman, bold or italic fonts and perhaps even a condensed font, giving a total of six to eight weights of type for the document.

Influences on readability

The hallmark of a readable typeface is moderation, meaning the reader doesn't notice any features of the letters or characters. If a typeface has a very distinctive feature – a decorative lower case *e*, for example – there is the possibility that readers will notice the letterform and interrupt the progress of their reading to react to the letter itself. Any extreme feature such as very thick or very thin strokes; tall, narrow, short or squat letterforms; or very fancy serifs takes your attention away from the message and therefore impedes readability.

A key to improving readability is to understand that human beings do not read letter by letter. Rather, we read entire words and phrases. A significant factor in recognizing a word is its *shape* which in turn is affected by letter spacing, word spacing, line spacing and line length.

One of the reasons it is so hard to read all capital letters is that the shape of the words is hard to distinguish. Compare these two sentences:

In this example it is easier to distinguish the word shapes.

IN THIS EXAMPLE, IT IS HARDER TO DISTINGUISH THE WORD SHAPES.

Likewise, unevenly spaced letters can disrupt our ability to distinguish word shapes. Closely-spaced lines inhibit our ability to keep our eyes on the current line; too much space between lines makes it difficult to move from one line to the next. A line that is too long makes it hard for us to find the beginning of the next sentence, while a line that is too short forces us to switch lines too often. A good recommended line length is 60-70 characters (including punctuation and spaces) though anything between 40 and 80 characters is readable.

Type trends and recommendations

The most readable serif typefaces are from the category called *Old Style*. These faces were originally designed for long documents, primarily books. Therefore, a good type library will begin with at least one classic Old Style face. Some examples of Old Style typefaces that may be familiar are Garamond, Caslon, Centaur, Bembo, and Jenson. Serif faces have an associative meaning of tradition and formality.

“Display type is also larger than body copy type (typically 16-24 points).”

“Closely-spaced lines inhibit our ability to keep our eyes on the current line...”

Which Typeface to Use (continued)

Sans serif typefaces are valued for their simplicity, informality and clean appearance. In addition, they come in heavier weights than serif faces. For good contrast to body type, select a sans serif typeface that includes several weights (thin and thick) as well as condensed and expanded versions. This will give you flexibility to make dynamic contrasts with the body type. Some sans serif typefaces that may be familiar are Helvetica, Univers, Frutiger, Futura, Optima, Gill Sans, and Avant Garde.

Only after you have invested in these basic typefaces should you consider branching out to other categories, including script and decorative fonts. Also, be aware of type trends. Some fonts – Hobo, Mistral, Avant Garde, Brush Script, Souvenir, Friz Quadrata, for example – were very popular for a time but now provide an outdated impression. Stick with the classic fonts and learn to use them effectively to enhance your documents.

“Stick with the classic fonts and learn to use them effectively to enhance your documents.”

What is a Dingbat?

Dingbats are *pictographs* (that is, a picture representing a word or idea) available in font format that can be inserted into a document. A dingbat can be a graphic element such as a checkmark or a square; a small illustration such as a telephone or a pair of scissors; or a decorative element such as a printer's flower. Dingbats are available as a font, often accompanying a particular typeface.

A popular and well-known dingbat font is ITC Zapf Dingbats, designed by Hermann Zapf. It often is provided with computers, printers, and software, making it readily available. Other dingbat fonts can be purchased, while some are available as freeware.

Here are some ways to use dingbats:

- In place of bullets
- To separate paragraphs
- To indicate the end of an article
- As a symbol to highlight contact information such as telephone and FAX number
- As a checkbox on a form or survey

Dingbats can also be used as a purely decorative element.



“A dingbat can be a graphic element such as a checkmark or a square; a small illustration...”

Q. *The readers of my publication are primarily seniors. Is there a recommended font and type size for this age group?*

A. Yes – in fact, there are type size guidelines for several age groups, all designed to promote readability. In general, the younger or older your readership, the larger the type size should be.

For predominantly senior readers (age 65 and older), set body text in 14 to 18 point. In particular, avoid fine print (8 point or lower).

For readers in the 40-65 age group, use 11 or 12 point body type.

For general audiences, body type of 10-11 points is suitable.

For young children or beginning readers, select a larger type size (14 points).

If you don't know the age of your readership, or if your readership spans a large age range of adults, use 10-11 point type. In addition, remember that the actual and apparent size of a font may appear different. For example, some fonts at 12 points appear visually smaller than others.



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Font Tricks & Tips

Here are some tips for using type effectively in page layout.

Tip 1: Match the size of the type to the column width. Some grid designs call for wide or narrow columns. In general, use a small type size with narrow columns and a larger type size with wide columns. Columns that have fewer than five words per line are difficult to read and retard comprehension; adjust the type size accordingly.

Tip 2: Learn about reverses. Reverses – white text appearing in a black background – should be used sparingly, often for emphasis. If you like the look of a reverse, try creating an initial capital letter by reversing a single letter, or reverse page numbers for design effect. In addition, select the fonts for the reverse carefully. Fine serifs and thin letter strokes may not be visible when reversed.

Tip 3: Distinguish between hyphens, en dashes and em dashes. Hyphens, em dashes and en dashes are all punctuation marks. Each is a different size, and each has a specific use. Hyphens (-) are the smallest and

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are used to hyphenate words and to separate characters in a phone number. En dashes (-) are used to show duration or range (such as January 1–31 or #76–100. Em dashes (—) are used in place of single or double hyphens to indicate a parenthetical phrase or to set apart clauses in a sentence. En and em dashes can be found in the character set of the font you are using.

Tip 4: When necessary, adjust character spacing for best appearance. Using typographer's marks (such as quotation marks and en and em dashes) and adjusting the spaces between characters for visual appearance adds a professional touch to your typesetting that will distinguish it from word processing. The degree of attention paid to the size, shape, and spacing of individual letters in a document is up to you.



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